

## **Murder Ballads**

### **The Basics**

#### **Time Required**

8-10 class periods

#### **Subject Areas**

8th Grade Literature

Worlds Meeting through 1760

#### **Skills**

Song analysis

#### **Author**

Ann Blake (2011)

### **The Lesson**

#### **Introduction**

Concurrently with our study of *Romeo and Juliet*, my class reads poems on the topics of love and death. In place of some of the poems I now use, I will substitute a unit on American murder ballads, focusing on those that have a love element. After a brief introduction to the history and conventions of the ballad, a type of narrative poetry, we will look at three sets of ballads. The first set, "The Cruel Ship's Carpenter," "Pretty Polly," and "The Willow" will help illustrate the process of transmission and the role of traditional literature in reflecting cultural attitudes. The second set, "Frankie and Johnny" and "Tom Dooley," will illustrate the role of ballads in providing commentary on actual events. The third set, "Zeb Turney's Gal" and "The Martins and the Coys," will look at the difference between ballads that have been shaped by the folk process as opposed to those that have a popular origin and outsider's perspective.

#### **Learning Objectives**

Students will understand that many American ballads are descendants of English ballads, that the ballads preserve many aspects of the originals but also are changed by the process of oral transmission and by the changing environment in which the song is transmitted.

#### **Preparation Instructions**

Songs used in this lesson

"The Cruel Ship's Carpenter"

“Pretty Polly”  
“The Willow Tree”  
“Tom Dooley”  
“Frankie and Johnnie”  
“Zeb Tourney’s Girl”

## Lesson Activities

### Lesson One: “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter,” “Pretty Polly,” and “The Willow”

Tragedy or Justice?

There is a long tradition of murder ballads, and many people must agree with Edgar Allan Poe that the death of a beautiful woman “is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” since women are so often the victims in these ballads. As Norm Cohen remarks, “Murdering a sweetheart, rather than marrying her, is the basis of so many American ballads that foreigners must wonder whether this is our national pastime” (116). Occasionally, however, the women manage to mete out justice to the wicked men.

A pair of related ballads will help show how elements of traditional English ballads both persisted and changed over time and over the ocean. With their different endings they illustrate a curious fact that Warner notes about the transmission of these ballads to America: supernatural elements disappear (130). “The Gosport Tragedy or the Perjured Ship’s Carpenter,” an English broadside ballad, tells the story of a young woman murdered by her lover when she becomes pregnant. She returns as a ghost and exacts a grisly revenge. The American descendant, however, “Pretty Polly,” ends with no justice done, only the wild birds mourning the murder.

A much less common variation on murdering one’s sweetheart appears in descendants of the Child ballad “Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight.” Among them is one version called “The Willow.” American versions no longer have the lover described as supernatural or as having special musical powers but do preserve the plot twist of having the young woman trick and kill the suitor before he can carry out his murderous plans.

### Procedures

For “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter,” I would project the lyrics on the screen and play or sing the song. We would figure out any difficult vocabulary, note the irony that covering her up “so safe and secure” means burying her, and chart the plot line, making sure the students understand William’s motive for killing Polly and Polly’s reappearance as a ghost. I would ask if the song had a satisfactory ending for them. Next I would play “Pretty Polly” without any introduction and ask for comments to see if they would spot it as a descendant. I would ask about the impact of the ending. Then I would pass out lyrics to the two songs juxtaposed on one sheet and ask them to chart similarities and differences. Finally we would talk about the folk transmission of ballads.

The next day I would project and play or sing the lyrics of “The Willow.” I would ask if they thought it a native American ballad or an English descendant. What clue can they find? Then we would discuss the contrasting appeals of the different endings. Why do we sometimes like to hear sad stories? Do they seem more realistic to us? Are we more satisfied when justice is meted out? Whom do we want to administer the justice? How do these endings compare to the ending of *Romeo and Juliet*? Would the students prefer a different ending to *Romeo and Juliet*? If so, why?

### Lesson Two: “Tom Dooley” and “Frankie and Johnny”

Fact or Fiction?

Many of us are fond of murder mysteries and thrillers; others prefer true crime. Some ballads offer us both: real murders but thoroughly embellished and moralized upon. Just as tabloids today can be sources for lurid but not necessarily accurate details about scandalous goings on, ballads in the past often offered stories of shocking crimes, but balladeers have not felt constrained to stick too closely to the facts.

