

## *The Sestina*

1. It is a poem of thirty-nine lines.
2. It has six stanzas of six lines each.
3. This is followed by an envoi of three lines. (Envoi: a brief ending that contains a summary and rounding off of the subject and argument of the poem.)
4. All of these are unrhymed.
5. The same six end-words must occur in every stanza but in a changing order that follow a set pattern.
6. This recurrent pattern of end-words is known as “lexical repetition.”
7. Each stanza must follow on the last by taking a reversed pairing of the previous lines.
8. The first line of the second stanza must pair its end-words with the last line of the first. The second line of the second stanza must do this with the first line of the first and so on.
9. The envoi or last three lines must gather up and deploy the six end-words.

Sestinas originated with the twelfth-century singer/poet troubadours, and they are “elaborate repetitions build up over thirty-nine lines...These patterns of repetition are constructed across a selected number of key words, so that in the end the sestina becomes a game of meaning, played with sounds and sense.”

The sestina “accommodates itself to conversation or plain style discourse” and it “provides the formal groundwork for a circular narrative, often of questionable meaning and amounting to little more than variations on a theme—a theme dependent upon and perhaps developed around the six words chosen for repetition.”

Adapted from *The Making of a Poem* by Mark Strand and Eavan Boland.

Check out this web site for more info on writing your own sestina:

<http://www.baymoon.com/~ariadne/form/sestina.htm>

## ***Sestina* by Elizabeth Bishop**

September rain falls on the house.  
In the failing light, the old grandmother  
sits in the kitchen with the child  
beside the Little Marvel Stove,  
reading the jokes from the almanac,  
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears  
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house  
were both foretold by the almanac,  
but only known to a grandmother.  
The iron kettle sings on the stove.  
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child  
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears  
dance like mad on the hot black stove,  
the way the rain must dance on the house.  
Tidying up, the old grandmother  
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac  
hovers half open above the child,  
hovers above the old grandmother  
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.  
She shivers and says she thinks the house  
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.  
I know what I know, says the almanac.  
With crayons the child draws a rigid house  
and a winding pathway. Then the child  
puts in a man with buttons like tears  
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother  
busies herself about the stove,  
the little moons fall down like tears  
from between the pages of the almanac  
into the flower bed the child  
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.  
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove  
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

*Shrinking Lonesome Sestina* by Miller Williams

Somewhere in everyone's head something points toward home,  
a dashboard's floating compass, turning all the time  
to keep from turning. It doesn't matter how we come  
to be wherever we are, someplace where nothing goes  
the way it went once, where nothing holds fast  
to where it belongs, or what you've risen or fallen to.

What the bubble always points to,  
whether we notice it or not, is home.  
It may be true that if you move fast  
everything fades away, that given time  
and noise enough, every memory goes  
into the blackness, and if new ones come-

small, mole-like memories that come  
to live in the furry dark-they, too,  
curl up and die. But Carol goes  
to high school now. John works at home  
what days he can to spend some time  
with Sue and the kids. He drives too fast.

Ellen won't eat her breakfast.  
Your sister was going to come  
but didn't have the time.  
Some mornings at one or two  
or three I want you home  
a lot, but then it goes.

It all goes.  
Hold on fast  
to thoughts of home  
when they come.  
They're going to  
less with time.

Time  
goes  
too  
fast.  
Come  
home.

Forgive me that. One time it wasn't fast.  
A myth goes that when the years come  
then you will, too. Me, I'll still be home.

## **Sestina by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909)**

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?
  
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.

### ***Sestina of the Tramp-Royal* by Rudyard Kipling**

Speakin' in general, I 'ave tried 'em all,  
The 'appy roads that take you o'er the world.  
Speakin' in general, I 'ave found them good  
For such as cannot use one bed too long,  
But must get 'ence, the same as I 'ave done,  
An' go observin' matters till they die.

What do it matter where or 'ow we die,  
So long as we've our 'ealth to watch it all --  
The different ways that different things are done,  
An' men an' women lovin' in this world --  
Takin' our chances as they come along,  
An' when they ain't, pretendin' they are good?

In cash or credit -- no, it aren't no good;  
You 'ave to 'ave the 'abit or you'd die,  
Unless you lived your life but one day long,  
Nor didn't prophesy nor fret at all,  
But drew your tucker some'ow from the world,  
An' never bothered what you might ha' done.

But, Gawd, what things are they I 'aven't done?  
I've turned my 'and to most, an' turned it good,  
In various situations round the world --  
For 'im that doth not work must surely die;  
But that's no reason man should labour all  
'Is life on one same shift; life's none so long.

Therefore, from job to job I've moved along.  
Pay couldn't 'old me when my time was done,  
For something in my 'ead upset me all,  
Till I 'ad dropped whatever 'twas for good,  
An', out at sea, be'eld the dock-lights die,  
An' met my mate -- the wind that tramps the world!

It's like a book, I think, this bloomin' world,  
Which you can read and care for just so long,  
But presently you feel that you will die  
Unless you get the page you're readin' done,  
An' turn another -- likely not so good;  
But what you're after is to turn 'em all.

Gawd bless this world! Whatever she 'ath done --  
Excep' when awful long -- I've found it good.  
So write, before I die, "'E liked it all!"