# Categories of Folk Song – Love songs

# We can group folk songs into a limited number of major categories. Love songs probably comprise the greatest wealth of songs in every language – but why? I suppose requited and unrequited love create the conditions in which poetry and song become a part of the process, either salving the soul or expressing the joy.

Often the language in such songs is very ‘indirect’, avoiding the subject to some degree, preserving a perceived morality, something which changes with the times. Thus the same song may well change with the times, where the subject becomes more or less sensitive as the morality of society changes.

Almost every song contains aspects which will be interpreted in different ways by different people. Most songs, however, will mean something to the listener, possibly far more personal than would be suggested – a familiar story, or their story.

The song here represents an ancient form but one which has lasted throughout the centuries.

# Seeds of love

1. Oh I sowed the seeds of love

It was in all the spring

In April, May or sunny June

When small birds they do sing

When small birds they do sing

2. Oh the willow tree will twist

And the willow tree will twine

And would I were in a young man’s arms

That ever had this heart of mine

That ever had this heart of mine

## 3. The gardener as he passed by

He bid me take great care

For if I gathered the rose so red

There groweth a sharp thorn there

There groweth a sharp thorn there

4. I said I’d take no care

Till I did feel the smart

And still did press the rose so dear

Till the thorn did pierce my heart

Till the thorn did pierce my heart

5. My garden is now run wild

When I must plant anew

And the beds that once were full of thyme

Are all o’er run with rue

Are all o’er run with rue

This song uses a vocabulary which avoids outwardly offensive language, but clear to the listener none the less. ‘Love’ is dressed up as a garden and birds singing and flowers create and impression of tenderness, care and loving. Specifically the ‘rose’ refers to love, both physical and platonic and the rose having thorns suggests the pain which love can inflict or which can result. The final verse talks of the garden having run wild – the affair is coming to a conclusion or is concluded – and planting anew suggests moving on to another liaison. Thyme is a herb used to flavour food and beds full of aromatic herbs over run by weeds suggests that feelings have similarly turned from the positive to the negative.

Such language will be found in many songs and the feelings are the same throughout. Essentially the song can be sung in the politest of company and in the most infamous of houses

**The Romeo and Juliet Syndrome**

It has been suggested that this song follows the theme of Romeo and Juliet. In fact the song is one of the ’Child Ballads’, number 84, and has many versions. Earlier versions were set in Scotland and in November – a real story probably – and were sung around the country until they arrived in the South of England in the 19th Century and Victorianised.

In our 19th Century version we have ’Sweet William’ and Barbara Allen. For 3 verses she is a hard hearted character showing no or little love for Sweet William. Suddenly in verse 5 onwards she changes completely and professes love so much so that she dies for the love of William. She is represented by the ’red rose’ he by the ’briar’ (wild rose). The phrase ’ Young man I think you’re dyin’ is hardly the feelings of someone in love. Scarlet town (first line), by the way, appears to be a joke. It is suggested that it is the town of Reading, north-east of London.

In the original version there is no ’Sweet William’ but a ’Sir John Graeme’. Barbara Allen is a serving girl who is slighted (ignored in a very obvious way) by him as she serves him wine. He summons her when he is very ill, about to die, and professes his love which she rejects with the phrase ’ Young man I think you’re dyin’. She leaves. Before he dies he orders his men to ‘be kind to Barbara Allen’, obviously feeling regret for his previous behaviour.

