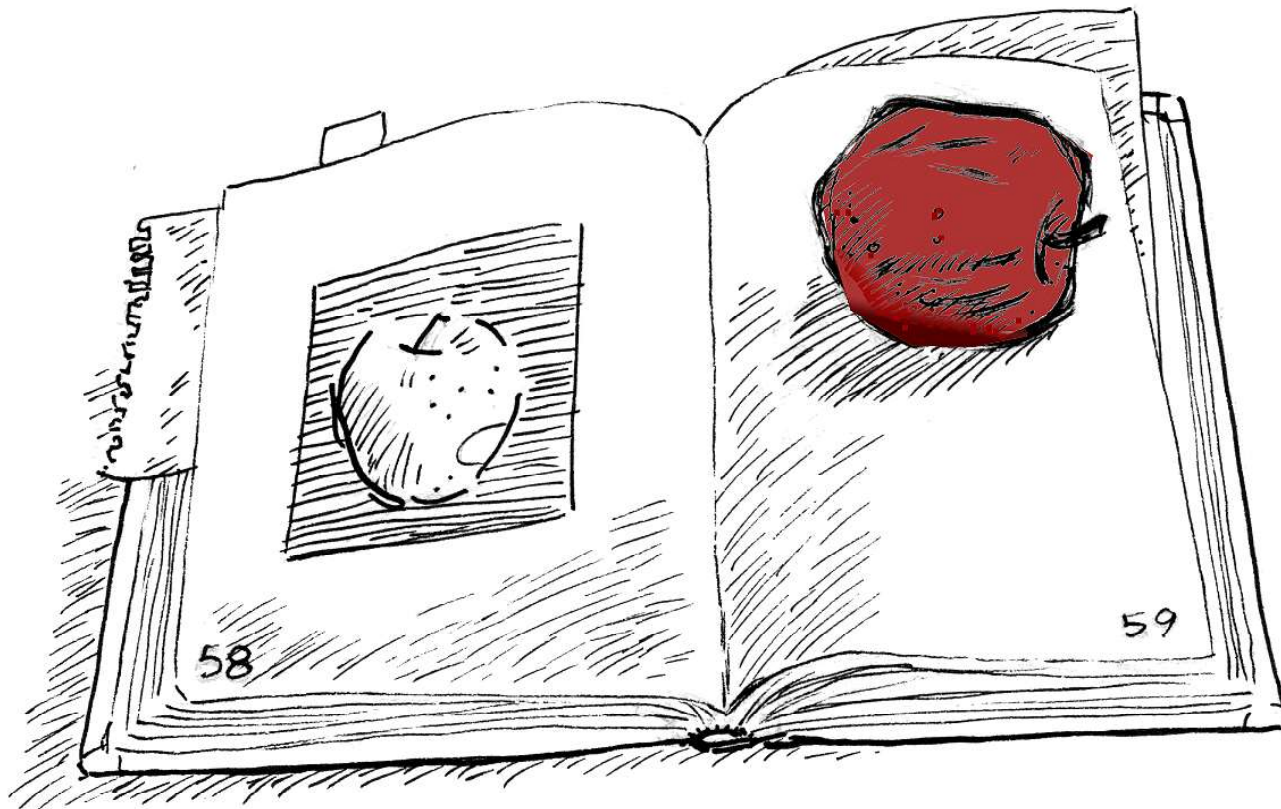


Lyrical Ballads



Lyrical Ballads

Overview: Lyrics from ballads are the beginnings of poetry.

What we call modern verse once began as a natural transition from music lyrics in early centuries of English language.

- Ballads were particularly characteristic of British and Irish popular song *and* poetry from the later medieval period until the 19th century.
- American murder ballads are often versions of older Old World ballads.
- Like folk tales and fables, this form of art describes worlds of reality outside of reality. They seem surreal and illogical because they are based on a story known only to the listeners in past centuries.
- Traditionally these were composed by people who were not literate, nor knowledgeable in formal music methods.
- They created their instruments by hand: penny whistles, drums, bagpipes, fifes, and sometimes fiddles in later years.

Lyrical Ballads

Specific themes:

- Folk Stories
- Drinking / Pub songs
- Sports
- Murder / Crime
- Love < Lost Love or Found Love or First Love

Westron Wynde

Lost Love Ballad

This is an example of a 16th century lyric with an anonymous author; contains a very terse, minimalist rhyme. Referred as the **ballad stanza**.

Follows the rhyme formula A B C B.