But do we care? Does it matter to us that the song is based on a real event? It certainly does at first, and even later, when the original event is forgotten, it still gives the song an extra bit of interest, but what really matters after the passage of years are the intrinsic qualities of the song. Take "Tom Dooley." The song is based on an 1866 murder in North Carolina. Laura Foster, the lover of a returning Civil War veteran named Tom Dula (pronounced "Dooley") was found murdered. Tom Dula was hanged for the crime, but some felt that he took the fall for Ann Melton, a former lover who may actually have done the deed.

In the earliest recorded version of the song by Grayson and Whitter in 1929, Tom Dooley admits his murder of Laura Foster, gives a few details about the grave, mentions someone named Grayson as responsible for his being in jail, but never gives a motive. In the version which becomes best known, performed by The Kingston Trio in 1958 and based on a song collected by Lomax, a spoken introduction implies that Grayson was a rival, but specific details (including even the name of the victim) are gone. Doc Watson's version from 1964 adds the details back, turns Grayson into a sheriff, and has Tom Dooley deny his guilt. All these versions have merit and are still worth listening to even though they fail to mention the other woman and give an inaccurate role to Grayson. The earliest written ballad, however, "The Murder" by Thomas Land, with a great wealth of circumstantial detail and at least a hint of an accomplice in the murder, has no literary merit and is eminently forgettable.

"Frankie and Johnny" (aka "Frankie and Johnnie"; "Frankie and Albert"; and "Frankie") is also based on a true incident, but that hasn't made much difference to anyone except the real Frankie, who felt her life was ruined by the notoriety.

It is clear from contemporary accounts that Frankie Baker was a prostitute who shot her pimp, Albert Britt, in her own bedroom in St. Louis in 1899. There may have been an argument first about his running around with another prostitute named Alice Pryor. Frankie claims that he threw a lamp at her and then came at her with a knife, so she shot him in self-defense, and in fact she was acquitted at her trial.

Some scholars have suggested that the song originated earlier than 1899, but the emerging consensus supports the belief that it was indeed based on Frankie Baker and Albert Britt. Cecil Brown, a contributor to the 2005 book *The Rose & the Briar*, gives a full and convincing account. Brown credits Bill Dooley, a street musician and composer who lived in the neighborhood, with writing the original lyrics and music very soon after the killing. Hughie Cannon, however, has the first published, copyrighted version in 1904.

Others quickly got to work on the song, and, as Brown puts it, "like an oyster in a shell, time and tradition produced the pearl of a folk ballad called "Frankie and Albert" (127). In his 1962 dissertation, Bruce Redfern Buckley looked at 291 versions of the song. According to Brown, Buckley divides the versions into "Folk" types and "Popular" types, the latter of which sanitize the story, making Frankie go down to the drugstore for ice cream whereas Folk versions have her going either to the bartender for some beer or to the whorehouse. The Popular type is more likely to have

her executed; the Folk type shows her alive but regretting the deed. Both types portray it as an act of jealousy, not an act of self-defense as the real Frankie claimed.

Frankie Baker's story is interesting, but the song has a life completely independent of the original incident. A song like "Marching through Georgia" or "John Brown's Body" will always make us think of its historical origin, but a song like "Frankie and Johnny" makes us think of passion and betrayal and jealousy. Some of the most memorable verses are thoroughly inaccurate, but that really doesn't matter. The lyrics economically create vivid pictures and an unforgettable narrative.

While performers have many possible versions of the lyrics to choose from, they still like to update them and change them. Sam Cooke, for example, has Frankie buying "everything for Johnny / From his sports car to his Ivy League clothes." Just as important as the choice of lyrics, however, in determining how an audience will react to a performance is the choice of style, so it would be instructive to listen to more than one version.

### **Procedures**

After dividing the students into small groups, I would pass out a summary of the facts in the Tom Dula case. I would ask each group to come up with a strategy for presenting the story in song. I would ask them to consider first what details they would leave out, what imagined details they would put in, what sort of message they wanted to convey, and what sort of emotion they would like to inspire in their audience. If there was time, I would ask whether it should be first person or third person, in one voice or more than one voice, whether the story should be reported in progress or in retrospect, and what sort of refrain they might want. After students share their opinions, we would look at the lyrics of the Kingston Trio and the Doc Watson versions and debate their merits. Next we would look briefly at the Thomas Land version, focusing on what the author does wrong. Finally we would listen to several versions, contrasting the styles and discussing their impact.

For "Frankie and Johnny," I would concentrate on the impact that style of delivery has on our reaction to the content of the songs. After briefly reviewing the historical background, we would look at the lyrics of the Frank Crumit version. First we would chart the story then pick out effective narrative devices. I would ask the students whether the song should have a more serious or more humorous treatment in its delivery and ask them to support their decision with specific references to the text. Next I would play the Crumit version and discuss its impact. For contrast, I would play a Mississippi John Hurt recording and ask what different impact was created by the different style.

