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The Development of Randal Ballad from Song to Nursery Rhyme:

A Critical Study

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Abstract:

Ballad is the oldest poetical form in English. Most of the ballads have been lost but some of them have been collected and published. Originally it was sung from village to village to the accompaniment of a harp by a singer or a band of singers who earned their livelihood in this way. Thus, it existed in a song form. Gradually, there was a change in its pattern. It is demonstrated with the example of the Randal Ballad in this paper. The researcher aims to study the developmental phase of ballad from song to nursery rhyme.

Key words: Ballad, Lord Randal, Song, Rhyme, Nursery Rhyme

Introduction:

Poetry is a type of literature or artistic writing. It evokes emotions of the readers. It is often divided into stanzas. There are two types of poetry: I) Subjective & II) Objective. The subjective poem reflects poet's own thoughts and feelings. The Objective poem is based on poet's observations of the external objects or events.

There are different poetical types like, lyric, ode, sonnet, elegy, Idyll, Epic, Ballad, Satire etc. This paper mainly focuses on ballad form.

The Origin and Meaning of the Ballad Form

The ballad form arises out of folk literature. It is one of the oldest form in English. The word ballad is derived from "ballare" which means "to dance". Originally it was sung from village to village to the accompaniment of dancing. Often it is written in the form of dialogues. They were easily understood by the audience. Because it is based on local events. It provided the entertainment to the audience. Most of the



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ancient English ballads were collected in Bishop Percy's "Reliques of Ancient English Poetry", published in 1765. "Popular Ballads of Olden Time" is also a collection of old ballads by Frank Sidgwick.

The Characteristics of Ballad:

The ballad is often defined as a short-story in verse. The story is generally tragic. It is full of simplicity. It is written in question-answer method. In ballad, one stanza has 4 lines. The first and third lines are four feet iambic. The second and fourth lines are three-foot iambic. The last line is repeated from stanza to stanza. It is called "refrain". It is always objective. It does not show the personal feelings or emotions of the poet. It has supernatural and magical elements. The obsolete and archaic words are used in ballad.

Kinds of Ballad:

There are three kinds of ballad. They are as given below:

- 1) **The Popular Ballad:** It is very simple and easy. It was developed naturally among illiterate people. These ballads have unknown authorship.
- 2) **Literary Ballad:** It was developed later on. They are the conscious imitation of earlier ballads.
- 3) **Mock-Ballad:** In this type of ballad, comic theme is used. It is totally opposite than regular ballad.

The Randal Ballad: Development, Transformation & Function:

According to the scholars and critics of the ballad, Lord Randal was the most popular purely traditional song in many European countries and also in America. There are many versions and variants are available which are the proofs of it. No one has raised the question why this ballad has not been so popular. The same is true of problems connected with ballad development. Even the point of departure presents us with the first difficulties. Archer Taylor has suggested that the oldest known version comprises two



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originally distinct motifs or scenes, namely the hunt and the banquet. But the question is whether one can really speak of a banquet at all. According to Child A Lord Randal has been out hunting, and was treated to a meal of fish by his True-Love. Thus, the meal was rather a fish picnic than a banquet, and insofar an unlikely part of a hunt. The meal and its preparation might be regarded as a social indicator and therewith an innuendo as to a possible misalliance and its potentialities for plot development.

This means that the origin must not necessarily be traced to two different stories, as is the case if we accept the banquet hypothesis. On the contrary the ballad may derive from a more psychologically complex nucleus concerning a love affair. Either way it is necessary to take the development of the ballad into consideration. It is, however, imperative that we do not succumb to the temptation of streamlining and rationalizing developmental tendencies in order to explain away apparent discrepancies and to make our ballad conform to order and logic. We must take the poems as they have been transmitted to us. Ballads come into existence through and after oral transmission. It is therefore no use to search for archetypes or originals. They would lack the aesthetic flavour of balladness. Inconsistencies, mental leaps and bounds, even gaps are part of the specific meaning of the ballad. This is particularly true of the Randal ballad. The hundreds of extant versions differ in all imaginable accessory parts and details, and yet they all retain a certain Randal nucleus sometimes reduced to vague associations. As it is likely that the popularity of the ballad is due to such similarities or common denominators, it seems necessary to point out what they are.

Lord Randal as a Nursery Rhyme

From its first appearance in popular poetry, the ballad of Lord Randal has not been addressed exclusively to adults. Many collectors report that Randal was popular with young and old, that even pre-school children were pleased by Lord Randal or wept for him, just as their grandparents did. Like folksongs, popular ballads are not restricted to a specific age group. The reason for this is probably the concentration of



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the epic plot on the emotional core in the process of oral tradition. This means that only the most important part of the ballad is preserved. In Lord Randal the basic situation of a confrontation between mother and son in an extreme situation of fate is apparently just as comprehensible for children, as for adults. An overview of the nearly innumerable variants of the ballad discloses the tendency towards change of milieu and social stratum. According to David Russel,

Originally Lord Randal belonged to the aristocracy, but in later oral tradition he descends to the bourgeois and still later even becomes a child. The proper names of the protagonist make the embourgeoisement very clear. Lord Randal - probably through dozens of intermediate stages - becomes Johnny Randolph, Jimmy Ransing, Johnny Ramble, McDonald, Fair Elson, Sweet Nelson, Orlando, Tyrante, and eventually 'my own pretty boy', 'my sweet rambling son', 'my sweet little one', and 'my pretty little one. (126)

The main characters have apparently been adapted to the respective audience. In the end, the main character itself becomes a child, thus when the grandmother for mysterious reasons poisons her little grandchild. In the earlier version, we read: 'I've been to my true-love's' {Barry 61), This is replaced by 'I've been to my grandmother's' {Child I). Such a change can only be explained by conscious remodelling of poems for the nursery through adults. This is obvious in the case of facts, motifs, words and symbols which were alien to children and had to be eliminated or at least rationalised.

On the way to the nursery, the person of the murderer and the murdered are changed according to the psychological needs of the child. The structure of the plot remains intact. There is, however, a noticeable shift in the emotional focus. The centre point is no longer the mother, but rather the victim. The child is not represented as a betrayed lover, nor in his emotional relationship to his mother. Instead he is now simply the victim of murder by poison. This gives additional weight to the action. As the protagonist is now a small



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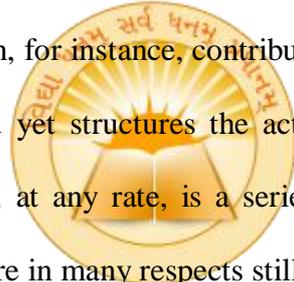
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boy, there can't very well be a murdering mistress; her place can be taken by someone more suited to a child's world, as for instance a step-mother. A close relationship to the murderess is no longer necessary. The figure of the murderer becomes replaceable and loses interest. The appearance of a neutral neighbour as murderer is quite typical. The entire interest is concentrated on the child.

Conclusion:

Thus, it is observed that the essential features of the old ballad remain intact during the development of the popular Randal ballad towards the nursery. The most important props of continuity were doubtlessly melody and metre. These formed a kind of mould or basis and thus favoured certain structures and forms of the subject matter. The Randal stanza has a rigid, nearly formulaic structure, and is thus optimal for mnemonic tradition. Incremental repetition, for instance, contributes to easy learnability. The same is true of the refrain, which remains the same and yet structures the action by means of its increasing cognitory function. The result of this development, at any rate, is a series of short, concise nursery rhymes about Randal (or whatever he is called), which are in many respects still near to the original ballad.



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