

THE BEAUTY OF THE SESTINA

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The *sestina* is not the most popular form to write to these days. However, a book of sestinas was published in 2014 which sparked an interest in the form¹. Admittedly it is a form that takes some time to fully appreciate.

The sestina is a twelfth century French form attributed to Arnaut Daniel. It is a form closely related to *blank verse* but involve *lexical repetition* and not rime. There have been a number of variations in its form, some successful, some not. For most, it is a challenge, not necessarily *Swinburne-like*, but to be able to use the form in an elegant manner. It is the flow that is important. There are some variations that would challenge the reader in accepting that they are actually classified as sestinas because they depart so far from the traditional form.

The sestina is a thirty-nine-line poem consisting of six sestets and a final tercet called the *envoi* (a sort of farewell from the poem itself) to give a conclusion to the poem. This sounds simple enough, but there is a fixed order that determines the pattern of repetition². Add to this, the same six words appear in prescribed position in the envoi. No mean feat whatsoever!

The six repeated words are always repeated at the end of the verse, these words are sometime called *teleutons* and they should not rime. To have these words rime destroys the beauty of the sestina form itself. The beauty of the sestina is that the end words *do not* rime, but they create a startling effect by their repetition. Swinburne developed a pattern for a rimed sestina, but this imposed rime does little, if anything for the form.

The format of the traditional sestina is fixed with the order of repetition not only in the sestets but also the finishing tercet. If the six teleutons are 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 then the order of their appearance at the end of each verse in the stanza is:

Stanza 1: 1 2 3 4 5 6
Stanza 2: 6 1 5 2 4 3
Stanza 3: 3 6 4 1 2 5
Stanza 4: 5 3 2 6 1 4
Stanza 5: 4 5 1 3 6 2
Stanza 6: 2 4 6 5 3 1

¹ **Obsession:** *Sestinas* in the Twenty-first Century.

Edited by Carolyn Beard Whitlow and Marilyn Krysl
ISBN 978-1-61168-530-5 (ebook)

² This may have been related to numerology. The actually origin is unknown.

The envoi is subject to its own restrictions:

Verse 1: 2 5

Verse 2: 4 3

Verse 3: 6 1

where the first is embedded in the middle of the verse and the second appears at the end of the verse.

In the case of each verse in the sestina, each line is written in *iambic pentameter*, although *decasyllabic* meters have been used with similar (although not a pleasant) effect.

Among the variations, *enjambment* is likely the most popular and effective. One of the problems, likely the biggest or noticeable one, is that the end words can become obtrusive. In other words, they start to become very obvious and distracting if the reader is to pause or stop at the end of each verse. The use of enjambment can overcome this difficulty by making the reader continue to the next verse, thereby disguising the obviousness of the end words.

Other techniques are to use *homophones*, *homonyms* or *elision*. Although not strictly staying with the lexical repetition *per se*, the *homophone* (same pronunciation, different spelling) can create a pleasant variation. *Homonyms* (same spelling, different meaning) too can have a similar effect, but some have a different pronunciation which can ruin the lexical repetition if used too often. *Elision* does not occur too often, but is possible with the eliding of the (generally) first vowel where appropriate.

One possible process to carry out in constructing the sestina is to write the tercet first. A tercet can be difficult to write, so it may take a few attempts. Once this is done, it is only a matter of choose the end words and an appropriate middle word to determine the teleutons.

In the following example the teleutons have been highlighted, mainly to show their position in the envoi.

THE SNATCHERS

In dusty moonbeams, harpies³ dance **around**
An angry fire that cursed the spiteful **breeze** —
They seem to lack the rhythm in a **way**
That each one moved, contorting to a **song**
In strange and varied movements, chanting **loud**,
Those guttural moans that echoed through the **night**.

An ancient dance performed this darkest **night**,
Surrounds the fire, as shadows gather **'round**,
And dance in silence as the chant rings **loud**
To flit away and stutter in the **breeze** —
Those half-rent sounds compose another **song**
That sings its dirge and passes on its **way**.

³ *Harpies* are also known as *snatchers* or *swift robbers*.

But woe betide cruel souls who come their **way**,
For misery may visit those **tonight**
Who boast and sing a vile and cheerless **song**
Whilst casting lots, content to laze **around**,
Enjoying laughs and life's cool summer **breeze**
In rowdy sounds, obnoxious, crude and **loud**.

Although this din the harpies danced was **loud**,
They ceased all movement, turned their heads one **way**,
Their feathers bristled, fluttered in the **breeze** —
Excitement burned in harpies' hearts this **night**.
Then one so bold, she whispered, Gather '**round** —
We'll snatch these fools!, and all burst into **song**.

Though evildoers, killers hear their **song**,
(Tis whispered soft, but in their mind rings **loud**.)
They never notice 'til the scene **around**,
Becomes a frenzy — harpies block their **way**.
With talons cruel, they snatch this bloodied **night**,
And punishment is meted on the **breeze**.

The winds awake! Farewell the gentle **breeze**,
'Tis no more calm, and wicked is its **way**
As harpies torture victims through the **night**,
Their punishment is just in screams so **loud**
Which may convince another change their **way**,
For snatchers hide, but always are **around**.

If pleasant **breezes** vanish, then a **loud**
Wild **song** in windy voices blows your **way** —
Beware the **night**, the snatchers are **around**.

FERRICK GRAY

LEXICAL REPETITION/TELEUTONS:
AROUND, BREEZE, WAY, SONG, LOUD, NIGHT