Ballad

DEFINITION

What is a ballad? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> A ballad is a type of poem that tells a story and was traditionally set to music. English language ballads are typically composed of four-line stanzas that follow an ABCB rhyme scheme.

Some additional key details about ballads:

- The ballad is one of the oldest poetic forms in English.
- There are so many different types of ballad that giving one strict definition to fit all the variations would be nearly impossible. The simplest way to think of a ballad is as a song or poem that tells a story and has a bouncy rhythm and rhyme scheme.
- Traditional ballads are written in a meter called common meter, which consists of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter (eight syllables) with lines of iambic trimeter (six syllables).
- Many ballads have a refrain (a line or stanza that repeats throughout the poem), much like the chorus of modern day songs.

Ballad Pronounciation

Here's how to pronounce ballad: **Bal**-lad

Ballads, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme

Ballads are a type of formal verse, meaning that they tend to have both strict meter and a defined rhyme scheme. For that reason, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of what meter and rhyme scheme are in order to understand ballads. We provide more details about these terms on their own pages, but here's a quick guide:

- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates the rhythm of lines of poetry. Each stress pattern is composed of repeating units (da-**dum**, da-**dum**, da-**dum**, for example) where each unit (da-**dum**) is called a foot. There are different types of feet; for instance, an iamb is a foot with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (de-**fine**), while a trochee has the opposite: a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (**Po**-et). Poetic meters are defined by both the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter that contains five iambs per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).
- **Rhyme scheme:** Poems that make use of end rhymes (rhymes at the end of each line), often do so according to a repeating, predetermined pattern. That pattern is called a rhyme scheme. Rhyme schemes are described using letters of the alphabet, so that each line of verse that corresponds to a specific type of rhyme used in the poem is assigned a letter, beginning with "A." For example, a four-line poem in which the first line rhymes with the third, and the second line rhymes with the fourth has the rhyme scheme "ABAB."

Meter in Ballads

Though the majority of ballads use iambs as their main foot, there is no specific meter required for a ballad. This means that while one ballad might use common meter (and many do), another ballad might use a different sort of meter. Generally speaking, ballads have a consistent meter throughout, so that a ballad in common meter will be common meter all the way through, while a ballad with another meter will use *that* meter all the way through. However, even poems with consistent meter tend to have some mild variations on that meter within them, meaning that a ballad in iambic pentameter will likely contain occasional lines of eleven or more syllables that break the "ten syllables per line" rule of iambic pentameter.

Ballad Rhyme Scheme

The stanzas of a typical ballad follow the rhyme scheme "ABCB." For instance, here's the first stanza of a famous Irish folk ballad entitled "Tam Lin" that exemplifies the traditional ABCB rhyme scheme.

> O I forbid you, maidens all,
> That wear gold in your hair,
> To come or go by Carterhaugh,
> For young Tam Lin is there.

The same ballad has a refrain of six lines that shows how the typical "ABCB" rhyme scheme can be modified for stanzas with more than four lines. The following stanza has a rhyme scheme of ABCBDB.

> Janet has kilted her green kirtle
> A little above her knee,
> And she has braided her yellow hair
> A little above her bree,
> And she's away to Carterhaugh
> As fast as she can hie.

Note: "bree" means "brow," and "hie," means "go." Also, "hie" is pronounced "hee," so it rhymes with "knee" and "bree."

The Evolution of the Ballad

The ballad as a musical and poetic form originated in Europe in the late middle ages—as early as the 14th century—when traveling minstrels popularized the form. Since then, many writers have adapted the ballad to their own vision for new and original compositions. As a result, *many* different types of ballads exist. These

variations can largely be broken up into three main categories that help define the evolution of the ballad:

