Poetry Forms

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# Free Verse

Free verse is an open form of poetry. It does not use consistent [meter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meter_(poetry)) patterns, [rhyme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhyme), or any other musical pattern. It thus tends to follow the rhythm of natural speech

Poets have explained that free verse is, despite its freedom, not entirely free. Free verse displays some elements of form. Most free verse, for example, self-evidently continues to observe a convention of the poetic line in some sense, at least in written representations, though retaining a potential degree of linkage. Donald Hall goes as far as to say that "the *form* of free verse is as binding and as liberating as the *form* of a Rondeau", and T. S. Eliot wrote, "No verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job". The American critic John Livingston Lowes in 1916 observed 'Free verse may be written as very beautiful prose; prose may be written as very beautiful free verse. Which is which?'

## Baltimore by Sinead Morrissey

In other noises, I hear my children crying -  
in older children playing on the street  
past bedtime, their voices buoyant  
in the staggered light; or in the baby  
next door, wakeful and petulant  
through too‐thin walls; or in the constant  
freakish pitch of Westside Baltimore  
on The Wire, its sirens and rapid gunfire,  
its beleaguered cops haranguing kids  
as young as six for propping up  
the dealers on the corners, their swagger  
and spitfire speech; or in the white space  
between radio stations when no voice  
comes at all and the crackling static  
might be swallowing whole a child's  
small call for help; even in silence itself,  
its material loops and folds enveloping  
a ghost cry, one I've made up, but heard,  
that has me climbing the stairs, pausing  
in the hall, listening, listening hard,  
to - at most - rhythmical breathing  
but more often than not to nothing, the air  
of the landing thick with something missed,  
dust motes, the overhang of blankets, a ship  
on the Lough through the window, infant sleep.

## Mushrooms by Sylvia Plath

Overnight, very

Whitely, discreetly,

Very quietly

Our toes, our noses

Take hold on the loam,

Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,

Stops us, betrays us;

The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on

Heaving the needles,

The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.

Our hammers, our rams,

Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,

Widen the crannies,

Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,

On crumbs of shadow,

Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.

So many of us!

So many of us!

We are shelves, we are

Tables, we are meek,

We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers

In spite of ourselves.

Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning

Inherit the earth.

Our foot's in the door.

## Reservoirs by R.S. Thomas

There are places in Wales I don't go:

Reservoirs that are the subconscious

Of a people, troubled far down

With gravestones, chapels, villages even;

The serenity of their expression

Revolts me, it is a pose

For strangers, a watercolour's appeal

To the mass, instead of the poem's

Harsher conditions. There are the hills,

Too; gardens gone under the scum

Of the forests; and the smashed faces

Of the farms with the stone trickle

Of their tears down the hills' side.

Where can I go, then, from the smell

Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead

Nation? I have walked the shore

For an hour and seen the English

Scavenging among the remains

Of our culture, covering the sand

Like the tide and, with the roughness

Of the tide, elbowing our language

Into the grave that we have dug for it.

## Death of a Naturalist by Seamus Heaney

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart  
Of the townland; green and heavy headed  
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.  
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.  
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles  
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.  
There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,  
But best of all was the warm thick slobber  
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water  
In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring  
I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied  
Specks to range on window-sills at home,  
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until  
The fattening dots burst into nimble-  
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how  
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog  
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog  
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was  
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too  
For they were yellow in the sun and brown  
In rain.

Then one hot day when fields were rank  
With cowdung in the grass and angry frogs  
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges  
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard  
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.  
Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked  
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:  
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat  
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.  
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew  
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

## Rain by Edward Thomas

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain   
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me   
Remembering again that I shall die   
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks   
For washing me cleaner than I have been   
Since I was born into this solitude.   
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:   
But here I pray that none whom once I loved   
Is dying to-night or lying still awake   
Solitary, listening to the rain,   
Either in pain or thus in sympathy   
Helpless among the living and the dead,   
Like a cold water among broken reeds,   
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,   
Like me who have no love which this wild rain   
Has not dissolved except the love of death,   
If love it be towards what is perfect and   
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

## November by Simon Armitage

We walk to the ward from the badly parked car

with your grandma taking four short steps to our two.

