Sestina

SUMMARY

The poem begins on a rainy day in September. As the light begins to fade, an elderly grandmother sits with her grandchild in the kitchen next to an old stove, sharing jokes from the almanac (a book containing, among other things, weather forecasts and data related to the tides, moon phases, and sunsets). She's carrying on cheerfully in order to hide the fact that she's crying.

The grandmother believes that the almanac predicted both her sorrow, whose arrival coincides with the fall equinox, and the rain thudding against the house's roof—and she also believes that these are things that only a grandmother can understand. The metal tea kettle whistles on the stove and the grandmother slices up some bread, announcing that it's tea time.

But the child just stares at the dense droplets that trickle down from the kettle like tears onto the stove, whose heat makes them bounce around wildly, mirroring the way that the rain outside bounces off the house. The grandmother starts to clean up, hanging the wise almanac up on its designated string.

The book floats there like a bird, its pages half-spread above the child and the grandmother, whose teacup is filled with murky tears. Shuddering, the grandmother says the house is cold and adds fuel to the stove.

The old stove seems to say that this was meant to happen, while the almanac says that it simply has the knowledge that it has. The child, meanwhile, is drawing a picture of a stiff house, a curving lane, and a man wearing buttons that resemble tears. Proud of the drawing, the child holds it up for the grandmother to see.

Unbeknown to the grandmother, who's going about her business at the stove, small moons trickle down like tears from the hanging almanac's pages, landing in the flower garden that the child has meticulously drawn in front of the house.

The almanac says that it's time to sow sorrow. The grandmother sings to the wonderful stove while her grandchild draws another utterly unknowable house.

THEMES

FAMILY TRAUMA AND COMMUNICATION

"Sestina" contrasts adult understanding and grief with childhood innocence and curiosity. Inspired by Bishop's own early experiences with loss (her father died with she was a baby and her mother was later committed to a psychiatric institution), the poem describes a grandmother sitting with her grandchild in the kitchen. Though she's joking and drinking tea, it's clear that the grandmother is upset; she's "laughing and talking to hide her tears." She keeps her grief hidden, however, presumably trying to preserve her grandchild's innocence. In this way, the poem illustrates how adults often try to shield children from pain. At the same time, it subtly suggests that the child intuits a great deal more than the grandmother realizes—and that this family's inability to communicate openly renders both parties a little lonelier.

While the poem at first seems to depict a sweet family scene, it soon becomes clear that the grandmother is struggling to hide some sort of tragedy from her grandchild. In between sharing "jokes from the almanac" and making tea, the grandmother tries "to hide her tears." This implies she knows something bad has happened but doesn't want to talk about it. She also says that "the house / feels chilly" and then places "more wood in the stove." While the cold may very well be real, given that the poem takes place in autumn, this line suggests that a more *metaphorical* chill has filled the home: that of grief or loneliness. Putting wood on the stove may also be an excuse for the grandmother to step away and compose herself so as not to upset her grandchild.

The grandchild, meanwhile, draws "a man with buttons like tears," an image that hints at the loss this family has suffered. But the child's "proud[]" demeanor suggests they don't entirely understand what they've drawn, and the grandmother "busies herself about the stove," distracting herself so she doesn't spoil the child's ignorance.

The grandmother seems to hide her emotions out of love; she wants to protect her grandchild from the pain of a difficult loss. Indeed, the grandmother's attentiveness to the child's needs—making tea, warming the house, telling jokes, and singing—all create a feeling of warmth. Even so, the poem might suggest the child already intuits more than the grandmother wants to admit.

For example, the child's obsession with drawing "inscrutable" (impossible to explain or understand) "house[s]" with "winding path[s]" suggests that they're aware, on some level, that there's been a shakeup in their home. And when the grandmother says that it's "time for tea now," the child is busy "watching the teakettle's small hard tears / dance like mad"—an image suggesting that the child is distracted by a loss or sadness that they can't articulate. The poem ends with the grandmother at the "stove" and the child scribbling away, separate from each other despite being in the same room. It's thus ambiguous whether the grandmother's attempts to protect the child only further isolate them both.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-39

TIME, CHANGE, AND GRIEF

"Sestina" depicts a moment in time marked by change and grief. Rather than seeming shocked by the loss she's carrying, the grandmother treats it as predictable as the arrival of autumn. That this awareness is something "only known to a grandmother" suggests that with age comes the understanding that both change and pain are inherent parts of life, as unavoidable as the passage of time and the changing of the seasons.

The grandmother is rather matter-of-fact about her grief, believing that both her "tears" and the "rain" smattering against the house were "foretold by the almanac." (An almanac is a yearly calendar that contains, among other things, weather forecasts and astronomical data.) This could suggest that the grandmother believes that whatever happened to this family was inevitable, or it might just suggest that grief *itself* is inevitable.

