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Playing with Dolls by David Trinidad

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Every weekend morning, I'd sneak downstairs to play with my sisters' Barbie dolls. They had all of them: Barbie, Ken, Allan, Midge, Skipper and Skooter. They even had the little freckled boy, Ricky ("Skipper's Friend"), and Francie, "Barbie's 'MOD'ern cousin." Quietly, I'd set the dolls

in front of their wardrobe cases, take the dolls' clothes off miniature plastic hangers, and play until my father woke up. There were several Barbies blonde ponytail, black bubble, brunette flip—all with the same pointed tits, which (odd for a boy) didn't interest me as much as the dresses and

accessories. I'd finger each glove and hat and necklace and high heel, then put them on the dolls. Then I'd invent elaborate stories. A "creative" boy, I could entertain myself for hours. I liked to play secretly like that, though I often got caught. All my father's tirades ("Boys don't play with Barbies! It isn't normal!") faded as I slipped Barbie's perfect figure into her stunning ice blue and sea green satin and tulle formal gown. All her outfits had names like "Fab Fashion," "Doll's Dream" and "Golden Evening"; Ken's were called "Play Ball!," "Tennis Pro," "Campus Hero" and "Fountain Boy,"

which came with two tiny sodas and spoons. Model boy that he was, Ken hunted, fished, hit home runs. Barbie's world revolved around garden parties, dances, play and movie dates. A girl with bracelets and scarves and sunglasses and fur stoles.... "Boys don't play with dolls!" My parents were arguing in the living room. "All

boys do." As always, my mother defended me. "All sissies!" snarled my father. "He's a creative boy," my mother responded. I stuffed all the dresses and dolls and shoes back into the black cases that said "Barbie's Wonderful World" in swirling pink letters and clasped them shut. My sisters, awake now, wanted to play

with me. "I can't play," I said, "Dad's upset." All day, he stayed upset. Finally, my mother came upstairs and said: "You're a boy, David. Forget about Barbies. Stop playing with dolls."

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The Literary Anatomy

Squaring the Circle: Understanding and Teaching the Sestina

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN

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I: The Self-Generating Sestina: Laying the Path as You Go

Such that the sestinal is a matter of helping students understand how the form progresses. Once they've figured this out, it's quite easy for them to compose a sestina themselves, building the form as they go. For both younger and older students, the sestina lends itself wonderfully to collaboration. And for any teacher who has encountered the stress of teaching a classroom of students divided between formalists and experimentalists, the sestina can provide the perfect space for reconciliation.

Before I lay out a full diagram for the sestina, I'd like to show how the form is built, offering you an example of a sestina and the structural diagram side by side. I'm going to use David Trinidad's "Playing with Dolls" from his book *Answer Song*.

The sestina uses repeated words, rather than rhymes, to end each line. These end words are called *teleutons* (Latin for *ending*). The first stanza of a sestina lays out the teleutons or end words:

- a Every weekend morning, I'd sneak downstairs to **play**
- b with my sisters' Barbie dolls. They had **all**
 - of them: Barbie, Ken, Allan, Midge, Skipper and
- d Skooter. They even had the little freckled boy,
- e Ricky ("Skipper's Friend"), and Francie, "Barbie's
- f 'MOD'ern cousin." Quietly, I'd set the dolls

So, these are our teleutons: play, all, and, boy, Barbie's, dolls.

From the first stanza, the poem moves forward in a progression called *retrogradatio cruciata* (Latin for *cross-wise regression*). The teleutons are repeated in a new order in each successive stanza. It's easier to see it in action than it is to explain. I've broken up the process into three steps:

¹ Quoted in The Last Avant-Garde: the Making of the New York School of Poets, by David Lehman.

Step 1 (the outer teleutons):

In this step, you'll notice that the teleuton that ends each stanza will always begin the following stanza.

a	Every weekend morning, I'd sneak downstairs to play ~
b	with my sisters' Barbie dolls. They had all
c \	of them: Barbie, Ken, Allan, Midge, Skipper and
d	Skooter. They even had the little freckled boy,
e	Ricky ("Skipper's Friend"), and Francie, "Barbie's
f	'MOD'ern cousin." Quietly, I'd set the dolls
f [×] a [×]	in front of their wardrobe cases, take the dolls' clothes off minature plastic hangers, and play

Step 2 (the middle teleutons):



Every weekend morning, I'd sneak downstairs to play with my sisters' Barbie dolls. They had **all** of them: Barbie, Ken, Allan, Midge, Skipper and Skooter. They even had the little freckled boy, Ricky ("Skipper's Friend"), and Francie, "**Barbie's** 'MOD'ern cousin." Quietly, I'd set the dolls in front of their wardrobe cases, take the dolls'

clothes off minature plastic hangers, and play until my father woke up. There were several **Barbies**blonde ponytail, black bubble, brunette flip--**all**

