

Themes which occur in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop

1. **Childhood** – Childhood is presented as a precious entity which is threatened by external factors. The innocence of childhood is threatened by Death in “ First Death in Nova Scotia” and “ Sestina” and by the child’s realisation that she is not the centre of the Universe but a small part of the human race in “ In the waiting room”. The inspiration for these poems can be found in Bishop’s own childhood which was defined by isolation. Her Father died when she was only 8 months old and her Mother went insane with grief, being institutionalised when her daughter was 5 years old. Bishop was raised by various family members and, as a result, never felt that there was a place she could call home. Her happiest childhood days were spent under the care of her Maternal grandmother at Great village, Nova Scotia and many of the places described by Bishop in her poems reflect various aspects of this idyllic place.

First Death in Nova Scotia

Theme – Death

Subject matter – The poem is based on an incident from Bishop’s childhood and records a child’s reaction upon encountering the corpse of her dead cousin, Arthur.

Analysis – Stanza 1 sets the scene in the parlour where the corpse is” laid out”. An atmosphere of coldness is, immediately, evident in the repetition of the word “cold”. The child’s bewilderment is evident in the matter of fact tone which described the bric a brac that surrounds the corpse.

This childish description is also found in stanza 2, as the speaker concentrates on describing the stuffed loon. The bird is silent. It “ hadn’t said a word” and “ kept its own counsel” on the day Arthur’s father shot it. The child does not seem to comprehend death here. Dead things are inanimate, they don’t walk or talk. Perhaps this allows her to ignore her dead cousin. She is haunted by his presence, however, as she uses personal pronouns in describing the dead bird. The loon and Arthur seem to be blurred in her mind. The metaphor which is used to describe the marble table as a “ frozen lake” re – enforces the sense of coldness.

The child's refusal to accept the reality of death is emphasised by her deliberately focusing on the loon and the coffin when she is lifted up in order to put a lily in the corpse's hand. The homely metaphor which is used to describe the coffin is childlike in its description of death.

“Arthur's coffin was
A little frosted cake,”

However, death looms as an ominous presence at the end of the stanza as the “red – eyed loon” eyes the little cake hungrily.

The speaker, finally, focuses on Arthur's corpse in stanza 4. Her descriptions are childlike and innocent. She compares Arthur's corpse to a “doll that hadn't been painted yet” in a striking visual simile. She equates the myth of “Jack Frost” to the process of dying, once again refusing to deal with the reality of the situation. However, the word “forever” suggests a realisation has been reached. Once again the imagery of coldness is in evidence.

The final stanza contains the description of another fantasy about death as the child imagines Arthur joining the royal couple in the warmth of their family life in the photograph. However, the child does not seem to believe this particular fantasy. The poem ends in ambivalence as the child questions how it could be possible for her cousin to join King George as a page at court “and the roads deep in snow?”. Whiteness seems to win over redness at the end of the poem.

Sestina

Critics agree that this is a highly Autobiographical poem which deals with the period after Bishop's Mother was institutionalised permanently due to mental illness and she went to live with her Maternal grandmother. Once again, the child's sense of loss is evoked through the poem's atmosphere and its detailed presentation of the physical objects in the kitchen where the poem is set.

Theme – Grief

Subject Matter – Sitting in the kitchen with her grandmother.

Analysis – Stanza 1 begins in a domestic scene as a grandmother reads jokes from an almanac to her granddaughter. However, grief is suggested by the Autumnal atmosphere and the “failing light “. This is made explicit by the description of the grandmother

“laughing and talking to hide her tears.”

Stanza 2 chronicles the grandmother’s superstitious thoughts as the almanac, she believes, “foretold “ the tragedy which has engulfed the house. It is suggested that this grief is “ only known to a grandmother “ because is not equipped to mourn the loss of her parents because she is too innocent to comprehend it.

The sense of grief seeps through the child’s innocence, which is unable to protect her from it, and this is emphasised by Bishop’s personification of the kettle.

“the teakettle’s small hard tears
Dance like mad on the hot black stove”

Darkness is, again, evident in this description and the rain, which was “ falling “ in stanza 1, is now more violent and threatening.

The almanac takes on a sinister quality in the simile used to describe it in stanza 4.

