

## Working with a Net: How Constraints Can Enable Writing

Niall Nance-Carroll

In this article, Niall Nance-Carroll explores how choosing a form with limitations can enable one to write more easily. Using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research on the pleasure of work and his own experience attempting to write in a poem for a creative writing class, something far outside his writing comfort zone, Nance-Carroll examines the benefits of relying on preexisting constraints to guide one when writing in an unfamiliar genre.

In a preface to some of his earliest work, famed French writer Albert Camus rejects praise for his essays “because at twenty-two, unless one is a genius, one scarcely knows how to write” (6). Camus is a harsh judge of his own work. His easy dismissal of his essays, which are better than most of us can ever aspire to write, can be strong discouragement for anyone with literary aspirations. Of course Mary Shelley puts him—and certainly any one of us—to shame, having pretty much invented both the gothic novel and science fiction by writing *Frankenstein* before she was twenty. For me, on the other hand, literary precociousness (accomplishment beyond the norm for one's age) is already a lost cause. Not only am I already too old to match Shelley's feat, but I would not place myself among those likely to mark the literary landscape even if I should devote my life to it. The greatest of writers invent and innovate with ease, but much of the time the rest of us must be content to work with variations on established forms; both because invention is quite hard work, and because most of our audiences not only expect but often require conventions.<sup>1</sup>

While I write quite a bit, my work is of an analytical bent rather than a literary one.<sup>2</sup> I analyze literature and popular culture, applying various theoretical perspectives and closely examining patterns. Such writing, carefully researched and heavily revised, is my strength and the foundation of my professional identity; when called upon to do almost any other type of writing, I fall back on familiar techniques (I had numerous footnotes even for a personal narrative assignment).<sup>3</sup>

### **Part 1: In which the author struggles with free verse and finds an unlikely ally**

Nevertheless, I once was obliged to hammer phrases and bend words to the demands of writing poetry in a creative writing class. I had signed up mainly because it fit my schedule and I needed another credit in composition. When I first had to write a poem as an assignment, I looked hopefully to free verse, which would not require rhyme, meter, rhythm, or any other organizational pattern that I would have to learn to use. I will admit that these sometimes got in the way of telling a story; it just always seemed like there was so much information that was too important to leave out. Without a rule to constrain the assemblage of words, I reasoned, my poems would be free to leap onto the page of their own free will. Faced with the first assignment, I discovered that this was not to be; a blank screen mocked me. All the experience I had from writing papers for high school and the beginning of college seemed inapplicable. The poetry that I had scribbled in the margins of my notes while not paying attention in math classes was no help either. It did belong to this general category of free verse, but it was terrible. A great poem in free verse can access an image or a feeling in language that is just beyond the everyday: when Carl Sandburg wrote “The fog comes/on little cat feet,” he gave us something that could not have been more elegantly stated in rhyme. Attempting to rhyme might have resulted in “the fog was fleet,” which would have lost the sense of slow silence. My free verse broke lines haphazardly, as much because of the margins of the page as some poetic instinct, and the images it used are not indelibly written on my mind. They are forgotten, discarded into recycle bins or packed away in boxes of old schoolwork never to be seen again—the fate they merited. I recognize now that my attraction to free verse was born of a process of elimination. I was not inclined to count syllables, so iambic anything was out of the question. I did not want to use rhyme because, in my experience, it always ended up sounding silly, as if it was trying too hard, or it relied too much on clichéd rhymes.

It turns out that Dr. Seuss made rhymes look easy, when they are actually really hard.

All set then, to write a poem that did not have a rhythm, a rhyme, or a shape, I hoped for some flash of insight that presumably would usher in a delightfully new poetic thought, supplying at once a new form of poetry and content to match. My hopes were dashed as the evening passed. I typed and

deleted a few words at a time, all the while discovering that I was definitely not a young poet in the making. Admitting that I was not going to write a great poem, I attempted at least to write *a* poem, any kind of poem, so long as I had something to turn in that would not embarrass me. But without any idea of what this could consist of, I kept drawing a blank on how it should even start. After forcing myself to continue on one draft until I had several lines, I was disappointed to see that they came off as a rip-off of the music I had been listening to while I wrote. Defeated and saddened at the discovery that I did not possess hitherto hidden talents, I flipped through my creative writing textbook, regretting that I had thought this would be a good way to pick up the extra composition credit. It was there that I discovered the sestina, the genre that was to become my poetic salvation. To my surprise, the most attractive quality of the form was not the freedom it afforded my writing, but the constraint. In contrast with the plethora of options afforded by every line of free verse, the guidelines for sestinas were strict. They also required repetition, not only of sounds but of words. Once I had committed to the words that would dominate the poem, the rest of the task was mostly filling in around them.

## **Part 2: In which the author digresses from poetry to write about jam**

At the time my discovery that limiting my options on a given task made it easier and more fun came as a surprise. I had always enjoyed having choices, but when it came to writing a poem, a plethora of options left me adrift. It turns out that I am not alone. Barry Schwartz in *The Paradox of Choice* describes two experiments that suggest that more options do not necessarily make for more happiness. On the contrary, beyond a certain number of choices, consumers do not like having more—they actually prefer having fewer. Schwartz explains that a chocolate tasting with 6 choices made consumers happier than one with 24, a jam tasting with 6 choices sold more jam than one with 30 (19-21). The study was run by Sheena Iyengar, and in her book, *The Art of Choosing*, she elaborates on it: the test was in the Menlo Park Draeger’s grocery store, “well known for its awe-inducing shopping experience,” boasting 3,000 cookbooks, 250 mustards and so forth, Draeger’s “was undoubtedly attracting attention to its unparalleled selection” (183-4). People shopped at this store because it had so many options, and yet they were less likely to buy after being presented with more of those options than with fewer. This is perhaps because choosing from such a large variety leaves us exhausted; in trying so hard not to make the “wrong” choice, either we end up avoiding any commitment at all and buy no jam, or else as soon as we do choose we begin to doubt the wisdom of that choice—hence my frustrating first attempts at making free verse.

### Part 3: In which the author returns to examine the sestina

To explore the definition of *sestina*, consider one written by Algernon Charles Swinburne in 1872. His is more ambitious than mine (although, considering that he published quite a bit of poetry and even invented a form whereas I took one creative writing class, it ought to be):

Although not the sestina.

#### WHAT IS A SESTINA?

A sestina is a poem arranged into stanzas of six lines. The last word of each line of the first stanza reoccurs at the end of the lines of each of the following stanzas, and then in the three line envoi, two of these ending words are used per line.

So in the first stanza the words are 123456 and in the second 615243, in the third 364125, in the fourth 532614, in the fifth 451362, and in the sixth 246531. Then the envoi: words 1 and 4 on one line, 2 and 3 on the next line, with 5 and 6 on the last line. See the poem to the right for an example.

#### “Sestina” by Charles Algernon Swinburne

- 1 I saw my soul at rest upon a day (1)
- 2 As a bird sleeping in the nest of night, (2)
- 3 Among soft leaves that give the starlight way (3)
- 4 To touch its wings but not its eyes with light; (4)
- 5 So that it knew as one in visions may, (5)
- 6 And knew not as men waking, of delight. (6)
- 7 This was the measure of my soul’s delight; (6)
- 8 It had no power of joy to fly by day, (1)
- 9 Nor part in the large lordship of the light; (4)
- 10 But in a secret moon-beholden way (3)
- 11 Had all its will of dreams and pleasant night, (2)
- 12 And all the love and life that sleepers may. (5)
- 13 But such life’s triumph as men waking may (5)
- 14 It might not have to feed its faint delight (6)
- 15 Between the stars by night and sun by day, (1)
- 16 Shut up with green leaves and a little light; (4)
- 17 Because its way was as a lost star’s way, (3)
- 18 A world’s not wholly known of day or night. (2)
- 19 All loves and dreams and sounds and gleams of night (2)
- 20 Made it all music that such minstrels may, (5)
- 21 And all they had they gave it of delight; (6)
- 22 But in the full face of the fire of day (1)
- 23 What place shall be for any starry light, (4)
- 24 What part of heaven in all the wide sun’s way? (3)
- 25 Yet the soul woke not, sleeping by the way, (3)
- 26 Watched as a nursling of the large-eyed night, (2)
- 27 And sought no strength nor knowledge of the day, (1)
- 28 Nor closer touch conclusive of delight, (6)
- 29 Nor mightier joy nor truer than dreamers may, (5)
- 30 Nor more of song than they, nor more of light. (4)
- 31 For who sleeps once and sees the secret light (4)
- 32 Whereby sleep shows the soul a fairer way (3)
- 33 Between the rise and rest of day and night, (2)
- 34 Shall care no more to fare as all men may, (5)
- 35 But be his place of pain or of delight, (6)
- 36 There shall he dwell, beholding night as day. (1)
- 37 Song, have thy day and take thy fill of light (1,4)
- 38 Before the night be fallen across thy way; (2,3)
- 39 Sing while he may, man hath no long delight. (5,6)

