

# The English Ballads

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## Abstract -

*The instinct for telling a story in rime and rhythm is nowhere better exhibited than in Ballads. Like the epic, the ballad arises out of folk literature. It is one of the oldest forms in English, of medieval native origin, and is derived from the word "Ballare" which means to dance. Originally a ballad was a song with a strong narrative substance sung to the accompaniment of dancing. The minstrel or the bard would sing the main parts, and the dancers would sing the refrain or certain lines which were frequently repeated. Often it was in the form of a dialogue. Thus the popular ballad had a strong dramatic element and the audience were not merely passive listeners, they danced and sang along with the bard. There was, thus, a strong sense of participation and consequently the entertainment was much greater. Then, gradually it spread to the villages where the strolling singers or the band of singers, to earn their living, moved from one village to another and sang the songs to the accompaniment of a harp or fiddle. The minstrels usually sang in the chimney corner of the farm house or on the village green where a knot of eager listeners would assembled to be entertained. As the ballads generally narrated some local event, they were easily understood by the audience even when they were most illusive loves, battles, or heroic exploits, some supernatural incident or some local event are the chief themes of the ballad.*

**Keywords** - Narrative Poem, Ballads, Historical, Cultural, and Intellectual Growth of Society, Folk, Broadside, Literary Ballads.

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**Characteristics of Ballad** - The Ballad is a short story in verse, originally intended to be sung to an audience. Since it developed at an early stage in man's cultural evolution, its subjects are deeds rather than thoughts, and they are of the simplest kind, such as a memorable feud, a thrilling adventure, a family disaster, love and war, and the life. The tale is usually fierce and tragic and frequently introduces the supernatural. The form of the Ballad has the following characteristics:

1. The poem is written in the Ballad measure, a quatrain in which the first and third lines are four foot iambic (a short syllable followed by a long) and the second and fourth three foot iambic, the latter along rhyming, as in the lines below -

There lived/a wife/at u/her's well.      a 4 feet

A weal/they wife/was she:              b 3 feet

She had/three stout/and stal/wart sons,      c 4 feet

And sent/them o'er/the sea              b 3 feet

Often variations in the number of both syllables and lines are introduced to suit the requirements of the thought.

2. The tale opens abruptly, without any attempt at a systematic introduction. Sometimes it begins with question and answer, which do not state who the speakers are but make the situation quite clear, as in "The Ship of the fiends" -

O where have you been, my long-lost love

This long seven years and mair?

O I'm come again to seek your love

And the vows that yen did swear.

3. It is impersonal in treatment, with nothing to show the writer's identity or personality. It is as though the tale told itself. The epic sometimes has personal touches but the Ballad, never.

4. Often the same lines are repeated from stanza to stanza as a refrain, and stock phrases are freely used. The following stanzas from "The Douglas tragedy illustrate the case -

O they rode on and on they rode,  
And all by the light of the moon,  
Until they came to the wan water,  
And there they lighted down.

O they rode on and on they rode,  
And all by the light of the moon,  
Until they came to his mother's hall,  
And there they lighted down.

The following are the examples of some of the stock phrases (or conventional epithets) used in the Ballads; merry men, milk-white hand, yellow hair, red or blood-red wine, gentle Knight, bonny bride, daughter dear, pretty base, etc.

5. There is no attempt at detail of time or place, the Ballad belonging to a period when both could be ignored or left vague in the interest of the story. As in "The wife of usher's well - "There lived" is sufficient or "It fell". The place, similarly, is regarded as of little moment.

As ballads are not of literary origin, they do not adhere to any fix form or pattern rather they are written according to the needs of the subject. Generally for the purpose of systematic study Ballads are divided into three kinds - the folk/traditional or popular ballad, the broadside ballad and the literary ballads.

**The Folk Ballad** - The folk/traditional/popular ballad is that song which mostly tells a story and is transmitted orally. It was popular among illiterate or only partial literate people. The time period of this ballad can be traced back to the middle ages when the travelling had been very common and people used to gather at one place for entertainment. In the words of M.H. Abrams, "In all probability the initial version of a ballad was composed by a single author, but he or she is unknown; and since each single who learns and repeats and oral ballad is apt to introduce changes in both the text and the tune, it exists in many variant forms. Typically, the popular ballad is dramatic,

condensed and impersonal: The narrator begins with the climatic episodes, tells the story tersely in action and dialogue (sometimes by means of dialogue alone), and tells it without self-reference or the expression of personal attitudes or feelings."