Time never stops moving forward, the poem suggests, and you can't outrun change or loss forever. And though the child is not yet aware of this loss—or is at least ignorant of its significance—the poem implies that it's only a matter of time before they grow up and feel it, too. The child's drawing of a "rigid house" with a "winding pathway" might hint at the future hardships they will endure because of this loss: a long, hard journey that leads them far away from the place they once called home.

And while the grandmother is paying attention to the stove, "the little moons fall down like tears / from between the pages of the almanac" and land in the child's drawing of a "flower bed." Little parts of the almanac become part of the child's drawing, suggesting that things outside of the child's control are shaping their future. The speaker then anthropomorphizes the almanac, saying that it says it's "Time to plant tears." This suggests that while the child doesn't understand any of what is happening at this moment, the seeds of their future grief are already being planted. Like seasons and the plants that grow and then wither alongside them, grief comes in cycles. In the end, loss is both predictable and impossible to prevent. The poem therefore suggests that no one can escape grief; loss and change are a central part of life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-10
- Lines 25-39

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

September rain falls ...
... hide her tears.

The opening stanza of "Sestina" sets the scene. It's a gloomy September day, and "rain falls on the house." Inside, an "old grandmother" and "a child" sit beside a "Little Marvel Stove" (an old-fashioned wood-burning stove) in the fading light of day.

Calling this light "failing" creates a slightly ominous tone, though nothing seems particularly out of the ordinary at first. The grandmother is reciting "jokes from the almanac," a book that contains weather forecasts, astronomical data, recipes, and so on, presumably having a nice time with her grandchild. It isn't until line 6 that the speaker hints at something darker bubbling beneath the surface: the grandmother is "laughing and talking to hide her tears." She knows something that the child does not, it seems, and is trying to protect the child from the pain of this knowledge.

Note how the speaker refers to these characters as "the old grandmother" and "the child" throughout the poem, rather than saying "an old grandmother" or "a child." The article "the" suggests that the speaker is talking about two very *specific* people at a very *specific* moment in time. Given that the poem was inspired by Elizabeth Bishop's own life, readers might envision the poet looking back on her younger self.

The poem's title also announces its form up front. A sestina is a complicated verse form consisting of 39 lines broken into seven stanzas: six sestets (six-line stanzas) followed by a final tercet (three-line stanza). The last words of each of the first six lines are repeated in each subsequent stanza (these repetitions follow a very specific pattern, which is discussed in more detail under the Form entry of this guide).

The poem is also written in a rough iambic tetrameter, meaning that lines contain four iambs (poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern: da-DUM). Here's the first line as an example:

Sep**tem-** | ber **rain** | **falls** on | the **house.**

This line is *almost* perfect iambic tetrameter, with the exception of the trochee in the third foot (a trochee is a foot that follows a stressed-unstressed beat pattern: DA-dum). The poem will contain many more variations throughout, its meter never totally settling into a perfectly predictable pattern.

LINES 7-11

She thinks that ...
... on the stove.

The second stanza zooms in on the grandmother. Her tears are

"equinoctial," meaning they happen during an equinox; her tears coincide with the movement of the earth. The poem further connects her tears to the rain "that beats on the roof of the house," and the grandmother believes that both this rain and her sorrow were "foretold by the almanac." Again, an almanac contains various forecasts tied to the weather, tides, and so on. In saying that it also predicted the grandmother's tears, the poem suggests her sorrow is as natural and unavoidable as the changing seasons.

Such things are "only known to a grandmother," however, implying that with age comes a deeper understanding of the ways of the world. The grandmother presumably keeps her tears—and the reason for them—to herself because she doesn't want to burden the child. As a result, she's left to carry the weight of her sorrow alone.

Notice how lines 7-10 comprise a single, sprawling sentence, which the speaker then follows with the blunter "The iron kettle sings on the stove." This sentence is short and to the point, as though the poem has suddenly been snapped out of its meditation on the nature of time and grief and back into immediate reality. Saying that the kettle "sings" subtly anthropomorphizes the device. It also suggests that the sound of its whistle is pleasant.

LINES 12-16

She cuts some ...
... on the house.

The grandmother slices up some "bread" and says "It's time for tea." Notice how the stanza break after "the child" in line 12 creates suspense: readers must continue on to the next stanza in order to discover what the grandmother "says to the child."

Yet the child is distracted by the sight of the water droplets trickling down from the kettle onto the stove, the hot surface of which makes them sizzle and jump about. The speaker compares these water droplets to "small hard tears" dancing on the stove in a way that mirrors the rain as it splashes onto the house.

The parallelism of the grammatically identical phrases "small hard tears" and "hot black stove" underscores the similarity between these two different kinds of "tears," one inside the house and one outside the house. The poem has also personified both the tea kettle's "tears" and the rain, granting both the ability to "dance." On the one hand, this makes the water droplets and the rain seem lively to the child. The word "tears," however, might also suggest that the child is more aware of what's going on than the grandmother thinks. Perhaps some of the rainy sadness of the outside world has seeped into the warm, dry house.

