



Elizabeth Bishop

Elizabeth Bishop

Widely regarded as one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Bishop led a very turbulent life. She moved from place to place, struggled with alcoholism and experienced agonising losses. However, despite the tragic circumstances of her life, she managed to produce a striking, crafted and idiosyncratic body of poetry. Her poems are defined by a perfection of tone, a highly refined degree of visual accuracy and moral, historical, social and psychological insights that have compelled the attention of generations of readers. In the early stages of her career, Bishop was regarded (and sometimes dismissed) as a 'miniaturist', or someone who concentrates on small poetic structures and descriptive detail. However, the careful reader of her poetry will notice that her work is by and large confessional. While her life story is charted in her poetry, her approach is an unusual one. Most of the poems on the course nominally address and describe seemingly unimportant subjects, such as a filling station, a tourist destination and a fish, to name but a few. However, these are always related in such a manner as to provide profoundly thought-provoking insights on life. A natural shyness kept Bishop out of the limelight, yet despite this, her work has steadily grown in popularity, so much so that it is now impossible to imagine a collection of English poetry that does not contain a poem by Elizabeth Bishop. Given that her work reflects so intensely on life, it can prove challenging, though once this challenge is met, the rewards outweigh any difficulties the reader may experience.

Sestina

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; 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.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

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

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.
Time to plant tears, says the almanac.

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

glossary

1 Worcester, Massachusetts – Elizabeth Bishop’s place of birth.

2 Aunt Consuelo – critics are divided as to whether or not this is a reference to Bishop’s real-life Aunt Florence.

9 arctic – in American English, any high waterproof overshoe with a warm lining.

14 National Geographic – a magazine often found in waiting rooms.

21 Osa and Martin Johnson – Johnson, Martin Elmer and Osa Helen, distinguished

American explorers, writers and motion picture producers who were also husband and wife.

28 pith helmets – (also known as the sun helmet, topee or topi) a lightweight helmet made of cork or pith with a cloth cover, designed to shade the wearer’s head from the sun.

25 Long Pig – in the Marquesas Islands of Polynesia, human flesh was called long-pig.

critical commentary: Sestina

1. content

The poet Anne Stevenson has said of Bishop that she 'was especially fortunate in her gift for making everything she wrote interesting'. Read aloud, *Sestina* quickly resembles a fairytale. This childhood bedtime story tone is most obvious when the more imaginative details of the story emerge. The tea kettle causes '**tears**' that '**dance**.' The almanac, which both provides the grandmother with jokes and the inevitable progression of time and therefore future sadness, '**hovers**' in a '**Birdlike**' fashion. The child can hear the almanac and the stove speak. One of the most important stylistic features of this poem is the manner in which these details separate the child's perspective from the grandmother's. In the opening lines, the grandmother attempts to amuse the child and thereby comfort her. Yet, as the poem continues, the child's role comes to the fore, first through her narrative voice and then through her drawing. In this drawing, the child unwittingly presents us with a fascinating frozen tableau of childhood loss and grief. Written in a strict poetic form, *Sestina* is yet another example of the inability of Bishop's childhood memories to yield a happy poem. The opening line sets the tone for the entire poem. In the dying of the year, autumn, '**rain falls on the house**'. It is dark in the house and the '**old grandmother | sits in the kitchen with the child**'. Any hope of warmth suggested by the marvel stove, jokes and laughing is quickly dashed in the final line of this stanza when the speaker tells us that the child is merely '**laughing and talking to hide her tears**'. In the second stanza, we learn that this child believes that the almanac has somehow foretold not only the rainy weather, but her sadness. Meanwhile, the rain continues to '**beat on the roof of the house**' and in the background the kettle sings on the stove. In the final line of the second stanza, which forms a run on line with the third stanza, the grandmother cuts some bread and says to the child '**It's time for tea now**'. However, the child is transfixed by the '**teakettle's small hard tears**'. As the moisture from the teakettle falls onto the hot stove, it boils. In the child's imagination it appears to '**dance like mad**'. The grandmother tidies the house and hangs '**the clever almanac | on its string**'. Once again, the stanza ends with Bishop making use of enjambment in order to move the poem gently forward. It is important to remember that the view of the scene is given from the child's perspective. The almanac hanging on the string becomes bird-like and hovers above the old grandmother. The prevailing atmosphere is one of sorrow and loss. Shivering from the cold, the grandmother continues to shed '**dark brown tears**'. In the next stanza, we return to the child, who is now drawing a rigid house. The drawing contains a man who also appears to be crying. In the final six-line stanza, this motif of tears is continued. The child returns her gaze to the almanac '**while the grandmother**

busies herself about the stove'. In the little girl's imagination, the moon shapes in this almanac are seen to drip off the page into her drawing:

**into the flower bed [she]
has carefully placed in the front of the house.**

The final lines which are contained in the closing tercet encapsulate the entire poem. The almanac reminds us that it is **'time to plant tears'** as the grandmother tends to the stove and the child continues to draw another enigmatic house.

2. stylistic features

Perhaps the most readily identifiable feature of this poem is the fact that it is a Sestina. The Sestina is a rather odd, fixed form. It is not typically rhymed (although rhymed Sestinas do exist) and relies for its structure on a strict pattern of repeated end words. The Sestina need not have a fixed metre, though many poets use iambic tetrameter or iambic pentameter. Because it keeps repeating the same end words for 39 lines (six sestets and an ending envoi of three lines), the Sestina is well suited for subjects that require intense observation or meditation. All Sestinas follow the same sequence of end words, which can be represented as follows:

First stanza: 1-2-3-4-5-6

Second stanza: 6-1-5-2-4-3

Third stanza: 3-6-4-1-2-5

Fourth stanza: 5-3-2-6-1-4

Fifth stanza: 4-5-1-3-6-2

Sixth stanza: 2-4-6-5-3-1

Envoi: First line contains 2 and 5

Second line contains 4 and 3

Third line contains 6 and 1

The entire poem is steeped in an atmosphere of loss and sadness. Bishop defines this grief through a series of precise and evocative adjectives: **'failing', 'small', 'hard', 'rigid', 'winding', 'marvellous', 'inscrutable'**. The accuracy and clarity of these words are enhanced by a series of metaphors and similes that highlight the deep tragedy of this childhood. We learn that the buttons that the child draws are like tears and that these tears dance like mad. There is a poignant inevitability to the sadness that pervades the poem. The entire scene was **'known to a grandmother'** and **'was to be'**. Notice how the grandmother's presence works to offset the cold atmosphere that dominates the poem.

