Introduction

Ballads

Throughout history, life’s tragedies and comedies—real and fictional—have been depicted in song. Narrative songs called ballads were popular in England and Scotland during the medieval period, particularly among the common people, many of whom could not read or write. The best of the early ballads were transferred orally from one generation to the next. Stories often changed in the retelling, sometimes resulting in dozens of versions of the same ballad.

Popular Entertainment In the Middle Ages, just as today, audiences craved dramatic—even sensational—stories. Typical subjects of ballads included tragic love, domestic conflicts, disastrous wars and shipwrecks, sensational crimes, and the exploits of enterprising outlaws. Later ballads celebrated historical events and romantic heroes of an earlier chivalrous age. Revenge, rebellion, envy, betrayal, and superstition all found thematic expression in the ballad.

Unknown Authorship The ballad genre is thought to be nearly 1,000 years old, with the earliest known ballad dating from about 1300. Because ballads were not written down until the 18th century, early ballads are all anonymous—the names of their composers lost forever in the mists of time.

The Legacy of “Barbara Allan” When waves of English, Irish, and Scottish immigrants settled in the New World during the 18th and 19th centuries, they brought many traditions, including their beloved ballads. Over time, some examples have proven consistently popular, becoming part of the American folk heritage. Among these enduring ballads is “Barbara Allan.” In the 19th century, a young Abraham Lincoln reportedly knew and sang this tale of unrequited love. Much later, during the 1920s and 1930s, famed country singer Bradley Kincaid featured it on his radio broadcasts from Chicago and Boston. In the 1960s, there was a great resurgence of interest in folk music, particularly in ballads. Singers and political activists Bob Dylan and Joan Baez both recorded the legendary song to wide acclaim. Over the years, countless variations of “Barbara Allan” have been discovered in the United States, with roughly 100 variations observed in Virginia alone. Indeed, scholars believe that “Barbara Allan” is the most widespread folk song in the English language.
POETIC FORM: BALLAD

Early English and Scottish ballads are dramatic stories told in song, using the language of common people. These ballads were composed orally and passed on to subsequent generations through numerous retellings. The three ballads in this lesson are written versions of folk songs that date back centuries.

Like works of fiction, ballads have characters and settings. Most examples also include certain conventions, such as

• tragic or sensational subject matter
• a simple plot involving a single incident
• dialogue

Additionally, ballads usually feature four-line stanzas, or quatrains, with rhyming second and fourth lines. The lines are heavily accented, and the stanzas contain repetition of words, phrases, and ideas. In the following example from “Barbara Allan,” observe how the patterns of rhyme and repetition help make the lines musically appealing and easy to remember:

O slowly, slowly rase she up,
To the place where he was lyin',
And when she drew the curtain by,
"Young man, I think you're dyin'."

READING STRATEGY: UNDERSTAND DIALECT

Dialect is a distinct language spoken by a specific group of people from a particular region. In the ballads you are about to read, certain words from Scottish dialect appear—twā, for example, meaning two. To help you understand other examples of dialect in the poems, follow these steps:

• Read each ballad through once, using the notes to help you identify the meaning of each word in dialect, then reread the line in which it appears.

• Paraphrase the events in the section of the poem you are reading to make sure you understand what is happening at that point in the story. Understanding these events can provide a context to help you decipher dialect used in that section of the poem.

Why tell stories in SONG?

From time to time, you’ve probably been infected by an “earworm”—a song that gets stuck in your head and plays over and over and over until you want to scream. Although a nuisance, earworms illustrate what a potent combination rhyme, melody, and lyrics can be—something that no doubt helped ensure the survival of ballads over the centuries.

QUICKWRITE Think of a popular song, radio commercial jingle, or song you remember from your childhood for which you know all or most of the words. Write it down and analyze the elements that make the song so memorable.
It was in and about the Martinmas time,
   When the green leaves were a-fallin’;
That Sir John Graeme in the West Country
   Fell in love with Barbara Allan.

5 He sent his man down through the town
   To the place where she was dwellin’:
   “O haste and come to my master dear,
      Gin ye be Barbara Allan.”

O slowly, slowly rase she up,
10   To the place where he was lyin’,
And when she drew the curtain by:
   “Young man, I think you’re dyin’.”

“O it’s I’m sick, and very, very sick,
15   And ’tis a’ for Barbara Allan.”
“O the better for me ye sal never be,
   Though your heart’s blood were a-spillin’.

“O dinna ye mind, young man,” said she,
20   “When ye the cups were fillin’,
   That ye made the healths gae round and round,
   And slighted Barbara Allan?”

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1 Martinmas: November 11 (St. Martin’s Day).
8 Gin (gīn): if.
9 rase (rāz): rose.
15 sal: shall.
17 dinna ye mind: don’t you remember.
19–20 made . . . Allan: made toasts (drinking to people’s health) but failed to toast Barbara Allan.
He turned his face unto the wall,  
   And death with him was dealin’:  
   “Adieu, adieu, my dear friends all,  
      And be kind to Barbara Allan.”

And slowly, slowly, rase she up,  
   And slowly, slowly left him;  
   And sighing said she could not stay,  
      Since death of life had reft him.

She had not gane a mile but twa,  
   When she heard the dead-bell knellin’,  
      And every jow that the dead-bell ga’ed  
       It cried, “Woe to Barbara Allan!”

“O mother, mother, make my bed,  
   O make it soft and narrow:  
   Since my love died for me today,  
      I’ll die for him tomorrow.”

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23 Adieu: goodbye.

28 reft: deprived.

29 gane (gān): gone; twa: two.

30 dead-bell: a church bell rung to announce a person’s death.

31 jow (jou): stroke; ga’ed: gave.
There are twelve months in all the year,
   As I hear many men say,
But the merriest month in all the year
   Is the merry month of May.

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
   *With a link-a-down and a-day,*
And there he met a silly old woman,
   *Was weeping on the way.*

“What news? what news, thou silly old woman?
   *What news hast thou for me?*”
Said she, “There’s three squires in Nottingham town,
   *Today is condemned to die.*”

“O have they parishes burnt?” he said,
   “Or have they ministers slain?
Or have they robbed any virgin,
   Or with other men’s wives have lain?”

“They have no parishes burnt, good sir,”
   *Nor yet have ministers slain,*
Nor have they robbed any virgin,
   *Nor with other men’s wives have lain.*

“O what have they done?” said bold Robin Hood,
   “I pray thee tell to me.”
“It’s for slaying of the king’s fallow deer,
   *Bearing their longbows with thee.*”

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7 silly: poor; innocent.

11 squires: well-born young men who served as knights’ attendants.

12 dee: die.

23 fallow: yellowish red.

**UNDERSTAND DIALECT**

*Paraphrase* lines 21–24. Why have the three squires been condemned to die?
“Dost thou not mind, old woman,” he said,
   “Since thou made me sup and dine?
By the truth of my body,” quoth bold Robin Hood,
   “You could not tell it in better time.”

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,  
   With a link-a-down and a-day,
And there he met with a silly old palmer,
   Was walking along the highway.

“What news? what news, thou silly old man?  
   What news, I do thee pray?”
Said he, “Three squires in Nottingham town  
   Are condemned to die this day.”

“Come change thine apparel with me, old man,  
   Come change thine apparel for mine.
Here is forty shillings in good silver,  
   Go drink it in beer or wine.”

“O thine apparel is good,” he said,  
   “And mine is ragged and torn.
Wherever you go, wherever you ride,  
   Laugh ne’er an old man to scorn.”

31 palmer: someone who carried a palm leaf to signify that he or she had made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

39 shillings: former English silver coins, each worth 1/20 of a pound.
“Come change thine apparel with me, old churl,
Come change thine apparel with mine:
Here are twenty pieces of good broad gold,
Go feast thy brethren with wine.”

Then he put on the old man’s hat,
It stood full high on the crown:
“The first bold bargain that I come at,
It shall make thee come down.”

Then he put on the old man’s cloak,
Was patched black, blue, and red:
He thought it no shame all the day long
To wear the bags of bread.

Then he put on the old man’s breeks,
Was patched from ballup to side:
“By the truth of my body,” bold Robin can say,
“This man loved little pride.”

Then he put on the old man’s hose,
Were patched from knee to wrist:
“By the truth of my body,” said bold Robin Hood,
“I’d laugh if I had any list.”

Then he put on the old man’s shoes,
Were patched both beneath and aboon:
Then Robin Hood swore a solemn oath,
“It’s good habit that makes a man.”

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
With a link-a-down and a-down,
And there he met with the proud sheriff,
Was walking along the town.

“O Christ you save, O sheriff,” he said,
“O Christ you save and see:
And what will you give to a silly old man
Today will your hangman be?”

“Some suits, some suits,” the sheriff he said,
“Some suits I’ll give to thee;
Some suits, some suits, and pence thirteen,
Today’s a hangman’s fee.”
Then Robin he turns him round about,
And jumps from stock to stone:
“By the truth of my body,” the sheriff he said,
“That’s well jumped, thou nimble old man.”

“I was ne’er a hangman in all my life,
Nor yet intends to trade.
But cursed be he,” said bold Robin,
“That first a hangman was made.

“I’ve a bag for meal, and a bag for malt,
And a bag for barley and corn,
A bag for bread, and a bag for beef,
And a bag for my little small horn.

“I have a horn in my pocket:
I got it from Robin Hood;
And still when I set it to my mouth,
For thee it blows little good.”

“O wind thy horn, thou proud fellow:
Of thee I have no doubt;
I wish that thou give such a blast
Till both thy eyes fall out.”

The first loud blast that he did blow,
He blew both loud and shrill,
A hundred and fifty of Robin Hood’s men
Came riding over the hill.

The next loud blast that he did give,
He blew both loud and amain,
And quickly sixty of Robin Hood’s men
Came shining over the plain.

“O who are those,” the sheriff he said,
“Come tripping over the lea?”
“They’re my attendants,” brave Robin did say,
“They’ll pay a visit to thee.”

They took the gallows from the slack,
They set it in the glen;
They hanged the proud sheriff on that,
Released their own three men.
**Text Analysis**

**BALLAD**

A **ballad** is a story told in song, using the language of common people. Early ballads were composed orally and passed down through retelling. Ballads feature literary elements such as characters, settings, a simple plot, and four-line stanzas called **quatrain**s.

**Directions:** Select one of the three ballads in the lesson. For each poetic convention listed in the chart, provide an example from the ballad.

**Ballad:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventions of a Ballad</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<td>tragic or sensational subject matter</td>
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<tr>
<td>a simple plot</td>
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<tr>
<td>dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>repetition</td>
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Strong, easy to identify characters
Quatrain (stanzas of 4)
Rhyme scheme of ABCB