

Dead Lovers: Notes and History

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Welcome

I've long been a fan not just of folk music, but of the stories and origins of traditional songs. I like to know how they traveled and the various forms they took along the way. So as part of the making of this album, I did some research on the songs I was considering. While I'm not a trained ethnomusicologist, there are a lot of great online resources that are easily accessible to the layperson, and I had a lot of fun reading up on these songs and collecting them, along with plenty others, on my blog:
www.thedeadloversproject.com.

One of the most challenging parts of folk song collecting is keeping track of the various origins and variations that each song has. Fortunately, a number of scholars including Francis Child, John Jacob Niles and, in recent times, Steve Roud have worked hard at doing just that. Roud began compiling an index of English-language folk songs in the 1970s that eventually moved online and is currently available to the public through the web site of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library in London. In each of the posts I've included the Roud Index number, and, if available, the number from the Child Ballad collection, which the curious can use to look up some of the many different forms and sources each song appeared in.

Why Dead Lovers?

In a couple decades of playing folk songs, I've definitely noticed some recurring themes. There are songs about drinking, of course, songs about nature, work, battle and plenty of love songs. And while there are a good number of cheerful and tender love songs, there's an impressively large selection of songs about romantic tragedy and heartbreak. I've joked for a few years now that I could do a whole album of "Dead Lover" songs until, well, I did.

But why the fascination with these horrible tragedies? Well, for one, they're often paired with wonderful melodies. They also show a fascination with sad and bloodthirsty stories that we see reflected in our modern-day crime dramas and reality shows. Sometimes it's fun to explore the macabre in a safe way.

But I've also come to suspect that these sad songs serve yet another function. As with the hard luck stories of modern blues and country, and the heartbreak ballads of rock and pop, there's a certain catharsis in a sad song. It lets the listener work through emotions that it can be hard to put a name to, let alone express in a socially acceptable way.

Many of the most gruesome murder stories also have very sweet or very catchy tunes, so I like to think that they started out as sappy love songs, but, even as modern folk singers sometimes do, somebody wrote parody lyrics about death and dismemberment and the parody stuck around long after the "serious" song was forgotten.

In any case, they're all wonderful old songs that have stood the test of time. I hope you enjoy listening to them half as much as I've enjoyed singing them.

Annachie Gordon: Matchmaking Mayhem

Arranged marriages were fairly common in the British Isles, especially among families where money, land or titles were at stake, for a very long time, and provide inspiration for any number of tragic stories, plays and, of course, songs. While in real life most couples either found themselves growing fond of each other over time or came to some arrangement that let them basically ignore each other for decades on end (which is easier to manage, I imagine, in a manor house than a studio apartment), in folk ballads they almost always end up involved in some sort of tragedy.

This song comes from Scotland and was first written down in the early 1800s. It is known as "Lord Saltoun and Auchanachie" (Child 239, Roud 102) or in more modern renditions simply as "Annachie Gordon."

In this story, young Jeannie from the Aberdeen region of Scotland wishes to marry a young man named Annachie (or Auchanachie, but it's hard enough to keep spelling it out the other way), but her father, feeling he isn't well-off enough, forces her into marriage with the local Lord Saulton (who, between 1785 and 1853 would have been Alexander George Fraser, though his wife's name was Catherine, so either the ballad is older than that or it took a lot of liberties with history, or probably both). Jeannie begs her parents not to marry her to a man she doesn't love when she'd rather have her handsome-but-broke lover Annachie, but the wedding goes ahead anyway.

In a particularly... I guess you'd say, "invasive" twist on the plot, when Jeannie refuses to consummate the marriage with Lord Saulton, her father orders her maids to "loosen up her gowns." At which point Jeannie falls to the floor and, as tragic heroines are wont to do in these situations, dies.

Annachie, who was off on a boat somewhere, happens to come home the same day that Jeannie was both married and died, and comes across his lover's servants weeping and moaning for their lost lady. He goes up and gives his dead beloved a kiss and then, as tragic heroes are wont to do in these situations, dies.