“Birdlike, the almanac
Hovers above the child”

This reminds us of the hungry loon in “First Death in Nova Scotia”. It is obvious that we are seeing things from a child’s point of view here. This is evident in the metaphorical description of the grandmother’s tears,

“her teacup full of dark brown tears”.

Grief is ready to engulf the child. Her innocence cannot protect her indefinitely.

In stanza 5, Bishop personifies the “Marvel stove” and the “almanac” as they discuss the child’s loss in impersonal terms. This is, again, evidence of

the child's point of view. The child tries to escape from the grief which surrounds her by drawing a house and a man, generally supposed to represent her dead Father. However, the man's buttons are like "tears". Grief, once again, looms large.

The final two stanzas are surreal as they describe how reality contaminates the child's fantastic imaginary world. The "little moons" fall into the flower bed which the child has drawn. It is suggested that her life will be tainted with tears once she is old enough to understand her grief.

In the waiting room

Theme – The loss of childhood innocence.

Subject matter – Waiting for her Aunt in a dentist's waiting room.

Analysis - The poem begins with a matter of fact tone and is childlike in the way it begins. The description of her surroundings are given in a child's idiom, "grown up people". The child's search for a coherent identity is ritualised in her reading of "National Geographic" magazine which brings her into the complex world of adulthood. The strange images which she encounters horrify her and force her to deal, psychologically, with her own nature. It reads like a rite of passage. This is emphasised by the moment when the young girl exclaims an "oh" involuntarily. This inability to contain her feelings results in a collapse of her identity. The stable world of the familiar is replaced by the knowledge that she will become like the women in the magazine. Her sense of disorientation is replaced by her return to the ordinary at the end of the poem, although now she is one of "them."

2. **A Sense of place** – In many ways, Bishop fulfils the modern American poet's search for what William Carlos Williams called "a sense of place". Like him, her poems often describe the significance of a speaker's experience of a place, while defining some particular aspect of existence in the process. This search for communion with a place obviously has its roots in Bishop's own life. Her childhood was defined by instability as she was shunted from one relative to another after her Mother's committal. Many of the Titles of her poems tell us where the speaker is and describe the action which surrounds them as they try to come to terms with this place. She referred to the capacity of places to allow us to access a deeper understanding of ourselves through contemplation. These places were called "Geographical mirrors".

The Bight

Theme – The chaotic nature of existence.

Subject matter – A detailed study of a coastal bay.

Analysis – The opening 10 lines provide a description of the speaker's surroundings through a series of metaphors which are disturbing in their association with death. The landscape is corrupt, rotting.

"White crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
And the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches."

The repetition of "r" and the broad vowels have a cacophonous effect, startling the reader. The water is a source of corruption, as it facilitates the process of corrosion. It "doesn't wet anything". The reference to the French symbolist poet, Baudelaire, makes the writer's intention for this poem clear. For Baudelaire, "correspondences" occurred when the external world of nature corresponded with the internal thoughts and feelings of an observer, allowing for an understanding of the inner self. He represented this process through the use of synaesthetic language and, hence, Bishop makes the dredging machine beat out the rhythm which may allow the speaker to find some harmony in these "untidy" surroundings.

The description of the birds in lines 11 – 14 is replete with mechanical similes. There is nothing romantic in the description of the place. The

objects which are described are as disorganised as the bay itself. The boats are compared to “torn open, unanswered letters”. Is the bay being compared to the poet’s untidy desktop? If so then we can read the whole poem as an extended metaphor for the poet’s life where “All the untidy activity continues...awful but cheerful”.

In the waiting room

See earlier notes. The waiting room is a metaphor for the existential experience of waiting for something to happen. The child is waiting to grow up in a manner which reminds us of Samuel Beckett’s tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, in his play “Waiting for Godot” (though Godot does not represent growing up).

Filling Station

Theme – The importunate supportive and nurturing influence of women.

Subject matter – The speaker describes a filling station.

Analysis – The squeamish opening line suggests that the speaker is a woman who is appalled at the filthy state of her surroundings. Stanza 1 describes how everything is contaminated with “oil”.

In stanza 2 the word “dirty” is repeated three times in the poet’s description of the men who work here. A family relationship is suggested which makes this a very unusual domestic scene.

Stanza 3 develops this association as the speaker begins to recognise some domestic qualities in the place, such as the “wickerwork” furniture. However, she explicitly states that “a dirty dog” is “quite comfy”. Is she suggesting that only an animal could feel at home in a place like this?

The apprehension of a lace embroidered mat “doily” and a “big hirsute begonia” in stanza 4 re - enforce the speaker’s perception of the place as a home. Perhaps the poem is about the effort which people make to maintain a level of beauty in the world. The unnamed person’s efforts balance out the inherent filth of the filling station. The absent woman lends comfort to the scene.

Questions of travel

Travel – The morality of tourism, home.

Subject matter – Bishop describes a number of landscapes in this poem.

Analysis – Section 1 (lines 1 – 12) sets the scene and establishes the Brazilian location of the poem. The poet describes a lush, spectacular landscape whose beauty is reflected in the sibilant “s” in “spill over the sides in soft slow – motion” which creates a harmonious musical effect. However, the speaker feels claustrophobic in her environs,

“ There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams”.

Everything happens too quickly. The streams move “rapidly down to the sea”, the clouds and streams are always “travelling, travelling”. Even the evolution of the waterfalls is seen as a fast process,

“For if those streaks, those mile – long, shiny, tearstains,
Aren’t waterfalls yet’
In a quick age or so, as ages go here,
They probably will be.”

The negative connotations of this metaphor are obvious. Is Bishop suggesting that it will be an unpleasant process?

Section 2 (lines 13 – 29) list the poet’s objections to the activity of travel. She suggests that it would be better to remain at home and imagine such things rather than visit them.

“ Oh must we dream our dreams
And have them too?”

For her, travelling is a form of voyeuristic intrusion into another landscape, another culture.

“ Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
In this strangest of theatres?”

Tourists are represented as “childish”, greedy consumers who do not take time to comprehend the significance of what they visit.

Section 3 (lines 30 – 59) provides an argument against staying at home. However, her arguments do not seem convincing as they are described in ambivalent terms. The pink trees are described in a striking simile. They are compared to performers in a pantomime, suggesting that there is something over – the – top about their appearance. Similarly, the man’s clogs, while unique, make a “sad” sound. Also, the “fat brown bird” has a sweet song but is in a cage, despite the brilliance of its construction. She cannot understand the history of the people who made them and, so, is left with as many questions as answers.

Section 4 (lines 60 – end) attempts to resolve these questions. Only the traveller can answer these questions for themselves. Bishop suggests that the desire to travel stems from a lack of imagination. She invokes the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, to support this theory. However, ultimately, she cannot answer these questions conclusively. The final lines are significant as the poet suggests that it is only through travel that we can come to understand what home is. Perhaps the poem chronicles the journey for a sense of place which the poet has undertaken.

At the Fishhouses

Theme – How our origins define who we are.

Subject matter - The speaker returns to Nova Scotia and describes what she sees.

Analysis – While the poem begins with a definite location, the first section examines how time, death and decay have altered the place. The speaker apprehends her surroundings in the fading light, which makes it difficult to see clearly. There is a constant link to the past as the fisherman is associated with the speaker’s grandfather. He is seen in the “gloaming”, as if he is fading away. This home place is fragile. Her ties to her motherland are tenuous and everything is being eaten away by erosion and the dark. What was once familiar is now strange.

Bishop, once again, describes her surroundings in great detail and uses some striking visual metaphors and similes to describe this landscape which lies at the mercy of the elements.

“the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
With creamy iridescent coats of mail,”

“two long bleached handles
And some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
Where the ironwork has rusted.”

These comparisons show the painter’s eye for detail in the synaesthetic images which are created. We get the impression that the personified sea, mentioned in line 12, threatens this tenuous balance.

In the second half of the poem, the sea is encountered. The reader gets the sense of an entity which cannot be described.

“Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
Element bearable to no mortal”

While the landscape is defined by impermanence, the sea is permanent. Ultimately, the maternal images of “the cold hard mouth” and “rocky breasts” seem to suggest that the originator of all life is indifferent to its creatures and they cannot return to it.

3 . Objects – Bishop describes objects in marvellous detail in her poetry. In “The Fish”, the speaker’s intense examination of the fish’s physical properties leads her to see it in human terms and commune with nature. In First Death in Nova Scotia and Sestina, objects are often personified and allow the child speaker to avoid thinking about death.