### **Lesson Three: "Zeb Turney's Gal" and "The Martins and the Coys"**

#### **Folk or Faux?**

Although the feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys is famous, feud songs are rare. Norm Cohen describes one ballad about the murder of an attorney in 1903 that continued in oral tradition. Charles Bell, who collected music in southeast Kentucky from 1964-1994, has never heard a feuding song. According to Bell, the people often deny that any feuding still takes place although to his knowledge it does. One family in the 1980s lost five out of seven sons to a feud.

According to Appalachian folk song collector Anne Warner, their prolific source Frank Proffitt gave them only one feud song, "Don Kelly's Girl." A variant of the song was printed in the *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3 (1939) and is on Library of Congress field recording 1345 B 1 (Warner 279). It is also known as "Zeb Tourney's Girl" and can be found under that title on the website *Mudcat Lyrics*. Although the *SFQ* singer claims the song originated in the mountains, Warner thinks the tone of the song makes that claim questionable. Robert Waltz in *The Ballad Index* agrees and suggests

that it was written in 1925 by Carson J. Robison. (The fact that the Leonard H. Axe Library in Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas, has a copy of the sheet music for “Zeb Turney’s Gal” in its Robison collection is additional evidence.)

## Procedures

First I would give a quick historical background of feuding in Kentucky. Then I would explain the difference between songs in the folk idiom and songs in the popular idiom by referring back to the different versions of “Tom Dooley.” Next I would project the lyrics of “The Martins and the Coys,” which are obviously humorous. I would ask students to explain how they know that the audience is not to take the feuding seriously. How do they know that this is a popular song in origin rather than a folk song? Then I would play the song and ask whether the style is in accord with their analysis. Next we would look at the lyrics of “Zeb Turney’s Gal.” I would explain that there has been some debate as to whether the song is folk or popular in origin and ask them to look for internal evidence in the song to support one view or the other. Does it have an outsider’s or insider’s perspective? Based on the lyrics, would they give it a humorous or serious treatment when singing it? Then I would play the song and ask whether the style is in accord with their analysis.

These songs could also be used in conjunction with other texts. The story line of young lovers from feuding families is familiar from *Romeo and Juliet*: “Prodigious birth of love it is to me that I must love a loathed enemy” (Act 1, scene 5). A more direct comparison would be with the Shepherdson-Grangerford feud described in chapter 18 of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The Saki short story “The Interlopers” has an ironic ending to a feud story and could thus be compared to the ending of “The Martins and the Coys.”

## Assessment

At the end of the ballad unit, I would ask the students to sing along to some of the songs. Then I could ask some more general, open-ended questions. I might focus first on the songs with an historical basis. Why might one choose to write a poem, song, or story based on real-life incidents instead of purely from one’s imagination? How can a narrative express a point of view? How can even a “true-life” story have a theme?

One could also use the ballads in a discussion of gender roles. How do the most common types of murder ballads both reflect and reinforce ideas about women? Susan Cook (in “Cursed Was She: Gender and Power in American Balladry”) argues that “we shape and are shaped by the stories we tell and that we come to believe them even in the face of other evidence” (217). She points out that in Laws’s *Native American Balladry*, five times as many murder ballads plots have female-only victims as opposed to men-only victims. Female victims are always killed by men, generally husbands or lovers, whereas men are often killed in outlaw situations (Cook 215). Women are almost always passive victims, often killed either because they refuse to marry the men (as in “The Banks of the Ohio”) or because the men won’t marry them after getting them pregnant. “Frankie and Albert” might seem like a counter example, but the fact that the Frankie character is based on an African-American prostitute in 1899 St. Louis puts it in a different setting from the Appalachian Mountain ballads and means that the “virgin or whore” stereotype is not really being undermined.

Ballads also bring up the issue of how we feel about crimes of passion as opposed to crimes of greed. Why are we drawn to stories of murder? Why do we sometimes romanticize criminals? How do we define crime? How is “illegal” different from “immoral”? A cheated husband or lover who kills his successful rival is often portrayed sympathetically in ballads as Olive Woolley Burt points out

(43); not so for a man who refuses to marry a woman because he has found a richer alternative (as in “The Willow” or “Lord Thomas and Fair Ellinor” (<http://www.contemplator.com/child/thomas.html>) According to Burt, “The despair of unrequited love is also often regarded as a rather noble excuse, whether the murderer kills the object of his affection or commits suicide or both” (44).

