

Landscape in elizabeth bishop's "cape breton"



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In "Cape Breton," Elizabeth Bishop describes a landscape for the rigid cliffs and water that compose it, but also for its representation on a grander scale. The landscape is a representation of the peaceful world and how it is inevitably interrupted by human presence, affecting its ability to be natural. To Bishop, the landscape is intriguingly mysterious but is constantly awaiting on the arrival of civilization, proving that we cannot always have just nature, but rather we must have nature in relation to humans. Bishop describes a landscape not as a world of things, but rather as a laying down of ideas and hidden meanings.

Bishop paints a mysterious landscape, one with a wall of mist that "hangs in layers among the valleys and gorges of the mainland" and "the ghosts of the glaciers" (Bishop 16, 18). The landscape is ominous and almost nervous, as if waiting on the arrival of something or someone. Bishop describes each feature of the landscape at more than just face-value. She describes each part of the landscape as having feelings rather than being lifeless and emotionless, suggesting that the landscape's meaning goes beyond the water and rock it is composed of. The glaciers are described as ghost-like and the edges of rock are irregular and nervous. Bishop paints a more abstract scene that is difficult to read at times, focusing not on the physical features per se, but the mind's ability to turn them into ideas. The image presents the idea that landscapes and nature in general, are most natural and peaceful when they are left alone, untouched by man. If Bishop painted the image of trees, water and all other features as individual components, it would be straightforward without any underlying meaning. But it is here, where Bishop's description of the landscape and the physical features that

compose it, work together to create emotions of mystery and magic. It allows the mind to contemplate the underlying meaning of the landscape, as something more than its physical qualities.

The mysterious landscape Bishop has described is interrupted by human presence. There are "occasional small yellow bulldozers" and "miles of burnt forests, standing in grey scratches / like the admirable sculpture made on stones by stones" (25, 37-38). The landscape that was once quiet is now dead and grey. The only sources of light are the yellow bulldozers and the yellow school bus that drives down the abandoned road. The bus is full of people and lets off a man and his baby who go through the meadow, to a house by the water. Bishop describes the physical qualities of the landscape and how they relate to human life. Once the man and baby travel from the bus to the house on the water, the landscape is no longer the same. The landscape is no longer quiet and mysterious, as if human presence has tainted this world. It is now meaningless and dead: "Whatever the landscape has of meaning appears to have been / abandoned" (31-32). Bishop does not focus specifically on the water or the mountains, but focuses on the landscape; how it feels and what themes it invokes. The landscape is not a world of things, but is rather a laying down of ideas and concepts. It is ironic how when the landscape shifts from lonely to inhabited, despite only being inhabited by two people, the tone of the landscape immediately changes. Humans, who are normally considered as being full of life and noise, make the landscape quieter than ever: "And these regions now have little to say for themselves" (39). The landscape is more than what can be seen by the

eye; it is a representation of the world's mysterious nature and how it becomes dark and dead when attempting to co-exist with humans.

Bishop's description of a landscape focuses not on the physical parts it is composed of, but how these features allow the mind to turn them into concepts and themes. The landscape relates to a bigger picture in relation to humans; how the world will always be best when it is alone. Landscapes will always be tainted by human life, or waiting upon human arrival. Bishop describes a landscape that is ominous and mysterious, that quickly changes into a dark and dead as a response to the presence of human life. The landscape is not about the water, the cliffs or the animals, but the work of these parts to create an image that goes beyond what meets the eye.