

Consumption, Degradation, and Cycle in M.T. Anderson's *Feed*
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Writing Sample:

From Dr. Valiant's *Representing Adolescence in Literature* class at the University of Pittsburgh. Fulfilling the objective to choose a short passage from a prescribed Young Adult text and use close reading to apply themes of the passage to themes of the novel. An excerpt of the cited passage and a visual representation of a sestina are included with this sample.

Within the climatic final scene of Part Three “Utopia” of M.T. Anderson’s critically acclaimed Young Adult dystopic novel, *Feed*, the literary, rebellious, yet tragic heroine, Violet, accuses typical *Feed* dystopian teen Marty of talking like a sestina, “a *fucking sestina*” (200). Not only does this declaration exhibit Violet’s “old world” liberal education as opposed to the other teens “School™” corporate commodified education, it also introduces the reader to the metaphorical concept of the sestina. The sestina as a poetic device contains a complicated structure that relies on the repetition of six specific words exhibiting a cyclical arrangement and culminating in a final stanza using all key words to thoroughly demonstrate the overall theme of a poem. The image of the sestina is exaggerated by Violet’s repetition of the poetic device, its purposefully italicized font, and its attachment to two exclamation points. The concept of the sestina acts as a metaphor to the conversational structure of the passage in order to highlight the duality of ‘feed’ and to highlight the cyclical theme of consumption and degradation of the dystopian characters—from being the consumer to becoming the consumed.

Violet accuses Marty of speaking in a sestina after he breaks the silence of the group declaring in rhythmic broken phrases “Okay—just—let’s—okay—let’s—fuckin’—fuckin’—just let’s play” (201). Although this is not actually a sestina in the poetic sense, its application mirrors the poetic device’s elements by repeating four basic words: okay, just, let’s, fuckin’. The notion of the repetition of the sestina is used again when the narrator Titus explains to the reader the interaction between Marty and Violet when the spin-the-bottle (another cyclical image) lands on Violet, “He reached out his hand toward her, She flinched backward. He put his hand on the top of her head...He held out his hand toward her wrist. He took her wrist in his hand.” (201). Like a sestina, six words (he, his, hand, toward, her, wrist)

are repeated in order to heighten the tension of the moment—and the physical movements of Marty and Violet mirror the layers of a sestina. Violet, by pointing out the sestina, forces the reader to pay attention to repeated words; the attention to repeated words stresses the excessive use of pronouns. The excessive use of pronouns—there are 68 in this short passage alone—reinforces Violet’s final testimony which points out the duality of consumption and the feed.

Violet’s screaming rampage at Marty, Quendy, Link, Calista, Loga, and Titus accuses the teens of no longer *having* the feed, but *being* feed. Violet’s use of pronouns within her statement sets up a dichotomy between those with the feed and those without the feed. Violet contrasts the group against ‘people’, “We are hovering in the air while people are starving... We’re playing games, and our skin is falling off. We’re losing it, and we’re making out” (201). Violet only uses the term “people” to describe those outside the group, assumingly those without the feed and non-Americans. The group is identified as hovering, playing, having skin fall off, making out, and most importantly never referred to by Violet as ‘people’. These abrasive images of hovering like flying, playing like animals, skin falling off like reptiles, and playing sexual games like savages, suggest that the group has become primal and animalistic. This idea is supported by Violet’s later declaration that Quendy is “*a monster! Covered with cuts! She’s a creature!*” (201). The teens in *Feed* have degraded from humans to animals, and have digressed even farther from animals to food, or animal feed, as Violet screams, “You don’t have the feed! You are the feed! You’re feed! You’re being eaten! You’re raised for food!” (201). A drastic degradation is clearly found in Violet’s statement. She has identified the teens with the feed as going through a cycle of consumption, down the food chain from humans, to animals, to feed for livestock. This

theme of food is significantly contrasted to the “people [whom] are starving” from earlier (201).