LINES 17-22

Tidying up, the ...
... dark brown tears.

The grandmother starts to tidy up the kitchen and places the almanac back on its designated "string." The speaker personifies the almanac, calling it "clever" and implying that the almanac *knows* something. After all, it did foretell both the rain and the grandmother's "tears."

The almanac appears "Birdlike" as it hangs on its string, its pages half-spread as it "hovers above" both the child and the grandmother. Notice the use of anaphora in lines 21-22:

> **hovers** half open above the child,
> **hovers** above the old grandmother

This repetition, as well as a bit of /h/ alliteration ("**h**overs **h**alf"), calls readers' attention the position of the almanac in relation to these characters: it's hanging over them, with a *bird's eye view* of their lives. Since an almanac is a kind of calendar, this image might symbolize the way that *time* rules over people; the poem's characters can't escape the changing seasons or the events life has in store for them.

The string of enjambments across lines 17-20 conveys the hovering motion of the book, the lines themselves seeming to float across the white space of the page:

> Tidying up, the old **grandmother**
> **hangs** up the clever **almanac**
>
> **on** its string. Birdlike, the **almanac**
> **hovers** half open above the child,

The speaker then says that the grandmother's "teacup" is "full of dark brown tears." Her tears aren't *literally* brown; the speaker is conflating her *tears* with her actual *tea*, implying that she's been quietly crying into her cup. Tea leaves are also associated with divination, so a teacup full of tears might suggest there's more sorrow to come.

LINES 23-26

She shivers and ...
... says the almanac.

The grandmother suddenly feels "chilly" and decides to add wood to the stove to warm things up. By this point in the poem, the reader may be wondering if the house is actually or if the chill the grandmother senses is more metaphorical—the sudden chill of sorrow. The grandmother may be putting "more wood on the stove" because she wants to step away for a moment so as not to upset the child while she regains her composure.

The speaker then anthropomorphizes both the stove and the almanac, imbuing them with the ability to speak. The objects in the kitchen almost become characters in the poem, while the things they say reflect an ongoing theme: the idea that the family's troubles were fated, beyond the grandmother and

child's control. The stove says that "It was meant to be" while the almanac, which the grandmother already believes predicted her tears, says, "I know what I know." These statements suggest a certain level of acceptance of whatever has happened, that it simply is what it is.

Note the parallelism of these lines as well:

> It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
> I know what I know, says the almanac.

This repetitive language makes the objects' statements seem firmer, as though they're in agreement and backing each other up.

LINES 27-30

With crayons the ...
... to the grandmother.

While the grandmother is adding wood to the stove, the child is busy doodling with crayons. The picture the child draws feels charged with symbolism: "a rigid house" with "a winding pathway" and " a man with buttons like tears."

- Home, usually, represents warmth, comfort, and stability—things the child might subconsciously be longing for.
- The meandering pathway, meanwhile, perhaps suggests that the way home feels long and arduous to the child.
- The "man with buttons like tears" might hint at whatever tragedy has been making the grandmother so sad, the thing that "was to be." The simile suggests there is something sorrowful about this figure, even if the child isn't fully aware of it. Perhaps the child's father has left the family or died. The poem never clarifies who this man is or what happened to him, but he certainly seems to be part of the event that the almanac "foretold."

Elizabeth Bishop's own father died when she was a baby and her mother was later institutionalized. Bishop lived with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia for a time before being sent to live with her paternal grandparents in Massachusetts, so the "winding pathway" might symbolize the multitude of changes and hardships this child, like Bishop, will face.

That the child "proudly" shows this mysterious picture to her grandmother suggests that the child doesn't quite understand the significance of what they've drawn. But the fact that they're drawing it at all hints that the child is aware something is missing or wrong, even if they can't articulate what that is.

LINES 31-36

But secretly, while ...
... of the house.

As the grandmother is tidying up around the kitchen, the almanac "secretly" slips "little moons" from its pages into the child's drawing. The personification once again casts the almanac as a secondary character with a mind of its own. The imagery is ambiguous, however. The speaker uses a simile to compare these moons to tears, as if the almanac has been saturated with the sadness that fills this house. Yet the word "secretly" also implies there's a *slyness* to the almanac, as if it is *intentionally* interfering with the child's drawing. In this way, the poem might be gesturing to the cruelty of time, with its endless store of change and loss.

The almanac's tear-like moons land in the "flower bed" the child is drawing "in the front of the house." That the child is drawing a flower bed in autumn symbolically suggests a hopefulness, a yearning for spring, warmth, and happiness—perhaps a return to the way things used to be, before the mysterious tragedy at the heart of the poem. That these flowers are being watered with tears, however, suggests that whatever has occurred will negatively affect the child's future.

