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**BONNY BARBARA ALLEN**

The title focuses the attention of the reader on a proper name: the one of a girl. It also relies on 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 realizes the poem is arranged into 8 stanzas of 4 lines each, that is 8 quatrains. From the analysis he or she can realize that the name Barbara Allen is repeated 5 times and therefore he/she may now realize that not only Barbara Allen is the focus of the text but that she is also present repeatedly like a refrain. In addition, the reader notices that line 2 and line 4 rhyme and therefore he may expect repetition is a significant feature of the poem that recalls 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 is going to die and he wants to meet the girl one last time and that is why he sent his men 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 a dinner they had together when he drunk so much and he most probably poisoned. His head he said was going round and round. It doesn’t take long for him to die and therefore he greets all his friends and asks them to be kind to Barbara Allen. As soon as he left the world Barbara started to realize/to be aware 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 Jon’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 means of a frequent use of refrain: “Barbara Allen” is repeated over and over again so that the listener or the dancer cannot forget that the protagonist of the text and the reaper of Sir John’s love is a young girl who has also the symbolic name of Barbara. The name becomes symbolic because it’s the reason why the aristocratic man of the town is on point of dying: Barbara is not only “Barbara”; she is also “Bonny”. The informed reader indeed knows that “bonny” means both beautiful and nice looking and vigorous and strength and to tell the truth Barbara will survive even if she will eventually suffer, while Sir John despite of all his possibilities being he among all other things an aristocrat.

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

If you consider the level of the ballad you can easily realize it is written in very simply language so that the common people may understand it, the ballad also employs/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 the reader the idea of the importance of the religious code in the cycles of nature. In order to create the settings and with the aim of introducing the characters the narrator provides the reader with just a few sketches that are anyway enough 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 protagonists is simply “Sir John Graeme in the west countryside”.

The ballad starts in a way similar to a fable, thus drowning immediately the attention of the reader. Indeed “it was in and about” (line 1) reminds the conventional “Once upon a time”. The idea to use a simple language to reach the audience is functional to create a mind picture of the story told. Consider for example the following lexical icons “country” (v. 3), “town” (v. 5) and “place” (v. 6/10). They’re all together word easy to remember and very clear in the mind of the listeners.

There is no decrypting intent in the text: what matters is the story and therefore narration and situation. What the composer is looking for is to allow the listeners 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 there was a rigid and clear-cut division in social classes. If it weren’t so, there mustn’t be any need for the narrator to use Barbara’s words to refer to a character that is only sketched. In the same way the listener comes across Barbara Allen, who is not simply Barbara.

**I FIND NO PEACE**

Right from the start the intelligent reader can hear the repetition of the sound “I”, that is an assonance, in the title of the sonnet. “I find no peace” underlines the sound “I” which may recall the sound of a cry. This is what the title may suggest and the reader is curious to find the reason why the speaking voice can find no peace. The title itself underlines the frustrated research for peace of the speaking voice since there is an absolute negation: the poet doesn’t say he cannot find any peace; rather he asserts vigorously that there is no peace in his life. So the question that might move the reader in reading the text is to find an answer to his question.

The layout clearly shows that the text is a sonnet since it is organized into 4 stanzas: 2 quartets and 2 tersest, the typical structure of a Petrarchean sonnet. Therefore he expects he will discover about the poet’s complex situation in the octave that is in the first 2 stanzas, and a possible solution in the 2 tersest. Indeed the sestet ends the poem which is of course a lyrical one: just looking at the text, without even reading it, the reader will see the high density of the subject pronoun “I” and this is what makes him/her expect to read something lyrical, something personal and private.

In the first quatrain the speaking voice seems to have come to a sort of resignation after a long battle with himself in order to find peace. But it sounds as if he hadn’t been able to. To tell the truth he says that he hopes “burns and freezes” thus conveying contradictory emotions. He also says something that might sound absurd: he flies, but he cannot arise. At the same time he says he has “naught” and “all the world” he seizes on.