I'm not an expert on this period in Anglo-Scottish history by any means, but my understanding is that the late 1700s and early 1800s represented a time when arranged marriage was on its way out. I would speculate that maybe the ballad audiences of the time were fascinated by stories of arranged marriage

gone awry in part because it was not the way things were currently done, and was regarded as a relic of the unenlightened past (not that, from our modern point of view, marriage and women's rights were particularly enlightened in 1824, but hey, baby steps).

The Banks of the Ohio: Jealousy and Regret

There are a lot of negative emotions found in songs about tragic romance and death. Obviously the sense of loss is a common one, as is the sense of hopelessness in the face of events beyond one's control. In some there's betrayal or jealousy, but in this song the overwhelming emotion is one of regret.

In "Annachie Gordon" the lovers died of heartbreak, and in other songs lovers die in battle, of disease or often by some mysterious means which isn't mentioned in the lyrics of the song (in which case, I've decided if a character's death is not otherwise explained, we can assume they were slain by werewolves. We'll call that "DeBlass' First Rule of Folk Song"). But "The Banks of the Ohio" (Roud 157) is all about murder.

The narrator, "Willie," is in love with a girl who likes him at least enough to walk out with him. He wants her to marry him, she's not into it, so he drowns her in the Ohio River. There's no discussion of another man in her life, though based on the (extremely catchy) chorus of "only say that you'll be mine, and in no other's arms entwine," Willie seems at least a bit concerned about the idea. But what really sets this apart from other songs of murderous envy is the final verse, where he laments "my god, what have I done?"

There are a number of songs about jealous lovers or competing suitors killing someone in a fit of passion, but usually, if there's any aftermath it's either treated as a moment of grotesque justice as in "Mattie Groves" or something they hide until they get caught as in "The Cruel Sister," whereas our narrator has a moment to realize that losing his temper and drowning a woman was A TERRIBLE IDEA. I mean, it shouldn't take even a three-and-a-half minute folk song to figure that out, but we live and we learn, right?

The origins of "The Banks of the Ohio" are a bit hard to trace. What I can tell is that it showed up in the United States sometime in the late 1800s, and was first recorded in the late 1920s. Beyond that, I haven't come across a direct ancestor in European folklore (though the theme of drowning someone out of romantic jealousy is pretty common), so I'm guessing it's a purely American song. My personal theory, which is purely speculative based on how sweet and singable the chorus sounds, is that it was originally intended to be a sentimental love song, but some later wit decided it sounded too clingy and wrote the murder verses as a parody, which became more popular than the original.

Black is the Color: Caledonia to Carolina and Back

"Black is The Color" (Roud 3103) is more about the heartbreak of someone missing their lover than the death of that lover. It's not even clear that the singer's beloved is actually dead; in the version I sing all that's clear is that he's not going to marry her. She may have rejected him, she may be already be married, she may be sailing away to another country, or she may have been eaten by werewolves (as "DeBlass' Rule of Folk Music" states, when the death of a character in a song is unexplained, one can assume they were eaten by one or more werewolves).

In the version by noted song collector and composer John Jacob Niles in the Appalachians, the singer says "if she no more on Earth I see, my life will quickly leave me." So IF she dies. But more to the point of the song, the singer is suffering the pains of loss and, in his mind at least, is going to pine away and die for the sake of his love.

I suspect this very vagueness of plot is part of the appeal of the song, and why it has been so popular over the past couple centuries. It allows for the performer to put their own interpretation on the whole thing.

This song also illustrates how folk songs travel and change. It's been kicking around since at least the 1800s, if not earlier, and based on references to the Clyde River, it likely came from the Lowlands of Scotland.

From Scotland, it seems to have traveled to the Appalachian region of America (which had a large population of Lowland Scots and Scots-Irish settlers), where in the early 20th century Niles wrote it down but decided he didn't like the traditional melody, so he wrote his own setting for it. From there it made its way into the popular repertoire, being reinterpreted by a number of jazz singers. It also became a staple of the American folk revival, and seems to have made its way back into popularity in the Celtic folk repertoire again through this American influence. The version I learned from a hostel keeper in Galway came through Christy Moore, who in turn learned his from Scottish singer Hamish Imlach. Imlach had apparently heard the Nina Simone version and, working from an imperfect memory, somewhat revised the melody and lyrics to create the version that he recorded in the 1960s, which Moore has been performing ever since.

