



Prose and poetry techniques: Sestina

Form

A sestina consists of six stanzas of six unrhyming lines followed by an envoi of three lines. The lines are almost always of regular length and are usually in iambic pentameter. The words at the end of each line are repeated in a different order from stanza to stanza:

- 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
- Envoi: 5, 3, 1 or (less commonly) 1, 3, 5 or 2, 4, 6

In a strict sestina, the remaining repetition words are used in the middle of the lines of the envoi. Example:

- Line 1 ends with 5, contains 2
- Line 2 ends with 3, contains 4
- Line 3 ends with 1, contains 6

However, this rule is not always followed.

- A double sestina has twelve stanzas.
- A triple sestina has eighteen

A variant, with rhyme

Some poets have introduced rhyme into the sestina. Couplets (lines rhyming in pairs) are usually avoided, and the pattern of word repetition is altered to prevent this happening.

Here is a pattern of word repetition for a rhyming sestina used by A C Swinburne in the 19th century:

- Stanza 1: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
- Stanza 2: 6, 1, 4, 3, 2, 5
- Stanza 3: 5, 6, 1, 4, 3, 2
- Stanza 4: 2, 5, 6, 1, 4, 3
- Stanza 5: 3, 2, 1, 6, 5, 4
- Stanza 6: 4, 3, 2, 5, 6, 1
- Envoi: 4, 3, 6

Internal repetition in the envoi:

- Line 1 contains 1
- Line 2 contains 2
- Line 3 contains 5.

Words 1, 3 and 5 rhyme together, and so do words 2, 4 and 6. This gives a rhyme scheme of ababab and bababa in alternate stanzas.

History

The sestina is one of several forms that originated with the troubadour poets of medieval Provence. It is said to have been invented towards the end of the 12th century by Arnaut Daniel. Dante Alighieri admired Daniel's sestinas and introduced the form into Italian poetry. It was known in Elizabethan England but was not widely used by English poets before the 19th century.

Advice

It is important to pick good repetition words. Words with more than one meaning are useful. Punning is perfectly acceptable.

The frequent repetition of words in emphasized positions tends to give the sestina an obsessive flavour. Some of the best sestinas in English use this to evoke a sinister atmosphere.