

Lesson Plan: The Tabloid Ballad

Periods: 1; an optional second, if you want to separate the writing and performance of the ballads into two days

NCTE standards: 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 12

INTRODUCTION

To many students, the word “ballad” will call to mind a slow, probably sentimental song: anything from the Plain White T’s “Hey There Delilah,” to Alicia Keys’ “Like I’ll Never See You Again,” or Taylor Swift’s “Love Story.” In the world of poetry, however, a ballad is a lively storytelling poem written in what is called the **ballad stanza**.

The ballad stanza is simple to illustrate and recognize, and not very hard to describe. In its most familiar version, the ballad stanza is four lines of alternating four-beat (tetrameter) and three-beat (trimeter) verse, with the second line rhyming with the fourth. Students may recognize this form from the theme song to “Gilligan’s Island,” written out here with the accented syllables (the “beats”) in capital letters:

Just SIT right BACK and you’ll HEAR a TALE,
A TALE of a FATEful TRIP
That STARTed FROM this TROPic PORT
A-BOARD this TIny SHIP.

Or they may remember it from “The Owl and the Pussy-Cat,” by Edward Lear:

They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon...

And although the four-beat and three-beat lines have been combined into one long 7-beat line—a change in the layout, but not in the sound—they will hear it in Robert W. Service’s “The Shooting of Dan McGrew”:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune;
Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
And watching his luck was his light-o’-love, the lady that’s known as Lou.

This might just as well be written out as:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up
In the Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box
was hitting a jag-time tune;
Back of the bar, in a solo game,
sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
And watching his luck was his light-o'-love,
the lady that's known as Lou.

Now it looks like the ballad it is.

This lesson will teach your students about the typical metrical forms of the ballad (how they sound), and the typical **narrative moves** of the ballad (how they tell their stories), by having them write ballads based on comic, even outrageous source material. In doing this, they will join a long tradition of sensationalist journalism written in ballad form: the tradition of “**broadside ballads**,” like the one that Shakespeare mocks in *The Winter's Tale*—

Here's another ballad of a fish that appeared upon the coast on Wednesday the fourscore of April, forty thousand fathom above water, and sung this ballad against the hard hearts of maids. It was thought she was a woman and was turned into a cold fish for she would not exchange flesh with the one that loved her. This ballad is very pitiful and true.

—or like this one, whose description appears in Robert Graves' *English and Scottish Ballads*:

A most miraculous strange and trewe ballad of a maid now dwelling at the town of Meurs in Dutchland, that hath not taken any food this 16 years and is not yet neither hungry nor thirsty: the which maid hath lately been presented to the Lady Elizabeth the King's daughter of England. This song was made by the maid herself and now translated into English.

Stories like this now find themselves told in *The Weekly World News* and other outrageous supermarket tabloids. Your students will turn the clock back, and rewrite them as ballads.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will have opportunities to:

- Listen to the sounds of several ballads being spoken
- Listen to how ballads tell stories
- Learn to hear, and to write, the typical rhythms of the four-line ballad stanza, with optional variations
- Write a comic ballad themselves, using those rhythms and narrative structures

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MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

To teach this lesson you will need:

- The Poetry Out Loud CD or access to the online Poetry Out Loud Audio Guide
- A CD player or computer
- Copies of supermarket tabloid articles, either in the newspapers themselves (*The Weekly World News*, *The Star*, *The National Enquirer*, and so on) or clipped selectively from the papers by you, or in an anthology of such stories like *Bat Boy Lives! The WEEKLY WORLD NEWS Guide to Politics, Culture, Celebrities, Alien Abductions, and the Mutant Freaks that Shape Our World*, available in the Humor section of many bookstores
- Optional: computer access, so that students can read ballads from the Poetry Out Loud online anthology

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

1. Introduce students to the term “ballad,” and explain the difference between what this term means when describing popular music—a slow, usually sentimental song—and the more technical meanings it has when describing a poem.

You will want them to know that the ballad is a lively storytelling form of poetry, and that this story typically gets told in a particular way:

- Ballads start quickly, without much introduction or narration, as in the famous opening of “Sir Patrick Spens”:

The king sits in Dumferling town
Drinking the blude-reid wine:
‘O whar will I get a guid sailor
To sail this ship of mine?’