### **Extending the Lesson**

For an assignment at the end of the unit, I would ask the students to find the lyrics to an acceptable modern song which they feel provides an interesting comparison or contrast to one of the songs in the unit. Each student would take a turn to project the lyrics, possibly play a brief clip of the music, and then explain to the class what they see as key points of comparison or contrast in content, theme, and/or style.

### **Resources**

#### **Lyrics**

“The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter”

In fair Worcester town and in fair Worcestershire  
A beautiful damsel she once lived there.  
A young man he courted her all for to be his dear,  
And he by his trade was a ship's carpenter.

Early one morning before it was day,  
He went to his Polly, these words he did say:  
'O Polly, O Polly, you must go with me,  
Before we are married my friends for to see.'

He led her through woods and through valleys so deep,  
Which caused this poor maiden to sigh and to weep:  
'O Billy, O Billy, you have led me astray  
On purpose my innocent life to betray.

'O Billy, O' Billy, Oh pardon my life,  
I never will covet for to be your wife;  
I'll travel the whole world to set myself free,  
If you will pardon my baby and me.'

'There's no time for pardon, there's no time to save,  
For all the night long I've been digging your grave.  
Your grave is now open and the spade is standing by';  
Which caused this young damsel to weep and to cry.

He covered her up so safe and secure,  
Thinking no one could find her, he was sure.  
Then he went on board to sail the world round,  
before the murder could ever be found.

Early one morning before it was day,  
The captain he came up and these words he did say:  
'There's a murderer on board and he must be known.  
Our ship is in mourning, we cannot sail on.'

Then up steps the first man, 'I'm sure it's not me';  
Then up steps the second, 'I'm sure it's not me';  
Then up steps bold William to stamp and to swear:  
'I'm sure it's not me sir. I vow and declare.'

Now as he was turning from captain with speed,  
He meet with his Polly, which made his heart bleed.  
She ripped him and tore him, she tore him in three,  
Because that he murdered her baby and she.

"Pretty Polly"

I courted Pretty Polly the live-long night  
I courted Pretty Polly the live-long night  
Then left her next morning before it was light.

Polly, pretty Polly, come go away with me,  
Before we get married some pleasure to see.

He led her over the fields and the valleys so wide  
Until pretty Polly, she fell by his side.

Oh Willie, oh Willie, I'm afraid of your ways  
I'm afraid you will lead my poor body astray.

Pretty Polly, pretty Polly, your guess is just right  
I dug on your grave the best part of last night.

She threw her arms around him and trembled with fear  
How can you kill the poor girl that loves you so dear?

There's no time to talk and there's no time to stand  
Then he drew his knife all in his right hand.

He stabbed her to the heart and her heart's blood did flow  
And into the grave pretty Polly did go.

He threw a little dirt over her and started for home  
Leaving no one behind but the wild birds to mourn.

## “The Willow Tree”

There was a youth, a cruel youth,  
Who lived beside the sea,  
Six little maidens he drowned there  
By the lonely willow tree.

As he walked o'er with Sally Brown,  
As he walked o'er with she,  
An evil thought came to him there,  
By the lonely willow tree.

O turn you back to the water's side,  
And face the willow tree,  
Six little maidens I've drowned here,  
And you the seventh shall be.

Take off, take off, your golden crown,  
Take off your gown, cried he.  
For though I am going to murder you  
I would not spoil your finery.

Oh, turn around, you false young man,  
Oh turn around, cried she,  
For 'tis not meet that such a youth  
A naked woman should you see.

He turned around, that false young man,  
And faced the willow tree,  
And seizing him boldly in both her arms,  
She threw him into the sea.

Lie there, lie there, you false young man,  
Lie there, lie there, cried she,  
Six little maidens you've drowned here,  
Now keep them company!

He sank beneath the icy waves,  
He sank down into the sea,  
And no living thing wept a tear for him,  
Save the lonely willow tree.

Resources/Materials for “Tom Dooley”

Thomas Land version

The Murder



The tragedy I now relate  
Is of poor Laura Foster's fate  
How by a fickle lover she  
Was hurried to eternity.  
On Thursday morn at early dawn  
To meet her groom she hastened on,  
For soon she thought a bride to be  
Which filled her heart with ecstasy.  
Her youthful heart no sorrow knew  
She fancied all mankind were true.  
And thus she gaily passed along  
Humming at times a favorite song.  
Ere sun declined toward the west  
She met her groom and his vile Guest;  
In forest wild they three retreat  
And look for Parson there to meet.  
Soon night came on with darkness drear  
Yet still poor Laura felt no fear.  
She thought her lover kind and true  
Believed that he'd protect her too.  
Confidingly upon his breast  
She laid her head to take some rest;  
But soon poor Laura felt a smart,  
A deadly dagger pierced her heart.  
No shrieks were heard by neighbors round  
Who were in the bed sleeping sound.  
None heard the shrieks so loud and shrill,  
Save those who did poor Laura kill.  
The murder done they her conceal  
And vow they'll never reveal  
To dig the grave they now proceed  
But in the darkness make no speed.  
But dawn appears, the grave not done,  
Back to their hiding place they run,  
And there in silence wait till night  
To put poor Laura out of sight.  
The grave was short and narrow, too.  
But in it they poor Laura threw,  
And covered with some leaves and clay,  
And hastened home at break of day.

