Bonny Barbara Allen

The title focuses the attention of the reader on a proper name, the once of a girl. It also relies an alliteration of the sound “B” (“Bonny Barbara”). The reader may be curious to find out why the poet decided to write a ballad about the young girl.

Considering the layout the intelligent reader realises the poet is arranged into eight stanzas of four lines each , that is eight quatrains. From the analysis he or she can realise that the name Barbara Allen recourse five times in eight stanzas and therefor he may know that not only is Barbara Allen the focuser of the text but she’s also present repeatedly like a refrain. In addition the reader notices that line 2 and 4 rhyme and therefor he expects repetition is a significant feature of the poem. It recourse features of a song.

The ballad is set in Autumn and tells about Sir John’s love for Barbara Allen, a young lady living in the countryside. He’s going to die and he wants to meet the girl one last time and that is why he said his man to ask Barbara to go and visit him. The lady is reluctant to go but she accepts to see him at last. Unfortunately she tells him that his death would be better for her. She reminds him of one dinner they have together when he drunk so much and h was probably poisoned. His head was going round and round. It doesn’t take long for him to die and therefor he greats all his friends and asks them to be kind with Barbara. As soon as he left the word Barbara started be realise that she was sad for his death. The tragic atmosphere is highlighted by the death-bell of the town where Sir John used to live. The bell itself seemed to cry Sir John’s love for Barbara Allen.

A connotative analysis of the level of sound displays the poet has resorted to frequent sound devices to make the text memorable and to focus on the tragic atmosphere of the story. He managed to get this effect by mean of a frequent use of the refrain: Barbara Allen is repeated over and over again so that the listener cannot forget that the protagonist of the text and the keeper of Sir John’s love is a young woman that have also the symbolic name of Barbara. The name became symbolic because it’s the reason why the aristocratic men of the town is on the point of dying. Barbara is not only Barbara but she’s also Bonny. The informed reader indeed know that bonny means both a nice looking and vigorous and strong and to tell the truth Barbara will survive even if she will eventually suffer why Sir John despite all his possibilities being a man or an aristocratic.

This explains for the ballad to be a tragic love story. It conforms to all the conventions of the Middle Ages both of the social and cultural level and on the literary level. According to the social standards of the time, it was always woman that once were cruel and guilty if they didn’t follow man’s expectations. Indeed during the Middle Age sand even later as well you can find no literary works which deal with woman’s tragic pain.

If you consider the semantic level of the ballad you will easily realise it’s written in very simple language so that the common people may understand and the ballad also displays the use of dialect and the Scottish dialect to be more precise. The tragic love story it deals with is set in Autumn, at “Martinmas time”. The choice of using the expression “Martinmas time” returns to the reader the idea of the importance of the religious code in society. Also it underlines how ordinary life was ruled by the cycles of nature. In order to create the settings and with the aim to introduce the character the narrator provides the reader with just a few sketches that are anyway inaf to suggest the scene and the situation. You can understand that if you consider that the “Martinmas time”(line 1) and “when the green leaves were a-falling”(line 2) suffice to create the seasonal background. As for the characters the narrator adopts the same style: one of the protagonist is simply “Sir John Graeme, in the West country”. The ballad starts in a way similar to a fable thus drawing the attention of the listener immediately. Indeed “It was in and about” reminds the conventional once upon a time. The idea to use simple languages to reach the audience is functional to create a mind picture of the story told. Consider for example to following lexical items: “country”(line 3), “town”(line 5), “place”(line 6), “place”(line 10) they are all together worlds easy to remember and very clear in the mind of the listener. There is no descripting intent in the text: what matters here is the story and therefor narration and situation. What the composer is looking for is to allow the listener of the ballad to create a very clear idea of what is going on in society and to be more precise the society of the time where and when there was a rigid and clear cut division in social classes. If it weren’t so there wouldn’t be no need for the narrator to use three worlds to refer to a character who is only sketched. In the same way the listener comes across Barbara Allen who is not simply Barbara.