

Our English Heritage: Ballads



English-American Ballads

Eventually the migration to New England began including a more diverse selection of people—not just Puritan/Separatist sects.

- There is no certain time when the demographic change began
- However as established previously, the English culture remained the main influence to the North American colonies.
- Basic cultural literature common between England and America:
 - folklore, myth, and superstition
 - oral stories
 - proverbs, sayings
 - literary classics
 - songs and ballads

English-American Ballads

Ballad overview

- lyrics from ballads are the beginnings of English poetry
- modern verse began as a natural transition from musical lyrics
- American ballads are often versions of older English ballads
- became popular in the Appalachia region of America

Like folk tales and fables, this form of art describes worlds of reality outside of reality. Oftentimes they are surreal and illogical because they are based on a already known story to the listeners, a story which details are lost today.

- traditionally these are composed by people who are not literate
- nor did they know formal musical methods
- they created their instruments by hand (penny whistles, fifes, fiddles, drums)

English-American Ballads

Ballads usually utilize an easy to recognize form:

- quatrain stanzas (4 lines)
- alternating meter of tetrameter and trimeter (4/3/4/3)
- standard rhyme scheme: A/B/C/B.

Because of its basic structure, it easily translates into poetry.

As can be expected, the formula is termed a **Ballad Stanza**.

English-American Ballads

Numerous themes are known to exist:

Common Folk Stories (such as Robin Hood or King Arthur)

Travel / Emigration (travel to New World: North *and* South America)

Sports / Drinking

Murder / Kidnapping

Outlaw

Tragic Stories

Lost Love / Found Love

Historical

Supernatural

Humorous

English-American Ballads

Some songs appear political in scope, criticizing a current monarch's actions in the country, or making commentary about a historical event.

During the nineteenth century, in Europe especially, ballads regarding the Napoleonic Wars were common.

And of course, last but not least, there are the popular drinking ballads, intended to be sung in a pub by a rowdy group of friends.

These are still popular today.

English-American Ballads

A murder ballad

- a sub genre where a song is created, based on a violent situation
- modern equivalents:
 - “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia”
 - “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
- the story is based on a fictional or true crime

English-American Ballads

The plot usually follows an expected formula which details:

- who the victim is
- why the murderer decides to kill him or her
- how the victim is lured to the murder site
- the act itself
- followed by the escape and/or capture of the murderer

Most often the ballad ends with the murderer in jail or on the way to the gallows.

Occasionally the song ends with plea for the listener not to copy the same evils outlined in the song. Murderous women usually burn, while male criminals hang.

Sometimes supernatural revenge appears in the text. In some American versions, this element is left out, more than likely due to some Puritan influences.

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

- written by T. J. "Red" Arnall
- based on traditional song "Little Sadie"
- notably sung by Johnny Cash;
- recorded first in 1947

English-American Ballads

The songs can be narrated by either the surviving victim or the criminal himself.

In some cases the songs are recounted by the ghosts of the murdered.

Parallel structure and repetition of verses is common.

The victim's story may be repeated to three or four different individuals before any action is taken against the murderer.

“The False Lady” is one from New England

- believed to have originated in Scotland
- Scottish version collected in late 1880's by Francis James Child, folklorist
- in the colonies the plot-line shifts slightly:
- in the original, the protagonist is burned at the stake for her actions

English-American Ballads

The False Lady || Anonymous

“Abide, abide, true love,” she said,
“Beg and stay all night,
You shall have pleasure in my room
With a coal and a candle light, light,
 With a coal and a candle light.”

“I won’t abide, you false lady,
And beg and stay all night,
For I have a far better love to enjoy,
When I go home, than you.”

As he stooped over saddle bow
To kiss her lips so sweet,
And with a penknife in her hand,
She wounded him full deep.

“Why woundest me, you false lady,
Why woundest me so sore?
There’s not a doctor in all Scotland
Can heal my mortal wound.”

She awoke her maids in the morning,
Just at the break of day,
Saying, “There’s a dead man in my bed-chamber,
I wish he was away.”

Some took him by the lily-white hands,
And others by the feet,
They threw him into a very deep well,
Full fifty fathoms deep.

“Lie there, lie there, you false young man,
Lie there, lie there alone,
And let the one that you love best
Think you long a-coming home.”

