

The Ballad : The Sensational Poem

- SLIGHTED WOMAN SPURNS LOVER'S DEATHBED REQUEST
- MAN DIES - MOTHER SUSPECTS POISON

These aren't the latest tabloid headlines or current soap opera summaries; they're the plots of medieval ballads. In the Middle Ages, just as today, certain forms of popular entertainment tended toward the sensational.

One of the older forms of poetry, the Ballad came to poetry from song. The "Balladeer" was a person who frequently entertained people with music, and he would tell his story in the form of a song, or ballad. The word *ballad* is originally derived from an Old French word meaning "dancing song." Although the English ballads' connection with dance has been lost, it is clear from their meter and their structure that the original ballads were composed to be sung to music.

Since ballads were the poetry of the people, just as popular music is today, their subjects were predictably popular—domestic tragedy, false love, true love, the absurdity of husband-wife relationships, and the supernatural. Unlike today's music, the ballads were not copyrighted by a singer, but were passed down orally from singer to singer. Using a strong beat and repetition, the ballads were a gift of story passed from performer to performer, from generation to generation. Although there weren't any strict rules, the form usually consisted of four-line stanzas, with an *abab* or *abcb* rhyming pattern, and would often include local speech and dialogue to help tell the story.

Poetic Conventions

The ballad singers also used some of the following *poetic conventions*:

- **The Refrain** - In concerts today a singer may invite the audience to "join in on the chorus." It's probable that a singer sang the narrative portions of a ballad while the audience joined in on the **refrain**. The use of the refrain contributed to the song's rhythm and often reinforced its theme, but there was another practical reason for the refrain: It allowed the singer, who sang from memory and often improvised, time to think of the next verse. A **refrain** is a repeated word, phrase, line, or group of lines.
- **Incremental Repetition**, to build up suspense. A phrase or sentence is repeated with a new element added each time, until the climax is reached.
- **A Question-and-Answer Format**, in which the facts of a story are gleaned little by little from the answers. Again, this device builds up suspense.
- **Conventional Phrases**, understood by listeners to have meaning beyond their literal ones. "Make my bed soon" in "Lord Randall" is an example. Whenever a character in a ballad asks someone to make his bed, or to make her bed narrow, it means that the speaker is preparing for death.

Bonny Barbara Allan (Traditional Scottish ballad)

c. 1000-1500 A.D.

It was in and about the Martinmas time,
When the green leaves were afalling,
That Sir John Graeme, in the West Country,
Fell in love with Barbara Allan.

Martinmas – Saint Martin's day
(Nov. 11th)

He sent his men down through the town,
To the place where she was dwelling;
"O haste and come to my master dear,
Gin ye be Barbara Allan."

Gin – if

O hooly, hooly rose she up,
To the place where he was lying,
And when she drew the curtain by:
"Young man, I think you're dying."

Hooly – slowly

"O it's I'm sick, and very, very sick,
And 'tis a' for Barbara Allan." –
"O the better for me ye's never be,
Tho your heart's blood were aspillin'.

ye's – you shall

"O dinna ye mind, young man," said she,
"When ye was in the tavern adrinkin',
That ye made the health gae round and round,
And slighted Barbara Allan?"

Dinna – don't you remember

Health – toasts

He turned his face unto the wall,
And death was with him dealing:
"Adieu, adieu, my dear friends all,
And be kind to Barbara Allan."

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

Reft – deprived

She had not gane a mile but twa,
When she heard the dead-bell ringin',
And every jow that the dead-bell geid,
It cried, "Woe to Barbara Allan!"

Gane – gone, Twa – two

Jow – stroke, Geid – gave

"O mother, mother, make my bed!
O make it saft and narrow!
Since my love died for me today,
I'll die for him tomorrow."

Eleanor Rigby

By John Lennon and Paul McCartney 1966

Ah, look at all the lonely people!
Ah, look at all the lonely people!

Eleanor Rigby
Picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been,
Lives in a dream,
Waits at the window
Wearing a face that she keeps in a jar by the door.
Who is it for?

All the lonely people,
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people,
Where do they all belong?

Father McKenzie,
Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear,
No one comes near
Look at him working,
Darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there.
What does he care?

All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?

Eleanor Rigby
Died in the church and was buried along with her name.
Nobody came.
Father McKenzie,
Wiping the dirt from this hands as he walks from the grave,
No one was saved.

All the lonely people,
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people,
Where do they all belong?

Ah, look at all the lonely people!
Ah, look at all the lonely people!

John Henry – Traditional Appalachian Ballad

Well, John Henry was a little baby
Sittin' on his daddy's knee
He pick up a hammer and a little piece
of steel,
And cried, "Hammer's gonna be the
death of me, Lord, Lord
Hammer's gonna be the death of me"

Now the captain he said to John Henry,
"I'm gonna bring that steam drill 'round
I'm gonna bring that steam drill out on
these tracks
I'm gonna knock that steel on down,
God, God
Gonna knock that steel on down"

John Henry told his captain,
"Lord, man ain't nothin' but a man
Before I let that steam drill beat me
down
I'm gonna die with a hammer in my
hand, Lord, Lord
Die with a hammer in my hand"

John Henry driving on the right side
That steam drill driving on the left
Says, "Before I'll let your steam drill
beat me down
I'm gonna hammer myself to death,
Lord, Lord
I'll hammer my fool self to death"

Well, captain said to John Henry,
"What is that storm I hear?"
John Henry said, "That ain't no storm
Captain, that's just my hammer in the
air, Lord, Lord
That's just my hammer in the air"

John Henry said to his shaker
"Shaker, why don't you sing?
'Cause I'm swingin' thirty pounds from
my hips on down
Yeah, listen to my cold steel ring, Lord,
Lord
Listen to my cold steel ring"

Now John Henry, he hammered in the
mountains
His hammer was striking fire
But he worked so hard, he broke his
heart
John Henry laid his hammer and died,
Lord, Lord
John Henry laid down his hammer and
died

Well, now John Henry, he had him a
woman
By the name of Polly Ann
She walked down to those tracks,
picked up John Henry's hammer
Polly drove steel like a man, Lord, Lord
Polly drove that steel like a man

Well every, every Monday morning
When the bluebird he begin to sing
You can hear John Henry from a mile or
more
You can hear John Henry's hammer
ring, Lord, Lord
You can hear John Henry's hammer
ring

So you can hear John Henry's hammer
ring, Lord, Lord
You can hear John Henry's hammer
ring!