

“A Sheep With Green Eyes”: Ambiguity, Identity, and Closure in Fanny Howe’s “Some Day”

Fanny Howe’s poem “Some Day” is a total of 6 lines about an encounter between a person and a sheep. Simple enough as far as topics go, but the meaning of the poem is wholly enigmatic. Some underlying meaning is not hidden in its short lines, there is hardly enough room to hide anything in the lines of the poem:

Some day a sheep with green eyes will meet me
at a door

“Self, come in
and be as vigilant
as the alien you are.”

I will enter with a book in my hand, I’m sure (Howe)

There are only two subjects in the poem, unless there are three, and they meet on either side of a door, maybe. There are any number of interpretations that can be made about “Some Day,” but all of them are just as correct (and incorrect) as any other. The poem’s meaning is not stated or discernible through a close textual reading, in fact the opposite is true; as each word is analyzed and one attempts to attribute meaning to it, all semblance of cogency is lost. In fact, none of the stanzas of the poem are necessarily connected at all. However, to state that the poem loses meaning because of its lack of logical progression, even though it appears to have such a simple narrative structure, would be an evasion of the greater issue: How can a poem as enigmatic as “Some Day” mean anything? Actually, the poem is reader-dependent; much like the way graphic novels take advantage of the closure effect (the natural urge to logically connect two panels), the poem invites the reader to make an informed, yet potentially subconscious, decision about what the poem means to them. “Some Day” does not suffer for meaning, rather, its enigmatic nature allows the reader to project meaning without lessening the experience.

The opening stanza of the poem is explanatory, and states its contents rather matter-of-factly, but very few details can be gleaned from it. The titular phrase, "Some day," opens the first stanza, and may be the clearest construction in the poem. Rather than use the more common phrase, someday, in order to indicate that the events that are the subject of the poem will happen at an indeterminate point in the future, which is itself only certain because of the use of the word "will," Howe separates the word into its two parts (Howe 1). This dichotomy accentuates the ambiguity implied by "Some," making it clear that this is not an event that is or can be prepared for. This word manipulation is in line with Nina Baym's evaluation of Howe's stylistic tendency to "set words loose from their usual moorings," which allows Howe to "explore the nature of consciousness" (801). The meaning of "Some day" is not compromised or transformed by its separation into two words, rather the implication of the phrase is merely skewed toward the ambiguous; Howe does not use coded language, she simply implies meaning using language that defies singular, logical interpretation. The end of the last stanza implies that the speaker will experience an occasion where a sheep will "meet [her]/at a door," but the true meaning of that phrase is utterly incomprehensible (Howe 1-2). There are three options, all of which assume that the door has an owner: Howe's speaker will open the door for the sheep, the sheep will open the door for the speaker, or the speaker and the sheep will meet on the same side of the door, meaning that there must be a third, unacknowledged agent in the poem, but that will be explored in more depth later. The initial interpretation of each of these ambiguous turns of phrase are entirely dependent on the reader's predilections and projection, but since none of the interpretations can be disproven, then any of them are as valid as any other.

Besides the speaker, there is only one other acknowledged agent in the poem, who the speaker knows will meet them on an unspecified side of a door on some indeterminate day. This

other agent, “a sheep with green eyes,” is as enigmatic as the poem itself, with no descriptive details other than its eyes, and no direct mention for the rest of the poem (Howe 1). In fact, all that is truly known is that the sheep will some day meet the speaker at a door. There is enormous symbolic potential surrounding this green-eyed sheep, but the possibility that this could just be a reference to a woolly mammal cannot be discounted either. Symbolically, though, there are quite a few popular uses of sheep, some of the earliest being biblical in nature, like “those who are led by Christ as the Good Shepherd,” and others alluding more to “sheep’s timidity, defencelessness[sic], inoffensiveness, [and] tendency to stray and get lost” (“sheep, n.”). These initial assumptions about the sheep frame the rest of the poem and contextualize the interactions therein, and may make the difference between a Miltonian reading with an Eve-like sheep and an existential identity poem, or even something else entirely. Actually, this would be in line with Howe’s conversion to “Catholicism, a religion whose sense of spiritual mystery deepened her inquiry into the invisible,” but again this would merely be another potential interpretation, based on correlation, which doesn’t necessarily indicate causation (Baym 802). The only descriptor attributed to the sheep is filled with symbolic potential as well; green eyes could be an allusion to any number of things, but some of the most loaded uses of green as a symbol paint it on a spectrum from a sign of envy, frailty, or gullibility to a sign of youth, immaturity, or vibrancy (“green, adj. and n.1”). As stated, this is the only time that the sheep is even acknowledged in the play, let alone described, so making a distinction between any of these potential symbolic meanings is impossible, further supporting the notion that the poem hinges entirely on reader response.

