

## Background

### Ballad

For centuries, unlettered people of Britain and America preserved an important body of early English literature: story songs, or *ballads*, which were passed along from singer to singer. Some ballads that originated in the Middle Ages are still with us, not as relics of history but as the roots of living music. Here is the opening of "Lord Randal," which probably dates from the thirteenth century:

*O where hae you been, Lord Randal, my son?  
And where hae you been, my handsome young man?*

Here is the opening of Bob Dylan's "Hard Rain":

*Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?  
Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?*

Still with us, too, in both lyrics and printed poetry, is a common verse structure of the songs, the *ballad stanza*. In poetry, it is also called the *Chevy Chase stanza*, after a ballad that tells of a battle between the English and the Scottish.

*God prosper long our noble king,  
Our liffes and saftyes all!  
A woefull hunting once there did  
In Chevy Chase befall.*

In this four-line form, or *quatrain*, the first and third lines have eight syllables; the second and fourth, the rhyming lines, have six. What we count, however, are the units of syllables, or *feet*, that make up the meter. Most verse in ballad form is made up of the *iamb*, a foot in which a stressed syllable follows a lighter syllable.

*God PROS / per LONG / our NO / ble KING,  
Our LIFFES / and SAF / tyes ALL!*

In *scansion*, the diagramming of meter, stressed syllables are usually given accent marks. The usual symbol for unstressed syllables looks like the smile of a smiley face.

☺ / / ☺ / / ☺ / / ☺ / /  
*God prosper long our noble king, 4*  
☺ / / ☺ / / ☺ / /  
*Our liffes and saftyes all! 3*

☺ / / ☺ / / ☺ / / ☺ / /  
*A woefull hunting once there did 4*  
☺ / / ☺ / / ☺ / /  
*In Chevy Chase befall. 3*

The iamb is the workhorse of metrical feet, the one that best replicates conversational speech. All of the verse dialogue in Shakespeare is in iambic pentameter, lines of five iambs, in which there is space for rich poetic adornment. The ballad stanza's more limited space—iambic tetrameter followed by iambic trimeter—is well suited to a story told in simple terms. The shorter line makes the point, like a punch line, and we move on.

But the form allows for all sorts of effects. In this stanza from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," alliterations and internal rhymes give the verse the speed of the ship it is describing:

*The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,  
The furrows followed free;  
We were the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea.*

The majority of Emily Dickinson's 1,775 poems are in ballad form or some variation of it. Dickinson squeezes some very complex ideas into those narrow lines. The verse slows down to the pace at which we read philosophy.

*The brain is deeper than the sea,  
For, hold them, blue to blue,  
The one the other will absorb  
As sponges, buckets do.*

Here is the basic form in one of William Wordsworth's "lyrical ballads":

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

Wordsworth breaks up the rhythm slightly with an extra syllable in the first line. Note, too, that the longer lines also rhyme. This two-rhyme variation is sometimes called the *common measure* or *hymnal measure*. As the terms suggest, it was used for hymns, and quite commonly.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now I'm found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

The ballad stanza's lines of four and three strong beats correspond to Latin septenary verse, long lines of seven strong beats, which came to England with the Norman Conquest. When we hear the ballad stanza in modern songwriting—in the Carter Family's "Storms Are on the Ocean" or Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm" or Bruce Springsteen's "The River" or Willie Nelson's "Seven Spanish Angels" or U2's "One"—we hear a rhythm older than our language.

## Blues

Another standard lyric structure in popular music is the *blues stanza*. Here, among thousands of examples, is a stanza from the Robert Johnson song "Love in Vain":

*When the train left the station, was two lights on behind.  
When the train left the station, was two lights on behind.  
The blue light was my blues and the red light was my mind.*

The three lines of the stanza—the second line repeating the first, the third line bringing home the rhyme—are usually set in twelve bars of music, in 4/4 time. While the lyrics of the blues are rarely in regular meter, the music often has a driving beat that is not unlike the heartbeat rhythm of the iamb: *da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM*.

This form, which seems to have originated in the Mississippi Delta in the nineteenth century, became an element of early New Orleans jazz—folklorist Alan Lomax likened jazz to a gumbo and the blues to the okra. And the blues was the music in the Memphis air at the advent of rock and roll.

*You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, snoopin' round my door.  
You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, snoopin' round my door.  
You can wag your tail, but I ain't feedin' you no more.*

The first to recognize the potential of the blues as written poetry was Langston Hughes, who was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902 and spent most of his childhood in the university town of Lawrence, Kansas. When he was eleven years old, he heard the blues coming from an orchestra of blind musicians on Independence Avenue in Kansas City. As Hughes biographer Arnold Rampersad describes it, "The music seemed to cry, but the words somehow laughed."

Hughes moved to the East in 1921 and heard the music again, in clubs on Lenox Avenue in Harlem and Seventh Street in Washington, D.C. "I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street," he once said. Those songs "had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going."

In his many poems in the blues form, Hughes broke the three lines into six lines, as in this stanza from "Morning After":

*I said, Baby! Baby!  
Please don't snore so loud.  
Baby! Please!  
Please don't snore so loud.  
You jest a little bit o' woman but you  
Sound like a great big crowd.*

The line breaks give a further sense of the music, indicating where a singer might pause or drag a word across a few beats. *Baby! Pleeeeeeease!*

Until his death in 1967, Hughes brought new musical rhythms into his poetry—boogie woogie, swing, bebop, soul à la Ray Charles, free jazz. In this body of work, as in the music, the blues was the basis.

