



# Ballad

The ballad has its humble beginnings in song. Before poetry was written down, it was recited or sung. One person would learn the

songs from another and in turn pass them

on as part of an oral tradition that spanned generations.

The ballad originated as folk music -- a form which proved so popular that, even when poets began writing their verses down, they kept writing ballads. Today, you will often hear slow songs or love songs referred to by that name.

The form is easy to pick up. Each stanza is a quatrain (four lines long) with the following rhyme and rhythm:

<u>Rhythm</u>	<u>Rhyme</u>
Line 1 -- iambic tetrameter (4 iambic feet): U/ U/ U/ U/	<b>a</b>
Line 2 -- iambic trimeter (3 iambic feet): U/ U/ U/	<b>b</b>
Line 3 -- iambic tetrameter (4 iambic feet): U/ U/ U/ U/	<b>c</b>
Line 4 -- iambic trimeter (3 iambic feet): U/ U/ U/	<b>b</b>

An alternative rhyme scheme is **abab**. Furthermore, you can have as many stanzas as you want.

Writing the first one is the most difficult, but once you get that duh Da, duh Da, duh Da, duh Da rhythm in your head you will find that ballads are quite easy to compose. Armed with that rhythm and rhyme scheme, I wrote my first ballad at the age of eleven:

“The world’s an open book,” he said,  
“A wealth of things to learn,  
Great volumes waiting to be read,  
Great knowledge to be earned.

The rising sun -- a new day comes  
With prospects ever great.  
With much to see and learn and do  
Then why procrastinate?”

It is worth pausing here to note that early ballads tended to share a common set of characteristics. These include:

- Cliché -- a cliché is an idea or phrase that has become trite from overuse. Older examples of ballad poetry contain a lot of clichés. We see quite a few milk-white steeds, rosy-red lips and lily-white hands. Whether or not you use clichés in your ballads is up to you. Normally, in writing poetry, I would advise you to steer as far away from cliché as possible. The best poetry doesn’t need it -- it has an honesty and originality that would be compromised by trite images and phrases. Cliché can be as deadly to poetry as hyperbole. But, and there is always a “but”, you may wish to write an old style ballad, and why not? In which case milk-white steeds are entirely appropriate. So here is a general rule of thumb: avoid clichés unless you are writing in the old style or using them to add comic effect.
- Originally, most ballads were about war, feuds and tragic love, but they were not limited to these topics. Ballads tend to focus on local events and people; even when they sing of wars between nations, they are singing about Johnny, the boy next door who has gone off a-soldiering.
- The language is simple, not overly intellectual. Words like ‘esoteric’,

'rhetorical', and 'theoretically' are out of place within the ballad.

You can, however, use flowery language which you should use as you would a cliché.

- Longer ballads sometimes have refrains – a line or even a whole stanza that you keep coming back to.
- Ballads tell a story. They are dramatic and tell their tale through action and dialogue. They tend to jump right into the action. There are no long introductions and explanations. You start in the midst of things.
- The narrator, the person telling the story, adopts an attitude that Basho would have applauded: one of non-involvement. The narrator does not tell his own story, but someone else's. He does not judge or make comment. He just, to use another cliché, "tells it like it is."
- And finally, there are many examples of free-form ballads that use different rhythms and rhyme schemes. I know, I sound like a parrot: "Rrrack! Rrrack! Throw the rule book away! Polly want a cracker!" But it's true. So to help you along, I've included both strict and free-form ballads. First here are some of my own.

### The Molly Maguires

Hot tempers and strong arms they had

Who worked Centralia's mines.

All day they laboured underground

Where ne'er the sun does shine.

So many died when walls caved in,

Entombed there where they fell.

Coal dust they breathed ate at their lungs

“More death,” sang the church bell.

For this there was no real reward,  
Scant wages -- take away  
The cost, Patrick, of the new pick  
You broke at work today.

Hot tempers and strong arms they had --  
They formed an angry gang.  
A reign of terror they unleashed,  
Though for it they might hang.

An ageing priest called out for peace --  
Condemned their savage deeds.  
Anger that hot will always find  
The victim that it needs.

They beat the priest with wooden clubs --  
Left him to wait for Death.  
But he did not pass quietly  
And with his final breath

He cursed the town, cursed it to hell  
That all may see and learn  
Hell-fire is the wage of sin --  
Forever may they burn.



That was in 1862  
The strong-armed men in time  
Each died by way of hangman's noose  
As it befit their crimes.

More than one hundred years had passed  
Until one fateful night  
Someone burned rubbish down the shaft  
And set the coal alight.

