

# Repeat yourself—on purpose!

The art of the villanelle, inspired by dance, lies in the nimble repetition of two key lines

## A QUICK HISTORY OF THE VILLANELLE

A villanelle is a poetic form that first emerged in 16th-century France, inspired by the rustic Italian dances that were fashionable at the time. They were designed to contrast with the madrigals of sophisticated city dwellers, and the results were often fun, lively, and animated. Eventually (and inevitably) their popularity faded, but they were revived in the 19th century: first in France, and later in England by Edmund Gosse and Oscar Wilde, Elizabeth Bishop, and even James Joyce, among others. By that time, they had acquired the form we recognize today—an intricate pattern of repetitions that, in the right hands, can create both emphasis and resonance.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE VILLANELLE

Before you begin, here's what you need to know about the villanelle's structure. (I'll stick to the traditional rules, which really shouldn't be broken until you become a whiz at the form.)

**Length:** A villanelle has **19 lines** broken up into five tercets (three-line stanzas), and a sixth stanza that contains four lines.

**Rhyme scheme:** A villanelle allows *only two rhymes throughout*, from beginning to end, as follows:

1. The first and third lines of the poem should be a strong **rhymed couplet** you've written in advance. These two lines are known as the **repetends**, or as lines **A1** and **A2**. They establish the poem's "**a-rhyme**."

**The repetends must be repeated in their entirety, and in a certain order,** throughout the poem.

2. All of your **second lines** (the middle lines) have to **rhyme with each other**. These establish the poem's "**b-rhyme**"
3. **The final stanza** must contain, in order, **the a-rhyme, the b-rhyme and the two-line rhymed couplet: A1 and A2.**

Here's a villanelle written by poet Susan McLean, titled "Unrequited Love"—color-coded to show how she did it:

### UNREQUITED LOVE

A1 Love is a talent; you can never learn it.  
 b When it rubs your ankles like a cat,  
 A2 you can reject it, but you can't return it  
  
 a to its owner. Yell at it or spurn it—  
 b it curls up mutely on your welcome mat.  
 A1 Love is a talent you can never learn. It  
  
 a can't be wiped out or created. Burn it,  
 b starve it, devastate its habitat—  
 A2 you can reject it, but you can't return it  
  
 a to a state of placid unconcern. It  
 b pays you back with interest, tit for tat.  
 A1 Love is a talent. You can never learn. It  
  
 a gives itself to those who cannot earn it.  
 b You may ignore its pleas, presuming that  
 A2 you can reject it. But you can't. Return it  
  
 a or not, someday you'll be the one to yearn. It  
 b figures—irony's a democrat.  
 A1 Love is a talent. You can never learn it.  
 A2 You can reject it, but you can't return it.

—Susan McLean

## STEP 1: A PRACTICE VILLANELLE

## “Another Story, Another Song” (after Alicia Ostriker)

1. A1 (**1st repetend**)      They need another story, another song.
2. b      The problem is they don't know what they need,
3. A2 (**2nd repetend**)      those good Republicans who voted wrong.
  
4. a (New; rhyme with “song”) \_\_\_\_\_
5. b (New; rhyme with “need”) \_\_\_\_\_
6. A1 (**1st repetend**):      [they] need another story, another song
  
7. a (New; rhyme with “song”) \_\_\_\_\_
8. b (New; rhyme with “need”) \_\_\_\_\_
9. A2 (**2nd repetend**):      [those] good Republicans who voted wrong
  
10. a (New; rhyme with “song”) \_\_\_\_\_
11. b (New; rhyme with “need”) \_\_\_\_\_
12. A1 (**1st repetend**):      [they] need another story, another song
  
13. a (New; rhyme with “song”) \_\_\_\_\_
14. b (New; rhyme with “need”) \_\_\_\_\_
15. A2 (**2nd repetend**):      [those] good Republicans who voted wrong
  
16. a (New; rhyme with “song”) \_\_\_\_\_
17. b (New; rhyme with “need”) \_\_\_\_\_
18. A1 (**1st repetend**):      [they] need another story, another song
19. A2 (**2nd repetend**):      [those] good Republicans who voted wrong.

Some “ong” rhymes: *bong, gong, long, prong, strong, thong, throng, along, belong, oblong, sarong, headstrong, Viet Cong, tagalong, sing-along, ping-pong, Hong Kong*

Some “eed” rhymes: *bead, bleed, speed, plead, greed, mead, read, seed, Swede, tweed, exceed, impede, centipede, chicken-feed, tumbleweed*

**A SELECTION OF VILLANELLES**

**DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT** by Dylan Thomas

- A1 Do not go gentle into that good night,  
 b Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
 A2 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
- a Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
 b Because their words had forked no lightning they  
 A1 Do not go gentle into that good night.
- a Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
 b Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
 A2 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
- a Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
 b And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
 A1 Do not go gentle into that good night.
- a Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
 b Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
 A2 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
- a And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
 b Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
 A1 Do not go gentle into that good night.  
 A2 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

**BACKUP PLAN** by A. M. Juster

- A1 If I were single once again  
 b (not that I'm really planning, dear),  
 A2 I would indulge! Like other men.
- a I'd bag the low-fat regimen  
 b and live on burgers, ribs and beer.  
 A1 If I were single once again
- a there would be Fritos in the den  
 b and napkin rings would disappear.  
 A2 I would indulge like other men,
- a not shave or floss, and sleep past ten.  
 b My feelings could be *insincere*.  
 A1 if I were single once again,
- a and free to leave the seat up when  
 b my heart desired, it is clear  
 A2 I would indulge like other men—
- a although I would be helpless then,  
 b and yearn for your return. I fear  
 A1 if I were single once again,  
 A2 I *would* indulge like other men.

