THE BALLAD

The term "ballad" is very widely used, but we are mostly concerned here with the traditional ballad. In this sense ballads can be defined as narrative songs in which the action focuses on a single episode.

Their subject varies considerably. There are historical ballads, border-raid ballads, ballads of Robin Hood, and a few on religious, semi-religious or supernatural subjects, but the majority are romantic ballads, mostly of a tragic nature. Motif and incident may be taken from folklore tradition going back many centuries, or from more recent episodes.

Since ballads were passed on by oral transmission, they exist in many versions and are sung to more than one tune. Besides, since the ballad metre is so simple, a single tune may do for different lyrics. Basically ballads metre has four primary beats to the line. The lines are often arranged in quatrains (groups of four lines). Syntax and language are usually also quite simple.

The absence of preliminary explanations and descriptions is a marked characteristic of the ballad. There is economy of language, and commonplaces and stock phrases take the place of particularised description. Commonplaces and stock phrases also help the memory of the singer.

One of the techniques sometimes employed in the unfolding of a ballad is the repetition of a theme with slight variations, thereby creating a feeling of tension. Another rhetorical device is a kind of parallelism, in which an action is described in phrases similar to those that have previously been used by one of the characters in speech. Similarly a question will be answered in nearly the same words as it is asked.

The refrain often forms an important element in ballad structure. It may be external, occurring at the end of a stanza or, more usually, internal, being interspersed between the narrative lines. Sometimes it consists of words that have a connection with the narrative. at other times it has no connection but appears to consist of words arbitrarily introduced. Again, at other times the refrain has developed into a jingle of meaningless syllables.

Francis James Child collected 305 ballads from England and Scotland, and their American variants, in the late nineteenth century. The ballads vary in age; for instance, the manuscript of "Judas" dates to the 13th century and a version of "A Gest of Robyn Hode" was printed in the late 15th or early 16th century. The majority of the ballads, however, date to the 17th and 18th centuries. Although some probably have very ancient influences, only a handful can be definitively traced to before 1600. Moreover, few of the tunes collected are as old as the words. Nevertheless Child’s collection was far more comprehensive than any previous collection of ballads in English.

With the folk revival of the late 50s and 60s both in Great Britain and America, some of these ballads were borrowed and made famous by singers and bands of the time (many of whom are still active today!!!!). Some sang them more traditionally with no or little accompaniment (e.g. Ewan McColl or Martin Carthy); some turned them into folk-rock songs with the use of both traditional instrument and modern electric ones (e.g. Steeleye Span or Fairport Convention). This modernization of old folk ballads has continued up to this day, with a varying degree in the use of electric instruments depending on the band or on the song itself...

1. Stylistic features
   - Folk tradition.
   - Short narrative song.
   - Preserved and transmitted orally.
   - Impersonal; narrator/singer rarely interferes.

2. Content
   - It focuses on a single crucial episode or situation
     There were three gypsies tae oor hall door,
     An’O but they sang bonnie O
They sang so sweet and too complete
That they stole the heart of our lady, O!
(from Gypsy Laddies)

3. Setting
- There is little description of setting
  There was a king and a noble king
  A king of muckle\(^{(1)}\) fame
  And he had an only daughter dear,
  Lady Diamond was her name.
  (from Lady Diamond)

4. Narrative features
- Dialogue is often used.
  "O sister, sister let me live,
  And all that’s mine I’ll surely give"
  "It’s your own true love that I’ll have and more
  But thou shalt never come ashore”.
  (from Cruel Sister)

5. Characters
- Both fantastic creatures and human beings.
  Fair Lady Isabel sits in her bower sewing
  Aye as the gowans\(^{(1)}\) grow gay
  There she heard an elf-knight blowing his horn
  The first morning in May.
  (from Lady Isabel and the Elf-knight)

