

The Ballad Tradition - The Supernatural

Ah, now the good stuff!

Some background to the Supernatural in the Ballads

The finest of the ballads are deeply saturated in a mystical atmosphere imparted by the presence of magical appearances and apparatus. "The Wife of Usher's Well" laments the death of her children so inconsolably that they return to her from the dead as revenants; "Willie's Lady" cannot be delivered of her child because of her wicked mother-in-law's spells, an enchantment broken by a beneficent household spirit; "The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry" begets upon an "earthly" woman a son, who, on attaining maturity, joins his seal father in the sea, there shortly to be killed by his mother's human husband; "Kemp Owyne" disenchant a bespelled maiden by kissing her despite her bad breath and savage looks. An encounter between a demon and a maiden occurs in "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight," the English counterpart of the ballads known to the Dutch-Flemish as "Herr Halewijn," to Germans as "Ulinger," to Scandinavians as "Kvindemorderen" and to the French as "Renaud le Tueur de Femme." In "The House Carpenter," a former lover (a demon in disguise) persuades a wife to forsake husband and children and come away with him, a fatal decision as it turns out. In American and in late British tradition the supernatural tends to get worked out of the ballads by being rationalized: instead of the ghost of his jilted sweetheart appearing to Sweet William of "Fair Margaret and Sweet William" as he lies in bed with his bride, it is rather the dead girl's image in a dream that kindles his fatal remorse. In addition to those ballads that turn on a supernatural occurrence, casual supernatural elements are found all through balladry.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/ballad/Subject-matter#ref503603>

The Wife of Usher's Well

Task: Read the text

The Wife of Usher's Well

THERE lived a wife at Usher's Well,
And a wealthy wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And sent them oer the sea.

They hadna been a week from her,
A week but barely ane,
Whan word came to the carline wife
That her three sons were gane.

They hadna been a week from her,
A week but barely three,
Whan word came to the carlin wife
That her sons she'd never see.

'I wish the wind may never cease,
Nor fashes in the flood,
Till my three sons come hame to me,
In earthly flesh and blood.'

It fell about the Martinmass,
 When nights are lang and mirk,
 The carlin wife's three sons came hame,
 And their hats were o the birk.

It neither grew in syke nor ditch,
 Nor yet in ony sheugh;
 But at the gates o Paradise,
 That birk grew fair eneugh.

'Blow up the fire, my maidens,
 Bring water from the well;
 For a' my house shall feast this night,
 Since my three sons are well.'

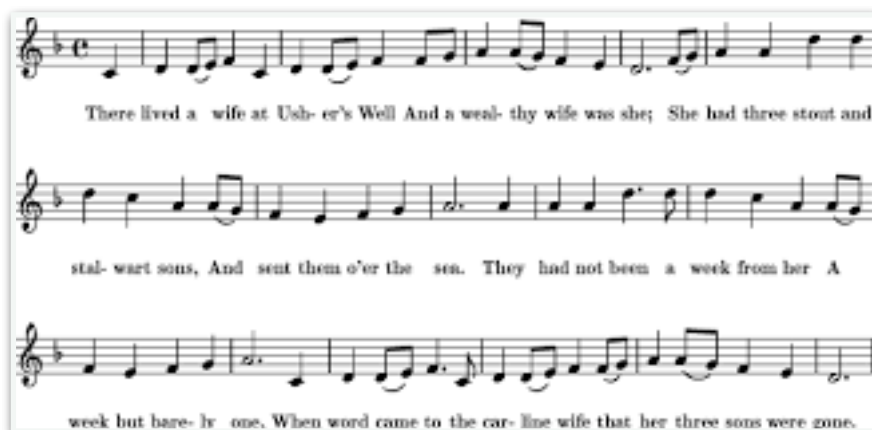
And she has made to them a bed,
 She's made it large and wide,
 And she's taen her mantle her about,
 Sat down at the bed-side.

Up then crew the red, red cock,
 And up and crew the gray;
 The eldest to the youngest said,
 'Tis time we were away.

The cock he hadna crawd but once,
 And clappd his wings at a',
 When the youngest to the eldest said,
 Brother, we must awa.

The cock doth craw, the day doth daw,
 The channerin worm doth chide;
 Gin we be mist out o our place,
 A sair pain we maun bide.

'Fare ye weel, my mother dear!
 Fareweel to barn and byre!
 And fare ye weel, the bonny lass
 Fareweel to barn and byre!
 And fare ye weel, the bonny lass
 That kindles my mother's fire!'



Understanding

Task: Note down what you think are important sections and find the meaning of them.

Text

Meaning

Themes

Task: Outline the mother's emotional journey, referencing from the ballad.

