

Ballad (from Lat. *ballare*: 'to dance')

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A short popular or traditional song that normally frames a narrative element. Scholars of the term's history and origin take it to signify a relatively concise composition known throughout Europe since the late Middle Ages, spreading later to the New World, notably the Americas: it combines narrative, dramatic dialogue and lyrical passages in strophic form sung to a rounded tune, and often includes a recurrent refrain. Performance is predominantly by solo singers, though choral and dance elements are known in some cultures. Originally the word referred to dance-songs such as the French *carole*, but by the 14th century it had lost that connotation in English and had become a distinctive song type with a narrative core. The word has sometimes been used, mistakenly, as a translation for the medieval French *forme fixe* ballade (see *Ballade*), and for the 18th- and 19th-century German ballade (see *Art Ballad*, 19th- and 20th-century); the latter was partly influenced by the narrative folksong tradition of Britain and Scandinavia (see also *Ballade* for instrumental pieces bearing this often confused title, and *Epics* for a discussion of longer narrative song forms).

The 'ballad opera', a satirical form of theatrical entertainment based on spoken dialogue and popular tunes of the day, was fashionable for several decades during the early to mid-18th century. Literary ballads which imitated the traditional ballad marked a significant phase of influence during the Romantic period. In the 19th century 'ballad' came to denote a sentimental song cultivated by the middle classes in Britain and North America, while in 20th-century popular culture it has come to refer to a slow, personalized love song or one, such as the 'blues ballad' in North America, in which the narrative element is slender and subordinated to a lyrical mood.

Balladry, Folk and Popular

Art Ballad, 19th- and 20th-century

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See also

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