He chose rhyming words, although it is worth noting that these are not rhymes that would normally impress anyone “may,” “day,” and “way” along with “night,” “light,” and “delight” would not be impressive alone; but because they have to continue showing up again, it is necessary to choose words that can naturally repeat quite often, unless one is really looking for a challenge. He chose a more universal topic and one more accessible than the pop-culture pastiche I chose, and his poem merits its long life. Swinburne’s final line “Sing while he may, man hath no long delight,” states, in relatively straightforward terms, an insight into the human condition that is in no way new but remains poignant every time a work of art reminds us of it in such moving terms.

An imitation of several other works.

Whereas my poem merited a good grade in an early creative writing class; a humble goal, but one it achieved admirably.

Aside from the syntax (the order of the words) and the old-fashioned “hath.”

Poetic forms that offered more freedom had left me thinking “I know I *can* do it this way, but am I really supposed to?” Perhaps for someone with greater artistic aspirations this would not have presented as much of an issue, but I was aiming to be competent, not impressive. Without the boundaries of a fixed form, I could only use the most arbitrary measure of “I like this” or “I don’t like how this sounds” to determine whether the poem was going well. I could agonize over such a poem for hours and go back and forth about word choice, but unless it was really good, there would be no evidence that I had put forth that effort. At least for the sestina I could take refuge in the fact that those last words were not allowed to change. It was not my lack of imagination but the constraints of the form itself that demanded repetition. I wrote a first stanza that I was reasonably happy with (although it has long since been deleted, a fate that it no doubt wholly deserved). I struggled to come up with additional stanzas based on the words that ended the first stanza but getting the lines to end in those words was such a tortured process that these additional stanzas were awful. I scrapped that ambitious attempt and instead started with the words that would need repeating. I chose a line from a song that seemed somehow both evocative and banal: “there were milkmen every morning.” I split “milkmen” into two words (to get me up to the six end words needed for a sestina) and committed to the phrase.

The poetic equivalent of a paragraph. In a sestina, it is a group of six lines.

Using only those six words as the heart of the sestina, I composed the last three lines or *envoi* first, since they needed to appear there in a specific order, and then wrote more lines to fit them. Figuring out interesting ways to use the same six words to end lines over and over is tricky, but it got easier once I had committed to that task, having closed off the possibility of ending the lines with any other words but those six and in that prescribed order. There were still a number of possible lines, but at least that number was no longer infinite. It still took me most of a night to get it into a shape that I was happy with, but by the next day I had a sestina. This is not to say that it was a great sestina, but by the end I had managed to write a poem, and on time for the

assignment. I titled it “Echoes of Judy’s Jungle” (a variation on the title of the Brian Eno song that I took the milkmen phrase from) and it is still probably my best poem ever (trust me, the competition isn’t that fierce). My poem was an assemblage of preexisting elements; the envoi was taken directly from the song, the situation and sentiment were taken not from my life but from books and television shows (shifting from mock-epic and over-the-top sentiments to a suddenly plainer and more somber tone as the serious nature of a situation set in), and the form of the sestina determined the rest. It became less an act of creation than a tying together of disparate parts into a cohesive whole.