We have brought her here to die and we know it.

You check her towel, soap and family trinkets,

pare her nails, parcel her in the rough blankets

and she sinks down into her incontinence.

It is time John. In their pasty bloodless smiles,

in their slack breasts, their stunned brains and their baldness

and in us John: we are almost these monsters.

You're shattered. You give me the keys and I drive

through the twilight zone, past the famous station

to your house, to numb ourselves with alcohol.

Inside, we feel the terror of the dusk begin.

Outside we watch the evening, failing again,

and we let it happen. We can say nothing.

Sometimes the sun spangles and we feel alive.

One thing we have to get, John, out of this life.

## Warming Her Pearls by Carol Ann Duffy

(for Judith Radstone)

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress

bids me wear them, warm them, until evening

when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them

round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,

resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk

or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself

whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering

each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

She's beautiful. I dream about her

in my attic bed; picture her dancing

with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent

beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,

watch the soft blush seep through her skin

like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass

my red lips part as though I want to speak.

Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see

her every movement in my head.... Undressing,

taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching

for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way

she always does.... And I lie here awake,

knowing the pearls are cooling even now

in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night

I feel their absence and I burn.

## Not Waving but Drowning by Stevie Smith

Nobody heard him, the dead man,

But still he lay moaning:

I was much further out than you thought

And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking

And now he’s dead

It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,

They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always

(Still the dead one lay moaning)

I was much too far out all my life

And not waving but drowning.

## The Thought Fox by Ted Hughes

I imagine this midnight moment’s forest:

Something else is alive

Beside the clock’s loneliness

And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:

Something more near

Though deeper within darkness

Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,

A fox’s nose touches twig, leaf;

Two eyes serve a movement, that now

And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow

Between trees, and warily a lame

Shadow lags by stump and in hollow

Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,

A widening deepening greenness,

Brilliantly, concentratedly,

Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox

It enters the dark hole of the head.

The window is starless still; the clock ticks,

The page is printed.

## Considering the Snail by Thom Gunn

The snail pushes through a green

night, for the grass is heavy

with water and meets over

the bright path he makes, where rain

has darkened the earth’s dark. He

moves in a wood of desire,

pale antlers barely stirring

as he hunts. I cannot tell

what power is at work, drenched there

with purpose, knowing nothing.

What is a snail’s fury? All

I think is that if later

I parted the blades above

the tunnel and saw the thin

trail of broken white across

litter, I would never have

imagined the slow passion

to that deliberate progress.

# Regular Rhythm and Rhyme

Many poems use regular rhythm and rhyme schemes despite not following the rules of fixed forms (such as the sonnet or villanelle).

## This be the Verse by Philip Larkin

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn

By fools in old-style hats and coats,

Who half the time were soppy-stern

And half at one another’s throats.

Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don’t have any kids yourself.

## Snow by Edward Thomas

In the gloom of whiteness,   
In the great silence of snow,   
A child was sighing   
And bitterly saying: "Oh,   
They have killed a white bird up there on her nest,   
The down is fluttering from her breast!"   
And still it fell through that dusky brightness   
On the child crying for the bird of the snow.

## Possession by Caitriona O’Reilly

That anxious way you have of closing doors

(like the brown of your eyes and hair)

was never really yours.

My arms and elongated nose were owned before –

fragments of jigsaw

in the rough art of assemblage whose end we are.

Sometimes I don’t know where we live

or whose voice I still

hear and remember

inside my head at night. In darkness and in love

we are dismembered,

so that the fact of our coming to at all

becomes a morning miracle. Let’s number

our fingers and toes again.

Do I love you piecemeal

when I see in your closing hand a valve-flower

like a sea-anemone,

or is it our future I remember, as the White Queen

remembered her pinpricked finger? All of you

that’s to be known

resides in that small gesture.

And though our days consist of letting go –

since neither one can own

the other – what still deepens pulls us back together.

## Legs by Vernon Scannell

Of well-fed babies activate

Digestive juices, yet I’m no cannibal.

It is my metaphysical teeth that wait

Impatiently to prove those goodies edible.

The pink of creamy bonelessness, as soft

As dough or mashed potato, does not show

A hint of how each pair of limbs will grow.

Schoolboys’ are badged with scabs and starred with scars,

Their sisters’, in white ankle-socks possess

No calves as yet. They will, and when they do

Another kind of hunger will distress

Quite painfully, but pleasurably too.

Those lovely double stalks of girls give me

So much delight: the brown expensive ones,

Like fine twin creatures of rare pedigree,

Seem independent of their owners, so

Much themselves are they. Even the plain

Or downright ugly, the veined and cruelly blotched

That look like marble badly stained, I’ve watched

With pity and revulsion, yet something more –

A wonder at the variousness of things

Which share a name: the podgy oatmeal knees

Beneath the kilt, the muscled double weapons above boots,

Eloquence of dancers’, suffering of chars’,

The wiry goatish, the long and smooth as milk –

The joy when these embrace like arms and cling!

O human legs, whose strangeness I sing,

You more than please, though pleasure you have brought me,

And there are often times when you transport me.

## Aubade by Philip Larkin

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.

Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.

In time the curtain-edges will grow light.

Till then I see what’s really always there:

Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,

Making all thought impossible but how

And where and when I shall myself die.

Arid interrogation: yet the dread

Of dying, and being dead,

Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse

—The good not done, the love not given, time

Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because

An only life can take so long to climb

Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;

But at the total emptiness for ever,

The sure extinction that we travel to

And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,

Not to be anywhere,

And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid

No trick dispels. Religion used to try,

That vast moth-eaten musical brocade

Created to pretend we never die,

And specious stuff that says No rational being

Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing

That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,

No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,

Nothing to love or link with,

The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,

A small unfocused blur, a standing chill

That slows each impulse down to indecision.

Most things may never happen: this one will,

And realisation of it rages out

In furnace-fear when we are caught without

People or drink. Courage is no good:

It means not scaring others. Being brave

Lets no one off the grave.

Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.

It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,

Have always known, know that we can’t escape,

Yet can’t accept. One side will have to go.

Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring

In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring

Intricate rented world begins to rouse.

The sky is white as clay, with no sun.

Work has to be done.

Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

# The Sonnet

From the Italian *sonetto*, which means “a little sound or song," the sonnet is a popular classical form that has compelled poets for centuries. Traditionally, the sonnet is a fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter, which employ one of several rhyme schemes and adhere to a tightly structured thematic organization. Two sonnet forms provide the models from which all other sonnets are formed: the Petrachan and the Shakespearean.

Petrarchan Sonnet  
The first and most common sonnet is the Petrarchan, or Italian. Named after one of its greatest practitioners, the Italian poet [Petrarch](http://www.poets.org/petra), the Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two stanzas, the octave (the first eight lines) followed by the answering sestet (the final six lines). The tightly woven rhyme scheme, abba, abba, cdecde or cdcdcd, is suited for the rhyme-rich Italian language, though there are many fine examples in English. Since the Petrarchan presents an argument, observation, question, or some other answerable charge in the octave, a turn, or *volta*, occurs between the eighth and ninth lines. This turn marks a shift in the direction of the foregoing argument or narrative, turning the sestet into the vehicle for the counterargument, clarification, or whatever answer the octave demands.

Shakespearean Sonnet  
The second major type of sonnet, the Shakespearean, or English sonnet, follows a different set of rules. Here, three quatrains and a couplet follow this rhyme scheme: abab, cdcd, efef, gg. The couplet plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, or even refutation of the previous three stanzas, often creating an epiphanic quality to the end.

Spenserian Sonnet  
The Spenserian sonnet, invented by sixteenth century English poet Edmund Spenser, cribs its structure from the Shakespearean--three quatrains and a couplet--but employs a series of “couplet links” between quatrains, as revealed in the rhyme scheme: abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee.

Modern Sonnets  
Stretched and teased formally and thematically, today’s sonnet can often only be identified by the ghost imprint that haunts it, recognizable by the presence of 14 lines or even by name only.

## Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And summer’s lease hath all too short a date.

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimmed;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimmed;

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,

Nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade,

When in eternal lines to Time thou grow’st.