Rather than move on to the second stanza and assume a logical progression of connected ideas, in a poem like “Some Day” where “each line [is] ambiguously connected to what follows”

it is important to understand the closure effect (Baym 801). The assumption for most readers may be that any two stanzas in a single poem are implicitly connected in some way, no matter how extraneously, but this is not necessarily the case. According to Scott McCloud's "Blood in the Gutter," the closure effect allows a reader or consumer of media to take fragmented segments and "*connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality*" (67). When the stanzas of "Some Day" are considered with this effect in mind, their coherence is highly dubious; correct or not, the assumption that the stanzas are connected in any way is just an assumption. The monologue that makes up the second stanza begins with the command "'Self, come in,'" and considering the previous stanza had the three potential agents (the sheep, me, or the ambiguous third agent) it may seem logical to assume that this mysterious "Self" is a reference to one of the three agents (Howe 3). However, the rest of the stanza makes no direct reference to the previous or the next stanza. In fact, "Self" is told to "be as vigilant/ as the alien you are," which could have any number of meanings, not least of which are that an extraterrestrial named Self should be wary of danger (Howe 4-5). Closure is fascinating in precisely this way, "by showing little or nothing of a given scene----and offering only *clues* to the reader----the artist can trigger any number of images in the reader's imagination" (McCloud 86). These images, or interpretations in a purely textual case like "Some Day," are often used as McCloud implies, as tools to help the artist convey intent. Howe employs closure differently; a balance of clues is struck in "Some Day" which allows closure to take place without the implication of a single, correct meaning. If there is not a discernibly correct interpretation of the relationship between the stanzas, then the possibility that the stanzas are not logically connected cannot be ruled out.

For the sake of argument, though, it will be assumed that the stanzas are all logically connected and the dialogue is coming from one of the three potential agents in the poem because the issue of who “I” is and how they relate to “Self” must also be addressed in an intelligible way. Barring the potential that I and self are entirely unrelated as they are in entirely different stanzas, which of the three agents are speaking, and which agent they are referring to as “Self” is another point of ambiguity. In a sense, a certain level of what Zac Schnier describes as pragmatism must be applied in order to discuss the poem in any certain terms, even though Howe’s style is clearly influenced by Abstract Expressionism, which focused on “‘intermediate possibilities’...alternatives to the binary logic” (Schnier 361; 359). Again, there are many possibilities of how “Self” and “I” may be related. If the stanzas are logically connected then the “me” from stanza one and the “I” from stanza two are the same, but “Self from stanza two is an enigma (Howe 1; 6; 3). If the speaker of the poem, “I,” is speaking then they must be addressing either the green-eyed sheep or the unacknowledged third agent, likewise for the sheep speaking, and again for the third agent. One of the more interesting of these options is perhaps the simplest, that “I” is speaking to the sheep, welcoming one of the possible symbolic interpretations of the sheep into its space, physically or spiritually. However, this interpretation is complicated by the third stanza, which speculates “I will enter with a book in my hand, I’m sure,” because if “I” is extending the invitation then why would it then enter (Howe 6). Unless, of course, “I” and the sheep are in some way two parts of a single entity. According to Baym, Howe’s fascination with this “condition of uncertainty and contradiction that extends to the idea of a poetic self-‘the strange Who-ever who goes under the name of ‘I’ in [her] poems’,” is an identifying quality in her work, and the state of ambiguous speakership in “Some Day” certainly utilizes the same principles (801). The converse option, though, that the green-eyed sheep is inviting “I” to enter,

is perhaps the simplest option, the most likely if one were to apply Occam's Razor. Without assuming the presence of the unacknowledged third agent, and taking into account the unlikelihood of "I" both inviting and entering, it is most likely that the sheep is expressing a kinship with a knowledgeable, book-bearing "I," seeking existential revelations through that knowledge. Even this is only editorializing and wild speculation; there are not enough context clues (let alone hard evidence) to support this reading or any other over the rest.

"Some Day" has the potential to drive even the most astute critic to run circles around all of the possible meanings, but at that point the poem's meaning is already lost. The poem means nothing, or at least nothing in particular, and at the same time it could mean anything. Rather than work through Howe's poetry and attempt to debunk or support every possible interpretation, the enigmatic nature of the poem can be realized through a relatively brief survey of the poem's ambiguous symbolism and word choice. In fact, Howe's poetry is so ambiguous in its very nature that it is impossible to tell whether or not the stanzas function as parts of a whole or as individual elements. The traditional structure of poetry triggers the closure effect when moving between stanzas, and the subjects could certainly support a logical connection between them, but the implied relationship is just vague and tenuous enough that the nature of the relationship is impossible to discern if it exists. Even the mysterious "I" of the poem is an enigma, potentially sharing an identity with the sheep, perhaps not, but making that distinction is unimportant for the purpose of analyzing the poem. Asserting that the poem certainly means anything more than nothing is a fool's errand, the only meaning that can be gleaned from "Some Day" is entirely dependent on a reader's personal projections and manifestation of the closure effect, meaning that is entirely subjective, and entirely valid.

Works Cited

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Far from seeing form as the expression of content, they stood the relationship on its head: content was merely the 'motivation' of form, an occasion or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise.Â Though 'ordinary language' is a concept beloved of some Oxford philosophers, the ordinary language of Oxford philosophers has little in common with the ordinary language of Glaswegian dockers.Â This is not perhaps quite as unambiguous as it seems at first sight: does it mean that you must carry a dog on the escalator? are you likely to be banned from the escalator unless you can find some stray mongrel to clutch in your arms on the way up? What I mean is that this approach has certainly given me a better understanding of the 'grammar' - or 'mindset' or 'ethos' or 'gemeingeist' or 'cultural genome' or whatever you want to call it - of Englishness. Now, when I witness some apparently bizarre or ludicrous English behaviour (as I write this, we are in the middle of the Christmas-party season) I can say to myself, for example, 'Ah, yes: typical case of social disease, medicated with alcohol and festive liminality, + humour + moderation'. (I don't usually say it out lou