Lynda’s tips for writing the Sestina

Yes, the Sestina is complicated and complex. It becomes easier after you have written a few of them. You will begin to listen to your poem as you are working on it.

The most difficult task will be to organize the line endings as they change constantly throughout the entire poem. You will be writing 39 line endings.

You will be using 6 words that you will be repeating in a very specific order.

Those six words will be changing positions in each of the stanzas.

Here is how I do it:

Step One:

I figure out six words to work with.

I have no preconceived idea for the poem – that is important.

You don’t want to write a didactic poem that will lock you into any particular path. The joy of writing the Sestina will be to discover new pathways and let the poem take you in a direction you could never have imagined beforehand.

I include a color, an adjective, a noun, and whatever else I want to put into my cocktail mix. You want to make discoveries as you are working. Put in a couple of words you never used before. Find something new and exciting to put into your poem. Begin to walk into unknown territories with your word choices.

Mix them up like that and it gives movement and tension to the poem.

Step TWO\_

Put those six words down on your page.

Give each word a letter or number. (I use numbers)

That will be the letter or number that a word will keep throughout the poem as you are writing. It will not change. Thank God! lol

Step THREE\_

Write down the word that will end each line – Do this down the right side of your page, vertically.

I do this stanza by stanza, until I have listed, vertically, 36 line ending words.

I will not choose the words for the Envoi until I have written the 36 lines of the poem. That way, the envoi will be completed in tandem with the conclusion of the poem.

Writing down the SIX word Line Endings is the tricky part, as you have to keep looking back at your list of words and the number you gave it, so you know where it will go in each stanza.

Tip: I write the first set of six lines FIRST, before I decide to lock in the word numbers. Often, when writing that first stanza you will need to rearrange those six word line endings. If you write the first stanza and then make the final decision as to the word numbers, it can help a lot. If you start off with an awkward set of words and you don’t catch it in that first stanza, your entire poem will be forced and awkward. You need to get it RIGHT at first, and then go on to number the words and continue on with your poem. A bad first stanza will be a bad poem all together.

Step Four\_

Now that you have all your six words in the numerical order they will be in for the poem, you can begin writing the rest of your lines and creating the stanzas. After you have decided the order they will go in the first stanza, you are now ready to continue on with the word endings as they are ordered.

Check back to be sure your words are in the correct numerical order before you continue on. Double check! Triple check!

Step FIVE\_

This tip will help you write a poem that moves and is alive and does not have stops and jumps that are not pleasant.

Don’t think of that last word at the end of the line as the last word in your thought or sentence. It can be a word that leads to the next line, as part of a thought or sentence.

You don't have to think of each of those six words as a final word - it will just appear at the end of the line, but that does not mean it has to END your thought or sentence. This makes the poem flow really well, and gives added tension or movement to your entire poem if you work it and work it, over and over, until you get those thoughts to flow as they should.

STEP SIX\_

Take your time. Spend some days or weeks with your poem.

Become a friend of the poem. Listen to what it has to say to you.

The poem should have a life that is amazing and it has so much to tell you, but you need to take the time to actually get to know it.

Go back again and again and CUT OUT WORDS,

CHANGE OUT WORDS,

RIP OUT WORDS,

ADD WORDS

Fine Tune your Poem.

I like to think that each word there is costing me lots of money.

If I had to pay for every word in that poem, what ones would I cut out to keep that money in my pocket? Don’t be frivolous with words in your poems.

Make every word count.

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