The metaphor of the sestina continues throughout the passage. The repetition of the motif of feed, and its double entendre demonstrate the application of the sestina. ‘Feed’ is no longer just the name of the pod-cast like technological brain supplement, but also the basic bottom food chain animal grain fed to bulk up livestock. Violet’s analogy suggests a comparison of the relationship between the teens (animals), the feed (livestock), and corporations (farmers). The teens were originally the market consumers when the technological feed was first created, but now they are being consumed by corporate marketing. The movement of the sestina mirrors the cyclic digression of the teens whom have the feed implanted into their heads. The theme of cyclical consumption reoccurs and changes meaning as the teens spiral through technological progression then digression, ending up less civilized, less educated, and more savage and “creaturely” than they were without the feed. Their humanity cycles and digresses through the visual path of the sestina. The clearest metaphor of the sestina is demonstrated in Violet’s final italicized statement “*Look at what you’ve made yourselves!*” (201). This last phrase reminds the reader that it was Americans who created the technology, Americans who abused the technology, and it is Americans who are to blame for the consequences of the technology.

Violet’s passionate outcry points out a central conflict of the dystopia of *Feed*. Through the metaphor of the sestina, M.T. Anderson asks his adolescent readers—the next generation of American power—the pivotal dystopic question: At what point do we stop controlling technology and technology starts controlling us? Explained earlier in the novel, the feed was originally pitched as an internal device that could aid the efficiency of its

consumer, veiled by educational progress but used especially for speedy market consumption. By the end of the novel, we start to question who has the control and if the feed acts less like a symbiotic relationship, and more like a controlling parasite. Violet's passionate speech directs the question: If the feed is no longer just an aid for its consumer, then is it possible that the group is now acting as food or fuel for the efficiency of the feed and its domineering corporations? Are the teen 'consumers' really just degraded to American Corporations livestock? When looking at her statement in this manner, "*You don't have the feed! You are the feed! You're feed,*" the cyclical sestina metaphor foreshadows the decline of the human race, or at least between the relationship of humans and technology (202). An interesting part of this passage is how Violet includes herself in the degrading group. While she sets herself apart by representing her old world knowledge through her use of diction and her metaphor of the "sestina," she uses the pronouns 'us,' 'we,' and 'our' when talking about the primal activities they are all involved in. Later, she excludes herself from the group and changes her pronoun use to 'you' and 'yourselves' when accusing the group of "becoming feed." This change in pronouns may have been used to exaggerate the blame on the feed and its society, which makes Violet's inevitable death more tragic, representing the books stance on the power and dangers of technology. This passage, in whole, works to demonstrate the cyclical changes in consumption, degradation, and control, while forcing the reader to contextualize the novel by questioning the dangers and powers of technology. In a world of instantaneous information and uncontrollable technological advancement, M.T. Anderson appeals to the next generation of readers to cautiously toe the line of humanity and technology.

Works Cited

Anderson, M.T. *Feed*. Cambridge: Candlewick, 2004. Print.

Excerpt of *Feed*, pages 200-201:

There was a quiet part. Then Marty said, “Okay-- just-- let’s-- okay-- let’s-- fuckin’-- fuckin’-- just let’s play.”

He spun the bottle, and it turned, with the neck flashing, and suddenly I could hear Quendy crying, and then I saw the bottle land on Violet. Marty got up and straightened his pants and walked over.

“Hey, there, sexy,” he said. “Let’s make this good.”

He reached out his hand toward her. She flinched backward. He put his hand on the top of her head.

I said, “This isn’t much fun.”

“We’ll show you fun,” said Marty, winking.

“Stop it,” said Violet, standing up. “Stop it all.”

“What’s wrong?” said Marty. He held out his hand toward her wrist. He took her wrist in his hand.

Violet was completely white. She was shaking. Her head, I mean, it was bobbing. She suddenly was yelling, “Can I tell you what I see? Can I tell you? We are hovering in the air while people are starving. This is obvious! Obvious! We’re playing games, and our skin is falling off. We’re losing it, and we’re making out. And you’re talking—you’re talking in a *fucking sestina! Okay? A sestina! Okay? Stop it! Fuck you! We’ve got to all stop it!*” she was screaming.

People were staring and chatting, and they weren’t chatting with me, except Link, who gave me a single, *What’s doing this? Fix it*, before cutting me off.

Violet was screaming, *“Look at us! You don’t have the feed! You are the feed! You’re feed! You’re being eaten! You’re raised for food! Look at what you’ve made yourselves!”*

She pointed at Quendy, and went, *“She’s a monster! A monster! Covered with cuts! She’s a creature!”*

Visual Representation of a Sestina stanza and rhyme scheme:

