

Conventions of a ballad

Ballads have strong associations with childhood: much children's poetry comes in ballad form, and English poets traditionally associated ballads with their national childhood as well. Ballads emphasize strong rhythms, repetition of key phrases, and rhymes; if you hear a traditional ballad, you will know that you are hearing a poem. Ballads are meant to be song-like and to remind readers of oral poetry--of parents singing to children, for instance, or of ancient poets reciting their verse to a live audience.

(A side note: contemporary music terminology also uses the term "ballad." In that context, the word describes a genre of "slow songs" in jazz or rock music. Ballads, in other words, are the songs at junior-high dances that make nervous adolescents pair off to sway back and forth arrhythmically or feign interest in, say, the paint chips on the walls of the gym. I do not know how "ballad" acquired that meaning as well as the older and still current one described here.)

Ballads do not have the same formal consistency as some other poetic forms, but one can look for certain characteristics that identify a ballad, including these:

- Simple language. Some ballads, especially older traditional ballads, were composed for audiences of non-specialist hearers or (later) readers. Therefore, they feature language that people can understand without specialist training or repeated readings. When later poets choose to write ballads, regardless of their intended audience, the choice of the ballad form generally implies a similar emphasis on simple language. Sometimes poets write ballads specifically to react against poetry they see as overly intellectual or obscure.
- Stories. Ballads tend to be narrative poems, poems that tell stories, as opposed to lyric poems, which emphasize the emotions of the speaker.
- Ballad stanzas. The traditional ballad stanza consists of four lines, rhymed abcb (or sometimes abab--the key is that the second and fourth lines rhyme). The first and third lines have four stresses, while the second and fourth have three.
- Repetition. A ballad often has a refrain, a repeated section that divides segments of the story. Many ballads also employ incremental repetition, in which a phrase recurs with minor differences as the story progresses. For a classic example of incremental repetition, see the first two lines of each stanza in "Lord Randal."
- Dialogue. As you might expect in a narrative genre, ballads often incorporate multiple characters into their stories. Often, since changes of voice were communicated orally, written transcriptions of oral ballads give little or no indication that the speaker has changed. Writers of literary ballads, the later poems that imitate oral ballads, sometimes play with this convention.
- Third-person objective narration. Ballad narrators usually do not speak in the first person (unless speaking as a character in the story), and they often do not comment on their reactions to the emotional content of the ballad.