

anything else that is mentioned in the first and last stanzas. Nor does its rhyme scheme (also two rhymed couplets) “fit” the “i-i-a-a ... a-a-i-i” scheme of the other two stanzas.

5

Out on the street when the sun comes up
 Who’s the man on the corner with an empty cup?
 Nobody sees him, and no one cares;
 Nobody seems to know that he’s even there.

This stanza is not, however, random or arbitrary, but closely linked to the first and third. One theme is *time of day*: “when the sun comes up” (5) corresponds to “night” (1) and “day” (9) by its position at the end of the first line of the stanza, and because it identifies a period (or “kind”) of time. The same phrase refers to the transition from night to day, which is the position that this stanza occupies in the song as a whole, which moves from “night” (1) to sunrise (5) and “day” (9). Another link—also transitional—is *location*, which moves from the private space of a bedroom (1-3), to “the street” (5), specifically, “the corner” (6), ending in a (public) “park” (9-12). The second stanza is thus subtly connected to the rest of the song, and forms a thematic transition from the first stanza to the third.

More striking, however, is the apparent incongruity of singing about a beggar in the middle of a song about lost love. The second stanza mentions neither of the former lovers, and its language is more distant, being third person (“the man”, “him”, “he”), rather than first and second (“I”, “you”). Why put an apparent commentary on society’s ignoring the poor³ in the middle of a song about love lost?

If we received the second stanza formatted as the first prose paragraph of a letter, we would understand it quite differently:

Dear Friend:

Out on the street when the sun comes up, who’s the man on the corner with an empty cup? Nobody sees him, and no one cares; nobody seems to know that he’s even there.

...

Most readers of such a letter would expect the next paragraph to ask us to notice our fellow human beings, especially those who are in need or, more specifically, to ask for money for a local soup kitchen, rescue mission, or some other social reclamation project. And if the page were decorated in red and green, we would expect some allusion to Christmas and a request that we give some money to the Salvation Army Santa Claus on the corner.

Such a reading in such a context would be a plausible interpretation of this “paragraph”. But these lines are not the opening paragraph of a letter, nor do they sit alone on a page. The stanza instead lies between two other stanzas, themselves so highly structured and closely linked—verbally, stylistically, and thematically—both to each other and to it, that its metaphoric function and its meaning are clear to the listener or reader.

The point is probably obvious: in the second stanza the metaphor of a beggar’s invisibility describe how the poet feels about being “on his own”, i.e., without his lover. Because she has left him for another, he feels poor,⁴ invisible, and even non-existent to her, and not only to her, but also to everyone else. Although he goes on to say that she does in fact see him (10), she pretends not to, and even changes her position to avoid catching his eye, just as pedestrians avoid eye contact with beggars.

Its thematic isolation makes the imagery of this second stanza effective—the reader must work out its relationship to the rest of the poem, first by recognizing that it is a metaphor (rather than social commentary), and then by asking what the metaphor is *about* (what is being compared to what?). Its obliqueness and apparent opacity lend this stanza its power.⁵

³This could be another biblical allusion (cf. Pr 19.4), or merely reflect common experience (as does, of course, the biblical proverb).

⁴It also alludes to the idea that being in love makes one “rich”, whereas those who lack love are “poor”.

⁵For the purposes of this discussion, the origin of this metaphor does not matter. Did the poet see a homeless person while working on the lyrics? Is the poet writing about his own experience? I.e., has he actually been a beggar? We do not know, nor do we need to know, however interesting we might find the story. See Hildebidle (n.d.).

We see, therefore, that metaphors need not be explicit (unlike “Words are weapons”, “Love is a rose”), nor are they necessarily recognizable by their contents. We further see that statements that could be literal in and of themselves *become* metaphors because of their context;⁶ without that context they would not be metaphorical to anyone except (perhaps) their author; on the other hand, in the right context their metaphoric function is unmistakable, their power nearly irresistible. And finally, we see, as a student—himself an accomplished jazz and R&B musician—said while discussing this song in class, “Man, these cats *really are* writing poetry!”

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⁶This is much like poetic lines, many of which cannot be identified as poetic apart from their context of preceding and following lines.

RESOURCES

Fanté, Ricky. (2004). "It Ain't Easy", on *Rewind*. New York: Virgin Records America. (ASIN: B0001XAOR0).

Hildebidle, John

n.d. "How Does a Poem Mean?" <http://web.mit.edu/lit/www/dutchiamb/howdoesapoemmean.html> (accessed 23.ii.MMX).