

Fixed Form & "The Long Deployment"

Poem by Jehanne Dubrow / motionpoem by Nicole McDonald

Lesson plan by Saara Myrene Raappana

Time: 50-120 minutes

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

1. Learn about the villanelle and the way that it uses refrain, expectation and surprise to build meaning
2. Learn about the way that the content and form mirror each other in "The Long Deployment" the poem
3. Analyze the way that "The Long Deployment" the film reenacts the form of the poem
4. Analyze the way that form in poetry and film function to signal meaning and create a sense of discovery for the reader

MATERIALS

- Villanelles:
 - "Ghost Villanelle" by Dan Lechay: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/51826>
 - "Solstice" by Tracy K. Smith: <https://genius.com/Tracy-k-smith-solstice-annotated>
 - "The Long Deployment" by Jehanne Dubrow, the poem AND the motionpoem (adapted by Nicole McDonald): motionpoems.org/episode/long-deployment/
- Pen/paper or other writing implements

ACTIVITIES

Have students discuss these questions in small groups or as a whole class:

1. The Poems (if students read the poems beforehand, this should take 20-25 mins; if they read the poems in class, this part should take about 35-40 mins): Have students read three villanelles:

First, "Ghost Villanelle" by Dan Lechay. Ask students to pay attention to the way it builds and fulfills expectations. Note, too, how the refrains gather additional meanings as they're repeated.

Second, "Solstice" a villanelle (with substitutions) by Tracy K. Smith. Ask students to pay attention to the way it builds and subverts expectations. Note, too, the way that the refrains change throughout the poem but remain similar enough to invoke earlier refrains.

Finally, Jehanne Dubrow's "The Long Deployment." Tell students that Dubrow calls her poem "an exploded villanelle," with seven tercets (instead of the expected five) and a quatrain (though the stanzas aren't divided up as you might expect). Dubrow says, "I hope the form mirrors the content, the poem lasting longer than it should (just as deployments often feel a few months too long)."

Then ask students to answer the following questions, either on their own or in small groups; then discuss as a class:

- a. How does the meaning of the refrains in "Ghost Villanelle" change throughout the poem?
- b. Why do you think Tracy K. Smith alters the refrains in her villanelle "Solstice"? How do the changing refrains operate differently than the regular refrains in "Ghost Villanelle"? How do they work the same?
- c. How is the effect of reading "The Long Deployment" the same as the other two villanelles? How is it different?

2. The Film (20-25 mins): Watch the motionpoem version of “The Long Deployment,” directed by Nicole McDonald. Then show the students the questions below, give them a chance to read them, and have them watch the film again with the questions in mind. After they’ve watched the film again, have them answer the questions in small groups or in class discussion.
motionpoems.org/episode/long-deployment/

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| a. Make a list of the images that are repeated in the film. | not, which lines do the repeated images correspond to? |
| b. Make a list of images that remind you of earlier images in the film. | d. Do the repeated images in the film work similarly to the way that repeated lines in the poem work? If so, how? If not, what do the repeated images achieve? |
| c. Do these repeated images correspond to repeated lines in the poem? If so, how? If | |

3. Depending on time, have students write a draft of the following exercise in class or at home.

Villanelle: the Writing Exercise

Refrain, Refrain, Refrain

A villanelle is a nineteen-line poetic form consisting of five tercets followed by a quatrain. There are two repeating rhymes and two refrains, with the first and third line of the first tercet repeated alternately until the last quatrain, which includes both repeated lines. Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art,” Dylan Thomas’ “Do not go gentle into that good night,” and Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking” are three of the best known modern English villanelles.

One of the things that regular meter, rhyme, or repetition does is create expectation; part of the pleasure and surprise of reading (and writing!) is built by the way that expectation is built, fulfilled, and subverted. With rhyme, the reader knows generally which sound will appear, and a sense of discovery is created with a surprising rhyme (or an expected rhyme used in a surprising way). With repetition, generally, additional meanings of the repeated word or phrase will be added with each iteration.

Write a villanelle that uses a single sense that isn’t sight (either sound, smell, taste, or touch) to invoke a memory. Stick to the fixed form *almost* perfectly—make one or two changes to the form at most, but make sure that those changes symbolize something about the poem (e.g., Dubrow’s villanelle invokes how long deployments often feel, so the poem is longer than a normal villanelle; Sylvia Plath’s “Mad Girl’s Love Song” is a strict villanelle, but the rhymes are very loose, sometimes barely rhymes at all—an evocation of the way the speaker is barely hanging on to sanity). When you hand in your draft, bring the poem itself, as well as 2-5 sentences that explain how you changed the form and why.

Villanelle cheat sheet:

Refer to the villanelle handout to see examples of villanelles.

Using capitals for the refrains and lowercase letters for the rhymes with slashes to indicate stanza breaks, the form is:

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