Nearly this entire stanza is enjambed, and as a result, the poem picks up momentum as it nears its conclusion. The fluid enjambments also evoke the movement of those moon-tears, whose smooth slide into the child's drawing might suggest the ease with which a future can be forever changed.

LINES 37-39

Time to plant ...
... another inscrutable house.

This final tercet is the sestina's envoi: a shorter stanza that ends the poem and summarizes or responds to the previous six stanzas. Here, the speaker anthropomorphizes the almanac once again:

> Time to plant tears, says the almanac.

The poem is playing with the fact that almanacs typically contain planting charts: calendars that calculate the best time of year to start sowing seeds for various plants. The little moon-tears the almanac dropped into the child's drawing are the seeds of sorrows to come. The child is longing for warmth and happiness, for the reunification of their family perhaps, but the poem suggests that this will not happen—and that the child's future contains grief and more grief. The crisp /t/ alliteration of "Time" and "tears" strengthens this idea; time will invariably bring more sorrow.

At the same time, however, planting leads to *growth*. Perhaps the poem isn't saying that the child's future will be filled with grief, but simply that whatever has happened will affect the child in some way as they grow up—for better *and* for worse.

The poem ends with the grandmother and the child seeming quite isolated from each other, even though they are still both

in the kitchen together. The speaker says,

> The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
> and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Both characters retreat into art or fantasy. The grandmother sings to the stove rather than to the child; perhaps, in her effort to shield the child from her pain, she's also cut the child off from her love. Meanwhile, the child is fixated on another drawing. That the house in their picture is "inscrutable" (unknowable) suggests that the child doesn't quite understand what it is they're longing for or what it is they've lost. Or, perhaps, the house is only "inscrutable" to the grandmother, who can't understand what's going on in her grandchild's mind.

SYMBOLS

HOUSES

Houses typically symbolize warmth, comfort, and safety. And, in a way, the house of "Sestina" does represent all that: the house shields the grandmother and her grandchild from the pounding rain and growing darkness outside (two things that themselves might be symbolic, representing the unavoidable pain and sorrow of life). The kitchen, in particular, is typically a warm and inviting space, here home to a "marvelous" little stove that the grandmother uses to make tea and heat up the room.

And yet, the house is also *cold*; the grandmother "shivers" because it "feels chilly." This chill represents the way that grief has sapped this home of its comforting warmth and stability. It's also no coincidence that the child then draws multiple houses toward the poem's end. These drawings symbolize the child's yearning for everything a home should be: a place of family, love, and reliable comfort.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "September rain falls on the house."
- **Line 8:** "and the rain that beats on the roof of the house"
- **Line 16:** "the way the rain must dance on the house."
- **Lines 23-24:** "She shivers and says she thinks the house / feels chilly"
- **Lines 27-30:** "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."
- **Lines 33-36:** "the little moons fall down like tears / from between the pages of the almanac / into the flower bed the child / has carefully placed in the front of the house."
- **Line 39:** "and the child draws another inscrutable house."

THE ALMANAC

The almanac (a kind of calendar that contains the dates of events, astronomical data, and so on) symbolizes change, time, and, broadly, forces that are outside of the characters' control yet invariably shape their lives.

The speaker says that the grandmother believes her tears (i.e., her grief over some unspoken loss or unsettling change) were "foretold by the almanac." This suggests that loss and change are inevitable; as time passes, it's bound to bring heartache and pain. The speaker also describes the almanac "hover[ing]" over both the child and the grandmother, again hinting at the way they're subject to the invariable passage of time, the shifting of the seasons, and so forth.

In the sixth stanza, the speaker says that the almanac's "little moons fall down like tears" into the child's drawing of a "flower bed [in front of the house]." This suggests that as time goes by, future sorrows are "plant[ed]" without their knowledge.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "reading the jokes from the almanac"
- **Lines 7-9:** "She thinks that her equinoctial tears / and the rain that beats on the roof of the house / were both foretold by the almanac"
- **Lines 17-19:** "the old grandmother / hangs up the clever almanac / on its string"
- **Lines 19-22:** "Birdlike, the almanac / hovers half open above the child, / hovers above the old grandmother / and her teacup full of dark brown tears."
- **Line 26:** "I know what I know, says the almanac."
- **Lines 33-36:** "the little moons fall down like tears / from between the pages of the almanac / into the flower bed the child / has carefully placed in the front of the house."
- **Line 37:** "Time to plant tears, says the almanac."

THE CHILD'S DRAWING

While the grandmother putters around the kitchen, her grandchild draws an "inscrutable" (unexplainable or unknowable) "house." This drawing symbolizes the child's awareness, on some deep level, of what they've lost and presumably long for: the security, comfort, and familiarity of home.

That the house in "inscrutable" suggests, perhaps, that the child themselves doesn't entirely understand their grief; they sense a fundamental shift in their world, but can't quite put their finger on what it all *means*. Unable to put their feelings into words, the child draws pictures instead. This word might also imply that the grandmother doesn't fully grasp what her grandchild is feeling; the "inscrutable" drawing conveys the distance between these family members, unable to communicate openly in the wake of some tragedy or trauma.