She is associated with the stove and the warmth that emanates from it. However, she, too, becomes part of the heartache and sorrow that characterise Bishop's childhood memories. It is a hallmark of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry that she writes of past pain without pathos and with precision. In fact, throughout this poem, the speaker chooses not to connect directly with the emotions that these memories engender. It is left to reader to do that. Like so many other poems by Bishop on the Leaving Certificate course, this poem presents an account of an event that borders on the surreal. Notice how in the sixth stanza the illustrations of the moon's phases fall from the almanac's pages onto the child's drawing. Here the almanac reminds the child that it is '**time to plant tears**'. The implication, although never stated, is that the adult Bishop will have to reap the future sadness that will inevitably result. The final line of the envoi perfectly captures the sad truth that for Bishop, the idea of home is an inscrutable or enigmatic one.

3. essay writing

Sestina is a perfect example of Bishop's mastery of what is a very difficult poetic form. In this sense it might be worth your while including the poem in any discussion of Bishop's poetry that you undertake. You may wish to include some of the following points.

- a. The poem focuses once again on Bishop's painful memories. In this respect, you may wish to compare or contrast the poem with *First Death in Nova Scotia* and *In the Waiting Room*.
- b. While this is an emotional and poignant account of childhood loss, the fact that the poem is written in the Sestina form prevents it from becoming too sentimental.
- c. Notice the precise nature of the diction and detail in this poem. This level of precision is a feature of Bishop's poetry in general. You may wish to devote an entire paragraph to this aspect of her work.

First Death in Nova Scotia

In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur
beneath the chromographs:
Edward, Prince of Wales,
with Princess Alexandra,
and King George with Queen Mary.
Below them on the table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur's father.

Since Uncle Arthur fired
a bullet into him,
he hadn't said a word.
He kept his own counsel
on his white, frozen lake,
the marble-topped table.
His breast was deep and white,
cold and caressable;
his eyes were red glass,
much to be desired.

"Come," said my mother,
"Come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur."
I was lifted up and given
one lily of the valley
to put in Arthur's hand.
Arthur's coffin was
a little frosted cake,
and the red-eyed loon eyed it
from his white, frozen lake.
Arthur was very small.

He was all white, like a doll
that hadn't been painted yet.
Jack Frost had started to paint him
the way he always painted
the Maple Leaf (Forever).
He had just begun on his hair,
a few red strokes, and then
Jack Frost had dropped the brush
and left him white, forever.

The gracious royal couples
were warm in red and ermine;
their feet were well wrapped up
in the ladies' ermine trains.
They invited Arthur to be
the smallest page at court.
But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?

glossary

Nova Scotia – the second smallest province in Canada.

1 parlor – a living room that is normally set aside for entertaining guests.

3 chromographs – pictures that created by means of chromolithography, which was the first method for making true multi-colour prints. (Before the chromolithograph, prints were coloured in by hand.)

4 Edward – Edward VII (Albert Edward, 1841–1910) was King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, King of the Commonwealth Realms and the Emperor of India.

5 Alexandra – Alexandra of Denmark, Edward's wife and the beautiful elder daughter of King

Christian IX of Denmark.⁶ King George with Queen Mary – King George Frederick Ernest Albert (1865–1936) and Mary of Teck, Queen of England (1867–1953).

8 loon - a fish-eating diving bird found in northern regions of the northern hemisphere.

14 to keep ... counsel – to remain silent or to keep your opinions to yourself.

28 frosted – American English for iced.

36 Maple Leaf (Forever) – Patriotic song composed by Alexander Muir in October 1867, the year of Canada's Confederation.

42 ermine – the white fur of an ermine, a small weasel, once valued as a symbol of wealth, nobility or high rank.

42 trains – long part at the back of a gown or robe that trails on the ground

46 page – a servant or attendant.

critical commentary: First Death in Nova Scotia

1. content

First Death in Nova Scotia is a poignant, restrained and beautifully evoked recollection of a painful childhood memory. The poem, told entirely in the past tense, opens by telling us that Arthur was laid out in the '**cold, cold parlor**'. Interestingly, this is the only published poem by Elizabeth Bishop that includes mention of her mother. Given the tragic circumstances of her relationship with her mother, it is not surprising that that this woman is associated with death. The scene is carefully and vividly depicted in the opening stanza. The body of the speaker's dead cousin Arthur lies beneath:

**[...] the choromographs:
Edward Princes of Wales,
With Princess Alexandra,
And King George with Queen Mary.**

On the table below these pictures of the British royalty stands a stuffed loon. This bird was shot and stuffed by Uncle Arthur, Arthur's father. In the second stanza, we learn that this bird has not said a word since '**Uncle Arthur | fired a bullet into him**'. With childlike simplicity, Bishop describes this dead bird. It is snow white, its breast is '**caressable**' and its red glass eyes are, from the child's point of view, '**much to be desired**'. In the third stanza, the voice of the mother punctuates the narrator's recollection of the drawing room:

**'come,' said my mother,
'come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur.'**

The speaker is lifted up and given a solitary '**lily of the valley | to put in Arthur's hand.**' In a description that recalls the speaker's depiction of the stuffed loon, we are told that '**Arthur's coffin was a little frosted cake**'. In the child's imagination, the bird eyes this cake greedily. The penultimate stanza concentrates on the poet's recollection of Arthur's physical appearance in the coffin. Emphasising the fact that Arthur was very small, she tells us that he resembled a doll that hadn't been painted yet. Attempting to make sense of all this, the child narrator concludes that:

Jack Frost had started to paint him

**the way he always painted
the Maple Leaf (Forever).**

In an obvious reference to Arthur's injury, the speaker feels that Jack Frost had only managed 'a few red strokes', and then he dropped the brush and left the little boy 'white forever'. In the final stanza, the young Elizabeth's gaze once again settles on the chromographs in the drawing room. In her mind's eye, Arthur becomes cast in the role of a stranded attendant who has been invited to court. Preparing to greet him formally, the assembled royalty are present in formal clothes of 'red and ermine'. Clutching the flower that the speaker placed in his hand, Arthur is forced to decline their offer to attend the court:

**But how could Arthur go,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?**

2. stylistic features

This is yet another poem by Bishop on the course that deals with the poet's memories of her troubled childhood. In order to heighten the impact of her recollections, the speaker recounts her story in the language of a young child. Accordingly, the language employed by Bishop is straightforward and she frequently makes use of repetition in order to approximate the idiom of a young child. As the child tries to make sense of what has happened to her cousin, the unfamiliar language of death is transformed into the more familiar language of the bedtime story. In this manner, Arthur's coffin becomes a frosted cake, what is presumably blood on his hair is transformed into Jack Frost's paint and the pictures of royalty wait for Arthur to come to court. Most readers will notice that this poem is typical of Bishop's poetry in general in that it relies heavily on visual detail. However, despite the accurate and vivid depiction of the scene, the setting also seems strangely dreamlike. In a very clear sense, the imagery in the poem is rooted in exact and precise observations of the circumstances surrounding her cousin's wake. However, the reader is left with the feeling that he or she has been witness to an imagined or surreal event. Bishop was intrigued by the frottage technique used by the artist Max Ernst. He aimed to create art through a series of uncontrolled associations that gave an imaginative impression of the object rather than the object itself. This is precisely what she achieves here. The depiction of Arthur's wake gives a child-like impression of that day when the speaker went to say goodbye to her cousin. Notice how her understanding that Arthur is no longer alive is related to the reader through metonymy and metaphor. The little boy quite literally becomes another object in the room, much like the chromographs and the stuffed loon. In order to come to terms with her cousin's death, Bishop constructs her

own private mythology. Conventional images of death have no real role in this poem. Although clearly written in endearing, child-like language, there is little or no human comfort. The two adult figures in the poem seem to have closer associations with death than life. The broad vowel sounds and predominance of cold adjectives are juxtaposed with the nursery rhyme-like rhythm to offer a chilling glimpse of a cheerless childhood.

3. essay writing

If you should decide to discuss First Death in Nova Scotia in an essay, you may wish to include the following points.

- a. This is one of three poems on the course that deals with Bishop's recollection of her childhood. Given the dominance of this theme, you may wish to devote an entire paragraph to this aspect of Bishop's poetry.
- b. On a technical level, this is a highly crafted poem. The language is restrained and each word is designed so as to give a child-like impression of Arthur's wake. In one of your essay's paragraphs, you may want to concentrate on Bishop's use of this kind of narrative voice.
- c. The detail in this poem is vivid. However, when taken as a whole, the poem has a dream-like or surreal quality. Many of Bishop's poems on the course are strongly influenced by her interest in art.

The Prodigal

The brown enormous odor he lived by
was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,
for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.
Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts,
the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare—
even to the sow that always ate her young—
till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.
but sometimes mornings after drinking bouts
(he hid the pints behind the two-by-fours),
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red;
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.
And then he thought he almost might endure
his exile yet another year or more.

But evenings the first star came to warn.
The farmer whom he worked for came at dark
to shut the cows and horses in the barn
beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,
with pitchforks, faint forked lightnings, catching
light, safe and companionable as in the Ark.
The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.
The lantern - like the sun, going away -
laid on the mud a pacing aureole.
Carrying a bucket along a slimy board,
he felt the bats' uncertain staggering flight,
his shuddering insights, beyond his control,
touching him. But it took him a long time
finally to make up his mind to go home.

glossary

The title of this poem is a reference to the parable of The Prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). For more information on this parable, consult the critical commentary on this poem.

Prodigal – wasteful or spendthrift to a degree bordering on recklessness.

2 close – the poet uses this word to describe the claustrophobic, stifling atmosphere of life in the pig sty.

10 two-by-four – a length of timber that is two inches thick and four inches wide, or that is trimmed to slightly smaller dimensions.

20 companionable – outgoing, sociable, good company.

20 Ark – in the Bible, the ship that God instructed Noah to build in order save his family and the animals of the world from the Flood. An ark is a place that provides refuge.

22 lantern – a light.

23 aureole – a halo or corona that in artistic convention is the painted or carved representation of a circle of light around the head of a divine being or a saint.

26 Shuddering – shaking or trembling uncontrollably, usually from an emotional reaction such as cold or fear.

critical commentary: First Death in Nova Scotia

1. content

At the heart of this intensely emotional poem is a direct reference to the biblical parable of The Prodigal son. Before attempting any discussion of the poem, it is important to become familiar with this story. The Bible (Luke 15:11–32) tells us that:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country, and he began to suffer. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. Such was his hunger that he longed to fill his stomach with the meal that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

Bishop uses this parable of The Prodigal son to explore her own struggle with alcoholism. In fact, this is the only poem she wrote that examines this deeply personal and destructive side of her personality. The Prodigal opens with a graphic depiction of the filth and deprivation of life in the pig sty. The odour is so bad as to become a physical, even solid presence. It is '**brown and enormous**' and becomes so familiar to this person that he can no longer discern it. If the smell is unbearable, the surroundings are equally squalid. The floor is '**rotten**' and the entire sty is plastered with '**glass-smooth dung**'. On all sides the pigs seem to

surround this dehumanised figure. These animals, including **'the sow that always ate her young'**, appear cheerful. In line 10 there is a slight shift in the poem as we learn that after **'drinking bouts'** the man is brought even lower than these animals. Lying in the puddles in a drunken haze, he is left to bake in the blazing sun. Despite the obvious physical, spiritual and emotional deprivation of his life in the pig sty, this man feels that he has it in him to **'endure | his exile yet another year or more.'** In the second sonnet that forms the second half of the poem, it is night-time. **'The farmer whom he worked for'** is busy tending to the animals. In sharp contrast to the farm worker, these animals are made to feel **'safe and companionable'** as if in an **'Ark'**. Even the pigs seem comfortable. The light of the sun that drew the worker's attention in the first half of the poem is replaced by the light from the farm owner's lantern, which is likened to a **'pacing aureole.'** The brightness and comfort it affords is diametrically opposed to the speaker's existence. His is a world of slimy boards and spiritual blindness. Like the bats, this worker is blind and uncertain and his life is beyond his control. The poem ends with a moving account of this man's shuddering insights. Despite the wretchedness of his surroundings and the apparent hopelessness of his situation, he is moved by some **'unknown force to make his mind up to go home'**.