Step 3 (the inner teleutons):



Every weekend morning, I'd sneak downstairs to play with my sisters' Barbie dolls. They had all of them: Barbie, Ken, Allan, Midge, Skipper **and** Skooter. They even had the little freckled **boy**, Ricky ("Skipper's Friend"), and Francie, "Barbie's 'MOD'ern cousin." Quietly, I'd set the dolls in front of their wardrobe cases, take the dolls' clothes off minature plastic hangers, and play until my father woke up. There were several Barbies-blonde ponytail, black bubble, brunette flip--all

with the same pointed tits, which (odd for a **boy**) didn't interest me as much as the dresses **and**

This pattern repeats to form the third stanza, and this repetition continues on through all six stanzas of the poem.

The Literary Anatomy

step 1 step 2 step 3 Model:



Part of the appeal of the sestina to its Renaissance inventor was mathematical. Because it is six stanzas of six lines, the poem is considered square (6x6 or 6^2). But the pattern of retrogradatio cruciata is circular. The last teleuton of each stanza is the first to be repeated:



Following the pattern of retrogradatio cruciata, you can see that the order of the teleutons in each stanza is created by using the teleutons of the previous stanza in a spiral pattern, beginning with the last teleuton and working inwards:



Jason Schneiderman

By combining a circular pattern of self-generation and a square pattern of layout, it achieves the classical ideal of squaring the circle. Margaret Spanos explains: "The traditional symbolic import of squaring the circle involves the union of the cosmic symbols of heaven (circle) and earth (square) in a true coincidence of opposites: a synthesis in a higher sphere of reality. Its purpose was to achieve a unity in the material world which transcended the obstacles of matter."

If the sestina were to continue via retrogradatio cruciata to a six-line seventh stanza, the end words would actually return to the order in which they appeared in the first stanza (a,b,c,d,e,f). Instead, the sestina ends with a three-line stanza called the *envoi* (sometimes called the *tornada*). In these three lines, all six teleutons must appear, with at least three at of the teleutons ending the lines. In Trinidad's poem, the teleutons appear in the envoi in the same order that they initially appeared in the first stanza:

ab	with me. "I can't play," I said, "Dad's upset." All	
cd	day, he stayed upset. Finally, my mother came upstairs	
and said: "You're a boy,		
ef	David. Forget about Barbies. Stop playing with dolls.	

The appeal of this envoi pattern is obvious—the return to the original order is pleasing and tidy. Sir Philip Sidney used this particular envoi pattern in his poem, "Ye Goat-herd Gods," the first sestina written in English. However, the envoi pattern from the earliest sestina, Arnaut Daniel's "Lo ferm voler" follows this pattern:

h	c
D	
d	c
•	
	d

This is often accepted as the "correct" form for the envoi, and was used by Ezra Pound for his "Sestina: Altaforte." Teleutons most commonly appear in an envoi in the order BDF; ACE; or ECA. Many contemporary poets, however, dispense with the envoi altogether or use the teleutons in any combination that seems convenient.

There is no requirement for the sestina's line in terms of meter or syllable count, but many poets do use the old standby of iambic pentameter. More commonly, the line lengths vary widely throughout the poem.

II. The History and Appeal of Sestinas

roubadour poet Arnaut Daniel invented the sestina in the twelfth century. Both Dante and Petrarch worked in the form, and Sir Philip Sidney brought it into English in the late 1500s. The sestina lost popularity after the Renaissance, but was picked up again by pre-Raphaelite poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who publicized the form with his 1861 translation of a Dante sestina. Rossetti's contemporary, Charles Algernon Swinburne, presumably wins the prize for biggest sestina of all time with his 150 line "The Complaint of Lisa," which uses 12 teleutons for 12 stanzas followed by a six line envoi, although he veers from strict retrogradatio cruciata in order to achieve a ŧ

A Diagram of the Sestina
a b c d d
f f a e b
d c c f d
a b e e
c b f a d
d e a c f b
b d f e c
a beab dc orcd or other variations faef (including omission)

rhyme scheme-a most unsestina-like concern.

Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte," (first published in 1909) was his first British publication, and marked the twentieth century revival of the sestina. Pound's sestina was long regarded as "the" English sestina, although Elizabeth Bishop and W.H. Auden were producing virtuosic sestinas by the 1930s. The New York School poets (John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch) introduced the playful element that tends to mark contemporary sestinas. "The effects gotten by repetition are delightful, and suit my fun-making purpose," Ashbery wrote of the form in a letter to Koch. Still, the sestina does remain a form open for subjects of significant gravity. Anthony Hecht's "The Book of Yolek" addresses the Holocaust, with the teleuton "camp" recurring in increasingly dire contexts.