Other parts of the child's drawing have symbolic significance as well. The fact that the pathway in front of the house is "winding," for example, perhaps suggests that the child's future feels uncertain in the wake of whatever loss has occurred. The man with "buttons like tears," meanwhile, likely represents the nature of the loss (perhaps the child, like poet Elizabeth Bishop herself has lost their father).

The child also draws a "flower bed" in front of the house. In a surreal passage, the speaker says that "little moons fall down like tears / from the pages of the almanac" into this flower bed. The almanac then says that it's "Time to plant tears." These seed-tears, planted in front of the house, represent seeds of grief being sown in the child's life. The child will grow alongside the fruits of those tears; whatever has happened, its effects will linger throughout the child's life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-30:** "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."
- **Lines 33-37:** "the little moons fall down like tears / from between the pages of the almanac / into the flower bed the child / has carefully placed in the front of the house. / Time to plant tears, says the almanac."
- **Line 39:** "and the child draws another inscrutable house."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

As a sestina, repetition is baked into the poem's form:

- The sestina pattern dictates that every line ends with one of the following words: "house," "grandmother," "child," "stove," "almanac," and "tears." Broadly, this repetition calls attention to important themes in the poem: family, home, time, and grief. The words also link stanzas together in a way that might call to mind a web of familial connections. The words from stanza 1 are, in essence, inherited by the following stanzas, just as the child will inherit the trauma of whatever loss has taken place.
- The revolving word endings might also call to mind the cycling of the seasons, the passage of time, and the inevitability of loss; the reader knows that certain words will appear in each stanza, just as the grandmother knows that hardships will crop up throughout life. (The sestina's pattern of repetition is described at length under the Form section of this guide.)

Other words crop up throughout the poem as well. For example, the speaker repeats the words "rain," "old," and "Marvel" throughout, calling attention to the dreary setting, the grandmother's age, and the warmth of that old-timey Marvel stove.

The speaker turns to the specific kind of repetition called diacope in lines 15-16 where the child watches drops of water from the tea kettle "dance like mad on the hot black stove, / the way the rain must dance on the house." This repetition creates a connection between the teakettle's metaphorical "tears" and the rain that is falling down on the roof of the house. Water falls from the kettle, the sky, and the grandmother's eyes; these are all symbolic tears, markers of the grief that threatens to flood this family's world.

The anaphora in lines 20-21 emphasizes the connection between "the child" and "the old grandmother":

> hovers half open above the child,
> hovers above the old grandmother

An almanac contains various forecasts and astronomical measurements. That ominously hovering almanac represents the future that hangs over *both* the grandmother and the child, as well as the various forces that will pull their lives in certain directions.

Finally, listen to the parallelism in lines 25-26:

> It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
> I know what I know, says the almanac.

Here, repetitive language fills the lines with a sense of firmness and finality. It sounds as though these two inanimate objects are agreeing that the human beings in this house are beholden to the whims of fate.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "dance like mad on the hot black stove, / the way the rain must dance on the house."
- **Lines 20-21:** "hovers half open above the child, / hovers above the old grandmother"
- **Line 25:** "says the Marvel Stove."
- **Line 26:** "says the almanac."
- **Line 37:** "says the almanac."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is an important part of the poem's form. Remember, line-ending words are a major component of a sestina; here, the lines in each stanza must end with the word "house," "grandmother," "child," "stove," "almanac," or "tears." Ending lines on these words leads to frequent enjambment, as the poet often must break lines before a phrase itself

concludes. Take lines 2-4:

> In the failing light, the old grandmother
> sits in the kitchen with the child
> beside the Little Marvel Stove,

Frequent enjambment also fills the poem with forward momentum that subtly evokes the inevitable passage of time, pulling readers further and further down the page. It makes the poem feel fluid despite the rigidity of its form.

Finally, enjambment often mimics or enhances the content of the poem's lines. Take lines 7-9:

> She thinks that her equinoctial tears
> and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
> were both foretold by the almanac,

The grandmother's "tears" flow right into "the rain," echoing the fact that "both [were] foretold by the almanac." Similarly, the enjambments of lines 17-20 evoke the hanging up of the almanac itself. Notice how the word "almanac" seems to "hover" across the stanza break, just as its pages "hover" above the grandmother and child:

> Tidying up, the old grandmother
> hangs up the clever almanac
>
> on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
> hovers half open above the child,

Likewise, the enjambments across lines 33-36 allow the poem to fall down the page just as the "little moons fall down [...] into the flower bed" that the child has drawn:

> the little moons fall down like tears
> from between the pages of the almanac
> into the flower bed the child
> has carefully placed in front of the house.

