

The Ballad Project

We've been pondering the role that *genre* plays in determining a text's meaning, with reference to both the pastoral elegy and the ballad. Now it's your turn to play around with genre—by trying your hand at producing something that explores the possibilities offered (and the limitations imposed) by the conventions of a specific genre.

For this project, you'll produce **two** short ballads of your own—one in the tradition of the broadside ballad, and one in the tradition of the lyrical ballad. Both should be written in ballad (or hymnal) stanzas as defined in the various online materials that we've read.

It might help here to briefly review the two styles, courtesy of the online Glossary of Poetic Terms. A **broadside ballad** is

[a] ballad . . . printed on a single piece of paper and sold for a penny or two on English street corners The name of the tune to which they were to be sung was indicated on the sheet. The subject matter of broadside ballads covered a wide range of current, historical, or simply curious events and also extended to moral exhortations and religious propaganda.

Your broadside ballad might take as its model Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham" or Alfred Hayes's "Joe Hill": it should be a narrative poem about a relatively recent event of *public* significance (that is, an event that was covered in the media), and it should also offer some form of commentary, implicit or explicit, about that event. You may choose to set your broadside to the tune of some other ballad, but selecting a melody isn't mandatory. Your broadside ballad should be *at least* six stanzas long.

A **lyric** is a poem

in which the speaker's ardent expression of a (usually single) emotional element predominates. Ranging from complex thoughts to the simplicity of playful wit, the power and personality of lyric verse is of far greater importance than the subject treated.

A **lyrical ballad**, then, is a literary ballad that utilizes the ballad stanza to produce a more private and meditative poem which nevertheless taps into some of the qualities we associate with ballads. You might use as your model here Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" or Emily Dickinson's #1129 ("Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—"). Your lyrical ballad should be at least two stanzas long.

These projects will be graded using a number of criteria: first and foremost, I'll consider the extent to which your stanzas conform technically to the features of ballad measure (in terms of meter and rhythm, rhyme scheme, etc.); second, I'll consider the extent to which your subject matter demonstrates an understanding of the ballad tradition and its various conventions; finally, I'll consider the quality of the poetry itself—e.g., is the syntax strained? is language used inventively and imaginatively? are any figures that you employ apt, or are the metaphors, similes, and/or symbols clumsy or grotesque or obvious? and so on.

Like the "Lycidas" Project, the Ballad Project is worth 15% of your course grade. (I know, right? Still, many of you may find the two projects equally difficult.) This is not a collaborative project, but you're certainly welcome to share your work-in-progress with one another for feedback and advice.

The completed project is nominally due on **Monday, February 29th**.