If I Was A Blackbird: Sad Songs Say So Much

Whether or not the story involves death, a recurring theme in many of these songs is the anguish of loss. It seems that singing about tragedy filled an important need for performers and audiences throughout the ages.

Nobody dies in "If I Was A Blackbird" (Roud 387), alternately known as "I Am A Young Maiden" in versions with a female protagonist. It tells the story of a young lover who is rejected by his/her love, and discouraged from courting them by their parents. And indeed, the protagonist doesn't seem to take any action (such as murder, as we've seen in past entries) but is just really sad about the whole thing. The language, as in many modern love songs, is a bit stalker-y, describing how they would like to follow their (non-reciprocating) true love as a bird and build a nest in the ship's rigging just to be close to them. A bit creepy yes, but compared to some of the other songs in this collection, which are full of murder and death, pretty mild.

The current version was first recorded in the early 20th century and is possibly pieced together out of various broadside ballads of the 19th. Its origins are most likely Scottish and/or Irish, as it doesn't seem to have been as popular in England or the Americas, and it mentions "Donnybrook Faire" which was located in Dublin, though just a mention of a place is, of course, no guarantee of origin.

It's a slightly unusual addition to this series, as nobody actually DIES in it, it's simply a really sad and plaintive song.

I think it's interesting to think about this song and various other "pining away in anguish" type ballads, in terms of what function they may have served for the singers and listeners. I've read before about how a lot of classic country (Hank Williams Sr. etc) dealt with heartbreak and infidelity largely because it was a socially acceptable way for men to express negative emotions. It could be hard to say "I'm not sure how things are going and I have doubts about my relationship" but "I caught my wife with my best friend" is a concrete image that stands in for those other uncomfortable feelings (it's worth noting that a lot of other Country pioneers struggled with alcoholism and very likely depression, so there's that).

By the same token, I suspect that in addition to the very human fascination with crime and gory drama that murder ballads give us, these sad old songs also had another purpose as a channel for negative emotions that balladeers and audiences alike may have had a hard time putting into words. Our terminology for generalized depression is pretty new after all, but depression itself likely isn't, nor are a host of other psychological ills. However, when somebody sings about being heartbroken because their true love dumped them, most folks can relate and it gives a shape to pour those nebulous feelings into (and if you up the ante by having your love die of violence, or illness or werewolves, all the more dramatic and emotionally poignant. After all, we may not have all lost our fiancée to werewolf attack, but a lot of us have had days when we've felt like we have).

And of course, in a lot of traditional cultures, especially among men, expressing too much emotion wasn't always socially acceptable. The allowable range of emotion would probably be limited to "Angry, hungry, drunk, horny or folk song." Thus music, which on one hand has often had such a role in bringing people together in joyful dance and celebration, also served the vital function of providing an outlet for negative and hard to define feelings. I don't know, with the ever expanding, yet still incomplete, understanding we have of the human mind nowadays, that depressing music could be considered the healthiest or most effective form of therapy, but there was a time when it was all we had.

Down in the Willow Garden: There's No Kill Like Overkill

Suppose you're a father whose son is dating a woman you don't approve of. Perhaps she's got some bad habits, or your son doesn't really love her but is a bit too passive aggressive to break things off, or maybe she's gotten pregnant and now he feels obligated to marry her. What kind of fatherly advice would you offer? Maybe you'd say something like "well, raising a child can be tough, but I'll help out" or "well, you'll have to break things off and live with the consequences" or even "here's a train ticket to the coast, get a job on a ship or something and stop whining."

