

# The Story of Roland Short Guide

## The Story of Roland by James Baldwin

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## Overview

Baldwin's Story of Roland is an excellent example of a medieval romance. It is a long narrative work comprising loosely connected episodes and involving a large cast of colorful characters, headed by Roland and Charlemagne.

The story illustrates the chivalric ideal of behavior expected of kings, knights, and courtiers during the Middle Ages. Its various episodes portray many deeds of courage and gallantry, fantastic adventures in exotic settings, and the romantic involvements of the central figures.

Most of the tales in the book have been adapted directly from original medieval and Renaissance sources, with a few transitional pieces which are original to Baldwin. This collection of tales is best read in its entirety, but individual stories can be read as self-contained pieces.

## About the Author

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American author James Baldwin provides a striking example of how a young person's love of reading can dramatically affect his or her later life. Baldwin was born on December 15, 1841, at an isolated Quaker settlement in rural Indiana (Hamilton County), a community in which few people owned any book other than the Bible, and where reading was viewed with suspicion. Fortunately, Baldwin's own home was an exception to the rule in this backwoods community, for Baldwin's father had assembled an extensive personal library.

At an early age Baldwin immersed himself in his father's books. His precocious love of reading soon set him apart from other members of his community, and prompted criticism from neighbors and friends. Despite such disapproval, Baldwin's portrait of the community, contained in the autobiographical *In My Youth*, is warm and affectionate.

Lacking formal schooling, Baldwin educated himself through his own program of reading. By the time he was twenty-four years old, he had become a teacher; four years later he became the superintendent of Indiana elementary schools, a position he held for eighteen years (1869-1887). Baldwin's selfless contribution to public education in Indiana was recognized in 1884 when he was granted an honorary doctorate from De Paul University.

Upon reaching early middle age, Baldwin turned his attention to writing and editing. From 1887 to 1893 he worked for the publishing company of Harper and Brothers in their education department and as an editor of periodicals. For the next thirty years, from 1894 to 1924, Baldwin wrote and edited for the American Book Company. His writings during these years were of several kinds. His preoccupation with the world's great adventure tales is reflected in the versions he wrote for young readers. His commitment to overall education is reflected in the wide variety of textbooks he helped produce.

Many of these textbooks were widely used throughout the United States, and it is estimated that during the earlier decades of the twentieth century at least half of the school books in American schools were either written or edited by Baldwin. Baldwin began writing fiction in 1882 and published *The Story of Siegfried*, the first of a number of anthologies based on ancient narratives. Baldwin next published *The Story of Roland*, a similar volume which recounts the adventures of Roland and other knights attached to the court of Charlemagne. In two subsequent volumes Baldwin treated heroic figures from classical myths and legends (*Old Greek Stories* and *The Golden Fleece*). He also turned his attention to slightly more exotic narrative materials, publishing *Old Stories of the East*. In 1910 Baldwin's collection of Arthurian narratives appeared with the title *Stories of the King*, and in 1912 he adapted stories from the Finnish epic *The Kalevala* in *The Sampo: Hero Adventures from the Kalevala*.

Most of these collections of heroic narratives were lavishly illustrated, bringing Baldwin into association with some of the greatest illustrators of his age. The 1882 edition of *The*



Story of Siegfried was originally illustrated by Howard Pyle, who later became both the illustrator and writer of similar tales and legends. The second edition of *The Story of Siegfried* (1931) was illustrated by Peter Hurd, who also illustrated the second edition of *The Story of Roland*, a volume originally illustrated by Reginald Birch. The illustrations to *The Sampo* were provided by N. C. Wyeth, one of the outstanding illustrators of texts for young adult readers.

Among the important educational materials prepared by Baldwin are many works of history and biography. In a volume entitled *Four Great Americans* Baldwin brought together biographical works on George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Webster, and Abraham Lincoln. In *Our New Possessions: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Philippines* (1899) he merged the study of history with geography.

Baldwin was especially fascinated with horses. This interest is revealed in *The Horse Fair*, *The Wonder Book of Horses* (1903), *Fifty Famous Rides and Riders* (1916), and *The Story of Roland*, with its frequent depiction of marvelous horses such as Reinold's horse Bayard.

Baldwin died on August 30, 1925, in South Orange, New Jersey.

## Setting

The main action in *The Story of Roland* occurs in the late eighth- and early ninth-century Frankish kingdom, which was ruled by Charlemagne. This kingdom was slightly larger than but roughly similar to modern-day France.