- **Folk ballads** are traditional ballads (such as "Tam Lin" and "Robin Hood") that existed as an oral (and often musical) tradition before they were recorded in written language. These ballads are, therefore, typically not attributable to any one author. These are some of the oldest ballads, and they tend to tell stories of love and adventure. Folk ballads typically employ common meter. Since the alternating four-stress and three-stress lines of common meter harken back to the seven-stress lines of the Old English epic poem Beowulf, some people speculate that the form of the ballad derives from that poem.
- **Lyrical ballads**, also called "literary ballads," are poems that began to appear in the 18th century as a new variation on the folk ballad. Although the Romantic poets who pioneered the form of the lyrical ballad were inspired by the musical traditions surrounding traditional folk ballads, lyrical ballads have little to do with oral tradition or music. Writers of lyrical ballads from the 18th to the 20th century, such as Coleridge and Poe, continued to use the "bouncy" rhythm of the iamb to tell their stories, but they allowed themselves to stray from always using common meter. In addition, these poets expanded the subject matter of the ballad by using lyrical ballads to tell everyday stories, rather than only stories characterized by excitement or adventure.
- **Modern ballads**: The word ballad is used today to describe many different types of poems and songs that tell stories, but not all modern ballads adhere to the conventions of meter or rhyme schemes that once defined the form. The musical roots of the ballad have, however, endured. Narrative songs—and especially pop songs about love—are often referred to as ballads. While this is a reminder of the ballad's origins, the ballad today enjoys less prestige than it once did when it was considered to be a form whose merit was largely literary rather than musical.

EXAMPLES

The following examples of ballads show several types of variations of the form. To help highlight the structure of each example, we've highlighted all "A" rhymes in green, "B" rhymes in red, and "C" rhymes in yellow.

Folk Ballad: "Barbara Allen"

"Barbara Allen" is a folk ballad that follows the traditional ABCB rhyme scheme. As is usually the case with traditional ballads, the author of this ballad is unknown because the lyrics have been passed down through oral tradition. Like other traditional ballads, "Barbara Allen" is often set to music.

> In Scarlet town, where I was born,
> There was a fair maid dwellin',
> Made every youth cry *Well-a-way!*
> Her name was Barbara Allen.

Lyrical Ballad: "La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad"

John Keats' ballad "La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad" is a perfect example of the lyrical ballad's departure from the form of the traditional ballad. While this poem employs the ABCB rhyme scheme and refrain ("O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms") that are typical of a traditional ballad, Keats' use of meter is unconventional for a ballad—particularly the short fourth lines of each stanza.

> O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
> Alone and palely loitering?
> The sedge has withered from the lake,
> And no birds sing.
>
> O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
> So haggard and so woe-begone?
> The squirrel's granary is full,
> And the harvest's done.

Lyrical Ballad: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's long lyrical ballad "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" employs many different types of meter, but the poem frequently uses common meter (the alternation of iambic tetrameter with iambic trimeter), as in the second stanza below.

> Water, water, every where,
> And all the boards did shrink;
> Water, water, every where,
> Nor any drop to drink.
>
> The very deep did rot – Oh Christ!
> That ever this should be.
> Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs,
> Upon the slimy sea.

Ballad: "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"

Oscar Wilde's famous ballad is based on a six-line stanza instead of the traditional ballad's four-line stanza, and it has an "ABCBDB" rhyme scheme. The poem is written in common meter, which was typical of the traditional ballad.

> And all men kill the thing they love,
> By all let this be heard
> Some do it with a bitter look,
> Some with a flattering word,
> The coward does it with a kiss,
> The brave man with a sword!

Ballad: "Annabel Lee"

Edgar Allen Poe's ballad breaks with convention by using stanzas of varying lengths and a highly irregular meter. However, the poem does employ the typical ABCB rhyme scheme (though it can be ABCBDB or even ABCBDBEB in longer stanzas) and a refrain: "In this kingdom by the sea."

> *I* was a child and *she* was a child,
> In this kingdom by the sea,
> But we loved with a love that was more than love—
> I and my Annabel Lee—
> With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
> Coveted her and me.
>
> And this was the reason that, long ago,
> In this kingdom by the sea,
> A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
> My beautiful Annabel Lee;
> So that her highborn kinsmen came
> And bore her away from me,
> To shut her up in a sepulchre
> In this kingdom by the sea.

