

Before You Read

BALLADS



Make the Connection

The Sensational

THREE DEAD SONS VISIT MOTHER FOR DINNER . . . SLIGHTED WOMAN SPURNS LOVER'S DEATHBED REQUEST . . . MAIDEN HEADED FOR GALLOWES; FAMILY REFUSES HELP. These aren't the latest tabloid headlines or current soap opera summaries; they're the plots of medieval ballads. In the Middle Ages, just as today, certain forms of popular entertainment tended toward the sensational.

Since ballads were the poetry of the people, just as popular music is today, their subjects were predictably popular—domestic tragedy, false love, true love, the absurdity of husband-wife relationships, and the supernatural. Unlike today's music, the ballads were not copyrighted by a singer, but were passed down orally from singer to singer. Using a strong beat and repetition, the ballads were a gift of story passed from performer to performer, from generation to generation.

Quickwrite

Suppose a historian from the future were to analyze today's popular songs. How would the historian describe the music you and your friends enjoy? What subjects dominate the songs? (Are popular songs sensational the way the ballads are?) What inferences



would the historian draw about us and our culture from the analysis of the songs and the stories they tell? Record your thoughts on these pop-music questions.

Elements of Literature

The Refrain

In concerts today a singer may invite the audience to "join in on the chorus." It's probable that a single singer sang the narrative portions of a ballad while the audience joined in on the **refrain**. The use of the refrain contributed to the song's rhythm and often reinforced its theme, but there was another practical reason for the refrain: It allowed the singer, who sang from memory and often improvised, time to think of the next verse.

A refrain is a repeated word, phrase, line, or group of lines.

For more on Refrain, see the *Handbook of Literary Terms*.

Background

The word *ballad* is originally derived from an Old French word meaning "dancing song." Although the English ballads' connection with dance has been lost, it is clear from their meter and their structure that the original ballads were composed to be sung to music.

The ballads as we know them today probably took their form in the fifteenth century, but they were not printed until three hundred years later when Sir Thomas Percy, Sir Walter Scott, and others traveled around the British Isles and collected them from the people who still sang them.



Illumination from a French manuscript of *Romance of the Rose* (detail) (15th century).

British Library, London.



- 670
100
- This ballad is sung in different versions in several countries. The basic story of the song varies little, but Randall is variously known as Donald, Randolph, Ramsay, Ransome, and Durango. Sometimes his last meal consists of fish, sometimes snakes. The dialect of this version is Scottish. This ballad, like many others, is sung entirely as a conversation.

Lord Randall

"O where hae ye been, Lord Randall, my son?
O where hae ye been, my handsome young man?"
"I hae been to the wild wood; mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain° wald lie down."

- 5 "Where gat ye your dinner, Lord Randall, my son?
Where gat ye your dinner, my handsome young man?"
"I din'd wi' my true-love; mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

- "What gat ye to your dinner, Lord Randall, my son?
10 What gat ye to your dinner, my handsome young man?"
"I gat eels boil'd in broo;° mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

- "What became of your bloodhounds, Lord Randall, my son?
What became of your bloodhounds, my handsome young man?"
15 "O they swell'd and they died; mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

- "O I fear ye' are poison'd, Lord Randall, my son!
O I fear ye are poison'd, my handsome young man!"
"O yes! I am poison'd; mother, make my bed soon,
20 For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wald lie down."

4. **fain:** gladly.
11. **broo:** broth.



A knight and his lady feeding a falcon, from a German manuscript (detail) (c. 14th century). Cod. Pal. Germ., 848, Codex Manesse, fol. 249v. Universitätsbibliothek, Heidelberg.

"Edward, Edward" is an international ballad, one found across northern Europe and brought to England and Scotland by travelers and sailors. Sir Thomas Percy, who compiled many of the popular ballads in the 1760s, found the same character in a Swedish ballad and also noted that another version of this ballad appeared with the title "Son Davie, Son Davie." Another collector changed the hero's name to Edward.

Edward, Edward

"Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude,^o
Edward, Edward?

Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude,
And why sae sad gang ye,^o O?"—

5 "O I hae kill'd my hawk sae gude,^o
Mither, mither;

O I hae kill'd my hawk sae gude,
And I had nae mair^o but he, O."

