

Interpretative Notes for “The Wife of Usher’s Well”

There are several levels of information contained within language used in traditional ballads. Much is that of the narrative, but there may be other important points of information which can refer to cultural or historic practices, or may refer to the emotional condition of the characters.

Literal statements may actually indicate a different action, which cannot fully presented due to the constraints of ballad language and the invasive nature a full description would have on the actual narrative of the story within the ballad.

Developed euphemisms may be used to indicate but not state a more visceral event than that which seems to be referred to. In the *Minstrelsy*, Scott seems to have resorted to at least one of these, and may have invented it.

Sometimes, such information may be presented through the use of supra-narrative functions, which operate as an effective shorthand code, implying actions, emotions or the likelihood of a certain outcome, which would not be easily described concisely or within the bounds of a ballad’s verses.

Several forms of these language structures, formulas and formulaic language have been developed within the tradition, in order to contain a full emotive response from a listener, who would often share the knowledge with the singer. To help interpret the subtleties which exist within some ballads, we have provided a list of interpretative points to help pinpoint important moments of action or response within these ballads, or to better explain certain phrases within the narrative or the dialogue

And remember, if words ever seem confusing on the page - always try reading them aloud.

Overview |

Sir Walter Scott was the first to publish this ballad, which came from an old woman who lived in Kirkhill, in West Lothian. The area is now part of Broxburn. There is no physical geography connected to Usher’s Well. Instead, it is a ballad location, such as Garland Town and Strawberry Castle, which cannot be mapped, and the ballad is perhaps all the better for it.

“The Wife of Usher’s Well” is, in effect, a ghost story, with three sons returning to their mother, but not being quite as they appear.

Verses 2 & 3 |

“Whan word came to the carline wife,”

“Whan word came to the carlin wife,”

There are two definitions of the word “carline”, which are relevant to the content of this ballad story. Carline can mean both an old woman and a witch.

For more definitions, go online to the Dictionary of the Scots Language / Dictionar o the Scots Leid: www.dsl.ac.uk

Verses 2 and 3 offer an effective example of ballad lingering. Here, the focus is on the loss of the sons and the fact is lingered over for two verses. These verses also offer an insight into how time is measured in the ballad tradition. Like other aspects of the ballad landscape and created universe, time is measured in units of one and three: one day to three days, one week to three weeks. The other main unit of time is seven years.

Verse 4 |

Scott, in his notes, mentions that the Wife of Usher's Well "had sinned in the same degree with the celebrated Lenoré". Lenoré (also translated as Ellenore and Leonore) is the eponymous heroine of Gottfreid Bürger's poem, which was published in 1774, and which Scott knew intimately, having published a translation of the original German.

While Lenore rails against God in her grief for the possible loss of her true-love William and is taken to her death in a graveyard, it seems that the Wife has greater powers than the heroine of Bürger's poem ever displays. At the very least, the Wife calls out in her grief, demanding the return of her sons, but she may also be a necromancer, casting spells to reclaim her sons.

Verse 5 |

"It fell about the Martinmass,"

Traditionally, the date for Martinmas was the 11th of November.

Verse 7 - 8 |

Although the ballad narrative has indicated that the sons are dead, the characters within the ballad are not party to that information. The returning sons are treated as if they are alive.

Verse 9 - 12 |

Once dawn approaches and the hours of night draw to a close, the sons announce that they must leave their mother's house. One of the sons gives three reasons why they must leave their mother's home: cocks are crowing (indicating that morning has come), dawn is breaking, and the worms are grumbling and complaining. This is a reminder that the ballad dead are not ghosts, but the corporeal dead, which must return to their graves.

The characters of the living are not affected or hurt by the dead sons.