Modern Ballad: "Livin' on a Prayer"

Bon Jovi's mega-hit from the 1980s, "Livin' on a Prayer," is a pop ballad: like traditional ballads, it tells a story, it's set to music, and it has a repeating refrain that makes the lyrics stick in your head. The song does not, however, employ the traditional ABCB rhyme scheme. The excerpt below contains the first verse and the song's refrain.

> Once upon a time not so long ago
> Tommy used to work on the docks, union's been on strike
> He's down on his luck, it's tough, so tough
> Gina works the diner all day working for her man
> She brings home her pay, for love, for love
>
> ...
>
> Woah, we're half way there
> Woah, livin' on a prayer
> Take my hand, we'll make it I swear
> Woah, livin' on a prayer

WHY WRITERS USE IT

As the ballad has undergone major shifts in form and content throughout its centuries-long history, the answer to why poets write ballads question differs, primarily based on the era in which a ballad was written. Folk ballads—the oldest form of ballad—were generally transmitted orally, so the repetitive form of the ballad was helpful for memorization. The strict meter and rhyme scheme of folk ballads helped singers and storytellers to remember the words of the poems, as did the recurring sounds of rhymes and the repeating words of refrains. All in all, the traditional ballad was an ideal form for narrative poetry that was transmitted orally because the form made the words so easy to remember. In addition, the communal nature of oral and musical storytelling made the ballad a perfect form for transmitting and preserving a culture's most important stories and myths.

After the advent of printing, though, memorization became less important—poetry was no longer exclusively an oral tradition, nor even the primary means of telling stories. In this context, writers' interest in ballads shifted away from the features that had made this form helpful for oral and musical storytelling, and more towards the form's potential in written language. A writer of this new kind of ballad—which coalesced into its own form of ballad, the lyrical ballad, in the 18th century—would choose a lyrical over a traditional ballad because of its less strict conventions regarding meter and rhyme and, more importantly, because the lyrical ballad took everyday life as its subject matter, rather than the tales of love and adventure that were the typical subjects of the folk ballad. Since writers used lyrical ballads to tell their *own* stories rather than the stories and myths of a broader culture (and because lyrical ballads were written rather than sung), the lyrical ballad was considered to be a more literary form than the traditional ballad. Thus, a writer might choose to write a lyrical ballad because the prestige of the form, combined with its association with the folk ballad, could give power to a commonplace story, placing a writer's own everyday life or observations alongside myths that were immortalized by traditional ballads.

The era of the lyrical ballad is considered to have been the apex of the ballad's literary prestige. While lyrical ballads are still written today, the ballad as a literary form began to lose its prestige during the Victorian era because of its increasing association with sentimentality. This uptick in sentimentality accompanied the return of ballads to their musical roots; rather than poems about everyday life, the term "ballad" began, in the 19th century, to connote something closer to its contemporary meaning, a slow love song. Contemporary ballads, like traditional ballads, use music to talk about love, but they have no strict meter or rhyme scheme. A writer today would be most likely to write a ballad out of the desire to tell an emotional story through song. This, however, is just the most common usage of "ballad"—the term can still be used by poets to describe poetry that tells a story, regardless of its meter and rhyme.

OTHER RESOURCES

- The Wikipedia Page on Ballad: A somewhat technical explanation, with more details about ballads in different cultures.
- The dictionary definition of Ballad: A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of ballad (spoiler: it comes from the French word for "dance").
- **Ballads on Youtube**
  - A rendition of the traditional Irish ballad Tam Lin that gives a sense for the musical and folk traditions behind these types of ballads.

- The original music video for Bon Jovi's "Livin on a Prayer" is a good example of a modern pop ballad.
- An unconventional ballad by Allen Ginsberg can give you a sense for how in modern times "ballad" has become a kind of catch-all phrase that can refer to poems of all sorts of different types.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Bergman, Bennet. "Ballad." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Bergman, Bennet. "Ballad." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/ballad.