2. stylistic features

Elizabeth Bishop's alcoholism and the peculiar circumstances of her early life forged a precarious path in her consciousness. In this poem, she confronts the loneliness and pain that dogged her for most of her adult life. In the poem, Bishop uses the parable of The Prodigal son to highlight the ugly and dehumanising nature of the alcoholic's existence. However, what is most remarkable about this poem is the measure of humanity that the poet manages to afford to her subject. For all the hardship, isolation and rejection that the farm worker has known, there is an incongruous sensitivity and depth of awareness in his language and thoughts. In particular, the delicacy of the description of the animals, which are in sharp contrast to the reality of their setting, provides the reader with insights into the worker's character. Perhaps the most striking stylistic feature of The Prodigal is its construction. While the arrangement of the poem consists of a very formal division into two sonnets of roughly even length, Bishop's use of erratic rhyme actively undermines this structure. This erratic rhyming scheme is first introduced in the opening quatrain.

The brown enormous odor he lived by	a
was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,	b
for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty	a
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.	c

The first three lines, rhyming a b a, induce the reader to expect the type of rhyming scheme we associate with a Shakespeare sonnet, but Bishop chooses not to allow the poem to rhyme smoothly. In this respect, the rhyming scheme mirrors the sense of alienation and obvious dislocation that is associated with the alcoholic state of mind. The alcoholic can appear organised and in control on the outside, but this exterior often disguises an inner turmoil. You should notice, too, that for most of the poem the descriptions of the sty are given in such a manner as to suggest that the worker is in fact on the ground. While drinking bouts bring him lower than the animals, it is only when he lies flat on his back that he witnesses the '**staggering flight of the bats**'. The movement of these creatures draws the worker's attention as he follows their upward motion. Similarly, his spirit is drawn upward and this prompts a '**shuddering insight**'. In this sense, the poem affirms Bishop's belief that even in the darkest hour, amidst the worst squalor, something of the nobility of the human spirit can endure.

3. essay writing

If you are thinking of making reference to this poem in an essay, you should try to bear the following points in mind.

- a. This is a deeply emotional poem that draws on the poet's life experience. Many of the poems by Bishop in this anthology are biographical. You may wish to devote an entire paragraph to this aspect of her work.
- b. The formal structure of the poem is offset by the disorganised rhyming scheme. Such control of form and structure is typical of Bishop's poetry.
- c. Although *The Prodigal* does provide the reader with a disturbing insight into the dehumanising reality of alcoholism, its message is ultimately heartening. Many of the poems on the course have an uplifting outlook at their heart. You may wish to devote a paragraph to this aspect of her work.

In The Waiting Room

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.
My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited and read
the National Geographic
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
"Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.

And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
—Aunt Consuelo's voice—
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me :
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I—we—were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic ,
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I ,
you are an Elizabeth ,
you are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance

—I couldn't look any higher—
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How I didn't know any
word for it how "unlikely" ...
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,

and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

glossary

1 Worcester, Massachusetts – Elizabeth Bishop’s place of birth.

2 Aunt Consuelo – critics are divided as to whether or not this is a reference to Bishop’s real-life Aunt Florence.

9 arctic – in American English, any high waterproof overshoe with a warm lining.

14 National Geographic – a magazine often found in waiting rooms.

21 Osa and Martin Johnson – Johnson, Martin

Elmer and Osa Helen, distinguished American explorers, writers and motion picture producers who were also husband and wife.

28 pith helmets – (also known as the sun helmet, topee or topi) a lightweight helmet made of cork or pith with a cloth cover, designed to shade the wearer’s head from the sun.

25 Long Pig – in the Marquesas Islands of Polynesia, human flesh was called long-pig.

critical commentary: In the Waiting Room

1. content

This intensely personal poem is grounded in a real experience. As if to remind us of this fact, the opening is very specific. We learn that **'In Worcester, Massachusetts, | [the poet] went with Aunt Consuelo | to keep her dentist's appointment.'** The speaker is equally specific about the time of year. While outside it is **'winter'** and **'dark'**, inside the waiting room is crowded with **'grown-up people, arctics and overcoats'**. While Aunt Consuelo receives her treatment, the speaker waits patiently in the waiting room and begins to read the National Geographic. Unsurprisingly, the journal contains photographs of a volcano, one of which is described as being **'black, and full of ashes'**. In the next photograph of the volcano, rivulets of fire seem to spill over the edges. We are then presented with another photograph, this time of **'Osa and Martin Johnson dressed in riding breeches.'** Dressed in the typical garb of the colonial explorer, their appearance is in sharp contrast to the image of the **'dead man slung on a pole.'** The caption (Long Pig) accompanying this disturbing image refers to the practice in the Marquesas Islands of Polynesia of describing human flesh as being like a type of pig. In addition to these photographs, the young speaker is drawn to the images of the 'Babies, with pointed heads' and the 'black, naked women' whose necks reassemble the necks of light bulbs. Although embarrassed by these, she feels 'too shy to stop' her perusal of the magazine. In line 35, a clear and sudden break in the poem's narrative occurs. Announced by the cry of pain from Consuelo, this break marks the point in the poem when the speaker experiences a moment of epiphany. At the same time, wintry Worcester recedes into the twilight and normal connections between time and space become distorted. This sudden intuitive leap of understanding, which centres on her sense of her own identity, causes her to feel as if she is falling. As if to anchor herself, the young Elizabeth's eyes remain fixed on the National Geographic and in particular on the date. It is **'February, 1918.'** The next stanza, which forms the third section of the poem, opens once again with an affirmation of identity. The speaker reminds herself that in three days she will be seven years old and she is one of them, an Elizabeth. Obviously bewildered and confused by the physical and cultural traits that she has found in the National Geographic, she begins to question her own identity. In what is presumably a reference to the wider human race, she openly wonders why she **'should be'** one of them. So intense are the feelings that these questions provoke in the speaker that she feels as if she is:

**[...] falling off
the round,**

**turning world
into cold, blue-black space.**

The effect of all this on the speaker is almost physical. Unable to raise her head up, she gives a sidelong glance to the other people in the waiting room. In this altered state of consciousness, the assembled people are reduced to an almost surreal grouping of:

**trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.**

All of this leads the poet to admit that nothing stranger had ever happened to her. For the first time in her short life, she becomes aware of her own existence. This awareness causes her to question the similarities, the family voice and other physical attributes that make us what we are. At the same time, she scrutinises the connections that join her to the wider world. She finds the reality of her existence to be the result of an 'unlikely' series of events that have brought her to this very room where she has just heard her aunt let out a cry of pain. The unrhymed quatrain that makes up the fourth stanza of the poem describes the poet's sensation of fainting '**beneath a big black wave**'. This disconcerting sensation precedes the speaker's return to the reality of the room, the cold outdoors and finally World War I. The first line of the final stanza suggests that the poet has been completely altered by this experience. Although the world has not changed and it is still the 'fifth of February, 1918', the poet distances herself from this fact. The outside world is described as being 'it.' The final description of the slush and snow is not a particularly edifying one.

2. stylistic features

Many of Elizabeth Bishop's poems on your course centre on the poet's recollections of her childhood. Perhaps the most striking and readily noticeable stylistic feature of this poem is the manner in which the speaker takes on the voice of a child and thereby imposes a child-like simplicity on the imagery and language. In very ordinary, almost un-poetic language, times and places are labelled with precision: '**In Worcester, Massachusetts**'; '**I said to myself three days | and you'll be seven years old**'; '**it was still the fifth | of February, 1918.**' The poem's perspective is told entirely from the six-year-old Elizabeth's point of view. The cry of pain, the date on the National Geographic and the unfamiliar adults all make her

suddenly aware that she is different. Although the resultant questions (Who is this person called Elizabeth? And why is she who she is?) are posed in relatively childish language, they are deeply profound and searching. The poem then quickly takes on the aspect of an enquiry into the nature of self. By portraying a reserved solitary child waiting for her aunt – not her mother or father, but her aunt – the poet forces us to consider this child as being completely separated from her background. For all intents and purposes orphaned, the young girl is forced to consider the cultural role models that are on offer. The images and photographs in the National Geographic are nearly all suggestive of victimisation and domination. In particular, the speaker is reminded of the position of women in society. From the cry of pain of that foolish, timid woman, her aunt, to the awful hanging breasts, the speaker is made to consider the repression of women. Responding to these largely negative representations of humanity, the young poet recedes into her own thoughts. This process of reevaluating her place in the world is obviously a disturbing one for the six-year-old Elizabeth. In particular, the image of the volcano erupting in **'rivulets of fire'** is suggestive of the violent change that she is about to undergo. In addition to this, the more attentive reader will notice that the setting of the poem (the dentist's waiting room) is usually associated with pain and discomfort. Furthermore, the atmosphere in this particular waiting room is stifling and claustrophobic. The poet's reaction to all this is to become completely disorientated. The sensation of fainting **'beneath a big black wave, | another, and another'** precedes her return to the harsh reality of the cold outdoors and World War I. In three days, the young Elizabeth will be seven years old, which is the commonly accepted age of reason. However, it is here in this waiting room that her understanding of her place in the world has forever been altered. This is a profound and complex poem that poses some of the most fundamental questions about human existence and identity.

3. essay writing

Given that many critics hold this to be one of Bishop's most important poems, you should consider mentioning the poem in any essay on her work. The following points may help you to organise your approach to this poem in an essay.

- a. Once again, Bishop focuses on an uncomfortable experience arising out a memory of her own childhood. Given that many of the poems on the course by Elizabeth Bishop draw on her childhood memories, you may wish to devote an entire paragraph to this aspect of her work.

b. Despite the seeming simplicity of the poem's language, this is a highly complex and thought-provoking poem. This is typical of Bishop's poetry. Other poems on the course, such as Sestina, follow this pattern.

c. The artist's eye for detail is never far from Elizabeth Bishop's poetry. In the case of this poem, the poet manages to create a vivid word picture of the waiting room on that day in February 1918. Many of the poems that are included in this anthology achieve a similar effect. You may wish to devote a separate paragraph to Bishop's eye for detail.

At the Fishhouses

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.
The air smells so strong of codfish
it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.
The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
to storerooms in the gables
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down
on. All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
among the wild jagged rocks,
is of an apparent translucence
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
growing on their shoreward walls.
The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales
and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
with small iridescent flies crawling on them.
Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,
cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where ironwork has rusted.

The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
He was a friend of my grandfather.
We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring
while he waits for a herring boat to come in.
There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.
He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,
from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
the blade of which is almost worn away.

Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water, thin silver
tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals ... One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in
music; like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."
He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment.
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water ... Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.

Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems
suspended above the rounded gray and blue-
gray stones. I have seen it over and over, the
same sea, the same, icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand
would burn as if the water were a transmutation
of fire that feeds on stones and burns with a dark
gray flame. If you tasted it, it would first taste
bitter, then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet.

the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems
suspended above the rounded gray and blue-
gray stones. I have seen it over and over, the
same sea, the same, slightly, indifferently
swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand
would burn as if the water were a transmutation

of fire that feeds on stones and burns with a dark
gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

glossary

4 gloaming – twilight, dusk

6 shuttle – this is a specific reference to a device in weaving that holds the weft thread and is used to pass it between the warp threads.