Common Meter: 3.5 / 3 / 4.5 / 3.5

Below is a rather short song, “Westron Wynde,” shown with Middle English spellings:

Westron wynde, when wilt thou blow?

(alliteration)

(Then) the small raine— down can raine.

(i.e.: can rain down)

Cryst, if my love were in my armes

And I in my bedde again!

The Unquiet Grave

This piece is an anonymous English ballad.

- Believed to be written in the 1400s.
- A basic reading shows a male figure mourning his love for “twelve month and a day.” At the end of this period of time, the dead woman speaks from the grave, complaining that his weeping is keeping her from a peaceful rest.
- Despite the passage of time, he begs for a kiss— this is intended to show a devotion towards the departed, rather than to be taken as an act of morbidity or perversion. With the logic of folk tales, the dead sometimes are shown locked in a perpetual state of sleep, waiting for the Second Coming.
- Despite his passionate devotion, the woman tells him her kiss would kill him, and most importantly, stop mourning over the loss. She wants him to move on in his life until the proper time for them to be together.

The Unquiet Grave

The rhyme scheme utilized is *not* the typical form for ballads.

Rather, this verse is set in A B A B showing two sets of alternating sounds.

- In an inventive manner, the writer experiments with repetition of key words stressing the theme's subject of grief for a dead loved one.
 - > The word "love" repeats twice as repeating element in stanza one and seven.
 - > Likewise in stanza five the word "lip" repeats.
 - > And also, notice keywords repeat between stanzas throughout

the verse: love (5), day (2), grave (3), sleep (2)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
love	love	day (<i>not up</i>)	grave	lips	green	love
rain	may	speak	sleep	strong	walk	decay
love	grave	grave	lay (<i>not lips</i>)	lips	seen	love
lain	day	sleep	seek	long	stalk	away

I am Stretched on your Grave

This piece is an anonymous Irish ballad.

- Originally written in the 1700s as a poem and later set to music.
- The rhyme scheme follows the pattern of A A B B.
- A basic reading shows another male figure mourning his deceased love.
- This also shows the male speaker terribly lonely and melancholy, lost in common memories.
- In this case, he has remained at the grave site for such a long period of time he has begun to “smell of the earth” — he has lain beside her since the burial. This use of the word earth acts as a bridge between the living and the dead. Due to his obsession, in his weakened state of mind, he is close to death himself being “worn down by the weather.”
- This song is more realistic in the sense the dead girl does not respond back. The poem is locked in the head of the depressed male persona.

Murder Ballads

Murder ballad—is a sub genre where a song is based on a violent situation.

Some modern equivalents:

“Frankie and Johnny”

“Mack the Knife”

“Bohemian Rhapsody”

“Cocaine Blues”

- Typically these ballads are narratives, presenting a loose plot line which details the scene of a murder.
- They can be narrated by an unseen narrative voice, the victims, in ghost form, or the criminals themselves.
- Parallel structure and repetition of the verses is common.

Cocaine Blues

Early one mornin' while makin' the rounds
I took a shot of cocaine and I shot my woman down
I went right home and I went to bed
I stuck that lovin' .44 beneath my head

Got up next mornin' and I grabbed that gun
Took a shot of cocaine and away I run
Made a good run but I ran too slow
They overtook me down in Juarez, Mexico

Late in the hot joints takin' the pills
In walked the sheriff from Jericho Hill
He said Willy Lee your name is not Jack Brown
You're the dirty heck that shot your woman down

Said yes, oh yes my name is Willy Lee
If you've got the warrant just a-read it to me
Shot her down because she made me sore
I thought I was her daddy but she had five more

When I was arrested I was dressed in black
They put me on a train and they took me back
Had no friend for to go my bail
They slapped my dried up carcass in that county jail

Early next mornin' bout a half past nine
I spied the sheriff coming down the line
Ah, and he coughed as he cleared his throat
He said come on you dirty heck into that district court

Into the courtroom my trial began
Where I was handled by twelve honest men
Just before the jury started out
I saw the little judge commence to look about

In about five minutes in walked the man
Holding the verdict in his right hand
The verdict read murder in the first degree
I hollered Lawdy Lawdy, have a mercy on me

The judge he smiled as he picked up his pen
99 years in the Folsom pen
99 years underneath that ground
I can't forget the day I shot that bad bitch down

Come on you've gotta listen unto me
Lay off that whiskey and let that cocaine be

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- written by T. J. "Red" Arnall
 - based on traditional song "Little Sadie" recorded in 1920's
 - notably sung by Johnny Cash; recorded 1968
 - recorded first in 1947