

## *The Sestina*

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### **The Sestina at a Glance**

- 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.
- 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.

## The History of the Form

**T**he inventor of the sestina, Arnaut Daniel, belonged to a group of twelfth-century poets—the troubadours—who needed, for their fame and fortune, to shock, delight, and entertain.

The sestina has thirty-nine lines and six stanzas. The stanzas have six lines each. There is an envoi of three lines at the end. Unusually, there are no rhymes. The repetitions stand in for rhyme and are of the words at the end of each line. The same six end-words are used throughout.

But there is a fixed distance for these repetitions. In the first stanza for instance, the word at the end of the sixth line must begin the first line of the second stanza. The second line of the second stanza repeats the end-word of the first line of the first stanza. And so on.

Elaborate repetitions build up over thirty-nine lines: This is the way the sestina operates. 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, then is very much a troubadour form.

The wit and ambition of its inventors have shaped it right up to our own day. But who were the troubadours?

The troubadours first appear in southern France in the twelfth century. Their name is almost certainly extracted from the verb

*trobar*—meaning “to invent or compose verse.” They were famous, celebrated, much in fashion, and eventually very influential on the European poetry of the next few centuries.

But here any real comparison with the contemporary folksinger has to end. The folksinger is often a dissident, a protester against social and political conditions. The troubadours were not. They were court poets. They sang—their poems were always accompanied by music—for French nobles like the Duke of Aquitaine or the Count of Poitiers. They competed with one another to produce the wittiest, most elaborate, most difficult styles. This difficult, complex style was called the *trobar clus*. The easier, more open one was called the *trobar leu*. The sestina was part of the *trobar clus*. It was the form for a master troubadour.