# Barbara Allen

1. In scarlet town where I was born

There was a fair maid dwellin’

Made every youth cry well a day

Her name was Barbara Allen

2. ‘Twas in the merry month of May

When new buds were a swellin’

Sweet Willian on his death bed lay

For love of Barbara Allen

3. So slowly, slowly got she up

And slowly she came nigh him

And all she said when she got there

Young man I think you’re dyin’

4. And as she tripped it lightly home

She heard the church bell tollin’

And every bell did seem to say

Hard hearted Barbara Allen

5. Oh mother, mother make my bed

Oh make it low and narrow

Sweet William died for me today

I’ll die for him tomorrow

6. They buried her in yon grave yard

And buried Will beside her

And on his grave there grew a rose

And out of hers a briar

7. They grew and grew right up the wall

Till they could grow no higher

Then twined into a lovers knot

The red rose and the briar

**The soldier and the Maid**

There are many songs describing relationships between lovers parted by war. This song refers to a time when Queen Anne was on the throne 1702 – 1714 and the army was fighting in the Iberian Peninsular (Spain and Portugal) under General John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough (the ancestor of Winston Churchill, prime minister during WW2).

It was common for couples to exchange gifts, such a two halves of a coin, as a token of their love. In verse 3 he refers to a diamond ring which he ’owns’ he gave her – owns means admits. This would amount to a ’breach of promise’ – a legal term which could be upheld by a court.

Recruits to the army were supposed to be unmarried and only in exceptional cases were marriages allowed. Women always followed armies in the field and liaisons were common with them and local women. In the army train, these women did the menial tasks and were looked after in common.

Officers were different. They paid their own expenses and their rank gave them social status and the resultant benefits. As they were expected to lead their troops they suffered a similar casualty rate to their men.

The man in this song was obviously wealthy.

# As I roved out

1. As I roved out one bright May morning

To view the mountains and valleys gay

Who should I spy but my own true lover

As she sat under yon willow tree

2. I took off my hat and I did salute her

I did salute her most courageously

As she turned around well the tears fell from her

Saying false young man you have deluded me

3. A diamond ring I own I gave you

A diamond ring to wear on your right hand

But the vows you made love you went and broke them

And married the lassie that had the land

4. If I married the lassie that had the land my love

It’s that I’ll rue till the day I die

But this fortune false sure no man can shun it

I was blindfolded I don’t deny

5. I wish the Queen would call home her armies

From the East Indies, America and Spain

And every man to his wedded woman

In hopes that you and I might meet again

**Ask the right question**

This song is a sanitised version of a song common in the army but also common in bars around the country. The husband tells her always to say ‘no’ but her lover suitably changes the question so that the ‘no’ really means ‘yes’. It is also a very short version and there may well have been far more verses, very specific and quite crude too, to add to the song.

**Oh No John**

On yonder hill there stands a creature,  
Who she is I do not know.  
I'll go and court her for her beauty;  
She must answer Yes or No.   
O No John! No John! No John! No!   
  
My father was a Spanish captain -  
Went to sea a month ago,  
First he kissed me, then he left me -  
Bid me always answer No.  
O No John! No John! No John! No!  
  
O Madam in your face is beauty,  
On your lips red roses grow,  
Will you take me for your lover?  
Madam, answer Yes or No.  
O No John! No John! No John! No!  
  
O Madam since you are so cruel,  
And that you do scorn me so,  
If I may not be your lover,  
Madam, will you let me go?  
O No John! No John! No John! No!  
  
O hark! I hear the church bells ringing,  
Will you come to be my wife?  
Or dear Madam, have you settled  
To live single all your life?  
O No John! No John! No John! No!

**Dialect Songs – Northern England and Scotland**

**A Geordie Song**

This song is in the accent and dialect of the North East around Newcastle. Although many of the words seem to be foreign they are not. They simply suggest a way of sounding the words. Blithe = happy, Neet = night, Divent = don’t, Gans = goes, Threesome reel = a dance for one man with two female partners, Fettle – to make, repair or do.

This is a comparatively modern song as are most dialect songs. Having an accent or dialect is more acceptable today than it has ever been.

## **Sally Wheatley**

Noo Ah'm myest distressed and sad

tho' Ah once'st was blithe and glad

and cud trip aboot tha toon both trim and neatly

Ah was happy neet and morn

But aall soch joys Ah've shunned

since Ah fell sa deep in love wi' Sally Wheatley.