After the denotative analysis of the 1st stanza the intelligent reader realises that the all the lines are based on contrast as the organising principle: “find no peace” is in contrast with “war is done”, “fear” is in contrast with “hope” and “burn and freeze” are opposites. The principle he has chosen helps readers almost to feel the complex emotional situation the poet is living. In addition, the poet relies on hyperbole both in line 3 and 4 to make his moot more lively and involving: how can a person “fly above the wind” and at the same time being unable to “arise” (line3)? This is a paradox and the same paradox comes back again in line 4 where the language deviation “and knocked I have” seems to be in total contradiction with the second part of the line where the speaking voice says “all the world I seize on”. The analysis of the stanza perfectly helps to understand the almost vivid emotional suffering of the speaking voice in that the reader feels he can almost perceive the pain of the speaker. The stylistic choices based on contrast bring together opposing words and feelings that are typical of an inner struggle. Therefore the next step he/she wants to take is to find out what the matter is with him and he has to read on as far as line 11 to discover the mystery as/since only there he will come across the reason of his tragic situation “I love another” and thus “I hate myself”. The curiosity of the reader to be satisfied has to follow the climatic construction of the sonnet since it is only at line 11 that the poet unveils the reason and the mystery of his apparently contradictory feeling, one which all lovers may experiment sooner or later.

**THE WIFE OF BATH**

The Wife of Bath is one of the several pilgrims going to Canterbury. She is introduced in the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales.

The only piece of information the reader can have from the title is that she comes from Bath. He or she can also understand her social status from the word “wife”.

The woman characterisation is built up resorting to different aspects of her personality. In the present paragraph I’m going to illustrate the ways the narrator exploits in order to bring the woman to surface. The first reference plays on irony since Geoffrey Chaucer immediately informs the reader that she is “somewhat deaf”. He also tells about her origin: she comes from bath or the near about. And besides he prizes her skill in clothes making. He also adds that she could compete with the dress-makers from “Ypres and Ghent”, two important towns famous for their clothes and materials in the Finnish countries.

The language used relies on a rhyme scheme that ties lines together that is the rhyming couplet. The reader’s attention is immediately drowned by the narrator’s choice of the typical incipit of fables when he says “There was”. Also he exploits word order the reversal when he says “at making clothes she had a skilful hand” because this is not the ordinary word order. In this way the stressed part of the line is “had a skilful hand” which rhymes with “Ghent”.

On a second moment the narrator indirectly underlines her ambition and vanity. He tells the reader that nobody in the parish dared to go and precede her in the offerings because if somebody did so she would immediately get angry. Such behaviour shows the woman was not really interested in charity but she rather enjoyed always being in the front or on the floor/stage.

The characterisation proceeds/goes on/develops with reference to the way she dresses and the narrator focuses the reader’s attention on two aspects of her dressing style: the first one (“her head dresses of finest woven ground”) highlights the ??? of her style of wearing but immediately after he parodies it because he informs that they weighed a good ten pound.

Furthermore he makes it loud and clear that she used to doing this on Sundays that is on the day when she went to mass and this implies that she wanted everybody to look at her.

In a way or another the narrator’s judgement unveils the double nature of the woman’s behaviour.

Also when the narrator describes/presents her stocking she would wear he insists on the colour red: “the finest scarlet red” makes the effect exaggerated and therefore ridiculous.

The colour is an additional way to underline that whatever the woman did was in excess and therefore once again the narrator wants to convey a critical point of view about the woman to whom he always refers with the noun “The wife of”.

The intelligent reader wonders why a married woman should choose addressing style just under pleasure to focus everybody’s attention on her in the style of today’s “veline”.

Probably she was more interests in attracting men’s attention than in any other possible matter.

The idea is immediately confirmed by the narrator’s description of the way she wore stockings.

He also insists on the money she used to spend on her physical appearance which makes the lady daring and rich. This allows the intelligent reader to understand that the narrator sets the character among the merchants in the middle class, one that had risen constantly in that period.

Again the narrator plays on the woman’s personality since he speaks of her as of a “bold” and “fair”, and this is again the point of irony “red in hue”.

The Wife of Bath is a woman of excesses eve in marriage since she has already had five husbands.

