

The Villanelle

The Villanelle at a Glance

- 1) It is a poem of nineteen lines.
- 2) It has five stanzas, each of three lines, with a final one of four lines.
- 3) The first line of the first stanza is repeated as the last line of the second and fourth stanzas.
- 4) The third line of the first stanza is repeated as the last line of the third and fifth stanzas.
- 5) These two refrain lines follow each other to become the second-to-last and last lines of the poem.
- 6) The rhyme scheme is *aba*. The rhymes are repeated according to the refrains.

The History of the Form

It hardly seems likely that a form so sparkling and complicated as the villanelle could have had its origin in an Italian harvest field. In fact it came from an Italian rustic song, the term itself *villanella* thought to derive from *villano*, an Italian word for “peasant,” or even *villa* the Latin word for “country house” or “farm.”

If it was a round song—something sung with repetitive words and refrains—it may have taken its first, long-lost shape as an accompaniment to the different stages of an agricultural task. Binding sheaves perhaps, or even scything. No actual trace of this early origin remains. By the time the villanelle emerges into poetic history, it does so as a French poem with pastoral themes.

The form we know today began with the work of a French poet called Jean Passerat. He was a popular, politically engaged writer in sixteenth-century France. When he died in 1602, he left behind him several poems that had entered popular affection and memory.

One of these was his villanelle about a lost turtledove: a disguised love song. Even through a fraction of Passerat's poems on his lost turtledove, the twentieth-century villanelle can be seen clearly:

*J'ai perdu my tourterelle:
Est-ce point celle que j'oy?*

Je veux aller apres elle.
Tu regretes ta femelle?
Helas! aussi fais je-moy:
J'ai perdu ma tourterelle.

With the publication of this villanelle and because of its immediate popularity—amounting almost to popular-song status in its day—the form defined itself through contact with an audience: a striking but not uncommon way for poetic form to find itself.

This poem established the pattern for all future villanelles, both in French and English. The actual structure is as follows. Five stanzas occur of three lines each. They are followed by a stanza, a quatrain, of four lines. This is common to all villanelles. The first line of the first stanza serves as the last line of the second and fourth stanzas. The third line of the first stanza serves as the last line of the third and fifth stanzas. And these two refrain lines reappear to constitute the last two lines of the closing quatrain. This intricate metrical pattern is set off by intricate rhyming. The rhyme scheme is *aba*, for the first three lines of the poem. And these rhymes reappear to match and catch the refrains, throughout the villanelle. The third line of the first stanza rhymes with the third line of the fourth stanza. And so on.

In the 1870s in England, French poetry became an object of interest and admiration. Swinburne, for instance, wrote an elegy for Baudelaire. This was followed by an interest in the forms of French verse and several poets of the time, including Henley and Oscar Wilde, took it up. Oscar Wilde's villanelle was written in 1891 and, though stiff and ornamental, shows the form ready to be launched into the twentieth century.