Ballade

DEFINITION

What is a ballade? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> A ballade is a form of lyric poetry that originated in medieval France. Ballades follow a strict rhyme scheme ("ababbcbc"), and typically have three eight-line stanzas followed by a shorter four-line stanza called an envoi. The last line of each stanza—the refrain—is always the same.

Some additional key details about ballades:

- The envoi of a ballade is typically addressed to a prince, making it a type of apostrophe.
- The ballade was one of three *formes fixes*, or "fixed forms," popular for composing lyric verse in 14th and 15th century France. These poems were often set to music and performed. The type of music that these lyrics were sung alongside is also called ballade.
- The ballade is actually an entirely different form than poetic form called the ballad, though their names come from the same root word and the two forms do have some features in common.

Ballade Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce ballade: buh-**lahd**

Ballades, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme

Ballades are a type of formal verse, meaning that ballades follow both strict *meter* and a defined *rhyme scheme*. For that reason, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of what meter and rhyme schemes are in order to understand ballades. We provide more details about these terms on their own pages, but offer a quick primer here.

- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates the rhythm of lines of poetry. The units of meter are called feet. Feet have different stress patterns. For instance, an iamb is a foot with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (de-**fine**), while a trochee has the opposite: a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (**Po**-et). Poetic meters are defined by both the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter used in many ballades that contains five iambs per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).
- **Rhyme scheme**: Poems that make use of end rhymes (rhymes at the end of each line), often do so according to a repeating, predetermined pattern. That pattern is called a rhyme scheme. Rhyme schemes are described using letters of the alphabet, so that each line of verse that corresponds to a specific type of

rhyme used in the poem is assigned a letter, beginning with "a." For example, a four-line poem in which the first line rhymes with the third, and the second line rhymes with the fourth has the rhyme scheme "abab."

Meter in Ballades

In contrast to a poetic form like a sonnet, which dictates that its meter *must* be iambic pentameter, there is no specific meter required for a ballade. But all ballades must use *some* consistent meter. So a ballade in iambic pentameter will be iambic pentameter all the way through, while a ballade with another meter will use *that* meter all the way through.

Ballade Rhyme Scheme

The stanzas of a typical ballade follow the rhyme scheme "ababbcbC," where C is the refrain. The rhyme scheme for the four-line concluding stanza, known as the *envoi*, is "bcbC," where C is again the refrain. For instance, here's the third stanza of a ballade entitled "Ballade of the Optimist," by the poet Andrew Lang. Note its ababbcbC rhyme scheme:

> And, sometimes on a summer's day
> To self and every mortal ill
> We give the slip, we steal away,
> To walk beside some sedgy rill:
> The darkening years, the cares that kill,
> A little while are well forgot;
> When deep in broom upon the hill,
> We'd rather be alive than not.

And here is the envoi for that same poem, with the rhyme scheme bcbC:

> Pistol, with oaths didst though fulfil
> The task they braggart tongue begot,
> We eat our leek with better will,
> We'd rather be alive than not.

Other Types of Ballades

While the form of ballade described above—three stanzas of eight lines with a rhyme scheme "ababbcbC" and a four-line envoi with a rhyme scheme of "bcbC"—is by far the most common type of ballade, there are some variations of the ballade form that should be mentioned.

- **Ballade royal:** This ballade variation uses four stanzas of seven lines instead of three stanzas of eight, lacks an envoi, and is always written in iambic pentameter.

- **Ballade supreme:** A ballade variation that has three stanzas of ten lines with a rhyme scheme of "ababbccdcD" and an envoi of five or six lines with a rhyme scheme of either "ccdcD" or "ccdccD".
- **Double-refrain ballade:** A ballade variation in which line four of the first stanza, as well as line eight, become refrains. The rhyme scheme of the envoi changes as well, becoming "bBcC" to reflect the double refrain.