7. Theme
- Ballads often deal with dramatic events.
  Ah my Geordie will be hanged in a golden chain
  ‘Tis not the chain of many,
  Stole sixteen of the King’s royal deer
  And he sold them in Bohenny
  (from Geordie)

In the ballads that follow consider:
- subject of narrative
- setting (time; place)
- characters
- narrative technique:
  - through direct speech only
  - by narrator
  - partly (or mostly) by narrator and partly through direct speech

Consider the rhyme scheme and the rhythm. Which are the most regular ballads as far as rhyme and/or rhythm are concerned?
Is there a refrain in the other ballads? What kinds? (examples)
Can you find parallelism in text/speech or question/answer?
What are the differences between the ballads in your book and the sung versions?

How can you define traditional ballads?
What are their most usual subjects?
Are there usually any preliminary explanations?
Is there usually only one version of a ballad? Why?
What's the basic ballad metre?
What are the syntax and language like?
What's common in ballads language?
What does the language sound nowadays? ( alright or old-fashioned?)
Why are there any apparently misplaced words?
"O where have you been, Lord Randall, my son? Where have you been, my ........................ young man?"
"I've been to the wild wood, mother, and I want to ........... down. I met with my true love, mother, make my bed soon."
"And what did she give you?" "She gave me some .................. and I'm - Sick, sick, weary and tired, Sick to the heart and I want to .......... down".
"O what did you eat, Lord Randall, my son? What did you eat, my .................. young man?"
"She gave me some .........., mother, fried in a pan, They were streaked and striped, mother, make my bed soon."
"And where did they come from?" "They came from the ditches."
"And what got your leavings?" "My hawks and my greyhounds."
"And what did they do then?" "They ........ down and died and I'm - Sick, sick, weary and tired, Sick to the heart and I want to .......... down".
"O what will you do, Lord Randall, my son? What will you do, my .................. young man?"
"I fear I am ..................., mother, make my bed soon. Down in the churchyard, mother, and .......... me down easy, For I've been to the wildwood and I met with my true love."
"And what did you eat there?" "......... in a pan."
"And what was their colour?" "All streaked and striped." 
"And where did they come from?" "My father's black ditches."
"And what got the leavings?" "My hawks and my greyhounds."
"And what did they do then?" "They ........ down and died."
"Oh, I fear you are ..................." "Make my bed soon."
"And where shall I make it?" "Down in the churchyard."
"Down in the churchyard." "And .......... me down easy for I'm - Sick, sick, weary and tired, Sick to the heart and I want to .......... down".

The ballad tells the story of a ................. who has ................. his own true ................. and tells his mother about his ................., asking her to ................. ................. because he feels ................. By what he tells his mother we understand that he has ......................

"Lord Randall", or "Lord Randal", (Roud 10, Child 12) is an Anglo-Scottish border ballad, a traditional ballad consisting of dialogue. The different versions follow the same general lines: the primary character (in this case Randall, but varying by location) is poisoned, usually by his sweetheart; this is revealed through a conversation where he reports on the events and the poisoner. Variants of this ballad are found in Danish, German, Magyar, Swedish and Wendish. Similar ballads exist across Europe. There are, for example different Italian versions, usually titled "L'avvelenato" ("The Poisoned Man") or "Il testamento dell'avvelenato" ("The Poisoned Man's Will"). One of them was published for the first time in 1629 by Camillo il Bianchino, in Verona.
There lived a wife in Usher's Well
A wealthy wife was ........
She had three stout and stalwart sons
And sent them o'er the ........
They had not been from Usher's Well
A week but barely ........
When word came to this carlin wife
That her three sons were ........
   I wish the wind may never cease
   Nor flashes in the flood
   Till my three sons return to me
   In earthly flesh and blood (2)
It fell about the Martinmas
The nights were long and........
Three sons came home to Usher's Well
Their hats were made of........
That neither grew in forest green
Nor on any wooded briars
But from the north side of the tree
That grows in Paradise
   Blow up the fire my merry merry maidens
   Bring water from the well
   For all my house shall feed this night
   Since my three sons are well. (2)
Then up and crowed the blood-red cock
And up and crowed the.......
The oldest to the youngest said
It's time we were .
For the cock does crow and the day does show
And the channering worm does chide
And we must go from Ushers Well
To the gates of Paradise.
   I wish the wind may never cease
   Nor flashes in the flood
   Till my three sons return to me
   In earthly flesh and blood (2)

