

# The Villanelle

**VILLANELLE**—composed of five tercets followed by a final quatrain, usually rhyming—aba aba aba aba aba abaa—alternately repeating the first and third lines at the end of each stanza.

Villanelles have been around for at least three hundred years. Its name derives from the Italian *villa*, or country house, where noblemen went to refresh themselves, perhaps dally with the locals, and imagine that they were back to nature. It seems to have grown out of native songs, with their frequent refrains and complex rhyming. (Conrad Geller)

Let's look at "**The House on the Hill**" by Edwin Arlington Robinson, and see how it fits this pattern. Using two different color highlighters, mark the two repeated lines throughout the poem; then continue the rhyme scheme marking:

They are all gone away,                   A  
The House is shut and still,            B  
There is nothing more to say.           A

Through broken walls and gray  
The winds blow bleak and shrill:  
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day  
To speak them good or ill:  
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray  
Around the sunken sill?  
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play  
For them is wasted skill:  
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay  
In the House on the Hill:  
They are all gone away,  
There is nothing more to say.

What are the effects of the repeated lines?

*From Conrad Geller's "Poetic Forms: The Villanelle"*

The first thing you need for a villanelle is a pair of rhyming lines that are the heart of your meaning. Here are the two key lines from *The House on the Hill*, by E. A. Robinson:

*They are all gone away  
There is nothing more to say.*

Now put an unrhymed line between these two, to make a three-line stanza:

*They are all gone away,  
The House is shut and still,  
There is nothing more to say.*

The next stanza begins with a line that rhymes with the basic couplet, a line that rhymes with the middle line you added, and (this is the key to this form) the first line of the couplet repeated:

*Through broken walls and gray  
The winds blow bleak and shrill:  
They are all gone away.*

The next stanza has a first line rhyming with "away" and "say," followed by a line rhyming with "still," and then the second line of the couplet repeated:

*Nor is there one today  
To speak them good or ill:  
There is nothing more to say.*

You see how the two lines of the base couplet become more and more meaningful with each repetition. That is why the success of the form depends so much on the careful selection of the couplet.

The poem then goes on this way for a total of five three-line stanzas, alternating the two base lines, and ends with a sixth stanza that adds the second line of the stanza one more time:

*Why is it then we stray  
Around the shrunken sill?  
They are all gone away.*

*And our poor fancy-play  
For them is wasted skill:  
There is nothing more to say.*

*There is ruin and decay  
In the House on the Hill:  
They are all gone away,  
There is nothing more to say.*

Beautiful, as the gloomy atmosphere deepens with each repetition.

Here is another, much lighter villanelle by a more contemporary poet, Sondra Ball. Her subject is the villanelle itself, and the form is strictly adhered to, though she does allow herself some irregular rhymes:

Musical and sweet, the villanelle,  
like light reflected in a gentle rhyme,  
moves to the ringing of a silver bell,

its form creating soft and tender spells.  
Like the singing of distant silver chimes,  
musical and sweet, the villanelle

flows through the heart, and builds a magic spell  
from sunlight and from shadows, and, sublime,  
moves to the ringing of a silver bell.

It never arcs into the sharp loud yell  
of vast pipe organs. Soft its climb.  
Musical and sweet, the villanelle,

like a tiny and translucent shell  
catching sunlight in the summer time,  
moves to the ringing of a silver bell.

Soft and gentle, tender and so frail,  
like light pouring through petals of the lime,  
musical and sweet, the villanelle  
moves to the ringing of a silver bell.

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Notice, too, that in this form poets can choose longer or shorter lines. Robinson's poem has three beats to a line, while Ball's has the more traditional five (ta-DUM, ta-DUM, ta-DUM, ta-DUM, ta-DUM).

This hardy and flexible poetic form has had a resurgence in the last hundred years. Probably the best of the poems produced during this time is Dylan Thomas's reflection on the death of his father, *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*. And for good measure it's probably one of the best poems of the twentieth century of any kind, period.

Source for Conrad Geller: <http://www.writing-world.com/poetry/villanelle.shtml>

Now read Dylan Thomas's villanelle, and mark the repeated patterns:

### **Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night**

*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 (oxymoron)  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that 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.

## The Waking

Theodore Roethke

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?  
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?  
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,  
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?  
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do  
To you and me, so take the lively air,  
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.  
What falls away is always. And is near.  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I learn by going where I have to go.

## One Art

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.

## Mad Girl's Love Song

*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).

Questions for "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"

1. What are the repeated lines? (Highlight the two in different colors.)
2. What examples of figurative language does Thomas employ in each stanza? Identify each.
3. What repeated pattern (besides the repeated lines) exists in stanzas 2, 3, 4, and 5?
4. What is the common theme in stanzas 2, 3, 4, and 5? What specific idea connects them?
5. How does the speaker present his argument to his father?