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

## A Dream Pang by Robert Frost

I had withdrawn in forest, and my song

Was swallowed up in leaves that blew alway,

And to the forest edge you came one day

(This was my dream) and looked and pondered long,

But did not enter, though the wish was strong:

You shook your pensive head as who should say,

'I dare not--too far in his footsteps stray--

He must seek me would he undo the wrong.'

Not far, but near, I stood and saw it all

Behind low boughs the trees let down outside;

And the sweet pang it cost me not to call

And tell you that I saw does still abide,

But 'tis not true that thus I dwelt aloof,

For the wood wakes, and you are here for proof.

## Leda and the Swan by W.B. Yeats

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,

He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push

The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

And how can body, laid in that white rush,

But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,

Did she put on his knowledge with his power

Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

## Anne Hathaway by Carol Ann Duffy

*‘Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed…’*

(from Shakespeare’s will)

The bed we loved in was a spinning world

of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas

where he would dive for pearls. My lover’s words

were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses

on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme

to his, now echo, assonance; his touch

a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.

Some nights I dreamed he’d written me, the bed

a page beneath his writer’s hands. Romance

and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.

In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,

dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –

I hold him in the casket of my widow’s head

as he held me upon that next best bed.

## Sunday Morning by Louis Macneice

Down the road someone is practising scales,

The notes like little fishes vanish with a wink of tails,

Man's heart expands to tinker with his car

For this is Sunday morning, Fate's great bazaar;

Regard these means as ends, concentrate on this Now,

And you may grow to music or drive beyond Hindhead anyhow,

Take corners on two wheels until you go so fast

That you can clutch a fringe or two of the windy past,

That you can abstract this day and make it to the week of time

A small eternity, a sonnet self-contained in rhyme.

But listen, up the road, something gulps, the church spire

Open its eight bells out, skulls' mouths which will not tire

To tell how there is no music or movement which secures

Escape from the weekday time. Which deadens and endures.

## Marked with D. by Tony HarrisonA sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,

He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push

The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

And how can body, laid in that white rush,

But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there

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The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead.

                                  Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,

Did she put on his knowledge with his power

Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

When the chilled dough of his flesh went in an oven

not unlike those he fuelled all his life,

I thought of his cataracts ablaze with Heaven

and radiant with the sight of his dead wife,

light streaming from his mouth to shape her name,

'not Florence and not Flo but always Florrie.'

I thought how his cold tongue burst into flame

but only literally, which makes me sorry,

sorry for his sake there's no Heaven to reach.

I get it all from Earth my daily bread

but he hungered for release from mortal speech

that kept him down, the tongue that weighed like lead.

The baker’s man that no one will see rise

and England made to feel like some dull oaf

is smoke, enough to sting one person’s eyes

and ash (not unlike flour) for one small loaf.

# Villanelle

The highly structured villanelle is a nineteen-line poem with two repeating rhymes and two refrains. The form is made up of five tercets followed by a quatrain. The first and third lines of the opening tercet are repeated alternately in the last lines of the succeeding stanzas; then in the final stanza, the refrain serves as the poem’s two concluding lines. Using capitals for the refrains and lowercase letters for the rhymes, the form could be expressed as: *A1 b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 A2*.

## **Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night** by Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,

Because their words had forked no lightning they

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright

Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,

And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,

Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

## Mad Girl’s Love Song by Sylvia Plath

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead,

I lift my lids and all is born again.

(I think I made you up inside my head)

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,

And arbitrary darkness gallops in.

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed

And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.

(I think I made you up inside my head).

God topples from the sky, hell’s fires fade:

Exit seraphim and enter Satan’s men:

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you’d return the way you said.

But I grow old and I forget your name.

(I think I made you up inside my head).

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;

At least when spring comes they roar back again.

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

(I think I made you up inside my head).

## **One Art** by Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;

so many things seem filled with the intent

to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster

of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.

The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:

places, and names, and where it was you meant

to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or

next-to-last, of three loved houses went.

The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,

some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.

–Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture

I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident

the art of losing’s not too hard to master

though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

# Rondeau

The rondeau began as a lyric form in thirteenth-century France, popular among medieval court poets and musicians. Named after the French word for “round," the rondeau is characterized by the repeating lines of the rentrement, or refrain, and the two rhyme sounds throughout. The form was originally a musical vehicle devoted to emotional subjects such as spiritual worship, courtship, romance, and the changing of seasons. To sing of melancholy was another way of using the rondeau, but thoughts on pain and loss often turned to a cheerful c’est la vie in the final stanza.

The rondeau’s form is not difficult to recognize: as it is known and practiced today, it is composed of fifteen lines, eight to ten syllables each, divided stanzaically into a quintet, a quatrain, and a sestet. The rentrement consists of the first few words or the entire first line of the first stanza, and it recurs as the last line of both the second and third stanzas. Two rhymes guide the music of the rondeau, whose rhyme scheme is as follows (R representing the refrain): aabba aabR aabbaR.

## We Wear the Mask by Paul Lawrence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,

It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,

This debt we pay to human guile;

With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties

Why should the world be over-wise

In counting all our tears and sighs?

Nay, let them only see up, while

We wear the mask

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,

We wear the mask!

## In Flanders Fields by John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow

Between the crosses, row on row

That mark the place, and in the sky

The larks, still bravely singing, fly

Scarce heard amid the guns below

We are the dead; short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

Loved and were loved, and now we lie

In Flanders fields.

Take upon your quarrel with the foe!

To you from failing hands we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high!

If ye break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.

# The Ballad

*Ballads* have strong associations with childhood: much children's poetry comes in ballad form, and English poets traditionally associated ballads with their national childhood as well. Ballads emphasize strong rhythms, repetition of key phrases, and rhymes; if you hear a traditional ballad, you will know that you are hearing a poem. Ballads are meant to be song-like and to remind readers of oral poetry--of parents singing to children, for instance, or of ancient poets reciting their verse to a live audience.

(A side note: contemporary music terminology also uses the term "ballad." In that context, the word describes a genre of "slow songs" in jazz or rock music. Ballads, in other words, are the songs at junior-high dances that make nervous adolescents pair off to sway back and forth arhythmically or feign interest in, say, the paint chips on the walls of the gym. I do not know how "ballad" acquired that meaning as well as the older and still current one described here.)

Ballads do not have the same formal consistency as some other poetic forms, but one can look for certain characteristics that identify a ballad, including these:

* *Simple language*. Some ballads, especially older traditional ballads, were composed for audiences of non-specialist hearers or (later) readers. Therefore, they feature language that people can understand without specialist training or repeated readings. When later poets choose to write ballads, regardless of their intended audience, the choice of the ballad form generally implies a similar emphasis on simple language. Sometimes poets write ballads specifically to react against poetry they see as overly intellectual or obscure.
* *Stories*. Ballads tend to be *narrative* poems, poems that tell stories, as opposed to *lyric* poems, which emphasize the emotions of the speaker.
* *Ballad stanzas*. The traditional ballad stanza consists of four lines, rhymed *abcb* (or sometimes *abab*--the key is that the second and fourth lines rhyme). The first and third lines have four stresses, while the second and fourth have three. Here is a stanza from "*Sir Patrick Spens*," a medieval ballad:

'I saw the new moon late yestreen

Wi' the auld moon in her arm;

And if we gang to sea, master,

I fear we'll come to harm.'

* *Repetition*. A ballad often has a *refrain*, a repeated section that divides segments of the story. Many ballads also employ *incremental repetition*, in which a phrase recurs with minor differences as the story progresses. For a classic example of incremental repetition, see the first two lines of each stanza in "*Lord Randal*."
* *Dialogue*. As you might expect in a narrative genre, ballads often incorporate multiple characters into their stories. Often, since changes of voice were communicated orally, written transcriptions of oral ballads give little or no indication that the speaker has changed. Writers of *literary ballads*, the later poems that imitate oral ballads, sometimes play with this convention.
* *Third-person objective narration*. Ballad narrators usually do not speak in the first person (unless speaking as a character in the story), and they often do not comment on their reactions to the emotional content of the ballad.

## (from) The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he

Was tyrannous and strong:

He struck with his o'ertaking wings,

And chased us south along.