The ballad tells the story of three .................. who ............ to console their sorrowful
.................... after being drowned at sea. They are allowed to .................. only one night
at .................... : at daybreak they must .................. to their graves.

"The Wife of Usher's Well" is a traditional ballad, catalogued as Child Ballad 79, originally from Britain, and is more particularly considered a Scottish ballad, but also popular in North America. No complete original version has survived. It first appears in print in Scott's Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802).
THE CRUEL SISTER (Sung by OLD BLIND DOGS - 1992)

There lived a lady by the north-sea shore
 .......... the bairn tae the bonny broom
Twa daughters were the bairns she bore
 Falalalala lala la lala
One was as bright as is the sun
So coal black grew the elder one.
A knight came riding to the lady's door
He travelled far to be their wooer.
He courted one, aye, with gloves and rings
But he loved the other above all things.
"Sister, sister won't you walk with me
And see the ships sail upon the sea"
And as they stood on that windy shore
The elder sister pushed the younger o'er.
Sometimes she sank, sometimes she swam
Crying "Sister reach to me your hand"
And as she floated just like a swan
The salt sea carried her body on.
Two minstrels walking by the north sea strand
They saw the maiden aye float aland.
They made a harp out of her breast bone
The sound of which would melt a heart of stone.
They took three locks of her yellow hair
And with that strang that harp so rare.
The first string that those minstrels tried
Then terror seized the black haired bride.
The second string played a doleful sound
"The younger sister oh she is drowned"
The third, it played beneath the bow
"And surely now her tears will flow."

This ballad tells the story of two .......... who are courted by the same .......... The .......... sister pushes the .......... one into the .......... and drowns her. Two .......... find the body and transform it into a .......... Taken to the girls' father's hall, the harp tells the .......... of the dead sister, and terror and grief seize the ..........

"The Twa Sisters" is a murder ballad that recounts the tale of a girl drowned by her sister. It is first known to have appeared on a broadside in 1656 as "The Miller and the King's Daughter." At least 21 English variants exist under several names, including "Minnorie" or "Binnorie", "The Cruel Sister", "The Wind and Rain", "Dreadful Wind and Rain", "Two Sisters", and the "Bonnie Bows of London". The ballad was collected by Francis J. Child (Child 10) and is also listed in the Roud Folk Song Index.
MATTY GROVES (Sung by FAIRPORT CONVENTION - 1969)

1. A holiday, a holiday
And the first one of the year
Lord Arnold's wife came into the Church
The Gospel for to hear.

2. When the meeting it was done,
She cast her eyes about
And there she saw young Matty Groves
Walking in the crowd.

3. "Come home with me, little Matty Groves
Come home with me tonight
Come home with me little Matty Groves
And sleep with me till light."

4. "Oh, I can't come, I won't come and
Sleep with you tonight
By the rings on your fingers
I can tell you are Lord Arnold's wife.

5. "What if I am Lord Arnold's wife
Lord Arnold is not at home
For he is out in the far cornfields
Bringing the yearlings home"

6. And a servant who was standing by
And hearing what was said
He swore Lord Arnold he would know
Before the sun would set.

7. And in his hurry to carry the news
He bent his breast and he ran
And when he came to the broad millstream
He took off his shoes and he ran.

8. Little Matty Groves he lay down
And took a little sleep
When he awoke Lord Arnold
He was standing at his feet.

9. Saying "How do you like my feather bed
And how do you like my sheets?
How do you like my lady
Who lies in your arms asleep?"