"Your hawk's blude was never sae red,
10 Edward, Edward;

Your hawk's blude was never sae red,
My dear son, I tell thee, O"—

"O I hae kill'd my red-roan steed,
Mither, mither;

15 O I hae kill'd my red-roan steed,
That erst^o was sae fair and free, O."

revere old
"Your steed was auld,^o and ye hae got mair,
Edward, Edward;

Your steed was auld, and ye hae got mair;
20 Some other dule ye dree,^o O"—

"O I hae kill'd my father dear,
Mither, mither;

O I hae kill'd my father dear,
Alas, and wae is me, O!"

25 "And whatten penance will ye dree^o for that,
Edward, Edward?

Whatten penance will ye dree for that?
My dear son, now tell me, O"—

"I'll set my feet in yonder boat,
30 Mither, mither;

I'll set my feet in yonder boat,
And I'll fare over the sea, O."

"And what will ye do wi' your tow'rs and your ha',^o
Edward, Edward?

35 And what will ye do wi' your tow'rs and your ha',
That were sae fair to see, O?"—

1. **brand . . . blude:** sword so drip with blood.

4. **gang ye:** go you.

5. **gude:** good.

8. **nae mair:** no more.

16. **erst:** before.

17. **auld:** old.

20. **dule ye dree:** grief you suffer.

25. **whatten . . . dree:** what punishment for sin will you suffer.

33. **ha':** hall; that is, ancestral home.

LITERATURE AND POP MUSIC

American Folk and Country and Western Music

When English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish people left their homes to settle in America, the old ballads were part of their baggage. Some ballads have changed little since then. When researchers traveled through the southern Appalachian Mountains in the early 1900s to record the songs of the mountain people, they found them singing "John Randolph," a ballad markedly similar to "Lord Randall." On the other hand, "Streets of Laredo," which tells the story of a cowboy dying of a gunshot wound, retains the remnants of its British ancestry only in the line, "Oh beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly." The fife and drum refer to a British military funeral. Even country and folk ballads written in this century tend to repeat the subjects and themes of the old medieval ballads. Consider:

- **ballads with supernatural elements**, such as the country and western song "Phantom 309" about ghost truck drivers;
- **ballads based on actual tragedies**, such as the country and western song "Ballad of the Green Berets" from the Vietnam War era and the folk songs "Birmingham Sunday" from the civil rights struggle of the sixties and "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" about a twentieth-century sea tragedy;
- **ballads about domestic disasters**, such as the country and western song "The Grand Tour," about a singer who tours his home after his wife has left him.

- "I'll let them stand till they doun fa',
Mither, mither; ^{mother}
I'll let them stand till they doun fa',
40 For here never mair maun° I be, O." 40. **maun**: must.
- "And what will ye leave to your ^{children} bairns° and your wife,
Edward, Edward?
And what will ye leave to your bairns and your wife,
When ye gang owre the sea, O?" — 41. **bairns**: children.
- 45 "The world's room: let them beg through life,
Mither, mither;
The world's room: let them beg through life;
For them never mair will I see, O." ^{more}
- 50 "And what will ye leave to your ^{own} ain° mither dear,
Edward, Edward?
And what will ye leave to your ain mither dear,
My dear son, now tell me, O?" — 49. **ain**: own.
- "The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear,
Mither, mither; ^{from}
55 The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear:
Sic° counsels ye gave to me, O!" ^{such} 56. **sic**: such.

The story in this ballad exists in many versions in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East—perhaps illustrating the universal theme called the battle of the sexes. “Goodwife” and “goodman” are terms once applied to married men and women, something like “Mr.” and “Mrs.” today.

The story takes place around November 11—Martinmas, or the feast of St. Martin of Tours, which was usually celebrated with a big meal.



The Chef (15th century). Woodcut.

Get Up and Bar the Door

It fell about the Martinmas time,
And a gay time it was then,
When our goodwife got puddings^o to make,
And she's boild them in the pan.

5 The wind sae cauld blew south and north,
And blew into the floor;
Quoth our goodman to our goodwife,
“Gae out and bar the door.”

“My hand is in my hussyfskap,^o
10 Goodman, as ye may see;
An^o it should nae be barrd this hundred year,
It's no be barrd for me.”

They made a paction tween them twa,
They made it firm and sure,
15 That the first word whaer should speak,
Should rise and bar the door.

Then by there came two gentlemen,
At twelve o'clock at night,
And they could neither see house nor hall,
20 Nor coal nor candle-light.

“Now whether is this a rich man's house,
Or whether it is a poor?”
But neer a word ane^o o them speak,
For barring of the door.

3. **puddings**: sausages, the black ones being made with blood.

9. **hussyfskap** (hu'zif·skep): household chores.

11. **an**: if.

23. **ane**: one.

25 And first they ate the white puddings,
And then they ate the black;
The muckle^o thought the goodwife to hersel,
Yet neer a word she spake.

Then said the one unto the other,
30 “Here, man, tak ye my knife;
Do ye tak aff the auld man's beard,
And I'll kiss the goodwife.”

“But there's nae water in the house,^o
And what shall we do than?”
35 “What ails ye at the pudding-broo,^o
That boils into the pan?”

O up then started our goodman,
An angry man was he:
“Will ye kiss my wife before my een,
40 And scad^o me wi pudding-bree?”^o

Then up and started our goodwife,
Gied three skips on the floor:
“Goodman, you've spoken the foremost word,
Get up and bar the door.”

27. **muckle**: much.

33. **but . . . house**: He probably wants water to soften the husband's beard.

35. **what . . . pudding-broo**: What's wrong with using the pudding broth?

40. **scad**: scald. **bree**: broth.

MAKING MEANINGS

Lord Randall
Edward, Edward
Get Up and Bar the Door

First Thoughts

1. The appeal of the ballads lies partly in what they don't tell you. What questions does each of these songs leave unanswered for you?

Shaping Interpretations

2. What is the emotional effect of the **refrain's** variation in the fifth stanza of "Lord Randall"?
3. Like many ballads, "Lord Randall" and "Edward, Edward" build up suspense with **incremental repetition**: the repetition of lines with a new element introduced each time to advance the story until a climax is reached. At what point in each ballad does the story reach a climax?
4. What could be the implications of Edward's last response to his mother in the final stanza of "Edward, Edward"?
5. How is the possibility of violence combined with ironic humor in "Get Up and Bar the Door"?

Extending the Texts

6. What popular songs or folk ballads do you know that focus on subjects like the ones in these three famous medieval ballads?

Refer to your Quickwrite entry (page 90) for possible ideas.

September, calendar page from the Salting Manuscript, *Hours of Margaret de Foix* (c. 1470–1480).

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



7. People often criticize the media today for glorifying violence. Do you think these ballads, including "Frankie and Johnny" (see *Connections* on page 95), glorify violence by singing about it? Why or why not? Is the issue the same? Discuss your responses.

ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE

Ballads: Popular Poetry

Ballads come from an oral tradition, so there are no strict rules dictating their form. However, a number of characteristics have come to be associated with ballads, and every ballad reflects at least some of them: **supernatural events; sensational, sordid, or tragic subject matter; a refrain; and the omission of details.** The ballad singers also used some of the following conventions:

- **incremental repetition**, to build up suspense. A phrase or sentence is repeated with a new element added each time, until the climax is reached.
- **a question-and-answer format**, in which the facts of a story are gleaned little by little from the answers. Again, this device builds up suspense.
- **conventional phrases**, understood by listeners to have meaning beyond their literal ones. "Make my bed soon" in "Lord Randall" is an example. Whenever a character in a ballad asks someone to make his bed, or to make her bed narrow, it means that the speaker is preparing for death.
- **a strong, simple beat**, with verse forms that are relatively uncomplicated. Ballads were sung for a general, rather than an elitist, audience. Only later, in the era of so-called literary ballads (more sophisticated poems that artfully evoked the atmosphere of the originals), did the rhyme scheme (*abcb*) and meter (a quatrain in which lines of four stresses alternate with lines of three stresses) of the ballad stanza become standard.

Giving an oral performance. With a small group, select a ballad and prepare it for performance. Have an audience **evaluate** your first performance according to **criteria** you all agree on (such as clarity of story, emotional appeal, and so on). Use your audience's evaluations to perfect your final performance.