The narrator paradises the figure of the woman when he says “she had been respectable throughout her life” and even when he tells the reader that all her weddings had been religious ones (“married in church”). He seems to suggest that as a man there is a high risk to court her.

Irony is underlined also when the narrator reinforces the woman’s worldly attitude adding “not counting other company in youth”. The narrator concludes his consideration about “The Wife of Bath” reputation saying that there is not even need to discuss about her behaviour.

The characterisation makes now reference to the woman’s passion for travelling: she seems to be continually moving around the world considered that she has been in Jerusalem, Rome, Boulogne, St James of Compostella and Cologne. All places connected with the idea of religion in that they’re all sites of pilgrimages. But not such spiritual bent comes out of Chaucer’s lines as for the wife spirituality and therefore the intelligent reader may rightly suppose she has exchanged religious sites for touristic resorts. The insistence of cataloguing pilgrimage sites adds to the narration irony, because it sounds rather impossible that a still young woman of the period could have visited all those places.

The Wife’s desire to talk and talk with men in particular comes immediately to surface at line 479 when the narrator plays on her pleasure to tell other wondering. The narrator doesn’t hide the double-faced nature of the woman’s behaviour since he metaphorically paradises the way she sits on a horse. She looks more as a trophy. In addition the narrator focuses the reader’s attention on her exaggerated style of dressing even on a horse. He seems to ridicule the woman openly in lines 472-473 once again reinforcing the idea he had alluded at line 407 focusing on her being “gap-teeth”.

The characterisation ends highlighting all of the woman’s wise attitude in giving advices on love matters and the conclusion sticks in the intelligent reader’s smile because Chaucer plays on repetitive double senses to let the reader know the Wife of bath is not at all the respectable woman she professes to be.

After a careful reading activity of the Wife of Bat’s characterisation one can rightly state that in order to make the character memorable the poet plays with different literary devices that range from the intentional rules of the rhyming couplet to the use of metaphorical language to indirectly unveil aspects of the woman’s personality that were not openly accepted during the middle ages.

Indeed the Wife of Bath seems to exhibit all the features that would make men be afraid of women with straight ???. In Chaucer’s opinion such a woman from Bath was clearly an object of desire that he rather present as a toy of pleasure.

Surely she did not at all represent the lend of woman approved of by the mentality of the time: her “gap-teeth” quality, her skill in the “old dance” make her a memorable character.

**MY GALLEY CHARGED WITH FORGETFULNESS**

Right from the first line of the sonnet, that coincides with the title, the reader expects to read about a sad situation considered that the poet uses the verb “to charge” that carries a negative connotation. The verb “to charge” is generally connected to something heavy or to a price you have to pay. Also the contemporary reader wonders why the poet uses the juxtaposition “galley” and “forgetfulness” since one word is a material and concrete while the other refers to an abstract and mental activity. Therefore the reader tries to find out / discover the reason for such association of words. The reading process will unveil the mystery: the galley is a symbol for the speaking voice’s life, one particularly difficult that is compares to the crossing of “sharp seas in winter nights”. The comparison underlines that difficult period the speaker is undergoing is a long one since the poet uses the plural (“nights”) the mood conveyed is negative, heavy and totally pessimistic since the words chosen always refer to a sea that seems to be caught by tempest. The semantic field of the “sharp seas” and “winter nights” is suitable to bring to surface the private, inner and sad feelings of a speaking voice that seems hopeless and powerless in front such environment.

Most Western literature exploits the imagine of the tempest or the shipwreck to hint at difficult phases in people’s life. The first quatrain refers exactly to such a situation: there is an inner enemy, one inside the speaker, that makes his life difficult and “heavy”, without light (“winter nights”). The voice of the quatrain seems to be asking for help in front of his enemy’s cruelness.

It goes without saying that the situation that justifies the existence of the sonnet is the private conflict the man on the galley is fighting between the “rock and rock” that is the impossibility of communication. It follows that the speaking voice is paradoxing one that cannot speak. He is not in control of himself: “my land steered with cruelness”.