The image is revealed without interruption, the poem's language enacting the way the "moons" fall into the child's drawing.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "grandmother / sits"
- **Lines 3-4:** "child / beside"
- **Lines 7-8:** "tears / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "house / were"
- **Lines 13-14:** "child / is"
- **Lines 14-15:** "tears / dance"
- **Lines 17-18:** "grandmother / hangs"
- **Lines 18-19:** "almanac / on"
- **Lines 19-20:** "almanac / hovers"
- **Lines 21-22:** "grandmother / and"
- **Lines 23-24:** "house / feels"
- **Lines 27-28:** "house / and"
- **Lines 28-29:** "child / puts"
- **Lines 29-30:** "tears / and"
- **Lines 31-32:** "grandmother / busies"
- **Lines 33-34:** "tears / from"
- **Lines 34-35:** "almanac / into"
- **Lines 35-36:** "child / has"
- **Lines 38-39:** "stove / and"

IMAGERY

Vivid imagery plops readers right inside the kitchen alongside the poem's characters, hanging out near a wood-burning stove as rain "beats on the roof of the house." At first glance, this kitchen with its steaming tea kettle might seems like a cozy respite from the stormy weather outside. But the imagery in the poem's third stanza suggests that all is not well indoors, either:

> [...] the child
> is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
> dance like mad on the hot black stove,
> the way the rain must dance on the house.

The child is watching droplets of water fall from the kettle onto the metal stove, the hot surface of which makes them sputter about wildly. Their movement mirrors that of the raindrops splattering off the house.

This imagery connects the rain to the kettle, hinting that the storm outside is swirling within this warm domestic scene. The imagery might suggest that the child is well aware of the torrent happening outside of the small, protected bubble the grandmother has created. Just as the house can't block out the sound of rain falling on the roof, the grandmother can't protect the child from picking up on whatever tragedy is afflicting this family. At the same time, the fact that the water droplets and rain appear to "dance" might suggest that the child doesn't understand what's happening. The rain seems exciting rather than gloomy.

In lines 19-22, the speaker compares the almanac hanging "half open" on "its string" to a bird hovering over the child and grandmother. This imagery infuses the book with its own agency, suggesting that its forecasts loom "above" the poem's characters. The image of the hovering book becomes symbolic, representing the way the future, and whatever the future will bring, is out of the grandmother and child's hands. The image of a "teacup full of dark brown tears," meanwhile, suggests that the grandmother has been weeping into her cup.

Some of the most striking imagery appears in the sixth stanza,

where the speaker describes "little moons" falling from the almanac "like tears" into the garden the child has drawn. This image is again metaphorical; nothing is *literally* falling out of the book. The image speaks to the way that the almanac's predictions trickle into the child's life. Let's break down the various pieces of the image one by one:

- An almanac often contains information related to the phases of the moon and the tides. The reference to its "little moons" thus brings to mind the passage of time and the pull of forces beyond human control.
- The simile comparing these moons to tears, meanwhile, suggests that time will cause grief. The almanac predicts grief in the child's future, and it seems to be crying into the "flower bed" that the child has drawn.
- Flowers typically represent hope, beauty, and potential. That the child has "carefully" drawn this flower bed might suggest a longing for spring and a return to happy, normal life.
- That the almanac's moons "fall down like tears" onto that flower bed suggests that the child's growth is being watered by grief. Basically, whatever loss has occurred has planted seeds of sorrow that will affect the child for the rest of their life.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "the rain that beats on the roof of the house "
- **Line 11:** "The iron kettle sings on the stove."
- **Lines 13-16:** "but the child / is watching the teakettle's small hard tears / dance like mad on the hot black stove, / the way the rain must dance on the house."
- **Lines 19-22:** "Birdlike, the almanac / hovers half open above the child, / hovers above the old grandmother / and her teacup full of dark brown tears."
- **Lines 33-36:** "the little moons fall down like tears / from between the pages of the almanac / into the flower bed the child / has carefully placed in the front of the house"

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The poem anthropomorphizes the almanac and the stove, adding to the poem's surreal atmosphere. In the second stanza, for instance, the speaker says that the "kettle sings on the stove." The kettle isn't *literally* singing; the speaker is describing the kettle's whistle in a way that suggests the sound is pleasant. Similarly, in stanza 3, the speaker says that "the teakettle's small hard tears / dance like mad on the hot black stove," just as the rain outside "must dance on the roof of the house." Like "sing," "dance" has pleasant connotations. The child, unaware of their grandmother's grief, thinks that the bouncing water droplets on the stove look happy and vibrant. The image conveys the child's innocence.

It isn't until the end of the third stanza that objects about the house seem to take on a life of their own. In line 18, the speaker describes the almanac as "clever," suggesting that it knows something the grandmother and child do not. And in lines 25-26, the speaker anthropomorphizes both the stove and the almanac:

> It was to be, says the Marvel Stove
> I know what I know, says the almanac.

