
Activity 3:11 – Repetitive Poetry: Sestina

“Sestina” means six in Latin. It comes from Provence and came to England by way of Italy. It is a six-stanza, unrhymed form that builds on six key words which appear six times at the ends of all sentences. Although a sestina need not be rhymed, each stanza is constructed according to a similar pattern or structure. The sestina finishes with a tercet that incorporates the key words within as well as at the ends of lines. Note how Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) uses the form in his poem, appropriately called “Sestina”:

1 I saw my soul at rest upon a day
2 As a bird sleeping in the nest of night,
3 Among soft leaves that give the starlight way
4 To touch its wings but not its eyes with light;
5 So that it knew as one in visions may,
6 And knew not as men waking, of delight.

7 This was the measure of my soul's delight;
8 It had no power of joy to fly by day,
9 Nor part in the large lordship of the light;
10 But in a secret moon-beholden way
11 Had all its will of dreams and pleasant night,
12 And all the love and life that sleepers may.

13 But such life's triumph as men waking may
14 It might not have to feed its faint delight
15 Between the stars by night and sun by day,
16 Shut up with green leaves and a little light;
17 Because its way was as a lost star's way,
18 A world's not wholly known of day or night.

19 All loves and dreams and sounds and gleams of night
20 Made it all music that such minstrels may,
21 And all they had they gave it of delight;
22 But in the full face of the fire of day
23 What place shall be for any starry light,
24 What part of heaven in all the wide sun's way?

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25 Yet the soul woke not, sleeping by the way,
26 Watched as a nursling of the large-eyed night,
27 And sought no strength nor knowledge of the day,
28 Nor closer touch conclusive of delight,
29 Nor mightier joy nor truer than dreamers may,
30 Nor more of song than they, nor more of light.

31 For who sleeps once and sees the secret light
32 Whereby sleep shows the soul a fairer way
33 Between the rise and rest of day and night,
34 Shall care no more to fare as all men may,
35 But be his place of pain or of delight,
36 There shall he dwell, beholding night as day.

37 Song, have thy day and take thy fill of light
38 Before the night be fallen across thy way;
39 Sing while he may, man hath no long delight.

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To write a sestina of your own, choose six words relating to a unifying theme, and assign each one a letter. The most successful sestinas use six words (A-F) which read by themselves provide information about the subject.

A _____
B _____
C _____
D _____
E _____
F _____

Stanza 1(Sestet)

A _____
B _____
C _____
D _____
E _____
F _____

Stanza 2 (Sestet)

F _____
A _____
E _____
B _____
D _____
C _____

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Stanza 3 (Sestet)

C _____
F _____
D _____
A _____
B _____
E _____

Stanza 4 (Sestet)

E _____
C _____
B _____
F _____
A _____
D _____

Stanza 5 (Sestet)

D _____
E _____
A _____
C _____
F _____
B _____

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Stanza 6 (Sestet)

B _____
D _____
F _____
E _____
C _____
A _____

Stanza 7 (Tercet)

AB _____
CD _____
EF _____