Of course, none of those make for a compelling folk song. If you're a father in a folk song your advice might be, "just kill her and I'll bail you out." As an example of what the reader will see is a continuing theme of "Don't Look to Folk Songs For Life Advice," we have "Down in the Willow Garden" (Roud 446). The narrator of the song meets his "love" in the titular willow garden where he serves her poisoned wine, which makes her "fall off to sleep," at which point he runs her through with either a saber or a dagger, and THEN throws her in the river, thus earning the dubious honor of a Murder Ballad Triple Crown by killing her three different ways which, unless she was some sort of supernatural creature (werewolf?), seems a bit unnecessary.

This is one of the unique features of this song: many ballads have a victim stabbed, OR poisoned, OR drowned, and a few have a victim killed and then the body tossed into a body of water to dispose of it (which, kidding aside, is what's most likely happening here), but this is the only one I know of where multiple methods of murder are used on a single victim. One explanation is that it's just a way to be as dramatic as possible in telling of the killing. After all, folk songs don't have to be realistic. It may also be that the killer wanted to be thorough, he poisoned her and then followed it up by stabbing her to make sure she was really dead, and then tossed the body in the river to hide the evidence.

Or another interpretation is that he was affected by sentimentality. He may have been unable to look his lover in the eyes as he killed her, so he drugged her so she would be unconscious when he did the deed. Anyway, "Down in the Willow Garden" is an American folk ballad that appeared some time in the late 1800s. It may be based on an even older song, and its alternate name of "Rose Connelly" had made

appearances in older material, but it probably didn't take its modern form until after 1889, when William Butler Yeats published his poem "Down By the Sally Gardens" which has an almost identical opening line:

Down by the Sally Gardens, my love and I did meet

Of course Yeats may have copped that line from an older Irish ballad "Ye Rambling Boys of Pleasure" (Roud 386), from which he seems to have stolen... er, drawn inspiration for a number of lines.

Since its initial appearance in recorded music in the 1920s, "Down in the Willow Garden" has become a staple of bluegrass, country and folk singers, and has also been recorded by the likes of Bon Iver, Nick Cave and The Everly Brothers. And, of course, it was performed by Holly Hunter in the Cohen Brothers' "Raising Arizona" as a lullaby.

Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye: Maimed Lovers

Wars are pretty much factories for making Dead Lovers, and there are plenty of songs about husbands or boyfriends who die in battle. But what if the lover returns, but the song is still tragic?

In the 19th-century broadsheet ballad "Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye" (Roud 3137) the titular Johnny has gone off to the military, leaving his sweetheart behind in Athy, County Kildare, with a newborn child (depending on the version, it may be made clear that they weren't married, and the child may be the result of a "fond farewell" to the young hero).

Johnny was off in "Sulloon" or Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) which was under British rule at the time, and he was seriously wounded. By "seriously" I mean "Anakin Skywalker at the end of Episode III" wounded. Young Johnny lost his arms, legs and eyes in fighting there and was destined to live out the rest of his time as a beggar. It seems likely the fighting referenced was decades earlier during the Kandyan Wars, or possibly the more recent Matale Rebellion.

The song was first published in 1867 and is credited to songwriter Joseph B. Geoghegan, who wrote several music hall songs that have passed into the folk tradition. It appears to be a parody of the 1863 Civil War marching song "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" by Irish-American bandleader Patrick Gilmore.

It's sometimes speculated that the much darker "Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye" was the older song, and the American version was a "cleaned up" take on it, but documents don't seem to bear that out. Personally, I think it's a very believable idea that a songwriter would take a popular marching song and make a grim parody of it by replacing the patriotic optimism with a tale about the gruesome consequences of war. The song also nicely captured a theme of the growing Irish Independence movement: young men from Ireland, itself a nation under British rule, were recruited to go fight and suffer abroad in other British colonies, to help the Crown keep its power.

Although it's not confirmed, I also suspect that the song influenced Dalton Trumbo's 1938 book "Johnny Got His Gun," in which the protagonist suffers a similar fate during fighting in World War I. In the book, Joe Bonham is a young American soldier who is horrifically wounded in an artillery explosion. Like the Johnny of the song, Joe loses his limbs and eyes. The title of Trumbo's book is more directly drawn from the 1917 song "Over There" which opens with the line, "Johnny get your gun, get your gun, get your gun,"

but it makes sense that the author would have also been aware of the older song, as well as the real-life horrors of the First World War.

