

Villanelle

Definition:

A *villanelle* is a poetic form with nineteen lines, two repeating rhymes, and two refrains. The poem is made of five tercets and one quatrain stanzas. The first and third lines of the opening stanza are repeated alternately as the last line of each of the stanzas that follow, and both are repeated in the two concluding lines of the poem. This repetition serves as the refrain, with the two repeated lines serving as each their own refrain.

An example of the refrain and rhyme scheme is illustrated as,

A1 b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 A2

“A1” and “A2” are the refrains being alternately repeated—except for the first and last, where both refrains appear. The lower case “a”s and “b”s are the rhyme scheme, which is a constant aba/aba/aba and so on.

Villanelles in their rigid form arose in the nineteenth century with the French poet Théodore de Banville. Before then, the villanelle was not so rigidly formed and a looser format was popular during the Renaissance in the form of Spanish and Italian dance-songs. Historically, the poems were characterized by use of simple, provincial themes, rather than being characterized by the rigid form it now has today.

Examples:

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Useful Links:

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5796#sthash.8rMB63NU.dpuf>
<http://www.uni.edu/~gotera/CraftOfPoetry/villanelle.html>

An example of a villanelle is Dylan Thomas's, "Do not go gentle into that good night"

1 Do not go gentle into that good night, A1 a
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day; b
 3 Rage, rage against the dying of the light. A2 a

refrains lines 1 and 3

Though wise men at their end know dark is right, a
 Because their words had forked no lightning they b
 Do not go gentle into that good night. A1 a

constant
 aba rhyme
 scheme

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright a
 Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, b
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light. A2 a

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight, a
 And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way, b
 Do not go gentle into that good night. A1 a

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight a
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay, b
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light. A2 a

And you, my father, there on the sad height, a
 Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray. b
 Do not go gentle into that good night. A1 a
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light. A2 a

refrains repeated
 in last two lines

Five tercets

Quatrain stanza

Another Example is W.H. Auden's "Villanelle"

1 Time can say nothing but I told you so, A1 a
 Time only knows the price we have to pay; b
 3 If I could tell you, I would let you know. A2 a

refrains lines 1 + 3

If we should weep when clowns put on their show, a
 If we should stumble when musicians play, b
 Time can say nothing but I told you so. A1 a

Alternately
 being
 repeated

There are no fortunes to be told, although a
 Because I love you more than I can say, b
 If I could tell you, I would let you know. A2 a

The winds must come from somewhere when they blow, a
 There must be reasons why the leaves decay; b
 Time can say nothing but I told you so. A1 a

Perhaps the roses really want to grow, a
 The vision seriously intends to stay; b
 If I could tell you, I would let you know. A2 a

Suppose the lions all get up and go, a
 And all the brooks and soldiers run away? b
 Time can say nothing but I told you so. A1 a
 If I could tell you, I would let you know. A2 a

until both refrains
 are repeated in the
 last two lines.

Five tercets

Quatrain stanza