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Oh, then up spoke a pretty little bird,
Sitting in a tree:
“An ill death may you die, lady,
For he had no love but thee.”

“Well, if you had your bow to bend,
Your arrow and your string,
I’d take my wings and away I’d fly,
You’d never see me again.”

“Come down, come down, my pretty little bird,
Sit upon my knee,
For I have a golden cage at home
That I will give to thee.”

“I won’t come down, you false lady,
And sit upon your knee,
For you have slain your own true love,
And I’m sure you would slay me,”

“I wish I had my bow to bend,
My arrow and my string,
I’d shoot you through the very heart,
Among the leaves so green.”

English-American Ballads

“The Three Babes” is an American ballad from the supernatural genre.

In this genre, characters become involved with other-worldly situations:

spirits and other ghostly aspirations visit the Natural World to give counsel or to cause harm depending on circumstances.

- Another common version is known as “The Miracle at Usher’s Well.”
- The plot displays a mother who loses her three children unexpectedly due to a plague. From an act of desperate prayer the spirits of her children visit her on Christmas—but when they do return, it is temporary.
- They refuse the food and drink she offers them, telling her they are expected to return to Christ by the morning.

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The Three Babes || Anonymous

There was a lady of beauty rare,
And children she had three;
She sent them away to the north country
To learn their grammaree*.

They'd not been there so very long,
Scarcely three months and a day,
When there came a sickness all over the land
And took those babes away.

“Ain't there a king in heaven,” she cried,
Who used to wear a crown?
I pray the Lord would me reward,
And send my three babes down.”

It was along about Christmas time,
The nights being clear and cold;
Those three little babes came running down
To their dear mammy's home.

She fixed them a bed in the backmost room,
All covered with clean white sheets;
And over the stuff, a golden one,
That they might soundly sleep.

“Take it off, take it off,” said the oldest one;
“Take it off, we say again.
Oh woe, oh woe, to the wicked world,
So long since pride began.”

* grammaree— in this case the word is not a derivative of “grammar,” but rather means “magic.”

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She fixed a table for them there,
All covered with bread and wine;
“Come eat, come drink, my dear little ones,
Come eat and drink of mine.”

“We do not want your bread, Mammy;
Neither do we want your wine;
For in the morning at the break of day,
With the Savior we must dine.”

- This version has a strong overt religious overtone—one that the original Scottish version lacks.
- Consistent between the two: pattern number of three.
- Expression of parental loss and grief.
- The theme centers around the belief that excessive mourning for the dead is wrong.

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For comparison, here is an early version.

The Wife at Usher's Well || Anonymous

There lived a wife at Usher's Well,
And a wealthy wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And sent them over the sea.

They hadna been a week from her,
A week but barely three,
Whan word came to the carlin wife
That her three sons were gone.

"I wish the wind may never cease,
Nor fashes in the flood,
Till my three sons come hame to me,
In earthly flesh and blood."

It befell about the Martinmass*,
When nights are long and mirk,
The carlin wife's three sons came hame,
And their hats were o the birk*.

It neither grew in syke nor ditch,
Nor yet in ony sheugh;
But at the gates o Paradise,
That birk grew fair enough

"Blow up the fire my maidens,
Bring water from the well;
For a' my house shall feast this night,
Since my three sons are well."

And she has made to them a bed,
She's made it large and wide,
And she's taen her mantle her about,
Sat down at the bed-side.

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Up then crew the red, red, cock,
And up the crew the gray;
The eldest to the youngest said,
“‘Tis time we were away.”

The cock he hadna cawed but once,
And clappd his wings at a’,
When the youngest to the eldest said,
“Brother, we must awa.

“The cock doth craw, the day both daw,
The cahannerin worm doth chide;
Gin we be mist out o our place,
A sair pain we maun bide.

“Fare ye weel, my mother dear!
Fareweel to barn and byre!
And fare ye weel, the bonny lass
That kindles my mother’s fire!”

carlin wife = old woman

fashes = troubles

flood = sea

birk = birch

syke = trench

sheugh = furrow

daw = dawn

channerin = grumbling

byre = cow shed

**martinmas*: November 11, St. Martin’s Day.

birk: Birch protects the dead from the influences of the living, from a tree that grows at the gates of Paradise.