The message of the ballad is concerned with grief and the 'correct' way to grieve. Explain your thoughts on this, commenting evidence of this theme in the ballad, with textual reference.

Play/Theatre script Version

'2010 Quondam play

In autumn 2010, Quondam toured an Arts Council England-supported "new play with songs" called The Wife of Usher's Well to 27 venues. Inspired by the border ballad, this reprised the historic text in a new setting of a mother's losing her son in the war in Afghanistan. The writer was Jules Horne and the cast was Helen Longworth, Danny Kennedy, Ruth Tapp and Andrew Whitehead.' - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wife_of_Usher%27s_Well

Task: Write a theatre script version of the story, making any changes you are inspired to make (as with the example above).

Look at these 2 examples that give advice on how to write a theatre script, and summaries the advice given:

<https://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Play-Script>

https://www.scribendi.com/academy/articles/script_writing_format.en.html

Look at the images below and compare them in terms of layout.
 Take note of positioning, font (italics, bold etc).
 There are a number of ways to lay out a theatre script and all are valid. The only suggestion I make is be consistent.

Scene 1

The drawing room of Lady and Lord Montague, which is furnished with plush carpets, silk curtains and beautifully carved antique furniture. Lord Montague is sitting on a velvet sofa, smoking a pipe and reading the paper. Lady Montague is sitting at a grand piano, trying but failing to play a melody.

Lady Montague: Try as I might, I simply cannot get this blessed melody right!

Lord Montague: You are trying too hard, darling. Relax, look at the notes and let your fingers find their way to the right notes. Stop trying to get it right. Just feel the music.

Lady Montague: *(pushing a strand of hair from her face wearily)* Yes. Perhaps you are right.

SCENE 5

NARRATOR 1:
NARRATOR 2 (Together): Scene five. Mulan fights bravely. The Emperor is grateful.

The CHORUS create the shape of a tree with their bodies.

NARRATOR 1: Fierce battles raged all over the land.

NARRATOR 2: Mulan fought with the courage of ten men.

*MULAN enters.
 The CHORUS and MULAN will create a series of freezes, of still pictures, showing soldiers in battle holding different, imaginary, weapons. The CHORUS speak as a group together when they are in position. MULAN does not speak.
 The CHORUS move and create a group freeze picture showing soldiers and Mulan facing the enemy, with each person holding a Qiang (an ancient Chinese bow). Mulan stands at the back of the group. They all face the audience.*

CHORUS (Together): Selfless.

NARRATOR 1: Mulan's skill won her great respect.

The CHORUS move and create a group freeze picture showing soldiers and Mulan facing the enemy, with each person holding a Ji (an ancient Chinese 2-handed pole weapon). Mulan stands at the centre of the group. They all face the audience.

CHORUS (Together): Loyal.

NARRATOR 2: One hundred battles.

The CHORUS move and create a group freeze picture showing soldiers and Mulan facing the enemy, with each person holding a Qiang (an ancient Chinese spear). Mulan stands at the front of the group. They all face the audience.

CHORUS (Together): Loving.

NARRATOR 1: Many noble generals lost their lives.

The CHORUS move and create a group freeze picture showing soldiers and Mulan facing the enemy, with each person holding a Yue (an ancient Chinese axe). Mulan stands near the front of the group. They all face the audience.

CHORUS (Together): Kind.

NARRATOR 2: Mulan's bravery gained her high status.

Task:

Either use a separate page and handwrite or use a word processing software (you know this stuff!)

Set out the story (as you see it) in play form.

Use stage directions and dialogue.

Tip: keep the setting limited (the house for example). One setting is the goal.

The Unquiet Grave

Understanding

Task: Listen to these versions of the ballad sung:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQgiebndmbc>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmCKP3akMYM>



Task: Note your observations of these versions

Version 1

Lyrics: _____

Voice: _____

Musical instruments: _____

Musical arrangement: _____

Version 2

Lyrics: _____

Voice: _____

Musical instruments: _____

Musical arrangement: _____

As with most of the Child Ballads, there are more than one version presented. Below is a selection of them.

Task: Read the texts

Outline the main events in each version, noting, particularly, the changes in the story versions and differences between them.

78A

78D

78E

78G

78Hb

What elements do you prefer and why?

78A: The Unquiet Grave

- 78A.1 'THE wind doth blow today, my love,
And a few small drops of rain;
I never had but one true-love,
In cold grave she was lain.
- 78A.2 'I'll do as much for my true-love
As any young man may;
I'll sit and mourn all at her grave
For a twelvemonth and a day.'
- 78A.3 The twelvemonth and a day being up,
The dead began to speak:
'Oh who sits weeping on my grave,
And will not let me sleep?'
- 78A.4 'Tis I, my love, sits on your grave,
And will not let you sleep;
For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,
And that is all I seek.'
- 78A.5 'You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips;
But my breath smells earthy strong;
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
Your time will not be long.
- 78A.6 'Tis down in yonder garden green,
Love, where we used to walk,
The finest flower that ere was seen
Is withered to a stalk.
- 78A.7 'The stalk is withered dry, my love,
So will our hearts decay;
So make yourself content, my love,
Till God calls you away.'

78D: The Unquiet Grave

- 78D.1 'PROUD BOREAS makes a hideous noise,
Loud roars the fatal flood;
I loved never a love but one,
In church-yard she lies dead.
- 78D.2 'But I will do for my love's sake
What other young men may;
I'll sit and mourn upon her grave,
A twelvemonth and a day.'
- 78D.3 A twelvemonth and a day being past,
The ghost began to speak:
'Why sit ye here upon my grave,
And will not let me sleep?'
- 78D.4 'One kiss of your lily-white lips
Is all that I do crave;
And one kiss of your lily-white lips
Is all that I would have.'
- 78D.5 'Your breath is as the roses sweet,
Mine as the sulphur strong;
If you get one kiss of my lips,
Your days would not be long.
- 78D.6 'Mind not ye the day, Willie,
Sin you and I did walk?

The firstand flower that we did pu
Was witherd on the stalk.'

78D.7 'Flowers will fade and die, my dear,
Aye as the tears will turn;
And since I've lost my own sweet-heart,
I'll never cease but mourn.'

78D.8 'Lament nae mair for me, my love,
The powers we must obey;
But hoist up one sail to the wind,
Your ship must sail away.'

78[E]: The Unquiet Grave

78[E.1] 'Cold blows the wind over my true love,
Cold blows the drops of rain;
I never, never had but one sweet-heart,
In the green wood he was slain.

78[E.2] 'But I'll do as much for my true love
As any young girl can do;
I'll sit and I'll weep by his grave-side
For a twelvemonth and one day.'

78[E.3] When the twelvemonth's end and one day was past,
This young man he arose:
'What makes you weep by my grave-side
For twelve months and one day?'

78[E.4] 'Only one kiss from your lily cold lips,
One kiss is all I crave;
Only one kiss from your lily cold lips,
And return back to your grave.'

78[E.5] 'My lip is cold as the clay, sweet-heart,
My breath is earthly strong;
If you should have a kiss from my cold lip,
Your days will not be long.'

78[E.6] 'Go fetch me a note from the dungeon dark,
Cold water from a stone;
There I'll sit and weep for my true love
For a twelvemonth and one day.

78[E.7] 'Go dig me a grave both long, wide and deep;
I will lay down in it and take one sleep,
For a twelvemonth and one day;
I will lay down in it and take a long sleep,
For a twelvemonth and a day.'

78[G]: The Unquiet Grave

78[G.1] 'Cold blows the wind to-day, sweetheart,
Cold are the drops of rain;
The first truelove that ever I had
In the green wood he was slain.

78[G.2] 'Twas down on the garden-green, sweetheart,
Where you and I did walk;
The fairest flower that in the garden grew
Is witherd to a stalk.

78[G.3] 'The stalk will bear no leaves, sweetheart,
The flowers will neer return,
And since my truelove is dead and gone,
What can I do but mourn?'

78[G.4] A twelvemonth and a day being gone,
The spirit rose and spoke:

.....

78[G.5] 'My body is clay-cold, sweetheart,
My breath smells heavy and strong,

And if you kiss my lily-white lips
Your time will not be long.'

78[Hb]: The Unquiet Grave

- 78[Hb].1 Cold blows the wind to-night, my love,
Cold are the drops of rain;
The very first love that ever I had
In greenwood he was slain.
- 78[Hb.2] 'I'll do as much for my true-love
As any young woman may;
I'll sit and mourn upon his grave
A twelve-month and a day.'
- 78[Hb.3] When a twelve-month and a day were up,
His body straight arose:
'What brings you weeping oer my grave
That I get no response?'
- 78[Hb.4] 'O think upon the garden, love,
Where you and I did walk;
The fairest flower that blossomed there
Is withered on the stalk.
- 78[Hb.5] 'The stalk will bear no leaves, sweet-heart,
The flower will neer return,
And my true-love is dead, is dead,
And I do naught but mourn.'
- 78[Hb.6] 'What is it that you want of me
And will not let me sleep?
Your salt tears they trickle down
And wet my winding-sheet.'
- 78[Hb.7] 'What is it that I want of thee,
O what of thee in grave?
A kiss from off your lily-white lips,
And that is all I crave.'
- 78[Hb.8] 'Cold are my lips in death, sweet-heart,
My breath is earthy strong;
If you do touch my clay-cold lips,
Your time will not be long.'
- 78[Hb.9] 'Cold though your lips in death, sweet-heart,
One kiss is all I crave;
I care not, if I kiss but thee,
That I should share thy grave.'
- 78[Hb.10] 'Go fetch me a light from dungeon deep,
Wring water from a stone,
And likewise milk from a maiden's breast
That never maid hath none. (read babe had.)
* * * * *
- 78[Hb.11] 'Now if you were not true in word,
As now I know you be,
I'd tear you as the withered leaves
Are torn from off the tree.'

Poem of the week: The Unquiet Grave

...

The first two stanzas are spoken by the young man (compare 78F with its female mourner). At first, it seems he directly addresses the dead woman, although it's not impossible that he's talking to a new, living beloved: "The wind doth blow today, my love,/ And a few small drops of rain." The reference to the "small drops of rain" faintly recalls the lovely quatrain from the early 16th century, "Westron wynde, when wilt thou blow/ The small raine down can raine?/ Cryst, if my loue were in my armes/ And I in my bedde again!" The speaker continues in lines three and four either to address his new lover, or to turn to another auditor: if the latter, the effect is of an "aside" spoken on-stage: "I never had but one true-love./ In cold grave she was lain." The device is more than expository: its simple directness confirms the speaker's emotional authority.

At first, the woman's death seems recent. But the pledged period of mourning ("a twelvemonth and a day") passes between stanzas two and three. The belief that graves become "unquiet", and the restless ghosts enact an angry or violent haunting because excessive grief prevents their leaving the earth, is an ancient one, far older than the poem.

This mourner refuses to accept that his time is up, and, as a result, "the dead began to speak". There's something eerie in the fact that the woman, though clearly the one referred to, is not specified: she is simply "the dead". Now the dialogue proper begins: the spectral woman asks whose weeping is disturbing her, and the young man promises he'll leave her in peace in return for one kiss.

The repetitions from verse to verse, a common mnemonic or musical patterning, here have the effect of bringing the lovers touchingly close, as if one echoed the other. "I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips" is reinforced almost tenderly by the response, "You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips", while the claggy of the alliteration leaves a contrasting impression of un-sentimentalised mortality.

Although it could be the man speaking in stanza six, it seems more likely that the woman's ghost is the speaker throughout five, six and seven. Her description of the dead flower is a parable about loss and its acceptance. The mourner still wants to believe the "finest flower" (their love) can grow again. The woman knows regeneration is impossible: the flower is "withered to a stalk" and this withering happens to lovers' hearts, too: it's an inevitable fact of time. The message is harsh and sad, but the subsequent words are kindly. "So make yourself content, my love,/ Till God calls you away." Permission to forge new connections seems to be offered in that "make yourself content".

Contemporary readers largely share the realistic attitude shown by this thoughtful ghost. We stress the importance of "moving on" as the eventual aim of mourning. But we need to remember that, whenever this ballad originated, it was long before modern psychologising about death. The superstition that kissing a dead person results in one's own death would have had a logical basis at a time when many people died of infectious diseases such as the plague. Read with a historically distanced perspective, the ballad may be a practical warning about how the living should treat the dead (for both their sakes) rather than advice on how best to survive traumatic loss.

It's interesting to compare 78B. There the lovers do kiss, and the poem ends ominously, as the male ghost tells the young woman, "I am afraid, my pretty, pretty maid,/ Your time will not be long."

Whatever the ballad's "message", its harmonies leave us in no doubt of the depth of the lovers' empathy. The images are memorably simple, almost archetypal. Intermittently liquid sounds and the flowing, predominantly iambic rhythm suggest at times a lullaby. The rain-flecked wind, the "earthy strong" breath and the green garden with its one withered flower are details that, although this is a "supernatural" ballad, create the impression of a natural cycle, ever-present and compelling.

Ballads are notoriously difficult to date. Some sources suggest c.1400; others say that there is no evidence that "The Unquiet Grave" existed in written form before 1800. In fact, not many of Child's ballads date from before 1600. In some versions, it's the young man who has died: like a medieval knight, he lies "slain" in the "greenwood". 78D has a literary diction at times, a hint of Scots dialect, and a nautical setting. The quality of 78A could reflect the later crafting and processing of some rougher, older material. But there are many versions in addition to Child's and you may have a favourite of your own.

What, in your own words, does the article say about ...

The speaker:

The dead loved one?

The repetition used:

The Message:

The effect of the ballad:

Language Features

Task: Now, go back to the texts themselves. Looking at the versions of the ballad presented, comment on:

The use of nature:

The Speaker and their conflict:

The message on grief:
