

“Sestina” by Elizabeth Bishop

About this Lesson

This lesson guides students through an analysis of a very specific poetic form, the sestina. The sestina (“song of sixes”) is a complex form that originated in the Middle Ages. It consists of six six-line stanzas and a final three-line stanza. In each six-line stanza, the writer repeats six end-words in a prescribed order and then uses those six words again in the final three-line stanza. Contemporary writers still find this classic form interesting and challenging, and Elizabeth Bishop’s poem is one of the most widely anthologized examples of the form.

Passages for LTF® lessons are selected to challenge students while lessons and activities make texts accessible. Guided practice with challenging texts allows students to gain the proficiency necessary to read independently at or above grade level.

This lesson is included in Module 7: Determining Tone.

Objectives

Students will

- discover and analyze the characteristics of the sestina.
- unlock meaning within the poem.
- practice writing paragraphs of analytical commentary, including evidence from the text.
- connect meaning with form.

Level

Grades Six through Ten

Connection to Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

LTF Foundation Lessons are designed to be used across grade levels and therefore are aligned to the CCSS Anchor Standards. Teachers should consult their own grade-level-specific Standards. The activities in this lesson allow teachers to address the following Common Core Standards:

Explicitly addressed in this lesson

Code	Standard	Level of Thinking	Depth of Knowledge
R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it. Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.	Understand	III
R.2	Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.	Analyze	III
R.4	Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.	Analyze	III

R.5	Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.	Analyze	III
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Implicitly addressed in this lesson

Code	Standard	Level of Thinking	Depth of Knowledge
R.10	Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.	Understand	II
L.1	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.	Understand	I
L.2	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.	Understand	I
L.3	Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.	Understand	II
L.5	Demonstrate understanding of word relationships and nuances in word meanings.	Understand	II

LTF Skill Focus

The foundation for LTF English lessons is the Skill Progression Chart that identifies key skills for each domain, beginning with grade 6 and adding more complex skills at each subsequent grade level while reinforcing skills introduced at previous grade levels. The Skill Focus for each individual lesson identifies the skills actually addressed in that lesson.

Levels of Thinking					
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create
Close Reading		Grammar		Composition	
<i>written, spoken, and visual texts</i>		<i>purposeful use of language for effect</i>		<i>written, spoken, and visual products</i>	
Reading Strategies Determining Main Idea Generalization Inference Paraphrase Summary Literary Elements Detail Diction connotation denotation vocabulary Imagery Mood Setting Style Theme Tone tone determined through diction, imagery, detail, point of view, and syntax vocabulary associated with tone Literary Forms Verse		Analysis of a Text Meaning and Effect related to parts of speech, phrases, clauses, sentences, and syntax		Types (modes) Expository analytical The Process of Composition Prewriting generation of ideas organization of ideas Structural Elements Body incorporation of quotes topic sentence use of commentary use of evidence	

Connections to AP*

Students must write an analytical essay based on poetry for one of the free response questions on the AP Literature exam. Students may be asked how the form contributes to meaning in the poem. The test also includes multiple choice questions on elements of poetry, including structure.

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Materials and Resources

- copies of Student Activity

Assessments

The following kinds of formative assessments are embedded in this lesson:

- guided questions
- analysis of pattern and form
- paragraph composition
- fill-in-the-blank templates

Teaching Suggestions

When teaching "Sestina," teachers may want to include the "Lesson Extension for 'Sestina' Graphing and Creating." It is located on the website under Teacher Resources and includes an organizer for graphing Elizabeth Bishop's sestina as well as for creating an original sestina. The graph helps students understand this complex form by having them manipulate the lines and stanzas.

Answers

Answers for this lesson are objective in some cases but subjective for other items. Throughout the questions, subjective answers will vary. To obtain the maximum benefit of the lesson, ask students to go beyond the expected responses.

1. *a, b, and c. The answer is six for each item.*
2. *a. house, grandmother, child, stove, almanac, and tears*
b. The word used at the end of each stanza is used at the end of the first line of the stanza. The first line word moves to end the second line in the second stanza. The order of the first stanza is A B C D E F; in the second, F A E B D C; in the third, C F D A B E, in the fourth, E C B F A D, and so on.
3. *a. It has only three lines.*
b. and c. Students circle the six words at the ends of the lines and in the final three line stanza.
4. *a. child and grandmother*
b. the generation of the parent of the child
5. *early fall (September), found in line 1*
6. *evening, line 2*
7. *rainy, line 1*
8. *tears, line 6*
9. *The action in the first stanza takes place beside the stove in the kitchen. These words might make a reader feel warm/cozy and secure/comfortable. But the word at the end of the stanza, tears, creates a different feeling in the reader, a feeling of sadness/melancholy. And this emotion is increased by the broader setting, for the action takes place in the evening during the fall/autumn, while it is raining outside.*
10. *a. teakettle, b. teacup, c. buttons, d. moons, and e. seeds*

11. *Both the grandmother and the child are trying to stay cheerful. The grandmother reads jokes and laughs and talks. But inside she is shedding tears. And the child sees tears in everything, from the "teakettle" to the "teacup," from the "buttons" to the "moons." This family is feeling sad/despondent/mournful, so sad/despondent/mournful that it seems to them that every object in their environment shares that emotion. No warmth from the stove or tea, no laughter nor tidying up from the grandmother, can take away the pain.*
12. *a man, perhaps the father or even grandfather
He could have died or disappeared.*
13. *a. yearly b. An almanac includes calendars with weather forecasts, tide tables, times of sunrise and sunset, phases of the moon, and other information of particular interest to farmers. It usually includes jokes, recipes, and other family interest items.*
14. *An almanac deals with the cycles (of the moon, tides, and of seasons) of the earth. All of life is cyclical: the sun rises and sets; one season ends and another begins; the earth rotates around the sun; people and other animals and plants are born and die before another generation arises.*
15. *Six words are repeated along with the number of lines in the first six stanzas.*
16. *Just as the moon waxes and wanes, life rises and falls. Life continues from generation to generation; one generation passes, and the next comes into being. Life involves a pattern, a structure, as season leads to season, as birth leads to infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, as there are differences in the pattern of the six words in a sestina. A sestina reflects the cyclical pattern of life.*
17. *The abstract ideas might include loss, generations, family, communication, caring for loved ones.*
18. *The speaker's attitude is reflective and accepting of the cyclical nature of life.*

“Sestina” by Elizabeth Bishop

Read carefully the poem “Sestina” and answer the questions that follow.

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, (5)
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. (10)
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, (15)
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, (20)
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. (25)
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. (30)

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,

* brand name of a wood or coal burning stove

the little moons fall down like tears
 from between the pages of the almanac
 into the flower bed the child (35)
 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.

Just as “tri” means three and “quad” means four, the Latin root “ses” stands for a number.

1. Look carefully at this poem. Notice that the last stanza is shorter than the others.
 - a. Other than the last stanza, how many stanzas are there? _____
 - b. How many lines are in each of the longer stanzas? _____
 - c. What number do you think “ses” represents? _____
2. Circle the last word of each line of the first six stanzas.
 - a. List below these six words.
 - b. Look carefully for a pattern in the use of these nouns, paying special attention to the first and last lines of each stanza. What is the pattern?

3. Look carefully at the last (seventh) stanza.
 - a. What is different about this stanza? _____
 - b. Circle the last word of each line in this stanza.
 - c. Are the other words from your list in Question 2(a) also present in these lines? If so, circle them as well.
4. Two of the six repeated nouns in this poem have to do with people.
 - a. What are they? _____
 - b. There is a generation missing between these two people. What is it? _____

Answer each question below, and write the number of the line that contains the evidence for your answer.

5. What time of year is it? _____
6. What time of day? _____
7. Describe the weather. _____
8. What is the grandmother hiding? _____

Setting (time and place) is often used to represent or reflect the **mood, tone, topic, or theme** of a poem or other piece of writing. Think about how the season, time of day, and weather in this poem are related to what the grandmother is hiding.

9. Complete the following paragraph by filling in the blanks with appropriate words.

The action in the first stanza takes place beside the _____ in the _____ (object)
_____. These words might make a reader feel _____ (room) _____ (adjective – feeling)
and _____. But the word at the end of the stanza, _____, (another “feeling” adjective) _____ (noun),
creates a different feeling in the reader, a feeling of _____. And (“feeling” noun)
this emotion is increased by the broader setting, for the action takes place in the _____ (time of day)
during the _____, while it is _____ outside. (season) _____ (weather condition)

10. Who or what seems to be shedding tears or seems to be like tears in the
 - a. third stanza? _____
 - b. fourth stanza? _____
 - c. fifth stanza? _____
 - d. sixth stanza? _____
 - e. seventh stanza? _____

11. Complete the paragraph below to explain more about the mood of this poem:

Both the grandmother and the child are trying to stay cheerful. The grandmother

_____ and
(paraphrased evidence from the poem about what the grandmother does to stay or seem cheerful)

(more paraphrased evidence from the poem about the cheerful things the grandmother does)

But inside she is shedding _____. And the child sees _____
(noun) (noun)

in everything, from the "_____" to the "_____"
(direct evidence) (direct evidence)

the "_____" to the "_____." This family is
(direct evidence) (direct evidence)

feeling _____, so _____ that it seems to them that
(feeling) (same feeling)

every object in their environment shares that emotion. No warmth from the stove or tea, no laughter nor tidying up from the grandmother, can take away the pain.

12. In line 29 the child draws a _____ in front of the house. Who might
this be? _____

How could this person be connected to the sadness of the child and the grandmother?

13. If you don't know what an almanac is, find out from a dictionary or other source.

a. How often is an almanac published? _____

b. What is its purpose? _____

14. Explain in two or three sentences how an almanac is related to the repetition of life. Think about the seasons, about crops and weather, about the life cycle of plants.

Sestina

A poem with six stanzas, each consisting of six lines, and a final three-line stanza (tercet) that "sums up" the main idea of the poem. The last word of a stanza is the first end-word of the next stanza. All six end-words in the first stanza are repeated in a different order at the ends of the lines in each of the other stanzas. All six end-words are also used in the tercet.

15. What is repeated in a sestina? _____

16. Explain in a short paragraph how the repetition in a sestina is related to the cyclical nature of life.

17. What abstract idea is Elizabeth Bishop's sestina about? _____

18. What is the speaker's attitude toward that idea? _____
