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Exploration of Theme

In this section, we aim to explore themes in popular literature, poetry, plays, art and music. In doing so, we gain new understandings and learn more through the words of the greats and the potent images of our collective histories. Write in, tell us your interpretations of your favorite works, and feel free to suggest the next piece of culture we research to divine its theme! Contact us! themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org

In this Anniversary installment of this page, we're reprinting our first "Exploration of Theme" article, exploring the history and lyrics of the popular ballad, "Scarborough Fair". Probably the most well-known version is by Simon & Garfunkel. Other popular versions are done by Martin Carthy and Celtic Women.

The origins of the song are vague as it is said to date back to medieval times and to have been written by a traveling bard. These musicians did not claim their work. Many interpretations of the song have been penned down through the centuries. Some speculate that both a woman and a man sang verses which mutually invited the other to do impossible tasks to prove the level of their adoration. Others say that parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme are the ingredients to a late medieval love spell. The interpretation that I found most fascinating and plausible is the one where the singer is a jilted lover whose lady fair has been unfaithful. If she completes the impossible set of tasks he sets before her, then and only then will she be a true love of his. The herbs mentioned in the song were selected with care. Parsley was said in those times to erase bitterness in both a physical and spiritual sense. Sage was to encourage unwavering strength. Rosemary symbolized

faithfulness and one's remembrance. Thyme was for the courage to act nobly, often seen as a symbol worn by knights protecting the realm.

The location of Scarborough Fair, where once there was hosted a vital forty-five day trading event in the 1500's, ties also into the meaning, 'Scarborough Warning' which means without warning. Thus the possible circumstance in the lady's departure. There is a highly romantic melancholy of the rhythm present in the song. Also, in the original lyrics, the man asks his beloved not only to accomplish the impossible for him to restore his faith in her, but he also asks that she return and ask for his hand in marriage which was entirely against the tradition of the time and highly unusual. Find out more research and listen closely the next time you listen to the enchanting melody.

For reference purposes, you can refer to
<http://www.scarboroughfair.de.vu/scarborough.htm>
and
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarborough_Fair

"Love imposes impossible tasks
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Though not more than any heart asks
And I must know she's a true love of mine..."

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