With sloping masts and dipping prow,

As who pursued with yell and blow

Still treads the shadow of his foe,

And forward bends his head,

The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,

And southward aye we fled.

And now there came both mist and snow,

And it grew wondrous cold:

And ice, mast-high, came floating by,

As green as emerald.

And through the drifts the snowy clifts

Did send a dismal sheen:

Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—

The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,

The ice was all around:

It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,

Like noises in a swound!

At length did cross an Albatross,

Thorough the fog it came;

As if it had been a Christian soul,

We hailed it in God's name.

It ate the food it ne'er had eat,

And round and round it flew.

The ice did split with a thunder-fit;

The helmsman steered us through!

And a good south wind sprung up behind;

The Albatross did follow,

And every day, for food or play,

Came to the mariner's hollo!

In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,

It perched for vespers nine;

Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,

Glimmered the white Moon-shine.'

'God save thee, ancient Mariner!

From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—

Why look'st thou so?'—With my cross-bow

I shot the ALBATROSS.

And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he

Was tyrannous and strong:

He struck with his o'ertaking wings,

And chased us south along.

With sloping masts and dipping prow,

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From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—

Why look'st thou so?'—With my cross-bow

I shot the ALBATROSS.

## Miss Gee by [W. H. Auden](https://www.poeticous.com/w-h-auden)

Let me tell you a little story   
  About Miss Edith Gee;   
She lived in Clevedon Terrace   
  At number 83.

She'd a slight squint in her left eye,   
  Her lips they were thin and small,   
She had narrow sloping shoulders   
  And she had no bust at all.

She'd a velvet hat with trimmings,   
  And a dark grey serge costume;   
She lived in Clevedon Terrace   
  In a small bed-sitting room.

She'd a purple mac for wet days,   
  A green umbrella too to take,   
She'd a bicycle with shopping basket   
  And a harsh back-pedal break.

The Church of Saint Aloysius   
  Was not so very far;   
She did a lot of knitting,   
  Knitting for the Church Bazaar.

Miss Gee looked up at the starlight   
  And said, 'Does anyone care   
That I live on Clevedon Terrace   
  On one hundred pounds a year?'

She dreamed a dream one evening   
  That she was the Queen of France   
And the Vicar of Saint Aloysius   
  Asked Her Majesty to dance.

But a storm blew down the palace,   
  She was biking through a field of corn,   
And a bull with the face of the Vicar   
  Was charging with lowered horn.

She could feel his hot breath behind her,   
  He was going to overtake;   
And the bicycle went slower and slower   
  Because of that back-pedal break.

Summer made the trees a picture,   
  Winter made them a wreck;   
She bicycled to the evening service   
  With her clothes buttoned up to her neck.

She passed by the loving couples,   
  She turned her head away;   
She passed by the loving couples,   
  And they didn't ask her to stay.

Miss Gee sat in the side-aisle,   
  She heard the organ play;   
And the choir sang so sweetly   
  At the ending of the day,

Miss Gee knelt down in the side-aisle,   
  She knelt down on her knees;   
'Lead me not into temptation   
  But make me a good girl, please.'

The days and nights went by her   
  Like waves round a Cornish wreck;   
She bicycled down to the doctor   
  With her clothes buttoned up to her neck.

She bicycled down to the doctor,   
And rang the surgery bell;   
'O, doctor, I've a pain inside me,   
  And I don't feel very well.'

Doctor Thomas looked her over,   
  And then he looked some more;   
Walked over to his wash-basin,   
Said,'Why didn't you come before?'

Doctor Thomas sat over his dinner,   
  Though his wife was waiting to ring,   
Rolling his bread into pellets;   
  Said, 'Cancer's a funny thing.

'Nobody knows what the cause is,   
  Though some pretend they do;   
It's like some hidden assassin   
  Waiting to strike at you.

'Childless women get it.   
  And men when they retire;   
It's as if there had to be some outlet   
  For their foiled creative fire.'

His wife she rang for the servent,   
  Said, 'Dont be so morbid, dear';   
He said: 'I saw Miss Gee this evening   
  And she's a goner, I fear.'

