

The Sestina Form in  
“Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape”

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Even the title of this poem tells you that this poem will be original and possibly interesting. John Ashbery has been known to write poetry that is original. Throughout his life, he has also been known to write poetry based on popular culture. Ashbery has won many awards for his innovative writing style, including the three major American book prizes: the National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. (Kermani)

The title of the poem is very descriptive, “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape.” Ashbery’s use of the title depicts images of equipment farmers’ use and the plants they raise on a farm. At first, you might think that this is a sestina poem about farm life. When you read the title, however, you have no idea that the subject of the poem is the cartoon-character, Popeye, and his friends. Instead, the title might have been “Popeye and His Friends Go to the Country for a Visit.” This would have been a more literal title for the poem, and just one area where Ashbery uses descriptive language in the poem.

The poem, written as a sestina, seems to be about a visit to the country for Popeye and his character friends. Ashbery uses the pattern of the sestina to present the occurrences of that day. “The sestina follows a strict pattern of the repetition of the initial six end-words of the first stanza through the remaining five six-line stanzas, culminating in a three-line envoi.” (“Poetic Form: Sestina”). Following the sestina form, the poet must have six words repeated at the ends of

each line. The first stanza determines the words and how to order the words in the remaining five stanzas. In this poem, the order for the words in the first stanza is: A. thunder, B. apartment, C. country, D. pleasant, E. scratched, and F. spinach.

Because of the strict nature of the sestina, after the first stanza, the following five stanzas must have the six words in a specific format. The form of the sestina for the remaining five stanzas is as follows: 2. FAEDBC, 3. CFDABE, 4. ECBFAD, 5. DEACFB, and 6. BDFECA. In the envoi, Ashbery does not follow the strict pattern for the final three lines. The envoi must end ECA or ACE, however, Ashbery ends this poem with AEC. The envoi does include the other three end-words, BFD, within the three end lines. With the sestina form, there is no need for a specific rhyme scheme. “The sestina relies on end-word repetition to affect a sort of rhyme.” (“Poetic Form: Sestina”)

The envoi, while using the six words within the last three lines, should summarize the whole poem within those lines. The poem speaks of being in Popeye’s apartment, thunder, spinach, and being in the country. Within three lines, the envoi does its job of summarizing the poem. The envoi states how happy Popeye was to spend the day in the country. It talks about the thunder and that the thunder was the color of spinach. It also talks about Popeye laughing and “scatching” his balls.

The poem is “a playful romp involving the cast of the Popeye cartoon world. Ashbery deftly remixes the end-word order to great comic effect (notice the surprise in each use of “scratched”) while sketching a disturbing domestic pathos, resulting in a poem both funny and melancholic. The poem, a masterful instance of the sestina, manages to also poke fun at the obsessive form.” (“Poetic Form: Sestina”)

When you look at the repeated word, “scratched” (lines 5, 9, 18, 19, 26, 34, 38) at the end of each line, the “scratched” item is different. In stanza one, the scratched item is the Sea Hag’s chin. Wimpy scratches his head under his hat in stanza two. In all of the stanzas, but stanza three, something or someone is being scratched. “Be but remembered space, toxic or salubrious, whole or scratched.” (18) In stanza three, the poet describes Popeye’s apartment as being in pieces or “scratched.” In the envoi, the speaker talks of Popeye scratching his “private parts.” Not only did Popeye laugh when he did this, but you could laugh reading the poem. John Ashbery definitely uses language in unexpected ways.

When reading the poem, you can tell by the language that the speaker is using better language than Popeye and his friends typically would say in a cartoon. The only character who appears to be speaking as he would in the cartoon is Wimpy. “M’love,” he intercepted, “the plains are decked out in thunder/Today, and it shall be as you wish.” (8 and 9) If you’ve ever watched a Popeye cartoon or read a Popeye cartoon in the newspaper, the characters don’t speak much proper English. The language appears to be too formal since the poem is a dialog and appears to be a satire of the Popeye cartoon.

When you compare a poem to a cartoon, there are many differences between them. With a cartoon, the artists have been able to give depictions to the characters through visual means. Plus, with a cartoon, you hear the dialog each character would say. With a poem, you have to use descriptive text to get that same visualization, while you are reading what the character would say.

Just about everyone has seen a Popeye cartoon. The cartoons have been around since 1933, with 750 cartoons made. (“About the Comic”) If you have ever seen a cartoon, you should be able to imagine the poem as if it was a cartoon. You can see in your mind’s eye, what the

apartment looked like, with all of those characters there. In the cartoons, Olive Oyl is a very tall and skinny female. Her legs are very long. “Olive came hurtling through the window; its geraniums scratched.” (19) Because of the cartoon, you know that Olive has very long, lanky legs. Before even seeing Olive’s body come through the window, you can imagine her long legs coming through and her feet landing.

When you imagine Swee’pea, you know that he did very little speaking in the cartoons. In many of the cartoons, Swee’pea is known for having notes pinned to his nightgown. Ashbery uses this concept within the poem. Plus, in cartoons, Swee’pea was always sad and always crying. Ashbery shows Swee’pea being sad here too. “But Swee’pea looked morose. A note was pinned to his bib...” (16).

You even know what Popeye looks like because of the cartoon. The cartoon mocks what a sailor would look like. Popeye is wearing all white and has over-exaggerated muscle strength in his forearms. Also, unless you’ve watched a cartoon, you wouldn’t know the connection between Popeye and spinach.

There are words being used these characters definitely would not say. They include tangram (3), salubrious (18), and arpeggio (25). The tangram is a seven-piece puzzle. The speaker could have used this as a hidden reference to the seven stanzas of the poem. Salubrious is meant for good health. In the poem, salubrious is a descriptive word for Popeye’s apartment. The arpeggio in the poem talks about how their lives appear to be disrupted and not in harmony. All of these words are used when the end-word “thunder” is being used. So, it appears that there are hidden meanings of words. In this instance, the word “thunder” is a clue that something bad might happen to the characters.

At the same time, these words, in particular, are very curious. When you think of Popeye even trying to speak these words, you have to laugh. He doesn't speak proper English at all. In one cartoon, Popeye is saying, "Ain't Bluto got no home ta go to?" You clearly understand that what Popeye is saying is, "Bluto, go home." But, Popeye is portrayed as being strong in body, not strong in education. The poet/speaker uses text that is nonsensical to Popeye's language.

Ashbery uses the very difficult poetic form of the sestina to bring comic relief to the cartoon-character Popeye and his friends. The sestina is a very strict form to follow, and Ashbery follows it very well. The use of image and language enhance the poem. The subject of the poem is from popular culture. By being a cartoon character, the reader has the capability of imagining the poem as if it happened in a cartoon. His use of the six end-words makes for a good laugh when reading. You even find unexpected uses for certain words. All-in-all, this is a very well written poem.

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