Why is the king in Dumferling town? What sort of party is this? Why does he need a good sailor? The ballad plunges into its subject, and leaves us with questions.

- Ballads often jump from scene to scene as they move from stanza to stanza, without much exposition or narrative to connect the events.
- Often, ballads use dialogue, rather than narration, to advance the plot.
- Ballads often feature repeated refrain-lines, which may be nonsense (“fol-de-rol-de-rolly-o”) or details that the poem returns to obsessively (“in this kingdom by the sea,” or “of the beautiful Annabel Lee”).
- The narrator generally remains anonymous and unidentified, so that our focus stays on the story, rather than on the storyteller.

You will want them to know the most basic ballad stanza: alternating 4-beat and 3-beat lines, with the second line rhyming with the fourth, as in the examples in the Introduction.

You may want to show them a few common variations on the basic ballad stanza.

- In “Jabberwocky,” Lewis Carroll writes stanzas of 4-beat lines with alternating rhymes, so that line 1 rhymes with line 3, and line 2 with line 4, like this:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”

- In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” John Keats writes ballad stanzas made of three 4-beat lines, and then a 2-beat closing line, like this:

I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a fairy’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 looked at me as she did love,
And MADE sweet MOAN.

- Edwin Arlington Robinson uses the same ballad stanza as Keats in “Miniver Cheevy”:

Miniver loved the days of old
When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
Would SET him DANcing.

Miniver sighed for what was not,
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,
And PRIam’s NEIGHbors.

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- Edgar Allan Poe adds an extra pair of lines to the ballad stanzas of “Annabel Lee,” mostly continuing the rhythmic alternation of 4- and 3-beat lines:

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

What’s most important is for students to get the sound of the ballad in their ears, and to learn that ballads tell stories in a particularly lively, scene-by-scene style.

2. To help students hear the sound of the ballad, play “Jabberwocky” (track 8 on the CD), and the selections from “Annabel Lee” (track 30). To help students hear the sound of the ballad when they read it from a page, you may wish to have them look at some ballads on the Poetry Out Loud website as well. The following poems are in ballad stanzas, with some variation:

- “Miniver Cheevy,” by Edwin Arlington Robinson
- “Annabel Lee,” by Edgar Allan Poe
- “A Red, Red Rose,” by Robert Burns
- “It Couldn’t Be Done,” by Edgar Albert Guest
- “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” by John Keats
- “Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight,” by A. Yvor Winters
- “The Birth of John Henry,” by Melvin B. Tolson
- “The Listeners,” by Walter de la Mare

3. Set out the supermarket tabloids or tabloid articles that you have gathered, and let students cut out or photocopy the articles they wish to write about. If several students wish to write about the same article, let them. It will be fun for them to compare their ballads when they are through. Now have the students write a ballad about the event or the person in the tabloid article, using either the standard ballad stanza (alternating 4-beat and 3-beat lines, rhyming ABCB) or some variation. If they choose a variation, they should stick with the same pattern throughout the ballad. Be sure to tell the students that the poem can and probably should be funny, and give them a minimum length—probably four or five stanzas—for the ballad. Make sure they know the ways a ballad usually tells its story, and encourage them to use these techniques as often as they can.

4. After the students have drafted their ballads, you can let them take the drafts home to be polished and revised before performing them in class. Or, if you prefer, you can ask students to share their “tabloid ballads” right away with the class.

5. Since this is a fun, informal lesson, you may not want to evaluate student ballads in any formal way. If you want to respond to them, however, or have fellow students respond, you will probably want to use questions like these:

- Did the ballad use some version of the traditional ballad stanza?
- Did it tell its story quickly, moving scene by scene and using dialogue to move the plot forward?
- Did it use typical ballad tools, like repeated lines or phrases?
- Was it memorable?

No matter how rough or polished their efforts, students will come away from this lesson with a lively, hands-on appreciation of the form—and the pleasures—of the ballad.



*Rhode Island
2009 State Champion
Amber Rose Johnson*