They took Miss Gee to the hospital,   
  She lay there a total wreck,   
Lay in the ward for women   
  With her bedclothes right up to her neck.

They lay her on the table,   
  The students began to laugh;   
And Mr. Rose the surgeon   
  He cut Miss Gee in half.

Mr. Rose he turned to his students,   
  Said, 'Gentlemen if you please,   
We seldom see a sarcoma   
  As far advanced as this.'

They took her off the table,   
  They wheeled away Miss Gee   
Down to another department   
  Where they study Anatomy.

They hung her from the ceiling   
  Yes, they hung up Miss Gee;   
And a couple of Oxford Groupers   
  Carefully dissected her knee.

## The Ballad of Father Gilligan by William Butler Yeats

The old priest, Peter Gilligan,

Was weary night and day;

For half his flock were in their beds,

Or under green sods lay.

Once, while he nodded on a chair,

At the moth-hour of eve,

Another poor man sent for him,

And he began to grieve.

“I have no rest, nor joy, nor peace,

For people die and die”;

And after cried he, “God forgive!

My body spake, not I!”

He knelt, and leaning on the chair

He prayed and fell asleep,

And the moth-hour went from the fields,

And stars began to peep.

They slowly into millions grew,

And leaves shook in the wind,

And God covered the world with shade,

And whispered to mankind.

Upon the time of sparrow chirp

When the moths come once more,

The old priest, Peter Gilligan,

Stood upright on the floor.

“Mavrone, mavrone! the man has died,

While I slept on the chair.”

He roused his horse out of its sleep,

And rode with little care.

He rode now as he never rode,

By rocky lane and fen;

The sick man’s wife opened the door:

“Father! you come again.”

“And is the poor man dead?” he cried.

“He died an hour ago.”

The old priest, Peter Gilligan,

In grief swayed to and fro.

“When you were gone, he turned and died

As merry as a bird.”

The old priest, Peter Gilligan,

He knelt him at that word.

“He who hath made the night of stars

For souls who tire and bleed,

Sent one of His great angels down

To help me in my need.

“He who is wrapped in purple robes,

With planets in His care,

Had pity on the least of things

Asleep upon a chair.”

# Elegy

The elegy began as an ancient Greek metrical form and is traditionally written in response to the death of a person or group. Though similar in function, the elegy is distinct from the epitaph, ode, and eulogy: the epitaph is very brief; the ode solely exalts; and the eulogy is most often written in formal prose.

The elements of a traditional elegy mirror three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace.

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## (from) Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,

The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,

The plowman homeward plods his weary way,

And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight,

And all the air a solemn stillness holds,

Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,

And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r

The moping owl does to the moon complain

Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,

Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,

Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,

The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,

The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,

The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,

No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

[…]

## (from) V by Tony Harrison

[…]

This graveyard stands above a worked-out pit.

Subsidence makes the obelisks all list.

One leaning left's marked FUCK, one right's marked SHIT

sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed.

Far-sighted for his family's future dead,

but for his wife, this banker's still alone

on his long obelisk, and doomed to head

a blackened dynasty of unclaimed stone,

now graffitied with a crude four-letter word.

His children and grandchildren went away

and never came back home to be interred,

so left a lot of space for skins to spray.

The language of this graveyard ranges from

a bit of Latin for a former Mayor

or those who laid their lives down at the Somme,

the hymnal fragments and the gilded prayer,

how people 'fell asleep in the Good Lord',

brief chisellable bits from the good book

and rhymes whatever length they could afford,

to CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK!

Or, more expansively, there's LEEDS v.

the opponent of last week, this week, or next,

and a repertoire of blunt four-letter curses

on the team or race that makes the sprayer vexed.

Then, pushed for time, or fleeing some observer,

dodging between tall family vaults and trees

like his team's best ever winger, dribbler, swerver,

fills every space he finds with versus Vs.

Vs sprayed on the run at such a lick,

the sprayer master of his flourished tool,

get short-armed on the left like that red tick

they never marked his work with much at school.

Half this skinhead's age but with approval

I helped whitewash a V on a brick wall.

No one clamoured in the press for its removal

or thought the sign, in wartime, rude at all.

[…]