**LAKE MICHIGAN INLET** by David Southward

- A1 Its ripples strum the banks of grassy dunes,  
 b Where kids prance in a passing jet-ski's wake.  
 A2 Cooling your feet on summer afternoons.
- a You try to picture prehistoric Junes—  
 b The glacial force, the eons it must take  
 A1 For ripples to strum the banks of grassy dunes—  
 a until the echolalia of the loons  
 b reminds you that some truths are too opaque.  
 A2 Just cool your feet. On summer afternoons
- a This blue, a kindred blueness in you swoons;  
 b The only thing to do is to partake  
 A1 In ripples that strum the banks of grassy dunes
- a And enter—by raft, yacht, kayak, or pontoon—  
 b A basin wise enough to quench your ache  
 A2 Or cool your feet on summer afternoons.
- a A simple beauty, common as the moon's,  
 b Attracts us to the shoals of this Great Lake,  
 A1 Whose ripples strum the banks of grassy dunes  
 A2 And cool the feel on summer afternoons.

**VILLANELLE FOR DARCY** by Jerome Betts

- A1 "Darcy, the diabetic cat, has died,"  
 b his fans were told by email recently—  
 A2 a life remembered with no little pride.
- a The Fiat-driver now feels mortified.  
 b To think, because he simply failed to see  
 A1 Darcy, the diabetic cat has died.
- a Was this the fatal ninth and last he'd tried?  
 b Whichever, it will surely prove to be  
 A2 life remembered with no little pride.
- a His poor squashed frame has been discreetly fried,  
 b with all involved expressing sympathy  
 A1 that Darcy, the diabetic cat, has died.
- a The people down the road could not abide  
 b the flattening of such fine felinity,  
 A2 a life remembered with no little pride.
- a Some of them sent cards, others cried  
 b and stuck this sign upon his favourite tree:  
 A1 *"Darcy, the diabetic cat, has died.*  
 A2 *A life remembered, with no little pride."*

**LONELY HEARTS**

A1 Can someone make my simple wish come true?

b Male biker seeks female for touring fun.

A2 Do you live in North London? Is it you?

a Gay vegetarian whose friends are few,

b I'm into music, Shakespeare and the sun.

A1 Can someone make my simple wish come true?

a Executive in search of something new—

b Perhaps bisexual woman, arty, young.

A2 Do you live in North London? Is it you?

a Successful, straight and solvent? I am too—

b Attractive Jewish lady with a son.

A1 Can someone make my simple wish come true?

a I'm Libran, inexperienced and blue—

b Need slim, non-smoker, under twenty-one.

A2 Do you live in North London? Is it you?

a Please write (with photo) to Box 152.

b Who knows where it may lead once we've begun?

A1 Can someone make my simple wish come true?

A2 Do you live in North London? Is it you?

**COMING TO TERMS OVER COFFEE** by Leslie Monsour

A1 I'd never fall in love with you.

b Love fizzles out and mortifies.

A2 Affection's fine, and it will do.

a Besides, love's common as bamboo

b And flits about like butterflies.

A1 How could I fall in love with you

a And send you flowery billets-doux

b Or hit upon you otherwise?

A2 Affection's fine, and it will do.

a Lovers are fickle and untrue;

b They tell each other little lies.

A1 I'd never fall in love with you,

a Stoop to some secret rendezvous,

b And be reduced to quivering sighs:

A2 Affection's fine, and it will do.

a So pour your famous foreign brew,

b As dark and jolting as your eyes.

A1 I'll never fall in love with you;

A2 Affection's fine, and it will do

**DIAGNOSIS: AUTISM** by Barbara Crooker

A1 I'm here to get my baby out of jail:  
 b it's his own mind that's getting in the way.  
 A2 I will not falter, neither will I fail.

a We're on a one-way train that tracks against the rail.  
 b He has no words. Or are there none to say?  
 A1 I'm here to get my baby out of jail.

a My time is what I spend to make the bail  
 b and I will give all that it takes to pay.  
 A2 I will not falter, neither will I fail.

a Like trying to drain the ocean with a pail  
 b is how I feel in facing each new day.  
 A1 I'm here to get my baby out of jail.

a He's on the sea in a boat without a sail  
 b or rudder, and must learn to find the way.  
 A2 I will not falter; neither will I fail.

a And though this task is hard and I am frail,  
 b and nothing can be done, the doctors say,  
 A1 I'm here to get my baby out of jail.  
 A2 I will not falter, neither will I fail.

