

Bonny Barbara Allen – First period

Considering the title, the reader immediately notices it plays on alliteration, a rhetorical figure that implies the repetition of consonant sounds (in this case of letters “b” and “n”). In this way, one may expect this poem is a ballad, a form of poetry that uses literary devices such as repetition and alliteration to make the text memorable.

The poem is made up of eight quatrains and it is characterized by a mixture of dialogue and narration.

In the first couplet of the first stanza, the poet gives us some information about the setting: the narration takes place in the West country, during the Martinmas time (on November), “when the green leaves are a-falling”. The narrator creates a sad atmosphere and prepares the reader to the events that are narrated in this ballad.

In the third and in the fourth line, the narrator gives the reader the first information about the story line; a man called Sir John Graeme fell in love with a woman, Barbara Allen.

In the second stanza the narrator's voice is combined with Sir John's servant's one; the Lord sent his servant to Barbara Allen to make her come quickly to his house and the narrator reports his words: “O haste and come to my master dear, gin ye be Barbara Allen”. In this passage the poet makes the servant speak dialect, using some expressions such as “haste” and “gin ye” that aren't used in common English. In this way, the language is used according to what the poem needs to communicate.

On a stylistic level, the second line of the second stanza is connected to the second one of the first stanza by the rhyme between the words “a-falling” and “dwelling”.

In the first three lines of the third stanza the narrator describes Barbara Allen's actions after the servant's coming: she rose up very slowly (in this case the poet plays on the repetition of the word “hooly”, that means slowly), went to the place where Sir John was lying in his bed and drew the curtains by. In the fourth line the narrator reports Barbara Allen's words, that are “Young man, I think you're dying”.

In the fourth stanza, the narrator reports Sir John's (in the first couplet) and Barbara Allen's words (in the second couplet). After the woman's affirmation, Sir John explains her that he's very sick (also in this case the poet uses the repetition of the word “sick”) and all because of her. Barbara's response is very detached; in fact she answers him that it is better for her if he dies, even if his heart is bleeding.

It sounds as if Barbara were not moved in front of his suffering, which is well expressed by the words “blood”, “heart” and “spilling”.

The fifth stanza is entirely characterized by Barbara Allen's words: she invites Sir John to remember when he was drinking in the tavern and slighted her. Also in this case, the poet uses some dialectical expressions to make the dialogue more realistic, such as “dinna ye mind” (don't you remember) and “ye made the healths gae round and round” (your head was turning, that means “you drunk a lot”).

In the sixth stanza the narrator's voice is combined with Sir John's one. He is fighting with death and he's greeting his friends and asking them to be kind to Barbara Allen. This implies she's important for him, even if her attitude was cruel and detached.

His aristocratic social status is underlined by the use of the French word “Adieu”, that distinguishes Sir John's speech from the dialectic expressions of Barbara Allen and the servant.

In the seventh stanza the poet plays on the repetition of the adverb “slowly”, which is synonymous of the word “hooly” used in the third stanza, and this slowness is emphasized by the use of a lot of commas that break the rhythm of the line. Barbara Allen leaves Sir John's room slowly, saying she could not stay with

him until his death. There is also a repetition of letter "s" in the third line, in the words "sighing", "said", "she" and "stay".

The end of the poem is told by the narrator's voice: Barbara Allen is quite near Sir John's house when she hears the church bells ringing because of his death.

In this case, the poet plays on the personification of the bells, whose "jaws" "cry'd, Woe to Barbara Allen". Sir John's benevolence for Barbara Allen contrasts strongly with the woman's maliciousness, which is condemned by the poet in the last couplet of the poem.

Looking at the text, the reader may notice that the name "Barbara Allen" is repeated at the end of the last line of most stanzas; this rhetorical figure is called incremented repetition and its function is to tie stanzas together and to make the ballad memorable.