Sestina

Definition of Sestina

Sestina is a type of a poem that contains six stanzas, each stanza having six lines, while a concluding seventh stanza has three lines called "*envoi,*" which is also known as "*tornada.*" As sestina derives its name from fixed structure and characteristics, it is as popular as the *sextain*. Unlike other poetic forms, sestina does not rhyme. However, it has rhythmic quality on account of the repetition of the final six words of the first stanza that recur in the remaining poem. Hence, a sestina follows the rule of an end word pattern.

Types of Sestina

Depending upon the number and size of stanzas, different poets have changed sestinas as give below.

Double Sestina

This may contain twelve stanzas with six lines in each stanza, and a final tercet. For instance, in Philip Sydney's, *Ye Goatherd Gods*; or the twelve stanzas with twelve lines in each stanza, and final envoi with six lines, such as in Algernon Charles Swinburne's, *The Complaint of Lisa*.

Trinita

This is a contracted form of sestina, containing three stanzas with three lines and final one-line envoi.

Examples of Sestina in Literature

Example #1: *Altaforte* (By Ezra Pound)

> "Damn it all! all this our South stinks peace.
> You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let's to music!
> I have no life save when the swords clash.
> But ah! when I see the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing
> And the broad fields beneath them turn crimson,
> Then howl I my heart nigh mad with rejoicing ... "

This is a perfect sestina in which Pound uses repetitive ending words, "peace," "music," "clash," "opposing," "crimson," and "rejoicing," respectively. As we know, sestinas have six stanzas with six lines in each stanza, which repeat the final words of first stanza, and this repetition occurs in the remaining poem too. The same happens in this poem.

Example #2: *A Miracle for Breakfast* (By Elizabeth Bishop)

> "At six o'clock we were waiting for coffee,
> waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb
> that was going to be served from a certain balcony
> —like kings of old, or like a miracle.
> It was still dark. One foot of the sun
> steadied itself on a long ripple in the river ..."

The above example presents complex structure of sestina. The poet has repeatedly used the words "coffee," "crumb," "balcony," "miracle," "sun," and "river," which show even from a surface reading that these are its keywords. Towards her concluding envoi, Bishop uses all her repeated words to illustrate the the breakfast miracle.

Example #3: *Paysage Moralisé* (By W. H. Auden)

> "Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,
> Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,

Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,
We honour founders of these starving cities
Whose honour is the image of our sorrow ...”

This example is presenting a modern form of sestina. In this form, again we see Auden has employed repetitive words like, “valleys,” “mountains,” “water,” “islands,” “cities,” and “sorrows,” which play on sensory description, creates vivid imagery in the minds of the readers, and adds rhythm to the poem.

Example #4: *Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape* (By John Ashbury)

“The first of the undecoded messages read: “Popeye sits in thunder,
Unthought of. From that shoebox of an apartment,
From livid curtain’s hue, a tangram emerges: a country.”
Meanwhile the Sea Hag was relaxing on a green couch: “How pleasant
To spend one’s vacation *en la casa de Popeye,*” she scratched
Her cleft chin’s solitary hair. She remembered spinach ... “

This one is another perfect example of sestina, containing six stanzas and a final envoi. Though the poem does not have a regular rhythm, the repetition of six words, “thunder,” “apartment,” “country,” “pleasant,” “scratched,” and “spinach,” towards the conclusion of each line, except the final envoi, giving it a slight rhyme.

Function of Sestina

The form of sestina requires adherence to its arbitrary and strict order. Though it is a complex verse form, it achieves its amazing effects due to intricate repetition of words, called “lexical repetition.” Therefore, it does not rely upon its meter or rhyme alone. Apart from drawing attention to its structure, this lexical repetition creates rhythm in the poem, brings harmony among various stanzas, enhances the subject matter, keeps the idea alive in the reader’s minds, and engages them. Hence, the basic