

Interpretative Notes for “The Cruel Sister”

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 |

This is one of the most well-known ballad tales. It exists in the singing traditions of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroës, as well as Scotland and England. Tales with a similar narrative were also recorded throughout Europe, and the ballad itself survived the transatlantic crossing to Canada and North America.

Verses 1- 4 |

These verses provide the backdrop to the events portrayed in the ballad. There is an example of ballad “lingering” in these verses. In verse 1, the knight woos the sisters. His actions are expanded upon in verses 2 and 3.

Verse 4 states the enmity which the elder sister feels towards her sibling.

Verses 5 - 8 |

The violent act, which marks all versions of this ballad, is contained in these verses. The elder sister suggests a walk by a water source, takes her sister's hand and leads her to it, and pushes or throws her into the water.

Verse 8 suggests that the younger sister is thrown in, as a line states that she "dashed her bonnie back to the jaw".

A jaw, here, is a breaking wave.

Verses 9 - 14 |

In these verses, the drowning sisters begs for rescue, offering land and the hand of her suitor William to her sister if she will only save her. Her sister retorts that she will get these things if her sister sinks, and adds that her beauty is one of the reasons that she wishes her dead.

Verse 15 - 19 |

She drowned sister is fished out of a dam by a miller. In verse 18, mention of her fine clothing reflects the beauty of the girl.

Verse 20 - 21 |

In these verses, a passing harper chances upon the body. Verse 21 is not common in the tradition, as it is assumed by the time the musician finds the body, it is reduced to bones.

Verses 22 - 23 |

In these verses, the harper constructs a harp out of the girls breastbone and locks of her yellow hair.

Verses 24 - 28 |

These verses contain the dénouement of the narrative. The harper brings the harp to the hall of the dead girl's father and, left alone, the harp begins to play. It acknowledges the presence of her father, her mother, her brother and her love William, before identifying her sister and implying her guilt in the line "Woe to my sister, false Helen!"