#### **Part 4: In which we attempt to explain why writing the sestina was enjoyable**

What was especially curious is that despite the initial struggle I actually enjoyed writing the poem. I experienced a little moment of joy every time a phrase fit well or I figured out how I would end the line with the word I needed; it was satisfying to come up with a solution to each problem that emerged. On occasion I still notice clusters of six words and think, “maybe I should write a sestina around that.” This is just because I like having an envoi composed of only six words, an additional limitation I have imposed on the sestina format which perhaps makes it more of a word game than an artistic production; then again, I’m not really a poet. Sometimes I even bring up the sestina template that I made for that assignment and make an attempt. It was not that the final product was so impressive. I did not feel the need to show it around (which is why the poem does not appear here), nor did I suddenly think of myself as a poet. Yet, the process was enjoyable. Why was that, and more specifically, why did the writing only become enjoyable when the form had stricter rules?

The template just lists the numbers in the appropriate order so that I can use the “Find and Replace” option in Word to replace each number with the word I have chosen.

The answer to this probably has more to do with psychology than writing itself, although it certainly had implications for how I approached new writing tasks. Psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi observes that if one can balance the difficulty of a task with one’s ability to perform it (and the ability to tell if one is performing it well) than even tasks that we find frustrating can be exciting (32). For one to experience this pleasure in work, he explains, “a person should perceive that there is something for him or her to do, that he or she is capable of doing it” (30); and “the activity must have relatively clear goals and provide rather quick and unambiguous feedback” (32). Csikszentmihalyi’s explanation of how work becomes rewarding in and of itself provides a means of understanding why writing within those boundaries was enjoyable for me in a way that writing without them was not. A skilled

poet or reader of poetry presumably could have identified the qualities of free verse with a discerning eye; they could recognize artistic merit where I could not. Nevertheless, I could recognize a sestina's formal characteristics and determine whether my poem had achieved them. Accepting the arbitrary conventions of these poetic forms gave me some sort of standard to strive for and a sense of whether or not I was successful. Csikszentmihalyi's research suggests that with a clear understanding of how to complete a task, the ability to determine whether or not one is completing it well, and a task that provides the correct level of challenge (ideally work that is just within our capacities), something that we conceive of as work can become enjoyable. As poetry was not something that I was writing for pleasure—at least not on that occasion, the ability to make it enjoyable was unexpected. This kind of immediate pleasure of work is unavailable when one cannot recognize or evaluate what constitutes success in the task; I could not determine whether or not I was succeeding in free verse, but I could when working in a fixed form. Providing feedback on my own poem contributed to my enjoyment of writing.

The well-known American poet Robert Frost likened writing poetry without rules to “playing tennis without the net.” That comparison may not be entirely fair to brilliant modern poets who invent wondrous new games of their own, but as I discovered in that creative writing class, I am not a brilliant modern poet. I can, with some work, compose a pretty good sestina. This was largely because the sestina demands a strict but straightforward set of identifying characteristics. As long as one follows those rules then the result is a sestina, not necessarily a particularly good one, but a poem that belongs to the general category. While I survived that creative writing class, I also learned that I did not have the skills or the heart for such work. As I continued to study literature, I noted that it was the transparency of these identifying characteristics that made some genres, even quite complex ones, more accessible. We might take Frost's analogy in a different direction: learning to play a game is extremely difficult when the rules are not obvious. Frost seems to have imagined that tennis without a net would be much easier; however, that net is also a clear physical marker of shots that clear versus those that do not. Imagine a net-less court where that marker is gone. All of the rules still hold, shots that would not have cleared the net would still not count, but to the novice observer or player it would not be clear why someone lost a serve. Perhaps this is the situation we often experience when trying to compose in new genres without stated rules; a frustrating series of mistakes that initially appear thoroughly arbitrary. A game or a task with stated rules may be difficult, but at least there are rules to follow. For tasks with unstated rules, we must decipher the rules before we can make any progress.

## Endnotes

1. This does not mean that those who do not invent a new form lack creativity; great authors have worked within established conventions. Stephen King did not give up because someone had invented the horror genre and William Shakespeare did not abandon the stage just because someone else had thought to write tragedies and comedies. Even genres that are considered “formulaic” have not been exhausted, new plots are not necessary for innovation, just new variations.
2. I study literature and write about it; rather than making any attempt to write the Great American Novel, I examine the Great American (or British, or other literature written in English or translated into it) Novel to see what techniques authors use, the social contexts in which they produce their work, and the ways in which that work has been received.
3. I will admit that these sometimes got in the way of telling a story; it just always seemed like there was so much information that was too important to leave out.

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