**WE COME FROM THE FURNACE OF THE STARS** by Lisa Vihos (after Barbara Brown Taylor)

A1 We come from the furnace of the stars  
 b and in their blazing light we beam.  
 A2 Together, all this world is ours.

a Our lives rain down as showers  
 b and all the waters in all the streams  
 A1 flow from the furnace of the stars.

a And all this love that ever flowers,  
 b tied to each other on threaded seam.  
 A2 Together, all this world is ours.

a In every color, every hour,  
 b every place where dreamers dream—  
 A1 we come from the furnace of the stars.

a Rise up in truth to power  
 b and do not fear its grimy gleam.  
 A2 Together, all this world is ours.

a With voices raised, we tower!  
 b We care, we share, we are, we seem.  
 A1 Together, all this world is ours.  
 A2 We come from the furnace of the stars.

## Step 2: A Few Rhymed Couplets to Inspire You

When I have fears that I may cease to be,  
I have another drink, or two or three. (Phyllis McGinley)

I mean the opposite of what I say.  
You've got it now? No, it's the other way. (Bruce Bennett)

It's not that every leaf must finally fall,  
it's just that we can never catch them all. (Michael Burch)

Government and the arts? They just don't mix.  
That bed of roses, folks, is full of pricks. (Michael Burch)

I lived as best I could, and then I died.  
Be careful where you step: the grave is wide. (Michael Burch)

I do not like green eggs and ham;  
I do not like them, Sam I Am. (Dr. Seuss / Theodore Seuss Geisel)

Thanks for showing us your [so-called] work.  
It's obvious that you're a clueless jerk. (Melissa Balmain)

It's easy to forget what brought us here,  
but still it's fun pretending every year. (Leslie Monsour)

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee  
And I'll forgive the great big one on me. (Robert Frost)

Tell me, O Octopus, I begs  
Is those things arms, or is they legs? (Ogden Nash)

Clouds are pretty, up above,  
but shitty in the middle of. (Julie Kane)



## TWO WOULD-BE VILLANELLES IN SEARCH OF CONTENT

### My Dreams

I dreamt a dream last night.  
It had caused me not to awaken.  
In my dream book, I write.

Some dreams are about love.  
About a love lost and broken.  
A dream I dreamt last night.

I had heartache and strife.  
The dream I felt is now taken  
to my dream book I write.

Some dreams are very light.  
Good dreams come only now and then.  
Most dreams I dream at night,

I wish to not highlight.  
They leave me sad and crestfallen.  
In my dream book, I write

How dreams will come tonight;  
until I have reawaken.  
I dreamt a dream last night.  
In my dream book, I write.



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### Landscape of Spring

Let's go frolic on the landscape of spring  
And relish jubilant nature's beauty  
That satiates our glorious wondering.

Exuding brightness from its paths that bring  
Showers of bliss in limitless bounty  
Let's go frolic on the landscape of spring.

Bellowing songs of insects and birds ring  
Thanking God's love and graces aplenty  
While flower-trees raise their hands, adoring.

Dragonflies and bees swirl around like string  
As we twirl, butterflies play...so pretty!  
Let's all frolic on the landscape of spring.

Floral vines boast on high walls, all flaring  
And balmy breeze drops petals-confetti  
Catch them under the sunray's offering.

View from the hill the clear lake's mirroring  
The rainbow colors with large quantity  
Let's all frolic on the landscape of spring  
That satiates our glorious wondering.

### STEP 3: YOUR ORIGINAL VILLANELLE

**(driven by an original rhymed couplet-- or borrow one from the list on Page 8)**

You can do this! Getting started with a couplet might seem daunting, but—in the same way that tying your shoes is a lot less difficult than written shoe-tying instructions might imply—it's really pretty simple in practice. Furthermore, success is practically guaranteed if you write your villanelle by starting out with a rhymed couplet. If you must, use one from the previous page, for practice:

**A1:** Line 1 of your couplet \_\_\_\_\_

**b:** New line with new rhyme \_\_\_\_\_

**A2.** Line 2 of your couplet. \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** rhyme it with couplet \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** use b-rhyme \_\_\_\_\_

**Repeat entire A1 line:** \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** rhyme it with the couplet \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** use b-rhyme \_\_\_\_\_

**Repeat entire A2 line:** \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** rhyme it with the couplet \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** use b-rhyme \_\_\_\_\_

**Repeat entire A1 line:** \_\_\_\_\_

**New line:** rhyme it with couplet \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** use b-rhyme \_\_\_\_\_

**Repeat entire A2 line** \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** rhyme it with the couplet \_\_\_\_\_

**New line;** use b-rhyme \_\_\_\_\_

**Repeat entire A1 line** \_\_\_\_\_

**Repeat entire A2 line** \_\_\_\_\_