Interestingly enough, Trumbo's book, and the 1971 movie of it, were a direct inspiration for the 1988 song "One" by heavy metal band Metallica. They even used clips of the movie in the music video. So, in a roundabout way, you could say that this song inspired the Metallica song as well, connecting Irish folk music and American heavy metal (they also later did a version of "Whiskey in the Jar," another Irish folk song, which was based on a version by Irish rockers Thin Lizzy, so maybe it's not that much of a stretch).

In a lot of later versions, including my own, the last verse of the song has kind of an epilogue: "they're rolling out the guns again... but they'll never take our sons again," making for a powerful anti-war statement.

She Moved Through the Fair: Haunting, Graceful and Gone

What could be more tragic than watching your lover die? How about looking back on the last moment you laid eyes on your beloved, joyfully parting with the promise of seeing each other soon and building a bright future together, only to have her die before you see her again? The classic Dead Lover song "She Moved Through the Fair" fixes on just such a cheerful parting of young lovers and a subsequent, unnamed tragedy. The singer's beloved tells him that her parents approve of their upcoming marriage, and they part lovingly. "It will not be long, love, till our wedding day" she says. He watches her move gracefully across the fairgrounds, not knowing that it would be the last he would see her alive.

While it's not clear in any version I've come across how the young woman in the song dies, we can assume it's sudden. She may have been murdered by bandits on her way home from the fair, she may have been in an accident of some type, or she may, of course, have been devoured by werewolves, but she's gone and it wasn't expected.

Whatever happens, happens, and his beloved is no more, and in the last verse the narrator tells of his dream, in which his dead lover came to his bedroom and once again repeated her parting words, "It will not be long love, till our wedding day."

"She Moved Through the Fair" (Roud 861) has been kicking around for over a century, though it's hard to tell exactly how MUCH longer, exactly. It seems the currently known set of lyrics were pieced together and written in part by Irish poet and playwright Padraic Colum, but it's likely some version of the song, and certainly the melody, existed long before that.

Without getting too deep into the music theory, the tune is in mixolydian mode, that is based around what would be the fifth tone of a modern "major" scale, giving it an ancient and--to our modern ears--somewhat exotic sound. I can't think of too many late-19th or early-20th century folk ballads that rely heavily on this

mode, but it was common in some older music. This is all pretty much speculation on my part, as I don't have sources to confirm this.

It's a lovely melody, and the imagery of her moving across the fairgrounds "like a swan in the evening" is pretty evocative. As such, some singers have tried to find ways to present the song without its tragic elements, usually omitting the last verse or more often the next to the last verse and its line "that was the last that I saw of my dear," making the dream sequence one of anticipation rather than pathos. Obviously, I'm not on board with that, and not just because of my affection for Dead Lover songs. The whole feel of the piece is just too dependent on that melancholy, haunting mood to be a cheerful song.

There are plenty of happy songs about running off and getting married, "Mairi's Wedding," "The Jock of Hazledean," and "The Birkin Tree" all come to mind quickly, about happy lovers marrying, in some cases whether or not their families agree, but now that I think of it, those are all from Scotland. Western Ireland, it seems, is the place for ghosts.

Matty Groves: Everyone is Terrible

With this next song we return to and double down on murder ballads. And by “double down” I mean “double murder.”

Matty Groves (Child 81, Roud 52) was first documented in 1658, though it may be older, and has many variations in the names of those involved and even the melody used, but the story is always the same.

Some wealthy and powerful man is out of town and his wife picks up a young man to sleep with while he's away. The hot-tempered lord returns home to catch the adulterous lovers together and kills them, sometimes quite gruesomely.

