Features of Old Ballads

1. Origin
   a. The folk ballad is an **anonymous poem[1]** dating back to the late middle ages
   b. Each ballad was composed by a single author (minstrel) and was transmitted by way of mouth ➔ there are **several versions[2]** of the same ballad (➔ *Lord Randall* is also knows as "*L'avvelenato*")
   c. Ballads were meant to be **danced and sung**

2. Content
   a. Ballads always tell a story / an event ➔ they are **narrative episodic forms**
   b. They generally focus on a **single situation**, without providing much details[3] on it.
   c. The main themes are: **love** (*The Unquiet Grave*), **death** (*BG Campbell, Lord Randall*), revenge and **supernatural**. Themes are generally drawn from every day's life
   d. There are **no moral lessons[4]**

3. Narrative techniques
   a. Since ballads tell a story, they are effectively told in a peculiarly **dramatic manner**: as a matter of fact, **dialogue** often bulks large in ballads (*Lord Randall, The Unquiet Grave*)

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[1] Ballads were composed by wandering poems who entertained the people of a local community

[2] Because ballads were transmitted orally, they were adapted to local culture. For example, the "greenwood" of the Scottish version of Lord Randal, becomes a "wildwood" in the American, a "meadow" in the Irish. In a sense, many foreign traditional parallels exist.

[3] All the same, in some ballads we can find some graphic images (e.g: "the stalk is withered dry")

[4] People were not interested in characters' deep psychological shaping or moral lessons: minstrels were expected to tell facts

b. Ballads generally start in *medias res*, show us the **sequence of events** and **quickly** proceed to their conclusion.

c. **Repetition** plays a pivotal role since it is used in order to emphasise a detail. It is possible to find the same sentence or even the whole stanza many times. The refrain is the better example of repetition.

d. Characters' psychology is not given and **they never moralise**.

e. The narrator is generally **impersonal** and never intrudes in the action

4. Form (fixed)

   a. The ballads' form is simple: they generally consists of some **four-line stanzas** with no subordinate clauses or long description

   b. Every stanza should be seen as a **unit** in which a part of the story is told

   c. The dominant rhyme scheme is **ABCB** and the stress pattern is 4-3-4-3 and mainly **iambic**

5. Lexis

   a. Words are mainly **short**, vivid, **concrete** and **saxon**

   b. The simplicity of the metrical structure results in the creation of **stock phrases** /formulae[5] ("*cold lips*", "*make my bed soon*") that can be used in any ballad (repertoire)

   c. Many **magic words[6]** or symbolic numbers are scattered between the lines

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[5] Since ballads were composed on the spot, stock words allowed minstrels to take time for thinking of what comes next
[6] Numbers 3, 7, 12,...) and words, such as "greenwood" (Lord Randall), "albatross" The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner) are clues that alert the reader that something extraordinary is going to happen.