The runaway slave at pilgrim’s point analysis

‘ The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,’ by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is a dramatic monologue spoken through the voice of a female runaway slave. Browning was an abolitionist. In this poem, Browning deviates from the traditional values of motherhood and creates a narration where the speaker kills her child, who is a product of this oppressive system. The narrator of this poem recounts the details and circumstances under which she murders her child; the speaker depicts the extent to which slavery has dehumanized and deprived her of her maternal instincts.

The narrator’s tone imbues an overwhelming feeling of unease and eeriness in stanza XIX. The structure of the stanza reveals flaws about this mother-child relationship. First, the rhyme scheme in this stanza, ababcdb, is irregular. Although the first four lines have an alternating rhyme scheme, line 131 ends with the word ‘ mother’ while line 132 ends with the word ‘ child.’[1] The two words do not rhyme and hence create a jagged flow to the stanza. There is something unique about the narrator’s relationship with her child, but up to and including the phrase, ‘ little feet’ (128), the nature of the relationship is unclear. The emphasis on the baby’s feet and the adjective ‘ little,’ is a generic and a common description for a mother to use about her child; however, the next phrase, ‘ that never grew;’ (128) creates alarm and hints at the baby’s fate. A semi-colon is attached to the end of this phrase, which according to The Poetry Handbook is ‘ an intermediate stop’ and provides a means to change topics.[2] The narrator is foreshadowing but does not expand on the brief premonition. The speaker says the baby ‘ beat with his head and feet, / His little feet that never grew; / He struck them out, as it was meet’ (127-129). Consonance perforates these lines—the “ t” sound

is often repeated—forcing readers to enunciate each word carefully. Therefore, even though the phrase “ never grew,” is only two words, the narrator makes sure that it is not overlooked. The meter here generates a steady beat, as it is dominated by iambs. This creates an even beat, which juxtaposes against the unevenness of the rhyme scheme. The line ‘ He struck them out, as it was meet,’ (129) is in iambs, and this song-like beat contributes to the ominous mood. She uses the phrase ‘ like a mother— /’ (131) followed by a dash and a line break. The combination of the punctuation mark and specific lineation displays her inability to complete her thought. The speaker seems to be preoccupied with the word ‘ mother,’ and takes time to regain her speech. While the narrator stresses the second and fourth syllables in the beginning half of ‘ I might have sung,’ she stresses the first and third syllables in the following phrase ‘ like a mother’ (131), which reverses the iambic meter. The noticeable change from iambic meter to trochee creates further friction within the stanza. The notion that the word ‘ mother’ distracts the narrator generates unease. [1] All quotations in this essay are taken from the poem, ‘ The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. [2] J. Lennard, ‘ Punctuation’, in the Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism, John Lennard (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115-116.

In stanza XX, readers observe the occurrence that makes the narrator irate. When the speaker ‘ pull[s] the kerchief close;’ (134) she moves the blanket covering the child. She and the child ‘ look at one another’ (139) for the first time in the passage. The colon, located after the word ‘ close’ (134), represents ‘ the second heaviest stop.’[1] The colon connects the line with

importance, and is significant because it is a warning signal to the reader. She sees the baby’s face when she moves the kerchief. Commas—or short breaks—permeate the line, ‘ More, then, alive, than now he does’ (136). The narrator also changes the verb tense in this line, as she transitions from past to present tense. The word ‘ then’ indicates the past, while the phrase ‘ now he does,’ indicates the present. The speaker is going off on a tangent and becomes distracted. Her mind wanders to the condition of the baby in the present, again warning readers of his tragic fate. The curt question ‘ where?’ (137) is a delineation of her original story, but is poignant and further captures the reader’s attention. The dash before the question indicates her temporary distraction, as she goes from recounting details to unguardedly voicing her concerns by asking a question. Still speaking in the present tense, she exclaims, ‘ Close!’ (138). The narrator snaps back into reality, shown by the use of the exclamation point, and returns to her monologue in the past tense. There is a line break after the phrase, ‘ child and mother,’ (138) and she states that they ‘ do wrong to look at one another’ (139). The primary connection between a child and mother is their mutual gaze, so the compunction the narrator feels when looking at her baby is disquieting. At this point, the relationship between a child and mother under slavery diverges from traditional Victorian familial relationships. The line break after ‘ a child and mother’ (138) magnifies the contrast between the narrator’s relationship with her son and a free woman’s relationship with her child. The words ‘ black’ and ‘ fair’ are stressed in the meter of the last line, ‘ When one is black and one is fair,’ (140). The narrator’s child is at the centre of the conflict between slaves and masters. Her emphasis on the words ‘ black’ and ‘ fair’ highlights her frustration for the difference between the two

populations—slaves are bound by servitude while masters are free. [3] See Lennard, the Poetry Handbook, 115