This particular version tells of Lord Arnold, Lord Arnold's Wife and Little Matty Groves, but there are Lord Ronalds, Lord Arlens and Lord Donalds, as well as Matty being spelled Mattie or being called Little Musgrave like the Christy Moore version of the song. The traditional melody of Matty Groves resurfaced in the United States in the 1800s in the much, MUCH more cheerful Shady Grove, which is the story of a young man courting.

But this project isn't about cheerful love songs, now is it? Let's talk about the bloody drama and gleefully sordid details of Matty Groves instead.

First off, this story starts off in church, where the titular Matty Groves catches the eye of Lord Arnold's wife. Lady Arnold persuades Matty to come home with her while her husband is out of town, but a loyal servant alerts Lord Arnold and the enraged lord rushes home to confront the pair.

He challenges Matty to a duel, which, after several verses of buildup is described with wonderful concision: "Matty struck the very first blow, and hurt Lord Arnold sore, Lord Arnold struck the very next blow and Matty struck no more."

Lord Arnold then sits his wife on his lap in a gruesome parody of a cheery domestic scene, and asks her which man she likes better now. The lady says she'd rather kiss the dead guy than "you in your finery," which further enrages the bloody nobleman and he slays her by running her through with his sword (in some versions so violently that he “pins her up to the wall”). He then calls for both the lovers to be tossed into the same grave, but with his wife on top because she was from a noble family.

So... there's really no good guy in this story, though you can certainly argue that cheating on a husband you didn't care for is probably less severe than murder. Or that sleeping with somebody else's wife is less

severe than killing an unprepared peasant in a one-sided duel. It's worth noting that in a lot of times and places, the execution of an unfaithful wife would be looked on as a fair punishment, but the ballad doesn't really seem all that sympathetic to Lord Arnold. It's really just a sordid and bloody story about people doing bad things to each other, which makes it, of course, extremely entertaining and a classic of the genre.

It's interesting to see how many Dead Lovers ballads seem to feature a wealthy young woman forced into an unhappy marriage. In fact, the unhappy marriage seems to be a common theme in a lot of these traditional songs, and it's almost always involving well-off people with lands and titles. It may be that for many centuries women were treated as bargaining chips to be used by their families to trade money and prestige, but based on the sheer number of times this comes up in song over the past four hundred years, it's also pretty apparent that at least part of society was really aware of this and didn't consider it a good thing.

It's also interesting to note that some of the exact language and situations come up in other songs, although with different outcomes. For example, in the slightly younger ballad "The Raggle Taggle Gypsy" and its variants (Roud 1, Child 200) a young lady runs off from her privileged position to follow a handsome vagabond, and while "Matty Groves" has the line "I'd rather one kiss from dead Matty's lips than you in your finery" the "Raggle Taggle Gypsy" has the line "I'd rather one kiss from the yellow Gypsy's lips than you in your finery." Racial profiling aside, the later ballad has a bit happier outcome than "Matty Groves" in that the young lady runs off to be poor and happy rather than rich and miserable. To be fair, though, Lord Arnold's Wife does end up reunited with her lover as well. They're together forever as Dead Lovers.

The Banks of the Lee: You'll Catch Your Death Out There

Sometimes poring through the excellent online resources of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, or Mudcat.org or Wikipedia for information on a folk song yields all sorts of fun and interesting knowledge, either about the historical context of the song, its likely composer or famous performances. Sometimes, as in the case of this week's Dead Lovers ballad, all you get is, "yep, that's a song that exists."

"The Banks of the Lee" (Roud v167) dates back to at least 1850, but beyond that, these sources have little information on it other than that it's been a popular song for a while. The "v" in its Roud Number indicates that it comes from the database's Broadside Collection, rather than having been recorded in the field by a wandering ethnomusicologist. This indicates that it may have been written by a professional for popular consumption rather than appeared through the magical process of folk music creation (yes, I am well aware that every "traditional" song had to have been initially written by SOMEBODY, but the fact that these songs entered the tradition anonymously and are part of a community tradition is part of their appeal to many of us).

"The Banks of the Lee" was one of these songs likely written for a broadside. It did manage to catch on and has been performed by singers pretty consistently up to the present day. It tells the tale of two lovers along the River Lee in County Cork, Ireland (we can tell it's meant to be the Lee in Ireland not the River Lea near London because of multiple mentions of "wild Irish flowers"). It's not clear what the narrator's profession is, but in any case he travels away from his beloved Mary across the sea for a time, leaving her with the warning not to "stay out too late on the moorlands."

When he comes back, she's dead. It's not explicitly stated what kills her (werewolves?), but the fact that his warning not to stay out on the moors is included in the song suggests that the exposure to the elements on the cold, damp moor led to an illness that carried her off (I mean, she could have been eaten by werewolves, that would be a pretty good reason to stay off the moors at night). He then hangs out at her grave bringing her flowers.

It's a pretty sentimental song, almost a bit too sappy, especially in rhyming "dearly" with "sincerely," but it's redeemed a little bit with the hint of weather and wildness implied in spending a night on the moorlands. In a lot of stories the moors are where exciting, and often bad things happen. Highwaymen, storms, animal attacks and just getting lost and dying of exposure, and our narrator worries, quite rightly, about his beloved being caught out late and alone on the windswept, rocky wildlands of southern Ireland.

The Unquiet Grave: Undead Lovers

There are certainly songs about being haunted by memories, and even a few about being haunted by the actual ghost of a lost lover, but in this final song, "The Unquiet Grave" (Child 78, Roud 51), we hear about a ghost that feels haunted by the living.

This story is told in the first person, and starts out telling you that the speaker's "one true love" is already dead, laying slain in the green wood, though the cause is left unexplained (say it with me now, "must be werewolves"). The narrator says they will spend a year and a day mourning on their lover's grave. Things get creepy when, after all that weeping the ghost of the deceased appears and complains that their still-living lover is disturbing their rest. Things get even creepier when our narrator demands a kiss from the "clay cold lips" of their dead love, who, being the more sensible of the pair refuses on the grounds that it would be fatal for their beloved. In many versions, the ghost then sets a series of impossible tasks for the living lover to complete, in this case a nut grown underground, water from a stone and milk from the breast of a virgin.

This "riddle" portion of the song is pretty interesting. I always assumed that they were components for a spell to make it possible for the living lover to share a kiss (or more) with the ghost without dying, but I've also read from other sources that this song reflects a belief that when one of an engaged couple dies, the survivor is still bound to them, and the impossible tasks represent a ritual to free them. Or it might be taken that the ghost is just making these demands to make their lover go away for a while and allow them some rest.

While "The Unquiet Grave" appeared in many variations in its native England, American versions were rare before the 20th century. In fact, it's worth noting that ballads of the supernatural, while not unheard of, have generally been far less common in the American folk tradition than in European songs. Often, American versions of songs about ghosts, fairies or other mysterious beings substitute The Devil for the otherworldly antagonists, likely due to the Puritan leanings of the original English-speaking colonists.

While American versions are hard to come by, this song also calls to mind the Irish ballad "I Am Stretched on Your Grave," which comes from a translation of a Gaelic poem that was set to music by an Irish folk-rock band called Scullion in the 1970s and covered by many since. In this case there is no ghost, but the narrator still takes the mourning at the graveside beyond what most would consider reasonable.

That song also takes on the idea that excessive mourning is a bad thing, with both the narrator's parents and the "priests and the friars" apparently pretty worried about the young narrator. But "Unquiet Grave" takes it a step further with the idea that the mourning is not only bad for the living, but can harm the dead. It's actually not an uncommon idea in religions and folk beliefs, either, that prolonged or showy displays of grief are bad for the departed, but I suspect that in both cases the real point is for the living to learn to move on after a loss.

Much like those long ago lovers, our time together is at an end. However, unlike the ghost from this song, I certainly won't mind if you want to come back to these songs over and over for twelve months and a day or more.

-Matt DeBlass

Explore more tragic romance songs with me on my blog www.thedeadloversproject.com, where I've posted videos and essays about these songs and others, and will continue to add more.