



Famous villanelles to read before you start

Do not go gentle into that good night by Dylan Thomas

The House on the Hill by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Mad Girl's Love Song by Sylvia Plath

Writing History: The Villanelle

A villanelle is one of those weird poems – simple in its make-up, but more difficult than you expect to put together.

Varieties of it have been around since the Renaissance, but the one we know today, as set down by French poet Theodore de Banville, mainly revolves around a core of two rhymes and two lines that get repeated over and over to create a hypnotic effect.

The tone of a villanelle is often quietly thoughtful, or melancholy, although the repetition has also been used to express more extreme frustration, grief or anger. Now, under the threat of Coronavirus, life as we know it has mostly shut down; to feel bored, sad or frustrated by all the things we can't do is only natural. If you want to express and lessen some of those feelings, a villanelle is a great form to try out.

Common poetry mistake no.1: 'Structured poems are a barrier to your real feelings.

Structure doesn't mean you are restricting your feelings. Big no.

A rhyming poem is not where emotions get squeezed out. All it means is you are expressing the feelings through the natural music of a structure, rather than relying on lots of different words to explain things.

The general 'feel' created by rhyme and repetition communicates far more to readers than you might think.

Cracking the Structure

A villanelle has five tercets (stanza with three lines) and a quatrain (stanza with four lines) at the end. The two repeated lines rhyme with each other. You can see the both way the lines are placed and the rhyme pattern (represented by the letters A and B) in the plan below:

Key Line 1 (A)

Line (B)

Key Line 2 (A)

Line (A)

Line (B)

Repeat Key Line 1 (A)

Line (A)

Line (B)

Repeat Key Line 2 (A)

Line (A)

Line (B)

Repeat Key Line 1 (A)

Line (A)

Line (B)

Repeat Key Line 2 (A)

Line (A)

Line (B)

Repeat Key Line 1 (A)

Repeat Key Line 2 (A)

Write your own Villanelle

With poems like this, the intricate structure means that you have to get into an almost scientific way of thinking about the placing of your thoughts, and, unlike a sonnet or ballad, the villanelle has the added difficulty that most of it is repetition of two simple, key phrases. If you pick a key phrase that doesn't evoke what you want to say or what you want your readers to feel, the whole poem feels a bit empty. Repetitive lines in poetry are like ice-cream – the simpler flavours have to be delicious because they are working alone, without ripples or chunks, to be satisfying and get you hooked.

Here's another, more technical analogy while we're at it: to make a car go, you have to give it the potential to move without getting stuck. This is a matter of both engine power and friction of road surface. Often poems really are like cars – they need a good quality engine and a decent road to get anywhere. In the case of poems like villanelles:

The 'engine power' is the sort of rhyme you choose. Ask yourself, does the word at the end of your line have a lot of corresponding rhyming words? Does the sound open itself up to half-rhymes? Think of the difference between a word like 'go' and a word like 'strange' – which has more words that rhyme with it? Which has a more satisfyingly open sound?

The 'road surface' is the subject(s) you are choosing to write about. Some topics will make you stick, because there is not much to say about them, or not much potential for movement. How many different images can you grow from your topic? How many directions can you take it in?

Now you have these two key ideas in mind, you can begin to write. Here are some tips to get you going:

- **Don't start to write in the structure.** Watch my video about collecting ideas. Write down and play with lots of different phrases, and start to imagine how they might fit together as lines. Brainstorm strong images you might like to use.
- **Consider these two overlapping questions**
 1. What feeling or set of emotions do I want to create in this poem?
 2. How do I want it to make my reader feel?

If you're not sure, brainstorm a bit and keep thinking. Poetry is always a form of communication between poet and reader. The joy of it is nobody has to understand you perfectly or get the exact idea you had writing it – they just need to be given enough to feel along with you. The feelings might be shared in language, rhythms, images, tone, or all of these.

- **Listen out for phrases you hear again and again while you're at home.** "Have you emptied the bin?" "This is the news at six..." "Stay Alert!" Could you use any of these as repeating lines?

- **The trick is often to look for the bigger picture of a situation, or mix it up.** When picking your images, go wide before you go narrow, especially in the planning stages. Don't just focus on writing about one big fight you had with your brother – write about the general feeling of being together with him and the family for hours at a time, and pick a phrase about your fight as one of your key repetitions. Similarly, don't just write about that spider you can see making a web every day on your bedroom ceiling but do use the spider, or phrases about spinning webs as the repeated lines in a wider poem about little things you notice at home, now you have time to study them. That poem will tell your reader you are feeling bored or thoughtful, and time has slowed.