The narrator exhibits various emotions in stanza XXI. She uses the possessive noun in the phrase ‘ my child’s face’ (142). This is the first time in the passage where she directly acknowledges that the baby is her child, enabling the reader to perceive a visceral emotion of the maternal connection between a child and a mother, regardless of race. This, in effect, magnifies the horror of the infanticide. The narrator expresses her emotions through punctuation. The speaker says, ‘—I tell you all,’ (142) followed by a dash and a line-break. Characteristic of the rest of the poem, she has to push herself along to get through the hard part. She fights against the urge to either forget or not disclose information, shown by the extensive use of punctuation. She uses commas and compounds it with dashes in this phrase, signifying her hesitation. She emphasizes the word ‘ master’ in ‘ master’s look’ (144). The italicization underscores the narrator’s sharp and bitter intonation. Her anger towards her master is manifested by the increase in pauses. The caesurae allow the speaker to breath and calm down before continuing. The narrator says, ‘ the master’s look, that used to fall/On my soul like his lash…or worse!— /’ (144-145). She gains times to think about the ‘ worse’ things the master had done by using an ellipses after the word ‘ lash.’ The exclamation point confirms her acrimonious spirit. The enjambment between the line break ‘ to save it from my curse / I twisted it round in my shawl’ (146-147) contrasts with the lack of fluidity of the rest of the stanza. After the word ‘ Therefore,’ (146) she gathers the courage to fluently and succinctly describe her murder. While the murder makes the

narrator seem deranged, her range of emotions displays humanness and vulnerability. She is not intrinsically crazy—her situation has led her to infanticide. While the murder horrifies Victorian society, it also appeals to women—even mothers—in the Victorian period. The narrator’s story illustrates how slavery effectively destroys the bonds between a mother and her child. Her child’s face reminds the speaker of ‘ the master’s look,’ (144), and she inevitably becomes spiteful when reminded of her oppression. The most primitive instinct of a mother is to protect her child. Slavery has led the speaker to communicate her frustration in the only way she can, by killing her baby, who represents the bridge between black and white people—a link she cannot accept.

The speaker is not entirely insensitive as a mother, as she recounts the death of her baby with fright. In stanza XXII, she states ‘ Till, after a time, he lay, instead, / Too suddenly still and mute. / And I felt, beside, a creeping cold— /’ (150-152). She later says, ‘ As in lifting a leaf of the mango-fruit’ (154). The narrator peppers the stanza with alliteration, using phrases such as ‘ suddenly still’ (151), ‘ creeping cold,’ (152) and ‘ lifting a leaf’ (154). She uses consonance to emphasize “ t” sounds, forcing the reader to enunciate and acknowledge each word. In the line, ‘ I dared to lift up just a fold,’ (153) the meter returns to iambs, restoring the calm after a few hectic lines. She states that ‘ he moaned and trembled’ (148). There is repetition with the first line of stanza XIX where he ‘ moaned and beat’ (127). While in the beginning the baby fought, he is now too weak. The speaker uses the dash in the end of the lines ‘ he shivered from head to foot,’ (149) and ‘ I felt, beside, a creeping cold’ (152). The abundance of commas further indicates that the

narrator is pushing through both her own and the reader’s horror. Her use of the words ‘ shiver’ (149) and ‘ creeping’ (152) elicits chills, and the icy mood of this stanza compares to the eeriness in stanza XIX. The narrator is living out a certain logic that is not necessarily sane, but her diction shows that she is affected by her actions. She uses the word ‘ dare’ (153) to display her vulnerability and fear. She did not simply kill her child and emotionlessly lift the ‘ fold’ (153) to examine the corpse. The speaker feels a ‘ creeping cold’ (152) and hesitates during the line break in an effort to gather courage to see the baby. This indicates she is not entirely devoid of reason or the basic maternal connection with her child.

In the final line of the passage, the narrator uses simile to compare the shawl to the leaf of a ‘ mango-fruit’ (154). Leaves cover and wrap around mangoes, while the insides are tender. The narrator suggests that her baby was sweet. She does not hate her baby; she is just unable to love him, as the baby is too powerful a reminder of her oppression. The narrator’s reaction to the infanticide forces the reader to re-evaluate whether or not she is simply a madwoman; the monologue reveals her despair and societal frustration to be what drives her to the radical action. The narrator, a black woman, was bound by society and lacked control over her life. She unfurls her tragic monologue with conflict, desolation, and desperation. This abolitionist poem appealed to Victorian society because it conveyed the horror of infanticide, a ramification of the narrator’s hard conditions as a slave-woman.

Bibliography

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. ‘ The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,’ lines 127-154. Lennard, John. “ Punctuation.” In The Poetry Handbook. 2nd ed. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005.