10 cleated – having wooden or other wedges attached to the structure in order to allow one to gain a foothold.

10 gangplank – usually a portable structure such as a bridge or plank used when boarding or disembarking from a boat.

15 opaque – not transparent or impervious to light so that images cannot be seen through it.

18 translucence – allowing light to pass through, but only diffusely, so that objects on the other side cannot be clearly distinguished. The word can also mean having a shining appearance.

22 herring – a small edible fish with silvery scales.

24 iridescent – having a lustrous or brilliant appearance or quality, often in the colours of the rainbow.

28 capstan – a type of crane consisting of a vertical drum around which a cable is wound. This device is normally used to move heavy weights or to haul in ropes on a ship.

32 Lucky Strike – a well-known brand of American cigarettes.

37 sequins – bright, often gold ornamentation such as would be found on a dress or material.

52 total immersion – involvement in something that completely occupies all one's energy and concentration. Here the poet is referring directly to the method of baptism practised by the Baptist denomination of Protestantism.

53 Baptist – a Protestant denomination that baptises people by total immersion when they are old enough to understand and declare their faith.

74 transmutation – a change from one form, substance, nature or state to another.

77 briny – tasting salty or tasting like sea water.

critical commentary: At the Fishhouses

1. content

When she had finished writing *At the Fishhouses*, Bishop raised her arms above her head in triumph. More than any other poem by Bishop on the course, *At the Fishhouses* provides us with a perfect example of her mature style. This is a complex piece that demands close attention and consideration from its readers. The poem is broken into three distinct segments that are separated by a line written in perfect iambic pentameter. In the opening section of the poem, the poet provides a detailed and objective description of an old fisherman, the Nova Scotia shoreline and the paraphernalia of the fishing trade. Following a short second section, we enter the third, more problematic segment of the poem. Written for the most part in stream of consciousness, the speaker provides us with a passionate description of the ocean at the same time she enters a moment of intense subjective meditation. The poem itself opens, much like a camera coming into focus, by carefully setting the scene. We learn that even though it is cold, **'an old man sits netting, | his net, in the gloaming almost invisible.'** The depiction is a timeless one which evokes a sense of continuity with a vanishing way of life. The fisherman continues his work to the backdrop of the setting sun and **'the fishhouses with their steeply peaked roofs | and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up | to storerooms.'** The entire scene is bordered by the sea, which is 'swelling slowly as if considering spilling over' and is bathed in a **'sliver'** light. For a brief moment, it is as if the speaker becomes transfixed by the movement of the sea. However, she forces her attention away from the sea to focus on **'the benches', 'lobster pots', 'masts' and 'small old buildings'**. In typical Bishop fashion, the speaker begins to concentrate on the minute details to be found on these various objects. She notices that:

**The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales**

The almost microscopic examination of the scene continues when the speaker tells us that the wheelbarrows are also lined with **'creamy iridescent coats of mail and small iridescent flies.'** The picture that the poet has painted is completed when she describes the area **'behind the houses.'** We learn that there is an **'ancient wooden capstan.'** Its two long 'bleached handles' are stained. The rusted ironwork is likened by the poet to 'dried blood'. There is a slight change in direction in the poem when the speaker addresses the old man. We learn that this man was a friend of her grandfather. Their conversation centres on the decline in the population, and codfish and herring. Once again, Bishop's attention is

drawn from the surface details to the minutiae of her surroundings. She notices the 'sequins' on the old man's vest and '**thumb**' and in the process begins to think about countless fish that this man has 'scraped' with the worn blade of his '**black old knife**'. As the poem progresses it is as if the poet is drawn closer and closer to the sea's edge. In line 40, which marks the beginning of the short second section of the poem, a perceptible shift occurs. The speaker describes the area near the '**water's edge [...] where they haul up the boats**'. In a slow, measured fashion her attention is drawn '**down and down**' towards the water. Line 47 marks the beginning of the third section of the poem, which most readers find challenging. It opens with a description of the water, which is seen by the speaker as being:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, element bearable
to no mortal, to fish and to seals [...]

The sea has long been viewed as a metaphor for human consciousness, and as the speaker is drawn to the water's edge, she begins what will amount to a deeply introspective meditation on knowledge and the nature of identity. Noticing a seal that she has seen '**evening after evening**', she reveals that the creature was inquisitive about her and strangely that, much like her, he believed in baptism by '**total immersion**'. As the seal seems interested in music, '**she used to sing him Baptist hymns**', in particular '**A Mighty Fortress Is Our God**'. The seal's reaction is to regard the speaker steadily. Disappearing momentarily, only to '**emerge almost in the same spot**', he '**shrugs as if it were against his better judgement**'. Meanwhile, the speaker seems to remain transfixed by the water. She repeats her initial impression that it is '**Cold dark deep and absolutely clear**'. For a brief period, in line 60, the poet gives consideration to the landscape behind her. Here the dignified fir trees stand as if waiting for the arrival of Christmas. However, before she becomes too distracted by this, her gaze returns to the sea:

**The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.**

This surface description of the sea yields to a more detailed examination of the nature of the water itself. In the poet's view, the water is a transmutation of fire that would cause one's hand to burn and one's wrist to ache. These lines, which most readers find very difficult to decipher, become clearer when the speaker tells us that she identifies these properties with knowledge itself. All of this is what we imagine knowledge to be:

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth

of the world, derived from the rocky breasts.
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Like the waters that encircle the world, knowledge itself is continually moving and flowing. All knowledge is indeed historical, as it is based on the learning and efforts of those who have gone before us. It is difficult not to be impressed by the sheer artistic beauty and metaphorical intensity of these lines.