Chorus: Oh dear me, Ah divent na what to de

for Sally's stole my heart away completely,

and Ah'll niver get it back

for she gans wi' Mr. Black

and they say he's gan ter marry Sally Wheatley.

Hoo Ah felt Ah divent naa,

the forst time I Sally saa,

in a threesome reel she hopped aboot so sweetly,

and Ah might a stood a chance

had Ah asked hor up to dance

but Ah was ower shy ta speak to Sally Wheatley.

Noo as often is the case

ye'll find others in yer place

if you fail ta shove ahead and fettle reetly,

for Ah'd scarcely torned me back

when Ah there was Mr. Black-

an’ he wuz jiggin' roond tha room wi' Sally Wheatly.

and he must hev got it reet

when he set hor hyem that neet -

after work dressed up he gans ta see hor neetly

There's great deanger in deleay

and A'd not be sad todeay-

if Ah had a hort Ah'd break't for Sally Wheatley

**Robert Burns**

Robert Burns was a great writer and collector of folk songs – over 1500 in his short lifetime (he died at 37 years - 25 January 1759 – 21 July 1796). He had 15 children by 5 different women including his wife Jean Armour. He is known for: "[Auld Lang Syne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auld_Lang_Syne)", "[To a Mouse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_a_Mouse)", "[A Man's a Man for A' That](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Man%27s_a_Man_for_A%27_That)", "[Ae Fond Kiss](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ae_Fond_Kiss)", "[Scots Wha Hae](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scots_Wha_Hae)", "[Tam O'Shanter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tam_o%27_Shanter_(poem))", "[Halloween](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween_(poem))", "[The Battle of Sherramuir](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Battle_of_Sherramuir)"

# Ae Fond Kiss

# Ae fond kiss and then we sever

# Ae farewell alas forever

# Deep in heart-wrung tears I’ll pledge thee

# Warring sighs and moans I’ll wage thee

Who shall say that furtune grieves him

# While the star of hope she leaves him

Me nae cheerful twinkle lights me

Dark despair around benights me

# I’ll not blame my partial fancy

# Naething could deceive ma Nancy

For tae see her was tae love her

Love but her and love for ever

# Had we ever loved sae kindly

# Had we ever laved sae blindly

# Never met or never parted

# We would ne’er been broken hearted

# Fare thee well by first and fairest

# Fare thee well my best and dearest

# Thine be ilka joy and treasure

## Peace, enjoyment, love and pleasure

Peace, enjoyment, love and pleasure

**North Yorkshire – accent only**

In Yorkshire and Lancashire the use of a familiar form of language is common. Instead of ’you’ they use ’thee’ (accusative) or ’thou’ (nominative), instead of ’your’, ’thy’ etc. ’Tha’s’ = you’ve or you’re, Bar = without, ’T’worms’ = the worms etc.

In addition you will find words such as ’fettle’ = do, make, repair and you can have a ’cup of char’ = a cup of tea. A ’char lady’ is a cleaner. Lakin’ – working etc.

# On Ilkley moor ba’t ‘at

1. Where hast thou been since I saw thee (Where have you been since I last saw you)

On Ilkley moor ba’t ‘at

Where hast thou been since I saw thee

Where hast thou been since I saw thee

**Chorus:**

On Ilkley moor ba’t ‘at (x3) (On Ilkley Moor without a hat)

2. Tha’s been a courtin Mary Jane (You’ve been courting Mary Jane)

3. Tha’s gonna catch thee death o’ cold (You’re going to catch your death of cold)

4. Then we shall have to bury thee (Then we shall have to bury you)

5. Then t’worms’ll come an’ eat thee up (Then the worms will come and eat you up)

6. Then ducks’ll come an’ eat up t’worms (Then the ducks will come and eat the worms)

7. Then we shall come an’ eat up ducks (Then we’ll come and eat the ducks)

8. Then we shall all have etten thee (Then we’ll all have eaten you)