The setting of the narrative shifts rapidly from Paris to Rome to Moorish Spain. A few of the episodes involve more exotic locales in "the East," suggestive of Persia or Arabia. There is a sense of unreality about the work which is entirely appropriate for medieval romance. Although these stories have some foundation in history, the descriptions of castles, palaces, and lavish banquets always far exceed the actualities of medieval life. Certainly, one of the purposes of medieval romance was to provide an idealized escape from the harshness of everyday life. Baldwin's book does full justice to that intention.



## Social Sensitivity

James Baldwin points out in the foreword to *The Story of Roland* that he was attempting to "adapt [his narrative] to our ways of thinking, and our modern notions of propriety." Now, more than a century later, Baldwin's "modern notions of propriety" seem almost too primly proper. The brief love affairs are handled with extreme decorum, and the violence which necessarily attends the adventures of knights is treated only in a general way and never with anything approaching the stark realism sometimes found in Baldwin's medieval sources. The book does have an important religious dimension, for the crusading spirit of the Middle Ages is reflected in Charlemagne's struggle to preserve Christianity from the pagan Saracens.

Militant Christianity surfaces in the direct conflict between Christian "good guys" and non-Christian (usually Moslem) "bad guys." In this regard the book remains faithful to its medieval sources, in which Christian beliefs are emphasized.



# Literary Qualities

The Story of Roland has all the essential features of a medieval romance. It is a lengthy narrative which consists of a series of loosely connected episodes. The actions depicted in these episodes involve descriptions of knightly combats, siege warfare, dangerous quests, romantic interludes, and encounters with giants, dragons, dwarfs, elves, and magicians. In such a work a large element of fantasy surrounds a core of realism. The tone is generally lighthearted, the mood optimistic, and the atmosphere magical, in contrast to a work such as *Beowulf* where the general outlook is gloomy. Such a contrast in tone and mood represents one general difference between romance and epic.

Also characteristic of medieval romance are the chivalric values reflected in *The Story of Roland*. Scorn falls on the many who fail to live according to such values, while those few who manage to live in accordance with the chivalric code—Roland, Ogier the Dane, Reinold—are revered.

Sometimes medieval romances are classified according to their "matters" or subjects. The four major categories of romance are said to be the Matter of Classical Antiquity, the Matter of France, the Matter of Britain, and the Matter of England. The Matter of Classical Antiquity concerns heroes such as Hector of Troy and Alexander the Great; the Matter of France focuses on Charlemagne and his knights; the Matter of Britain concerns King Arthur and the Round Table knights; and the Matter of England deals with "English" heroes (actually heroes of Germanic background) such as Havelock the Dane.

*The Story of Roland* draws upon the full range of available materials from the medieval Matter of France. The greatest medieval work in this tradition is *The Song of Roland*, a poem known as a *chanson de geste* (a poem which blends characteristics of the epic with those of the romance). *The Song of Roland* portrays the heroic deaths of Roland and several of his closest companions at the hands of the Saracens, deaths brought about by the treachery of the evil Ganelon. This poem provides the material for only a small portion of Baldwin's book, the rest deriving from medieval poems such as Matteo Maria Boiardo's fifteenth-century *Orlando Innamorato*.

Other than *The Song of Roland*, the most notable literary source for Baldwin is the Renaissance poem *Orlando Furioso* by the sixteenth-century Italian poet Lodovico Ariosto. It is a work filled with fantastic occurrences and features Roland's disappointment in love, his lapse into madness, and his final recovery.





# Themes and Characters

Fundamental to Baldwin's *Story of Roland* is the chivalric ethic, a code of knightly behavior emphasizing such virtues as courtesy, honesty, generosity, and mercy. The chivalric hero is expected to exhibit great courage, valor, and physical prowess, like his earlier counterparts in heroic literature—such as Beowulf, for example—but he is also expected to exhibit refinement and courtliness. It is not unusual for the chivalric hero to be well-versed in foreign languages or the arts. He is often skilled in music, poetry, and such activities as hunting, falconry, and playing chess.

Unlike earlier heroes, the chivalric hero is always expected to be modest, self-effacing, and a sincere Christian.

Charlemagne is the character around whom all the other heroes revolve. Charlemagne is a mighty and noble ruler whose concerns are not limited to his own realm. He must also protect all Christendom from his archenemies the Saracens, who were primarily Moors from Spain. Charlemagne does not always perfectly fulfill the chivalric ideal.

He engages in several petty squabbles with some of the lesser rulers in the lands under his control, and his actions and decisions are sometimes challenged or criticized by his knights. To some extent he provides a foil for the capabilities and values of his finest knights, just as in Arthurian literature some of King Arthur's knights come to exceed even the king in their nobility and prowess.

