

Ballads

- A ballad is a narrative poem that tells a story. Often called “stories told in song,” ballads range from detailed accounts of historical events to fantastic tales of heroes and monsters. Ballads were originally meant to be sung or recited, and they are usually composed of the plain language of common people.
- “According to poets Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, who co-edited *The Making of a Poem*, the ballad’s appeal lies in its ability to captivate us. “The ballad,” Strand and Boland assert, “keeps an audience awake. Its subject matter is tabloid: death, murder, suicide, disgrace, mystery. It is lurid, musical, communal. It leaps from event to event.”
- Ballads are often categorized into two forms. The first, folk ballads, were composed orally and handed down by word of mouth. These ballads usually depict ordinary people who have had unusual adventures or have performed daring deeds. The second form, known as the literary ballad, refers to a poem written by a poet who imitates the form and content of the folk ballad.
- Ballads are a form of poetry that have proved to have lasting power. William Shakespeare is one famous admirer of the genre. “I love a ballad,” a character humorously remarks in Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*, “if it be doleful matter merrily set down, or a very pleasant thing indeed, and sung lamentably.
- The famous ballad “Barbara Allen,” which is featured in *McDougal Littell Literature*, has been referred to as “the most widespread folksong in the English language.”
- Though the ballad genre has its origins in the Middle Ages, there is a more modern, American version as well. Indigenous American ballads depict the exploits of outlaws such as Jesse James and the feats of folk heroes like Casey Jones and John Henry.
- “Hotel California” by the Eagles, “American Pie” by Don McLean, and “Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)” by Green Day are all contemporary songs that have been described by critics as ballads.