These are the three most common variations of the ballade form, but poets also play with or modify the ballade form in other nonstandard ways as well, such as leaving out the envoi or modifying the rhyme scheme in unique ways.

✳ EXAMPLES

The following examples of ballades include both standard versions of ballades as well as various types of variations of the form. To help highlight the structure of each example, we've **bolded the refrain** and highlighted all "a" rhymes in green, "b" rhymes in red, and "c" rhymes in yellow. Note also how the titles of all of these poems include the word "ballade"—it's typical for ballades to include the word "ballade" in their title.

Andrew Lang's "Ballade to an Optimist"

This ballade follows the standard ballade form. It has three stanzas of eight lines each, a four-line envoi, a refrain in the last line of each stanza and the envoi, and the typical ballade rhyme scheme of ababbcbC for the stanzas and bcbC for the envoi.

And, sometimes on a summer's day
To self and every mortal ill
We give the slip, we steal away,
To walk beside some sedgy rill:
The darkening years, the cares that kill,
A little while are well forgot;
When deep in broom upon the hill,
We'd rather be alive than not.

What though we wish the cats at play
Would some one else's garden till;
Though Sophonisba drop the tray
And all our worshipped Worcester spill,
Though neighbours "practise" loud and shrill,
Though May be cold and June be hot,
Though April freeze and August grill,
We'd rather be alive than not.

And, sometimes on a summer's day
To self and every mortal ill
We give the slip, we steal away,
To walk beside some sedgy rill:
The darkening years, the cares that kill,

A little while are well forgot;
When deep in broom upon the hill,
We'd rather be alive than not.

Pistol, with oaths didst thou fulfil
The task thy braggart tongue begot,
We eat our leek with better will,
We'd rather be alive than not.

The only slightly non-standard aspect of this ballade is that its envoi, rather than addressed to a prince, is addressed to the character of Pistol from Shakespeare's play Henry V.

Chaucer's "To Rosemounde: A Balade"

This romantic ballade was written by Geoffrey Chaucer, the 14th century poet best known for his Canterbury Tales. Because the poem written in Middle English—the language of Chaucer's time—it can be difficult for modern English speakers to understand its meaning. Even the spelling of "ballade" in the title is nonstandard. Nonetheless, the poem is an important example of how ballade's were prominent not only in France during the middle ages, but also in England where Chaucer lived. Notice, also, the poem's slight variation: it doesn't include an envoi at the end.

Madame, ye ben of al beaute shryne
As fer as cercled is the mapamounde,
For as the cristal glorious ye shyne,
And lyke ruby ben your chekes rounde.
Therwith ye ben so mery and so jocounde
That at a revel whan that I see you daunce,
It is an oynement unto my wounde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce.

For thogh I wepe of teres ful a tyne,
Yet may that wo myn herte nat confounde;
Your semy voys that ye so smal out twyne
Maketh my thoght in joy and blis habounde.
So curtaysly I go with love bounde
That to myself I sey in my penaunce,
"Suffyseth me to love you, Rosemounde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce."

Nas neuer pyk walwed in galauntyne
As I in love am walwed and ywounde,
For which ful ofte I of myself devyne
That I am trew Tristam the secounde.
My love may not refreyde nor affounde,
I brenne ay in an amorous plesaunce.
Do what you lyst, I wyl your thral be founde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce.

Chaucer's "Ballade of Good Counsel"

This modern English translation of Chaucer's "Ballade of Good Counsel" maintains the original poem's rhyme and meter (iambic pentameter). This poem is an example of a "ballade royal," a variation on the traditional ballade that uses four stanzas of seven lines instead of three stanzas of eight. In keeping with the form of the ballade royal, this poem has no envoi. The rhyme scheme is "ababbcC", a pattern referred to as "rhyme royal."

Flee from the crowd and dwell with truthfulness;
Suffice thee with thy goods, tho' they be small:
To hoard brings hate, to climb brings giddiness;
The crowd has envy, and success blinds all;
Desire no more than to thy lot may fall;
Work well thyself to counsel others clear,
And Truth shall make thee free, there is no fear!