The main coal seam was burning now  
Beneath the quiet town.  
It undermined foundations and  
Would bring the houses down.

It killed the trees by burning roots.  
Vents opened in the ground  
And flames leapt up and sulfur smoke  
Choked all the land around.

The fire rages on there still --  
The land's as grey as ash.  
How strange it took so long until  
That death curse came to pass.

## From the Trenches

As James surveyed the battlefield  
Beneath a clear blue sky  
He wondered how the day would end  
And who would live and die.

There was no life in No Man's Land --  
No birds to sing for mirth --  
Just ridges stitched with barbed wire  
Across the blasted earth.

Across this wasteland long and wide,  
With jagged, panting breath,  
The living now must run and fight  
Their bullets raining death.

He wishes to kill nothing now,  
Nor does he want to die.  
"Advance!" the Sergeant shouts. He does  
Beneath the clear blue sky.



### The Viewing

He lays there still and quiet now  
His eyes are closed in sleep.  
I do not try to waken him  
From slumbering so deep.

His skin looks strange, like made of wax  
His chest won't rise in breath.  
He doesn't look quite real at all --  
But that's the look of death.

### Tragic Love

In days of old when faithless love  
Abandoned lady fair  
She'd grieve as though her soul was crushed  
Beneath her weighty cares.

The poets tell us she would lie  
As beautiful as art  
And close her eyes a final time  
And die of broken heart.

It is a more pragmatic age  
Now in this present day:  
When love's sharp barbs fill girlish hearts  
With anger and dismay,

They know their wounds will mend one day,  
They'll find another man  
And if the jerk comes crawling back  
They say, "Talk to the hand."

### A Wakeful Night

When human eyes are closed in sleep  
The forests come awake.  
To hawk for bugs, on paper wings  
The bats skim o'er the lake.

The fox crawls from her earthy den  
To watch her off-spring play.  
The hedgehog digs in open space  
That it will shun by day.

The crickets sing their high-pitched song  
Amidst the barks of deer,  
The rustles of the underbrush,  
The screams of injured hare.

It is a lively company  
The forest creatures keep  
As they give birth and hunt and die  
While mankind lies asleep.





## The Spider

The smallest tremor of the web --

A silent call to rise:

I feel vibrations through eight feet

And turn my eight large eyes

To find the fly held by the strands--

His frantic wing-beats will

Exhaust what strength remains in him,

Make for an easy kill.

By fang and silk my kind live on,

By skilful weavers' art,

Urged on by hunger's drumbeat slow

As any beating heart.



I have a confession to make. Since writing that one ballad at the age of eleven, I hadn't written another one in the last 33 years. So I was a bit nervous about writing some for you. In the examples above, I stuck religiously to the formula, alternating lines of iambic tetrameter with iambic trimeter over and over again. It was hard at first, but once you get used to a ballad rhythm, the steady rise and fall of the lines, it becomes a lot easier and the words just flow. However, as I said before, many poets do not stick to the formula (Surprise!). Here are examples by the masters to show you just how different ballads can be. I include them here (after my own work) because these guys are a tough act to follow. Wisely, I chose not to...

She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways

~William Wordsworth.

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
--Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me!

Excerpts from La Belle Dame Sans Merci

(Translation: The Beautiful Woman without Mercy)

~John Keats

“O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing....

“I see a lily on thy brow  
    With anguish moist and fever dew,  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
    Fast withered 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....

And there she lulled me asleep,  
    And there I dreamed -- ah! woe betide!  
The latest dream I ever dreamed  
    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 starv'd 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 withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

Excerpts from Lord Randal

~ Author Unknown

“O where have you been, Lord Randal, my son?  
O where have you been, my handsome young man?” --  
“I have been to the wild wood; mother, make my bed soon,  
For I’m weary with hunting, and fain would lie down.”

“Who gave you your dinner, Lord Randal my son?  
Who gave you your dinner, my handsome young man?” --  
“I dined with my sweetheart; mother, make my bed soon,  
For I’m weary with hunting, and fain would lie down.”...

“And where are your bloodhounds, Lord Randal, my son?  
And where are your bloodhounds, my handsome young man?”--  
“O they swelled and they died; mother, make my bed soon,  
For I’m weary with hunting, and fain would lie down.”

“O I fear you are poisoned, Lord Randal, my son!  
O I fear you are poisoned, my handsome young!” --  
“O yes! I am poisoned; mother, make my bed soon,  
For I’m sick at the heart, and I fain would lie down.”

These poems are wonderful, but don't be intimidated by them. There was a time when Wordsworth, just like you, had yet to write his first ballad -- and he probably ended up binning it. So relax and have a go....