The second quatrain repeats the same feeling of unlazyness of the speaking voice that again sound obsessed by incessant thoughts about his “enemy”. In line 5/6 the desperate mood of the speaker is almost tangible. A series of stylistic choices make vivid such desperation. It is conveyed by millions of hyperbolic descriptions such as “endless wind”, “tear the sail”, “forced sights” and “trusty fearfulness" that makes clear/clarifies that there is a gradual linguistic transformation: from a concrete use of lexis the poet moves to the emotional sphere of the speaking voice with the purpose to have the reader feel exactly what the lines suggest.

Now the sonnet shows its “volta” but it is not a positive one. Indeed the sestet provides a totally tragic ending since the speaking voice does not seem to see any possible way out/ escape to his personal situation which is clearly asserted in the last line where the use of the verb “remain despairing” seems to tie present and future without any credible solution.

The poet works intelligently on language relying on hyperbolic expressions/phrases like “a rain of tears” thus attributing a human qualities to a natural aspect as well as the expression “a cloud of dark disdain” underlines once again the obsession of the speaking voice.

Alliteration of sound “r” and “d” make all together such feeling almost concrete.

Even rhyme helps such suggestion since it connects “…” with ignorance a choice of words anticipated by this pessimistic mood and feeling justifies the ending line of the sestet.

Interesting is also to notice the association “the stars” “led me to this pain”. It underlines again that the speaking voice’s enemy is unreturned love, a lord that drive his galley with cruelty.

There is a perfect symmetry between the octave and the sestet as far as coherence the syntactical deviation of the second line of the last tercet clearly expresses that the speaker’s obsession solves the key-position of the verb “drowned” brings even more to surface his total inability to use reason and since he cannot “…” his leading star he cannot even hope to reach his beloved lady’s heart, in short he “remain despairing of the port”.

The sonnet ends with a metaphor where the port becomes the symbol for the lady that has made him one whose life (“my galley”) is “charged with forgetfulness”.

**SONNET 18 - Shall I compare thee to summer’s day?**

The sonnet I’m going to analyse is sonnet 18. It was written by William Shakespeare and it belongs to a collection of sonnets.

From a first reading you can immediately perceive/realize the speaking voice is addressing to an unknown you (“thee”). The sonnet starts posing an immediate question: the speaker wonders whether he has to compare the unknown you to a summer’s day. The Intelligent Reader would like to know the reason why the speaking voice asks that question and it is such curiosity that makes him/her go on reading to find out the identity of the addressee and the reason for such comparison. To satisfy his/her curiosity the reader goes on reading to find a possible answer and understands the sonnets exploits the Elizabethan or Shakespearean structure to send/convey/communicate its message. Indeed the sonnet is organised into three quatrains and a rhyming couplet and therefore he/she expects to discover the three different aspects of a problem or situation the poet is going to present in the three quatrains and the possible solution the speaking voice is probably advancing in the final rhyming couplet.

The question the speaking voice asks is of course a rhetoric question since the speaker does not wait for an answer and therefore there is no communicative gap in the text. The answer immediately makes clear/ clarifies the addressee is better and superior to a summer’s day because during the summer temperature is often hot while the unknown you is “more lovely and more temperate” (line 2).

Right from the very first line of the answer it appears that the speaking voice plays on the mysterious you ‘s superiority: the repetition of more and more on one side presents an addressee who is full of pleasant and positive virtues, on the other creates a phonological parallelism. This highlights the positive qualities of the unknown you who is magnified right for the very first beginning. The speaker has no doubts he is better than a season when Nature is at its most. Indeed summer has got its own natural cycle and therefore lasts for a short time; at the same time “rough winds” do shake “the darling buds of May” (line 3), while the relationship the poet is referring to is more balanced and pleasant.

William Shakespeare exploits the semantic field of Nature to develop his argumentation. He justifies his rhetorical question in a long comparison where his beloved addressee always wins the competition. “Summer”, “winds”, “buds”, “heaven” all together creates a background to which his beloved addressee is continuously compared and whose destiny is always better.

The intelligent reader also realises that the poets stylistic choices to exploit the semantic field of Nature on one side and the field of time on the other (“day”, “more and more”, “May”, “lease”, “too short”, “a date”, “sometime”, “often”, “declines”, “eternal summer”) helps and adds the development of the problematic situation he is going to express.