By attributing speech to these objects, the poem casts them as characters in this drama. The stove, like the grandmother, seems matter-of-fact as it accepts this loss was meant to be. The almanac is more mysterious; it knows something, but won't say what. Indeed, it "Secretly" drops "little moons" into the child's drawing as the grandmother goes about her business in the kitchen. Since these moons are compared to "tears" being planted in the child's garden, the almanac's secretiveness feels almost malevolent; time, it seems, has a different plan for the child's life than the grandmother might have hoped.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "The iron kettle sings on the stove."
- **Lines 14-16:** "the teakettle's small hard tears / dance like mad on the hot black stove, / the way the rain must dance on the house."
- **Line 18:** "the clever almanac"
- **Lines 25-26:** "It was to be, says the Marvel Stove. / I know what I know, says the almanac."
- **Lines 31-36:** "But secretly, while the grandmother / busies herself about the stove, / the little moons fall down like tears / from between the pages of the almanac / into the flower bed the child / has carefully placed in the front of the house."
- **Line 37:** "Time to plant tears, says the almanac."

VOCABULARY

Little Marvel Stove (Line 4, Line 25) - An old-fashioned kind of cast iron stove.

Almanac (Line 5, Line 9, Line 18, Line 19, Line 26, Line 34, Line 37) - A yearly calendar that contains information about upcoming events, weather forecasts, and astronomical data as well as recipes, articles, and so on.

Equinoctial (Line 7) - Happening on or around an equinox (equinoxes occur twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall, when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are equal in length). The speaker is saying that the grandmother's tears coincide with the start of autumn.

Foretold (Line 9) - Predicted.

Kettle (Line 11, Line 14) - A vessel used for boiling water.

Rigid (Line 27) - Unable to be moved or altered; stiff.

Inscrutable (Line 39) - Unable to be explained or understood.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's title makes its form clear: this is a "sestina," an elaborate fixed verse form that originated in 13th-century France. A sestina is composed of six sestets (six-line stanzas) followed by a single tercet (three-line stanza) that acts as an envoi (an envoi is a shorter stanza at the end of a poem that wraps things up, summarizes the rest of the poem, or serves as a dedication). This creates a total of 39 lines.

Rather than using a specific meter or rhyme scheme, the sestina follows a complex pattern of repetition. The words that appear at the ends of the first six lines are repeated throughout the next five stanzas in a set pattern. In this poem, the end words of the first stanza are:

1. house
2. grandmother
3. child
4. stove
5. almanac
6. tears

These words then appear as the end words in the next five sestets, rearranged as follows:

1 2 3 4 5 6 (house, grandmother, child, stove, almanac, tears)
6 1 5 2 4 3 (tears, house, almanac, grandmother, child, stove)
3 6 4 1 2 5 (child, tears, stove, house, grandmother, almanac)
5 3 2 6 1 4 (almanac, child, grandmother, tears, house, stove)
4 5 1 3 6 2 (stove, almanac, house, child, tears, grandmother)
2 4 6 5 3 1 (grandmother, stove, tears, almanac, child, house)

All six words then appear within the final tercet. Modern poets tend to be less strict about the word order for the envoi, so long as all six words appear in it.

All this repetition calls attention to thematically important words in the poem; the end words here all relate to family, home, grief, and time. The form feels cyclical as well, evoking the cycling of the seasons that the poem alludes to in its opening stanza. In its rigidity and predictability, the form might also evoke the way that the grandmother and child are ultimately subject to forces beyond their control.

The pattern of interwoven words, meanwhile, mirrors the deep connection between the grandmother and her grandchild as well as the way trauma can be passed down between generations. Each stanza essentially inherits and rearranged pieces of the previous stanza; likewise, children inherit pieces of their parents and grandparents.

METER

"Sestina" begins in rough iambic tetrameter. This means that its lines consist of four iambs, poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM). Here are the first four lines scanned:

Sep**tem-** | ber **rain** | **falls** on | the **house.**
In the **fail-** | ing **light,** | the **old grand-** | mother
sits in | the **kitch-** | en **with** | the **child**
be**side** | the **Lit-** | tle **Mar-** | vel **Stove**

These four lines are regular enough to be recognizable as iambic tetrameter, but there are also plenty of irregularities. For example, line 2 starts with an anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed) and there are multiple trochees (stressed-unstressed).

There are variations like this throughout the poem, some lines having extra syllables or swapping out iambs for other kinds of poetic feet. Overall, the poem's imperfect meter lends rhythm without making this sound overly stiff.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't follow a rhyme scheme, but the sestina's strict pattern of repetition creates an effect similar to regular rhyme. The repetition of specific words throughout the poem creates its own kind of music, especially as readers start to expect to hear these words at the end of each line. The poem feels intricately woven, its repetitive, circular rhythms perhaps evoking the grandmother's complex, inescapable feelings of grief.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Sestina" is essentially invisible. Rather than revealing anything about themselves, they focus only on the grandmother and grandchild sitting in the kitchen.