The distinguishing feature of a sestina is that its repetitions accumulate across the entire poem. The teleutons provide a kind of tether—the poem can never stray too far from the verbal territory staked out in the first stanza. The envoi offers closure by increasing the speed of the repetitions—analogous to the way that the final couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet speeds up the rhyme—but the use of the teleutons in the envoi is anticipated from the very first stanza. No new formal element is introduced after the initial revelation of the teleutons. The sestina establishes its territory in the first stanza—much like the villanelle—but the sestina has a great deal of freedom within the constraints of the end words. The most successful sestinas tend to tell a story or meditate on a concern. The narrative or meditation can move forward while the teleutons remain stable.

III. Teaching the Sestina

he easiest way to teach the sestina is to lay out the structure for students at the beginning of the lesson. But teachers can also give examples of sestinas (as handouts or on overhead projection) and then ask the students to figure out the pattern individually, in groups, or as a whole class. The form can be difficult to decipher at first (unlike say, the villanelle), but students often enjoy unraveling the puzzle.

The sestina offers several advantages when being taught in the classroom. Because the sestina relies on neither rhyme nor rhythm, it can provide an unexpected and refreshing field of play outside the terms of a formal verse/free verse debate. It is a form that carries none of the baggage (positive or negative) of rhyme and meter. Once the students understand the form, the sestina can inspire a great number of collaborative exercises. Students can give each other end words (the more outrageous the better) from which to write, or the class can decide on six end words and write a sestina as a group. If you have time for an in-class writing assignment, students often have great fun using the surrealist composition game known as *exquisite corpse* to compose a sestina, with each person writing one stanza, and then passing it to the next person. With very adept students, you can play the game backwards, starting with the envoi, and then passing it around as the students write upwards. This is unlikely to produce great sestinas, but the end words assure some kind of coherency, and the student writers often find great joy and fun in the Frankenstein's monsters they create.

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IV. Variations and Tips

he teleuton is an endless source of variation and fun. In Paul Muldoon's "The Last Time I Saw Chris," the teleuton "pants" (in the first stanza) returns as "participants," (second stanza) "hotpants" (third stanza), and "p(e)an(u)ts" (fourth stanza) before settling back into "pants" for its final three repetitions. Miller William's "The Shrinking Lonesome Sestina" uses smaller and smaller syllable counts for each stanza's line, such that the sixth stanza is reduced only to the teleutons:

> Time goes too fast. Come home.

James Merrill's "Tomorrows" uses "one," "two," "three," "four," "five," and "six" as teleutons, but they returns as homophones—so "one" becomes "won," "six" returns as the end of "classics," and "five" comes back at the end of "belief I've." Marie Ponsot's "Residual Paralysis" uses "will" as both a noun and a verb. Jonah Winter uses "Bob" as all six teleutons to great comic effect in his "Sestina: Bob."

While "sestina" means *made of sixes*, the sestina form can be expanded or contracted. Alfred Corn's "Audience" has only five teleutons and is composed of five fiveline stanzas, followed by an envoi of two lines. The motion of retrogradatio cruciata could be used for any number of teleutons, although it's probably wise to stick to the standard six when first introducing the form.

For the most part, poets try to mask the repetitions of the teleutons, to avoid a sense of predictability or a formulaic quality. Many poets enjamb the lines, so that the teleuton does not receive a heavy stress each time it appears. I find that the best way to hide repetitions is with more repetitions—repeated words that come near teleutons will actually make them less noticeable. David Lehman points out that in choosing teleutons, it is wise to choose five from one paradigm and one from another—as Ashbery does in "The Painter" choosing five art words (portrait, buildings, brush, canvas, subject) and one religious word (prayer). Ashbery derived the ratio from Elizabeth Bishop's "A Miracle for Breakfast," which uses five teleutons of tangibility (coffee, crumb, balcony, sun, river) and one supernatural teleuton (miracle). I will admit that I often write the envoi first, to make sure that my teleutons will carry me to a place I want to go.

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VI. Sestina Resources

ohn Frederick Nims' essay, "The Sestina" in his book *A Local Habitation* provides an excellent overview of the sestina's history, and will point the reader to a number of excellent sestinas. Marianne Shapiro's very well-researched book *Hieroglyph of Time: The Petrarchan Sestina* provides an extremely in-depth analysis of sestinas, although it is definitely geared towards an academic audience. Lewis Turco's *The Book of Forms* and John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason* explain the form quite nicely, and for a selection of sestinas, Mark Strand and Eavan Boland's *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* offers sestinas from the Renaissance to the present.

To find an enormous selection of contemporary sestinas, visit McSweeney's online sestina section at <u>www.mcsweeneys.net/links/sestinas/</u>. You'll find a stunningly broad array of approaches to the form.

Notes

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