Torment thee not all crooked to redress,
Nor put thy trust in fortune's turning ball;
Great peace is found in little busy-ness,
And war but kicks against a sharpened awl;
Strive not, thou earthen pot, to break the wall;
Subdue thyself, and others thee shall hear;
And Truth shall make thee free, there is no fear!

What God doth send, receive in gladsomeness;
To wrestle for this world foretells a fall.
Here is no home, here is but wilderness:
Forth, pilgrim, forth; up, beast, and leave thy stall!
Know thy country, look up, thank God for all:
Hold the high way, thy soul the pioneer,
And Truth shall make thee free, there is no fear!

Therefore, poor beast, forsake thy wretchedness,
No longer let the vain world be thy stall.
His mercy seek who in his mightiness
Made thee of naught, but not to be a thrall.
Pray freely for thyself and pray for all
Who long for larger life and heavenly cheer;
And Truth shall make thee free, there is no fear!

Villon's "Ballade des Pendus"

This English translation of François Villon's well-known poem doesn't retain the original rhyme scheme, which is hard to preserve when translating from French to English. Nonetheless, the poem is a good example of a "supreme ballade." In this common variation of the ballade, the stanzas have 10 lines each. In the original French, the three main stanzas follow the rhyme scheme "ababbccdcD" and the envoi follows the rhyme scheme "ccdcD." This poem was written in France in the 15th century, when the ballade was at the height of its popularity.

Human brothers who live after us,
Do not have (your) hearts hardened against us,

For, if you take pity on us poor (fellows),
God will sooner have mercy on you.
You see us tied here, five, six:
As for the flesh, that we nurtured too much,
It is already long-time consumed, and rotting,
And we, the bones, become ashes and powder.
Of our pain let no one make fun,
But pray God that he wills to absolve us all!

If we call you brothers, you must not
Have scorn for it, although we were killed
By justice. Nevertheless, you know
That all men do not have staid common sense.
Forgive us, since we are shivering,
Toward the son of the Virgin Mary,
That his grace may not run dry for us,
Preserving us from the infernal wrath.
We are dead, let no soul harry us,
But pray God that he wills to absolve us all!

Rain has unsmirched and washed us
And the sun has dried and blackened us;
Magpies and crows have carved out our eyes,
And torn off our beards and eyebrows.
We never sit for a moment;
Now here, then there, as the wind changes,
at its pleasure, without cease (it) tosses us,
More pecked by birds than thimbles.
Do not then be of our brotherhood,
But pray God that he wills to absolve us all!

Prince Jesus, who has command of all,
Prevent Hell from having lordship over us:
With him, we have nothing to perform nor to trade.
Men, there is no mockery here,
But pray God that he wills to absolve us all.

Notice how Villon addresses the envoi to Jesus Christ, instead of the common practice of addressing it to a prince.

Ballade in Henley's "Ballade (Double Refrain) Of Midsummer Days And Nights"

This poem by William Ernest Henley is an example of a double-refrain ballade, in which both line 8 and line 4 of the first stanza become refrains that are repeated throughout the poem, as well as in the envoi.

With a ripple of leaves and a tinkle of streams
The full world rolls in a rhythm of praise,
And the winds are one with the clouds and beams--
Midsummer days! Midsummer days!
The dusk grows vast; in a purple haze,
While the West from a rapture of sunset rights,

Faint stars their exquisite lamps upraise--
Midsummer nights! O midsummer nights!

The wood's green heart is a nest of dreams,
The lush grass thickens and springs and sways,
The rathe wheat rustles, the landscape gleams--
Midsummer days! Midsummer days!
In the stilly fields, in the stilly ways,
All secret shadows and mystic lights,
Late lovers murmur and linger and gaze--
Midsummer nights! O midsummer nights!

