

# Explication of elizabeth bishop's "the shampoo"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In her affectionate verse “ The Shampoo”, Elizabeth Bishop addresses her lesbian partner Lota, whose great black tresses have begun to bear the signs of grey aging. Her tone is tender and her language contemplative—she marvels at the marks of age with a sigh, not a scowl. Bishop infuses the poem with imagery of lichens and astros, first to observe the marks of aging, then to expose an emotional current that runs deeper than its transient, physical counterpart. “ The Shampoo” serves as vehicle for a subtle and sentimental declaration of love, which Bishop asserts even against the faint manifestations of age. In the first stanza, Bishop likens the grey hairs of her partner to marine lichens—insinuating their way through the threads of her hair and spreading forth in “ gray, concentric shocks.” (The strands of grey that reveal themselves are “ shocks” both in the sense that they are tufts of color and literally shocking to Bishop; they have existed all along but until now have gone unnoticed, and their presence and implications are jolting.) In the opening line of the poem, the grey hairs are termed oxymoronically to be “ still explosions.” This is perhaps to say that they grow quietly, imperceptibly—almost as flowers do—until their growth is perceived, at which point the reaction of the observer is an explosion of emotion. Bishop further supports the notion of a silent maturation in line 5 when she mentions the moon, which she employs as a metaphor for Lota’s face. The “ rings around the moon” are in fact the lines and wrinkles that have begun to manifest themselves upon Lota’s aging visage. As with the spreading of lichens, the changes in the waxing and waning of the moon can never quite be observed in their movement, but can instead only be detected once the full change is complete. Despite the physical transformations that have occurred and are still occurring, Bishop notes that in memories she and her

<https://assignbuster.com/explication-of-elizabeth-bishops-the-shampoo/>

lover are ever-fresh and still full of the vibrancy of youth. Although the rhyme scheme (abacbc) remains in effect throughout the poem's three stanzas, Bishop uses her poetic license to tweak it in the second stanza. This is appropriate given the slight shift of her tone, which becomes one of lament for her "dear friend" who has shown aging before her time. Bishop is aware of her own unrealistic wish to preserve a sort of indestructibility—an immortality—which Lota's wrinkles and grey hairs clearly supplant. Even still, she fantasizes that the "heavens will attend / as long on us," (Lines 7-8) as they would attend on the moon, which is seemingly an infinity. As Lota has been "precipitate" and appears to have aged suddenly, even earlier than Bishop feels she should have, so has the abstract "Time" been "amenable"—following in tandem with the practical reality of Lota's maturation. There is a hint of the solemn when Bishop refers to the grey hairs against the black backdrop of Lota's head as "shooting stars." Shooting stars do in fact illumine the sky; but shooting stars are also falling stars. Eventually, these stars will flicker out, just as life finally fails. The "shooting stars" are in "bright formation", which gives them a sense of direction, purpose—as if they were soldiers marching toward the final clash between life and death. Lota's lines "are flocking where, / so straight, so soon?" (Lines 15-16), Bishop asks, displaying a childlike curiosity which is merely rhetorical. Bishop herself knows the final destination of grey hairs and aging, and recognizes that they are undeniable signs of the irreversible progression of life toward death. Bishop's final solution to the shadows of aging is the warm and intimate act of washing her partner's hair—a celebration, rather than a denigration, of the rite of growing old. The act of shampooing is generally thought to be an autonomous task; here, however,

<https://assignbuster.com/explication-of-elizabeth-bishops-the-shampoo/>

Bishop seeks to wash her partner's hair in an attempt to become one with her. In its tender simplicity, the act evokes a sense of bonding with gentle and genuine caresses; it does not connote sexual love, but emphasizes rather a sincere, almost spiritual love. By washing away the worries and concerns surrounding old age, Bishop celebrates her partner and their mutual love. In the concluding lines of the poem, Bishop beckons Lota to come to the "big tin basin" that is "battered and shiny like the moon." The moon, with its crevices and craters, is of course Lota's face—a face that is weathered and lined with age, yet still glowing with life and vigor. That the order of these final adjectives is "battered and shiny" is perhaps significant as the lasting impression is not of the "battered" but of the "shiny"—of the resplendence that still emanates from Lota's face.