Bishop wrote this poem with her own childhood in mind. Her father died when she was still a baby, and her mother was institutionalized for mental illness when Bishop was five. Bishop spent much of her childhood being raised by her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia and later her paternal grandparents in Massachusetts. The poem clearly draws from her own early exposure to familial trauma and grief.

The poem itself isn't explicit about this connection, however. The speaker's tone remains neutral and distant, as if they are observing a scene that has little to do with them. The grandmother and grandchild, for their part, seem to clearly care for each other yet struggle to communicate openly. The grandmother actively hides her grief from her grandchild, whose drawings suggest an awareness of a pain that the child

can't quite put into words.

SETTING

The poem takes place in a family's kitchen on a gloomy autumn day. The light is fading, "September rain" is falling outside, and the grandmother and grandchild sit by an old-fashioned "stove." In many ways, the setting seems cozy. The grandmother is making tea using an "iron kettle," which seems to "sing" as the water boils. Water droplets look to the child like "small hard tears" that "dance" on the hot surface of the stove, just as "the rain must dance on the house." The child is coloring with crayons, proud of their artwork and apparently unaware that some great tragedy has taken place.

Indeed, it quickly becomes clear that all is not well in this house. The grandmother is making tea and a snack while trying to hide her tears from her grandchild, and a chill fills the home that seems more than literal: it symbolizes the cold sorrow that has infiltrated what should be a warm, comforting space. The child's drawings of a "rigid house / and a winding pathway" as well as "a man with buttons like tears" further suggest that loss and grief lurk in the background, casting a shadow over what otherwise might be a happy family scene.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop was a celebrated American poet, as well as a short story writer, painter, and translator. Bishop created visual art throughout her life and kept multimedia journals. Her work is sometimes described as imagistic; she tends to observe the physical world closely and encode her conclusions in minute descriptive details, often while exploring themes of loss, belonging, and yearning.

The time frame of Bishop's career places her within the generation of Confessional poets. These poets—who included Bishop's peers Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, as well as her longtime friend Robert Lowell—emphasized the autobiographical in their poetry, often highlighting intense emotional and psychological experiences. Bishop, however, was critical of this mode of writing and resisted including such detailed or direct personal accounts in her poems. Though her poems, including "Sestina," draw on her life, they often do so with a degree of distance and convey their feeling in indirect or ironic ways.

Bishop was a gay woman writer in the male-dominated 20th-century literary world, and even her implied portrayals of same-sex love led to rejections from publications like *Poetry* and the *New Yorker*. It's fair, then, to see her restrained, indirect approach as both an artistic decision and a professional prerequisite. She asserted that she didn't want to be judged on the basis of her sexual orientation or gender, but on the quality of her work as a poet.

"Sestina" can also be considered in the context of its form. Originating in 13th-century France, the sestina wasn't commonly used in English until late in the 19th century. Beginning in the 1930s, poets such as W.H. Auden and Ezra Pound helped popularize the form in the 1930s, and it was much more well known when Bishop published "Sestina" in the '50s.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sestina" was published in a 1956 issue of *The New Yorker*, but it was inspired by Bishop's early life. The poet's father died when she was only a baby, and her mother was institutionalized for mental illness not long after (she would remain institutionalized until her death in 1934, meaning that Bishop never got to know her). Bishop lived with her mother's parents in Nova Scotia until her father's family (whom she hardly knew) demanded custody and she moved to Massachusetts to live with them. She missed her maternal grandparents and bounced between cold and often abusive households until she finally left for Vassar College, where she met fellow poet Marianne Moore and began to develop a whole new style of writing. While "Sestina" can definitely be read with Bishop's specific biography in mind, though, it's important to note that the poem itself is not overtly autobiographical.

More broadly, Bishop lived through World War I, World War II, and the turbulent 1960s and '70s. But for the most part, the painfully shy Bishop strove to avoid the outside world: she was most at ease when traveling to secluded islands, or holed up in the Library of Congress (where she worked for a time as a poetry consultant).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Listen to a Reading of "Sestina" — "Sestina" read aloud by the poet Charles Simic. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGwq8RcWXw4)
- A Biography of the Poet — Read more about Elizabeth Bishop's life and career in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop)
- What Is a Sestina? — A definition of the poetic form Bishop uses, as well as examples of other famous sestinas. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/sestina)
- Voices and Visions Short Film — Watch a 1988 documentary about the poet. (https://www.youtube.com/

watch?v=7XB6sJ-PeLo)

- An Interview with the Poet — A 1977 Ploughshares interview where Bishop discusses her poetry and influences. (https://www.pshares.org/issues/winter-2011-12/archive-work-conversation-elizabeth-bishop)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BISHOP POEMS

- First Death in Nova Scotia
- One Art
- The Fish
- The Mountain

HOW TO CITE

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