

Definition of Ballad

Before everything else, it is very important to throw light on the etymology of the word *ballad*. Etymologically, the word *ballad* has been taken from Latin word *ballare*, which means *dancing song*. Ballad is a shorter narrative poem, which comprises of short stanzas. F.B Gum has explained the definition of *ballad* as, ***“a poem meant for singing, quite impersonal in material, probably connected in its origins with the communal dance but submitted to a process of oral traditions among people who are free from literary influences and fairly homogeneous in character.”***

Ballad is a short story in verse, which is intended to be sung with the accompaniment of music. It is opposite to the Epic, which is a lengthy story in verse. It is a popular poem among the common folks Southern Appalachian Mountains of America.

What is a Ballad?

Dr. Margaret Yocom defines ballad as:

“Is it defined by its form? by the way it tells a story? by who sings it? by the date of its composition or performance? Is a ballad identical to its text, and, if so, to which text? As you read, note the use of past or present tense, and note how many of these statements propose a cultural location for “ballad” and then cut away as “not ballad” all material that doesn't fit.”

Characteristics of a Ballad

Characteristics of a ballad are as under:

- Every ballad is a short story in verse, which dwells upon only on one particular episode of the story. There is certainly only one episode of the story in a ballad and the poet needs to complete the story within the limits of small number of stanzas. John Keats's ballad **La Belle Dame sans Merci** is an excellent example in this regard.
- Another fundamental characteristic of a ballad is its universal appeal. Every single ballad touches upon a specific subject, which bears universal significance. It's not simply restricted to his personality or his country, rather; it deals with the whole humanity. John Keats's ballad **La Belle Dame sans Merci** convinces the readers that most of the women are perfidious and double-crossing.
- Use of colloquial language is an indispensable feature of a ballad. The poet has a tendency to make use of day-to-day and commons words instead of bombastic and flowery language in the ballad. Read John Keats's ballad **La Belle Dame sans Merci** to know how the poet has used colloquial language in his ballad.
- Unlike other kinds of poems, ballad has an abrupt and unexpected opening. The poem starts all of a sudden, without providing any details about the subject matter. Similarly, the ending of many ballads may also be abrupt and unexpected.
- There are no extra details about the surroundings, atmosphere or environment. The poem starts suddenly and the reader has to visualise the setting himself through the words of the poet. Thus ballads lack in superfluous details.
- Dialogue is also an indispensable feature of a ballad. The story is mostly told through dialogues. Look at of John Keats's ballad **La Belle Dame sans Merci**, which is a complete dialogue between the speaker and the knight.

- Generally, in every ballad, there is a refrain. Refrain is a phrase or a line, which is repeated again and again after a stanza.
- The poet tends to use stock phrases so that it may be easier to be memorized by the readers. That is why; every ballad is easier than any poem to be memorized.
- Use of ballad stanza is another remarkable characteristic of a ballad. Every ballad is written a ballad stanza. Ballad stanza is a stanza, which consists of four lines with **abcb rhyme scheme**. There are four accented syllables in the first and third line, while in the second and the fourth lines there are three accented syllables.
- Use of supernatural elements is an imperative feature of a ballad. Johan Keats and Coleridge's ballads are best examples in this regard.
- Usually, the themes of most ballads are tragic, but it must be kept in mind that there are some ballads, which are comic in nature.
- Simplicity is an additional characteristic of a ballad. Approximately, all ballads are simple in structure, style and diction, which make them the most popular form of poetry. Look at the ballads of John Keats and Coleridge! They are very easy to be comprehended and remembered.

Types of Ballad

There are two kinds of ballads, which are discussed in details:

1. Folk or Traditional Ballad

Folk or traditional ballad is a kind of ballad, which was developed by anonymous poets in the ancient times and handed down to our generation by word of mouth. It has no written form. It is a verbal sort of poetry, which underwent reasonable changes during the course of time due to new circumstances and conditions. In every new age, it altered a lot and absorbed many traits of the contemporary age. Legouis asserts 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.”*** The traditional ballad had no single author, rather; it was the product of many poets. It is pertinent to mention here that nobody knows about the author of the traditional ballads. The *Nut-Brown Maid* and *Chevy Chase* are excellent examples in this regard. Look at the first three stanzas of *Chevy Chase*:

Chevy Chase

*GOD prosper long our noble king,
our liffes 1 and saftyes all!
A woefull hunting once there did
in Chevy Chase befall.
To driue the deere with hound and horne
Erle Percy took the way:
The child may rue that is vnborne
the hunting of that day!
The stout Erle of Northumberland
a vow to God did make
His pleasure in the Scottish woods
three sommers days to take.*

2. Literary Ballad

Literary ballad is actually an imitation of the traditional ballad. The only difference between the two ballads is the 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 or a shepherd, villager or a farmer. Nobody knows about the real author of the traditional ballad. Moreover, time cannot bring about any change in the text of the literary ballad as it is preserved in hard and soft copies. The poet is the legal owner of his ballads. Literary ballads are more polished and lengthy when compared with the traditional ballads. Literary ballads possess all the remaining features of the traditional ballad. John Keats, Samuel Coleridge, Wordsworth and many other poets excelled in balladry. For instance, look at John Keats's ballad *La Belle Dame sans Merci*:

La Belle Dame sans Merci

*O WHAT can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.
O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms!
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.
I see a lily on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.
I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.
I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look'd at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.
I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.
She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
"I love thee true."
She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept, and sigh'd fill sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.
And there she lulled me asleep,*

*And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill's side.
I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—"La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!"
I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.
And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.*

(La Belle Dame sans Merci by John Keats)

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