10. Oh well I like your feather bed
And well I like your sheets
But better I like your lady gay
Who lies in my arms asleep

11. "Get up, get up!" Lord Arnold cried,
"Get up as quick as you can
Let it never be said in fair England
I slew a naked man!"

12. "Oh I can't get up, I won't get up
I can't get up for my life
For you have two long beaten swords
and I not a pocket knife."

13. Well it' true I have two beaten swords
And they cost me deep in the purse
But you will have the better of them
And I will have the worse.

14. "Ando you will strike the very first blow
Strike it like a man
And I will strike the very next blow
And I'll kill you if I can

15. So Matty struck the very first blow
And he hurt Lord Arnold sore
LordArnold struck the very next blow
And Matty struck no more.

16. And then Lord Arnolds he took his wife
He sat her on his knee
Saying who do you like the best of us
Your Matty Groves or me?"

17. And then up spoke his own dear wife
Never heard to speak so free
"I'd rather a kiss from dead Matty's lips
Than you and your finery"

18. LordArnold he jumped up
And loudly he did bawl,
He struck his wife right through the heart
And pinned her against the wall.

19. "A grave, a grave", Lord Arnold cried
"To put these lovers in
But bury my lady at the top
For she was of noble kin


This ballad tells he story of a ................. called Matty Groves, who is invited by a nobleman's ................. to spend the ................. with her. But a ................. hears everything and ................. to tell her ................. So when Matty ................., the man has come back and challanges him. Matty hasn't got any ................. but the nobleman gives him his ................. one and tells him to ................. first. He does so but he only ................. the nobleman, who ................. Matty and ................. him. The nobleman then also ................. his wife.

"Matty Groves" is an English folk ballad that describes an adulterous tryst between a man and a woman that is ended when the woman's husband discovers and kills them. It dates no later than the 17th century, and Child  Ballad #81. It has several variant names, including "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard."
There chanced to be a pedlar bold
A pedlar bold he chanced to be
He rolled his pack all on his back
And he came to being o'er the lea.
By chance he met two troublesome blades
Troublesome blades they chanced to be
One of them was Robin Hood
The other was little John so free.

Gentle men of high born blood
Gamble Gold and Robin Hood

"Oh pedlar, pedlar what's in the pack
Come speedily and tell to me"
"Several suits of the gay green silk
And silken bowstrings two or three"
"If you have suits of the gay green silk
And silken bowstrings two or three
By my body!" cries Robin Hood
"Half your pack belongs to me"

Gentle men of high born blood
Gamble Gold and Robin Hood

"Oh no, oh no" says the pedlar bold
"No that can never be!"
"There's never a man in Nottingham
Can take one half my pack from me!"
Then Robin Hood he drew his sword
And the pedlar by his pack did stand
They fought till the blood in streams did flow
And he cried: "Pedlar, hold your hand"

Gentle men of high born blood
Gamble Gold and Robin Hood

"Oh pedlar, pedlar, what's thy name
Come speedily and tell to me"
"I'm Gamble Gold of the gay green woods
I've travelled far beyond the sea"
"If you're Gamble Gold of the gay green woods
Then my cousin you must be!
Let us away to a tavern near
And bottles crack most merrily!"

The ballad tells the story of a person who meets Robin Hood and little John; in his pack he has some precious material and Robin Hood would like to have some of it. The pedlar refuses to give up his stuff, so they start fighting. Suddenly Robin Hood asks the pedlar his name. He discovers that he is his cousin, so they stop fighting and go to a tavern near a place to celebrate.

The Bold Pedlar and Robin Hood is Child ballad 132, featuring Robin Hood. It is a traditional version of Robin Hood Newly Revived. This ballad was printed on broadsides in 1684-6. Robin Hood ballads were extremely popular with the peasantry in England for several hundred years. Thirty-seven of Child's Ballads are Robin Hood ballads.