### The Search

Since Laura left at break of day  
Two days and nights had passed away;  
The parents now in sorrow wild  
Set in search of their lost child.  
In copse and glen, in wood and plain  
They search for her but all in vain;  
With aching hearts and pensive moans,

They call for her in mournful tones.  
With sad forebodings for her fate  
To friends her absence they relate,  
With many friends all anxious, too,  
Again their search they do renew.  
They searched for her in swamps and bogs,  
In creeks and caves, and hollow logs;  
In copse and glen, and bramble too;  
But still no trace of her they view.  
At last upon a ridge they found  
Some blood all mingled with the ground.  
The sight to all seemed very clear  
That Laura had been murdered there.  
Long for her grave they search in vain.  
At length they meet to search again,  
Where stately pines and ivies wave,  
At last they found poor Laura's grave.

#### The Resurrection and Inquest

The grave was found as we have seen  
Mid stately pines and ivies green.  
The Coroner and Jury too,  
Assembled this sad sight to view.  
They take away the leaves and clay  
Which from her lifeless body lay.  
They from the grave her body take  
And close examination make.  
When soon the bloody wound they spied,  
Twas where the deadly dagger pierced her side;  
The inquest held, this hapless maid  
Was then into her coffin laid.  
The Jury made the verdict plain,  
Which was, poor Laura had been slain;  
Some ruthless fiend had struck the blow,  
Which laid poor luckless Laura low.  
Then in the church yard her they lay  
No more to rise till judgment day  
Then robed in white we trust she'd rise  
To meet her Saviour in the skies.

Source:

West, John Foster. *The Ballad of Tom Dula: The Documented Story Behind the Murder of Laura Foster and the Trials and Execution of Tom Dula*. Durham, NC: Moore Publishing, 1970.

Kingston Trio Version (1958 Capitol Records) lyrics available at  
<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/t/tomdooleyvarious.shtml>

Doc Watson's 1964 version (Vanguard Records) lyrics available at

<http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/watson-doc/tom-dooley-1524.html#start>

#### Resources/Materials for “Frankie and Johnny”

Mississippi John Hurt’s performance of “Frankie,” available on *YouTube* at “Frankie’ MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT (1928) Folk Blues Guitar Legend” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr\\_VUEITbjY&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr_VUEITbjY&feature=related)

or from *An Anthology Of American Folk Music* (Folkways RF202) or on disc 1 of *Mississippi John Hurt – D.C. Blues: Library of Congress Recordings* for a more serious folk guitar version.

Also listen to Frank Crumit’s 1927 recording, available on *YouTube* at “Frankie and Johnnie-Frank Crumit” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLKqYBkRFrE>) for a more popular, lighthearted, jazzy version.

Watch Mae West singing part of the song in the movie *She Done Him Wrong* on the Youtube clip “Who’s Doing Who Wrong” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeUEOpcZRZg&feature=fvwrel>)

“Frankie and Johnnie” lyrics available at

<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/f/frankieandjohnnyenglishlyrics.shtml>

Resources / Materials for “Zeb Tourney’s Girl” (“Zeb Turney’s Gal”; “Don Kelly’s Girl”) Available at [http://www.folklorist.org/song/Zeb\\_Tourney's\\_Girl](http://www.folklorist.org/song/Zeb_Tourney's_Girl)

Resources / Materials for “The Martins and the Coys” available at <http://www.cowboylyrics.com/tabs/autry-gene/the-martins-and-the-coys-8216.html>

*YouTube* has a clip of Gene Autry performing “The Martins and the Coys” in *The Big Show* (a 1936 movie), but the sound quality is not high, so I would also recommend the YouTube of Wilf Carter performing the song from the RCA LP *Yodelling Memories: Wilf Carter*, even though it cuts off the last verse (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeMa87TZtvs>).

One could also watch the cartoon version on *Youtube*: “Make Mine Music – The Martins and the Coys” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtyUychvYls>). The song became the basis for a 1944 BBC “ballad opera” put together by Alan Lomax. *The Ballad Operas: The Martins and The Coys* is available on CD.

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