There's a music of bells from the trampling teams,
Wild skylarks hover, the gorses blaze,
The rich, ripe rose as with incense steams--
Midsummer days! Midsummer days!
A soul from the honeysuckle strays,
And the nightingale as from prophet heights
Sings to the Earth of her million Mays--
Midsummer nights! O midsummer nights!

Envoy
And it's O, for my dear and the charm that stays--
Midsummer days! Midsummer days!
It's O, for my Love and the dark that plights--
Midsummer nights! O midsummer nights!

Because of the second refrain in the envoi, the typical rhyme scheme of "bcbC" shifts to "bBcC".

Ballade in Chesterton's "A Ballade of Suicide"

G.K. Chesterton wrote many ballades in English in the 19th and 20th centuries. This one is unusual in a few ways, as he plays with the form but not in the usual variations as royal ballade or supreme ballade. Instead, Chesterton changes the usual "ababbcbC" rhyme scheme by returning to the "a" rhyme in place of the "c" rhyme, resulting in an atypical "ababbabA" rhyme scheme. The second stanza is also irregular, since it contains only seven lines instead of the usual eight. However, as the poem's title indicates, it is still considered a ballade—just an irregular one.

The gallows in my garden, people say,
Is new and neat and adequately tall;
I tie the noose on in a knowing way
As one that knots his necktie for a ball;
But just as all the neighbours–on the wall–
Are drawing a long breath to shout "Hurray!"
The strangest whim has seized me. . . . After all
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

To-morrow is the time I get my pay–
My uncle's sword is hanging in the hall–
I see a little cloud all pink and grey–
Perhaps the rector's mother will not call

I fancy that I heard from Mr. Gall
That mushrooms could be cooked another way–
I never read the works of Juvenal–
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

The world will have another washing-day;
The decadents decay; the pedants pall;
And H.G. Wells has found that children play,
And Bernard Shaw discovered that they squall,
Rationalists are growing rational–
And through thick woods one finds a stream astray
So secret that the very sky seems small–
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

Envoi

Prince, I can hear the trumpet of Germinal,
The tumbrils toiling up the terrible way;
Even to-day your royal head may fall,
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

🔧 WHY WRITERS USE IT

Generally speaking, the ballade has not been used throughout history for any one specific literary purpose, as the contexts in which ballades were written have varied over time and in different places. As a poetic form, it has been used to express all manner of emotions and to explore a wide range of subject matters, from the heavy to the light-hearted.

When it was at the height of its popularity in the 14th and 15th centuries, ballades were commonly set to music, and the ballade's rhythm and rhyme scheme were among the features that made it so well-suited to musical accompaniment. In particular, the presence of a repeating refrain as one of the ballade's defining features made its sung verses more memorable, much like the repeated choruses of modern day songs. Although many classical ballades dealt with somber subjects, such as Villon's "Ballade des Pendus" ("Ballade of the Hangmen"), it became common for ballades written in the 19th and 20th centuries to take lighter and even humorous topics as their subjects, such as Henley's "Ballade (Double Refrain) Of Midsummer Days And Nights," or Chesterton's more darkly funny "A Ballade of Suicide."

🌐 OTHER RESOURCES

- The Wikipedia Page on Ballade: A somewhat technical explanation, with more details about how ballades were set to music.

- The Dictionary Definition of Ballade: A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of ballade (spoiler: it shares a root with a different poetic form, "ballad").

- This translation of Chaucer's "Balade to Rosemounde" will help you make sense of the poem, which was originally written in Middle English.

- **Ballades on Youtube**

  ◦ This reading of Chesterton's "A Ballade of Suicide" will give you a sense of how ballades sound when read aloud.

  ◦ The 19th century German composer Robert Schumann's "Ballade des Harfners," while it does not strictly follow the poetic form of a ballade, is one interpretation of how a classical ballade may have sounded when set to music.

HOW TO CITE

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