2. stylistic features

Poets as diverse as John Ashbery, James Merrill, C.K. Williams and Jorie Graham have named Bishop as a major influence on their work. They variously have praised her perfection of tone, her social, moral and psychological insights, her visual accuracy and her formal invention. All of these characteristics are present in *At the Fishhouses*. Even a cursory reading of this poem suggests to the reader that it contains a complex philosophical meditation on the nature of knowledge. In the opening half of the poem, the poet presents the reader with a highly objective account of the Nova Scotia coastline. In doing so, she appeals to all the senses. It is important to realise that these details create the preconditions for what Seamus Heaney has described as the 'rhythmic heave' that occurs in line 46. The rusted ironwork, the ancient wooden capstan and the old man who knew the speaker's grandfather create an unconscious awareness in her mind of the historical nature of knowledge. Thus, as the speaker takes in the scene and talks to a man who knew her dead grandfather, she is made aware that all life is transitory and that generations come and go. Furthermore, knowledge, which will become the central theme of the poem, is alluded to in the encounter with this man. We learn that he was a 'friend of [her] grandfather', that he has seen a 'decline in the population' and that he has scraped 'the principal beauty from unnumbered fish'. In line 46, the lucid and vivid awareness that has characterised the first section of this complex poem gives way to a more disconnected stream of thought. Once again, it is important to stress that although a clear distinction exists between the first and third segments of the poem, they are in fact connected. With thoughts of the past, her 'grandfather' and 'the decline in the population' on her mind, the poet becomes mesmerised by the sea. Beautifully evoked in the opening lines of the poem where Bishop echoes the long 'o' of 'although' with the broad 'o' of 'gloaming', 'cold' and 'old', the sea now takes on a symbolic value. It comes to represent knowledge in general and in Seamus Heaney's estimation hints at the 'rebirth of a religious impulse' in a secular world. While it is very difficult

to untangle the poet's train of thought in these lines, a discernable pattern does emerge upon closer reading. The sea comes to represent the unknown and, in some respects, the unknowable. Religion, which once provided many of the answers to the more philosophical questions that life poses, has been replaced by cold reason in the twentieth century. In the poem, the traditional symbols of religion and Christianity are either replaced or pushed to the background: Back behind us [...] | [...] associating with their shadows, a million Christmas trees stand waiting for Christmas.

As Christian hymns enter the poet's mind, she is not greeted by some divine creature, but more amusingly by an ordinary seal. Rather than concentrate on the unknowable, imponderable and mystical questions that have been the preserve of Christianity, the poet chooses to examine knowledge and reason. The ocean provides her with a fitting symbol for knowledge. Like knowledge, it is in continual flux, always moving always changing. In Peter Denman's view, 'the poem ends with a magnificent speculation on the nature of knowledge. How do we know what we know? How do we hold on to experience?' The poet feels that, like the cold water, all knowledge comes at a price. Learning is a difficult process that at first tastes bitter and is often painful. Human knowledge is always contingent upon the achievements of our ancestors. In this sense, the poet is vindicated in feeling that all knowledge is historical.

3. essay writing

At the Fishhouses is perhaps Elizabeth Bishop's best-known and most memorable poem. As such, it is worthy of inclusion in any personal response to Bishop that you may be asked to make. If you decide to include this poem, try to bear the following points in mind.

- a. The poem provides us with a complex commentary on the nature of knowledge.
- b. This is a highly crafted poem that draws on many language devices in order to enhance its rhythmic effect.
- c. The level of detail in the poem is typical of Bishop's poetry in general. Make sure you understand how detailed descriptions in the first half of the poem reinforce the philosophical meditation that takes place in the final section.

Elizabeth Bishop: an overview

Now that you have read a selection of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, you should take the time to look at the following general points. The purpose of these is not to tell you what to think, but rather to help you form your own opinions. When you have read these points, you may wish to take the time to reread Bishop's poetry. You should notice that the general points made here can be used to form the backbone of your paragraphs when it comes to writing on poetry. From now on, try to think about Bishop's poems in terms of what they say and how they say it. Open your mind to any reasonable interpretation of the poems. Remember, your opinions are as valid as anything printed. However, you must be prepared to ground these opinions in fact. If you find this process difficult, that is entirely normal. Remember that a poem is not meant to be studied and dissected in the manner that the Leaving Certificate asks us to. While we have to keep the exam in mind, you should try not to allow it to detract from your enjoyment of the poetry on the course.

1. The poetry by Elizabeth Bishop on the Leaving Certificate course is varied, yet in nearly every poem on the course we are presented with examples of her keen eye for detail. In her poems she displays a passion for accuracy and faithfully recreates scenes from Canada, America, Europe and Brazil.
2. While her poems shun self-pity, it is possible to detect her feelings of separation as a woman, a lesbian, an orphan, a geographically rootless traveller and a sufferer of depression and alcoholism.
3. The value of travel and the role it plays in the exploration of self form an integral part of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry.
4. Bishop's poetry is confessional in that it draws heavily on the painful memories of her early childhood. In more than one poem on the course, there is a notable absence of a loving mother figure. Similarly, her poetry questions the notion of home.
5. Her poetry is thoroughly modern in the manner in which it seeks to confront the dark recesses of the psyche. Nowhere is this more apparent than in such poems as *In the Waiting Room* and *At the Fishhouses*. When Bishop explores the inner landscape of the soul, she relies heavily on stream of consciousness technique in order to draw the reader in fully to the poem.
6. In her poems, Bishop exercises sublime control over language and form. Her work is at once honest, witty, profound, thought provoking and graceful. This breadth of poetic style is mirrored by a mastery of form. Amongst the poems for study in this anthology we find a *sestina*, a *sonnet* and monologues.

This list of general points is of course in no way exhaustive; there are quite literally thousands of perfectly valid observations to be made about the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. You should try to use these points as guide that may help you to construct your first response to Bishop's work. Finally, as you reread her poems in this anthology, try to do so with an open mind. Remember, your opinion is as valid as any of the points mentioned above. Try to consult these points frequently, as they will help you when it comes to writing essays.

paragraph building

As you organise your thoughts, try to do so in focused paragraphs. A paragraph is more than just a group of sentences.