Foremost among Charlemagne's knights is the valiant Roland, Charlemagne's nephew. The title of the book, *The Story of Roland*, is somewhat misleading. Although Roland is certainly one of its most prominent characters—and the book begins with his boyhood and ends with his demise—he is by no means the exclusive focus, and many other noble characters share the limelight. Ogier the Dane, for example, is nearly as important as Roland. These two characters, along with Reinold and Roland's closest friend, Oliver, represent the flower of Charlemagne's court. They are not, however, always perfect knights. One of the longest central adventures in the book—Roland's quest for the armor of Hector of Troy—is an example of a flawed quest in which the hero is ultimately unsuccessful.

Reinold's proudest possession is a magnificent steed named Bayard.

Reinold's success is often directly related to his horse's marvelous capabilities, and the loss and subsequent return of Bayard produces powerful emotions in Reinold.

Among the many fascinating minor personalities in the book are the dwarf-magician Malagis, who has been a pupil of Merlin, the magician from Arthurian legend; Angelica, the Princess of Cathay, who changes from an enemy to a friend; Bradamant, a formidable female warrior; Morgan the Fay, who serves as Ogier the Dane's protectress; and the jealous Ganelon, whose treachery finally brings about Roland's demise.



## Topics for Discussion

1. What are the chief virtues of the true chivalric hero? Which characters best exemplify these qualities?
2. What character flaws does Charlemagne possess? How seriously do they detract from his nobility?
3. Does Roland exhibit any important character flaws? What are they? In which episodes are they seen?
4. Sometimes unlikely characters, or characters who appear to be among Charlemagne's or Roland's enemies, also exhibit chivalrous qualities. What are some instances of this?
5. How much realism is there in the book? Where is it found?
6. In which particular episodes does magic play an important part?
7. Although most of the major heroes in the book are men, women also play a significant part in many of the adventures. Characterize the most prominent women in the book.
8. Several episodes involve horses.  
Which ones? What are the special capabilities of Reinold's horse Bayard?
9. Which do you consider to be the most effective of the individual episodes in the book? Why?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the figures of Roland, Ogier, and Reinold. What important character differences, if any, can you find?
2. There are other modern adaptations of medieval materials pertaining to Roland and Charlemagne, such as Ian Serrailier's *Ivory Horn* and Richard Winston's *Charlemagne*. Choose another book that treats these figures and compare it with *Baldwin's Story of Roland*. You may wish to make a general comparison, or you may wish to limit your comparison to a specific character or even a specific adventure.
3. Compare the figure of Roland as he is presented in Baldwin's book with the figure of Beowulf in a work such as Ian Serrailier's *Beowulf the Warrior*. To what extent do their virtues and capabilities overlap? In what important ways do they differ? Is it necessary for both to die?
4. Compare the chivalric code as it is reflected in this work with the heroic code as reflected in earlier epics such as *Beowulf*.
5. Read about the figure of Morgan La Fay in works of Arthurian literature. Then compare the versions of her character in those works with her character presented in *Baldwin's Story of Roland*.
6. Do research on the historical Charlemagne. How true to history is the portrait of Charlemagne found in Baldwin's book?

## For Further Reference

Dudley, Robert. *In My Youth: From the Posthumous Papers of Robert Dudley*.

Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1914.

This is James Baldwin's partial autobiography, which he published under the pseudonym of Robert Dudley; it was republished in 1923 with the title *In the Days of My Youth*. It provides an affecting portrayal of the rural Quaker community of Baldwin's youth.

Goldin, Frederick. *The Song of Roland*.

New York: W. W. Norton, 1978. From among the many readily available translations of this Old French *chanson de geste*—which is one of Baldwin's major sources—Goldin's translation is one of the best for younger and older readers alike. It also contains an excellent introduction and bibliography.

Waldman, Guido. *Ariosto: Orlando Furioso*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974. Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* is one of the most significant sources used by Baldwin. It is a complex and difficult work, but it is not necessarily beyond the capabilities of ambitious students. Waldman's prose translation is clear and readable, and his introduction, while brief, is helpful.

## Related Titles

Among the many varied writings of James Baldwin, those which are most closely related to *The Story of Roland* are *Stories of the King*, which deals with King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, and *The Story of Siegfried*, which focuses on the exploits of the great hero of Germanic legend. These two books, like *The Story of Roland*, are adapted directly from medieval literary sources. In a similar vein are Baldwin's retellings of classical legends in *Old Greek Stories* and *The Golden Fleece: More Old Greek Stories*; his renditions of Arabic and Persian tales in *Old Stories of the East*; and his recounting of early Finnish tales in *The Sampo: Hero Adventures from the Kalevala*.

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