

Ballads

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# What is it?

- A song/narrative spoken poem that **tells a story**
- Focuses on one **incident**
- Begins in the **middle** of a crisis
- Proceeds to the **resolution** with little background information, character development, or descriptive detail

# Common Topics

- Tragic love
- Domestic conflicts
- Wars
- Shipwrecks
- Sensational crimes
- Exploits of outlaws



Just like today with tabloid headlines and soap operas, certain forms of popular entertainment tended toward the sensational.



## Plot Examples:

- Three dead sons visit mother for dinner
- A maiden is headed for the gallows, and her family refuses to help

# Traditional Structure

- **Four** lines per stanza
- Second and fourth lines **rhyme** and are often shorter than the first and third lines (ABCB rhyme scheme)

# On Top of Spaghetti...

On top of spaghetti,  
All covered with cheese,  
I lost my poor meatball,  
When somebody sneezed

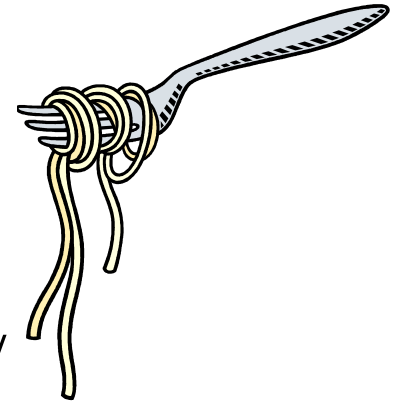
It rolled off the table,  
And on to the floor.  
And then my poor meatball,  
Rrolled out of the door.

It rolled in the garden,  
And under a bush,  
And then my poor meatball,  
Was nothing but mush.

The mush was as tasty  
As tasty could be,  
And then the next summer,  
It grew into a tree.

The tree was all covered,  
All covered with moss,  
And on it grew meatballs,  
And tomato sauce.

So if you eat spaghetti,  
All covered with cheese,  
Hold on to your meatball,  
Whenever you sneeze.



# Usual Formula

- **Stock descriptive phrases**
  - A word or phrase habitually used by a group of people: **a cliché**
  - Example: blood-red wine
  - One less thing for the singer to remember
- **Refrain in each stanza (repetition)**
  - Contributed to the song's rhythm and reinforced its theme
  - Provided the singer with time to think of the next verse
- **Incremental repetition**
  - A line or stanza is repeated, but with an addition that advances the story

# Characteristics

- Treats a highly **dramatic** situation in the **simplest** language
- Uses a considerable amount of **dialogue** (sometimes local dialect)
- Because ballads were well-known, the folk balladeer could often **skip parts**, which allowed him to develop parts that **interested** him. This accounts for the gaps in plots – “leaping and lingering”



# Characteristics



- Ballads deal with:
  - Strong elemental passions of **humanity**
  - **Powerfully** depicted love, hatred, faith, revenge, fear, courage, or loyalty
  - Many involve the supernatural and end **tragically**



# Your Task

1. Read and analyze the sample ballad on your handout. **Identify the structure and characteristics (topic) of the poem.**
2. Create your own ballad using either your own topic or a tabloid sample. **Remember, the structure of a ballad is just as important as the entertainment value.**