1. Generally speaking, the best paragraphs tend to have two or three relevant quotations that fit in with the grammatical logic of the paragraph's sentences.
2. They tend to focus on one aspect of the poet's work.
3. Rather than concentrate on what a poem says, the best paragraphs deal with what the poet has to say on a particular idea or topic.
4. Strong paragraphs also deal with how the poet organises his or her ideas. This usually means that you give some time to discussing the poet's use of language.
5. Finally, you must address the question asked. In recent years, most questions on the Leaving Cert have tended to be personal responses. This means that your paragraphs must contain a personal aspect. While you do not want to overdo it, the easiest way to achieve this is to include the personal pronoun 'I'.

sample essay: Elizabeth Bishop

The poetry by Elizabeth Bishop that I have studied is complex, honest and engaging. Her style is accomplished yet subtle enough to convey the strength of her emotions in a manner that never seems contrived. I think that she communicates to a modern audience in a genuinely memorable fashion. T.S. Eliot once said that genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood. I feel that this is true of Bishop's poetry.

I found Bishop's treatment of childhood deeply moving and often poignant. From the little that I have read about her life, it is apparent to me that her early years were troubled. This is reflected in her poetry. The overwhelming feeling that any reader of Bishop's childhood poems encounters is that Bishop's early years left a legacy of loss and pain. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the poem, "Sestina". Here, the predominant atmosphere is one of loneliness. The September rain combines with the "failing light" and the grandmother's "tears" to create a memorable evocation of Bishop's childhood. However, in a manner typical of Bishop's style, the strict use of the sestina form prevents the poem from becoming too sentimental. At its heart, Sestina contains a powerful message (one found elsewhere in Bishop's poetry) concerning the notion of identity. The childhood memories evoked in this poem serve

to highlight Bishop's difficulty with the concept of home. The "child draws an inscrutable house", the picture contains a man shedding tears and there is a noticeable absence of a mother figure.

Similarly, in *First Death in Nova Scotia*, Bishop's childhood memories are painful. In this case, they centre upon the death of her little cousin, Arthur. Where "Sestina" omits a mother figure, "First Death in Nova Scotia" links the mother to the child's first encounter with death. There is a restrained simplicity in the language used by Bishop. We learn that "Arthur was very small", "he was all white like a doll" and "Jack Frost had left him white forever". In keeping with the emptiness we find in "Sestina", Bishop refuses to provide any comfort for the child. While this is a genuinely sad poem to read, I was also struck by the lack of conventional theology. The fact that the poem fails to offer us the comfort of an after life makes it more difficult to accept. Arthur is not invited to heaven rather to "court".

Although Bishop's childhood memories are painful in themselves, the poet also does an excellent job of presenting us with the impact that her troubled formative years had on her adult life. In Bishop's

poetry there is a very real tension between the need to return to childhood and the need to escape from it. "The Waiting Room" and "At the Fish Houses" depict this tension. However, given the context of Bishop's life, I feel that "The Prodigal" best exemplifies the impact her unhappy childhood had on her adult life. Obviously this poem is not autobiographical, but the tenderness and empathy that Bishop shows towards the alcoholic swine herd are deeply moving. This is another poem that centres on the idea of home. The squalor and filth of the swine herd's existence are palpable. In the poem, we learn that the "brown enormous odour he lived by was too close for him to judge". Despite the awful reality of his existence, the swineherd is capable of beautiful insights. There is an endearing quality to the manner in which the "pigs [stick] out their little feet" and snore. The final lines of this poem are genuinely touching, especially when one considers Bishop's nomadic existence.

It took him a long time finally to
make up his mind and go home.

Once again I was struck by Bishop's control of feeling in this poem. As in "Sestina", she relies on tight structure (this time the sonnet form) to achieve a powerful yet restrained message.

It's no wonder, given the troubled nature of Bishop's childhood and her sense of dislocation as an adult, that she spent so much time inquiring into the nature of identity. Very often, as in "Questions of Travel" the idea of the journey becomes a metaphor for the exploration of the self. The observations of nature and the natural world in this poem are very interesting. The reader is presented with images of "crowded streams", "trees", "the fat brown bird" and "one more folded sunset". However, the poet very quickly goes beyond the postcard image, in order to acknowledge the intrinsic value of travel. For Bishop, travel involves exploration and this exploration is, in her estimation, "part of what it is to be human". She believes that we are determined to "rush to see the sun the other way round". She even goes so far as to say that such travel yields powerful insights into the human condition. In the final two stanzas of the poem, set off in Italics, Bishop reaches a profound conclusion. She dismisses Pascal's ideas about travel and finally she claims that the choice about who we are is in reality never made freely:

Continent, city, country, society, the choice
is never wide And never free.

Here Bishop examines in a simple and straight forward manner some very difficult concepts. I find the final two lines of the poem very poignant when

considered in the context of Bishop's nomadic life. The idea that she should find the idea of "home" perplexing is very moving.

Bishop's poems do not merely confine themselves to explorations of self and identity. She is also a skilled observer. One of the most interesting techniques that Bishop employs is her tendency to make the familiar look strange. In this respect, she often employs strange and unusual similes. In "At The Fishhouses", the detailed description of the fish houses and the microscopic examination of the "wheelbarrow", "the old man's hand" and the "capstan" suddenly give way to a strange, almost unrecognisable place. The beautiful "surface of the sea" becomes, in the final section of the poem, like what "we imagine knowledge to be". It is "dark, salty, clear, moving, utterly free drawn from the cold hard mouth of the world." The familiar has become almost surreal. Similarly, in "The Fish" we witness another such transformation. The "tremendous fish" that was battered and venerable is released and the familiar world of the fishing boat is transformed until becomes "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow." "In The Filling Station", the detailed almost photographic description of the "oil soaked, oil permeated" "little filling station" gives way to a completely different viewpoint. Suddenly, in the final

lines of the poem the station becomes symbolic of the fact that someone loves us all.

I have to admit to finding Bishop's poetry challenging. Compared to many of the other poets on the course, which I found accessible on a first reading, many of Bishop's poems were perplexing. However, I honestly feel that Bishop rewards the readers' efforts. Her keen eye for detail, her restrained, yet deeply emotional poems and her mastery of form deserve our attention and admiration. I strongly recommend that everyone read at least one poem by Elizabeth Bishop.



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