Although many traditional ballads were originated probably in the later middle ages, but were collected first in England in the eighteenth century. Thomas Percy published *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765, which inaugurated wide spread interest in folk literature. However Percy changed the ballads in his own style, yet they inspired romantic poets and later Victorian poets of English Literature. Popular ballads are still being sung in the British Isles and even in remote, rural areas of the United States. Two more collections of later period are important as they widely spread the popularity of folk ballads. These collections are - Francis J. Child's, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98) which includes 305 ballads of variant versions, and Bertrand H Bronson's edited work *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (4 vols, 1959-72).

Traditional ballads also include a variety which is called Border Ballads or fairy Ballads. These were based on incidents taking place along the Anglo-Scottish border in the 15th and 16th centuries dealing with raids, feuds, seductions and elopements between the two sides.

Traditionally all ballads follow the scheme of four line stanzas riming a b c d in ballad measure. Following is the example of famous Robin Hood ballad which tells about the birth, valour and marriage of Robin Hood:

Kind gentlemen, will you be patient awhile?

Ay, and then you shall hear anon

A very good ballad of bold Robin Hood,

And of his brave man, little John.

In Locksley town, in merry Nottinghamshire,

In merry sweet Locksley town,

The bold Robin Hood he was born and was bred

Bold Robin of famous renown.

One famous borderside ballad which tells the Invasion of Britain by Caesar, says -

Dark rolling clouds and driving storms

Obscure the islands of the west

And demons fierce, terrific forms,  
 Their rocky-barrier'd coasts invest  
 Where mid eternal snows they sleep,  
 Watch'd by the never-setting stars,  
 Beyond the confines of the deep,  
 Beyond the tide of caesar's wars.

As time passed the folk ballads, which had oral traditions only, found their place in printed papers and Legouis confirms that "like money in circulation it lost, little by little, its imprint; its salient curves were blunted, and long use gave it a polish, it did not have originally."

**Broadside Ballad** - According to the definition of encyclopedia Britannica, broadside ballad is a descriptive or narrative verse or song, commonly in a single ballad form, on a popular theme, and sung or recited in public places or printed on broadsides for sale in the streets. Thus broadside ballads were printed on one side of a sheet of paper, sung and sold in the streets of London, or carried to towns throughout England by travelling salespeople called "chapmen". Though many of these ballads reported ancient battles, knight and ladies, ghosts, forced marriages, spurned love, tales of outlaw Robin Hood etc, they also often speak about current events, religious issues, wonders and monstrous happenings (such as the birth of deformed children) and other timely topics. Beginning with the sixteenth century, these broadsides were hooked in the streets or at country fairs in Great Britain.

Broadside ballads decorated walls of the paper with the woodcuts of lords and ladies, shepherds, milkmaids, murderers, lovers and such pictures which served as advertisement for the ballads as well as artistic accompaniment. Broadside ballads are a combination of art, music and poetry, and were widely disseminated in England from the 16th to the 18th century.

Following is the example of broadside ballad "The Traders Medley" published by Thomas Durfey, which gives a veritable shopping list of the sort of things one could buy in Restoration England:

Come buy my greens and flowers fine  
 Your houses to adorn  
 I'll grind your knives to please your wives  
 And bravely cut your corns

Ripe strawberries here I have to sell with taffety tarts and pies  
I've brooms to see will please you well  
If you'll believe your eyes.

**The Literary Ballad** - The traditional ballads gradually started losing their charm as we advance to the Neo Classical age where neither writers nor people in general had any inclination towards simplicity, lyrical tone and superstition in their literature. But as a reaction to these qualities of neo-classical poetry when Thomas Percy published the collection of ballads in the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765, the whole lot of romantic poets welcomed these songs of ancient time and gave birth to the literary Ballads, which is a narrative poem written in deliberate imitation of the form, language, and spirit of the traditional ballad. Although the Romantic poets who pioneered the form of literary ballad were inspired by the musical traditions surrounding traditional folk ballads, yet literary ballads had little to do with oral tradition or music. Literary writers of Romantic, Victorian and Modern period of English literature however used the iambic meter to tell their stories but instead of using the common meter of old ballads, these poets used variation in their meter as they expanded their subject matter to tell everyday stories, rather than only stories characterized by excitement or adventure.

Thus, literary ballad which is actually an imitation of the traditional ballad differs from the later on the matter of authorship. The author of the literary ballad is a known personality, while the author of the traditional ballad is anonymous. The author of the traditional ballad may be a common man, a shepherd, a villager or a farmer and moreover his work is strengthened or changed from the addition of other unknown authors from time to time where as time cannot bring about any change in the text of the literary ballad as it is published with name and preserved in hard and soft copies. The poet is the legal owner of his ballads. Literary ballads possessing all the features of traditional ballads are more polished and lengthy when compared with the traditional ballads. John Keats, S.T. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Edgar Allen Poe, Oscar Wilde and more poets of English literature tried their hands of literary ballads and made them immortal through the theme they choose, and the manner in which they depicted their themes.

Ballads carry tales of tragic romance (Edgar Allen Poe's *Annabel Lee*), of the honour of warriors (Rudyard Kipling's "*The Ballad of East and West*") of the despair of poverty (William Butler Yeats' "*The Ballad of Moll Magee*") of the secrets of brewing (Robert Louis Stevenson's "*Heather Ale: A Galloway Legend*"), and of conversations

across the division between life and death (Thomas Hardy's "Her Immortality"). The ballads' combination of narrative propulsion implied melody and archetypal stories are irresistible.

Keats was among the romantic poets that revitalized ballad as a poetic form of literature. In his poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, Keats utilizes the traditional ballad form of measures and meter. In addition, his narrative verse reflects traditional folklore setting of the Middle Ages, with a knight as the main character and kings and princes - all who have been entranced by "*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*". The mournful tone of the poem along with conflict of enchantment and dream scope in opposition to reality is also resonant of traditional balladry -

And there she lulled me asleep,  
 And there I dreamed - Ah! woe betide! -  
 The latest dream I ever dreamt  
 On the cold hill side.  
 I saw pale kings and princes too,  
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;  
 They cried - '*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*  
 Thee hath in thrall'.

**Mock Ballad** - A minor form of the Ballad of art, as in the case of the epic, is the mock Ballad, in which a comic theme is treated with the seriousness appropriate to a Ballad. In everything but its humorous subject, it follows its model closely. Cowper's "*John Gilpin*" is a famous example, William Maginn's "*The Rime of the Ancient Waggoner*" parodying "*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" is another interesting work of Mock Ballad. Here are a few stanzas, describing Waggoner's "fateful" journey with his passengers -

The wain is full, the horses pull,  
 Merrily did we trot  
 Along the bridge, along the road,  
 A jolly crew I wot  
 The night was dark, like Noah's ark,  
 Our wagon moved along;  
 The hail pour'd fast, loved roared the blast,  
 Yet still we moved along

And sung in chorus 'cease loud Borus',  
A very charming song.

'Bravo, bravissimo', I cried,  
The sound was quite elating;  
But in a trice, upon the ice  
We heard the horse skating.

In the Ballad poetry of England we find English and other European societies more organized as structures and the feelings of common men are given importance in these poems. The large variety of ballads shows the growth of language and literature and it also shows the craving of human beings for sharing their views among them. The poets of early ballads are however uneducated men but the clarity of their thoughts and freshness to treat their subjects amaze us and we see growing communal feelings in Europe.

The growth of poetry witness human growth too. The development of man from a crude and rude human being to a person of sophisticated feelings, growing concern for humanity and nature and ultimately the growth of religion for a belief that we are protected by some supreme power and we receive but what we give so we should always be careful for things around us and behave accordingly, is evident from the literature of early and middle ages in Europe/England. The English Ballads deal with historical events or incidents, with local traditions, with personal adventure or achievement in pure objective manner. It also signifies the strong bond of people in a society as well as the feeling of togetherness, concern for each others problems and finding common solutions for them.

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