

Interpretative Notes for “Annan Water”

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 |

Verse 2 |

“Gar saddle me the bonny black”

This is a variant of the supra-narrative formula “ Oh saddle me the black the black, / Oh saddle me the brown”. When this formula is used, it indicates that the character calling for a horse is in a desperate hurry.

Verse 3 - 5 |

The narrative lingers on the journey made by the hero. He wears out one horse and continues his ride on another, a grey mare. Very often, desperate rides are highlighted by the character using three horses, very often a black, a brown and a grey. The grey usually takes him (it is almost always a male character) to his target. Here, the narrative only presents two horses, but still offers three lingering verses, focusing on the grey mare. The hero has almost ridden her to destruction when he reaches the Annan.

Verse 6 |

This verse emphasises the danger of the river, which has already been suggested in verse 1, with the line “Annan water’s wading deep”.

Verse 7 |

A male character’s distress is often displayed visually by the buttons bursting off his waistcoat. This is a supra-narrative formula indicating an emotional state, which would not be easily conveyed within the constraints of the ballad verse structure. Another common formula which represents similar fears and emotions is a bleeding nose.

Verse 8 |

The hero drowns in this verse.

Verses 9 -10 |

The narrative voice changes in these verses. Instead of an impartial narrator, the voice would seem to belong to the hero’s true-love.

The “frush saugh wand” refers to fresh wands, that is thin branches, of either the willow or the sallow tree. In this case, it is more probably willow which is meant.