

Elizabeth bishop

[Life](#), [Childhood](#)



Elizabeth Bishop, an only child, was born in Worcester, Massachusetts. After her father, a successful builder, died when she was eight months old, Bishop's mother became mentally ill and was institutionalized in 1916. Effectively orphaned during her very early childhood, she lived with her grandparents on a farm in Great Village, Nova Scotia, a period she also referenced in her writing. This was also where she developed into a first-class fisher woman. Bishop's mother remained in an asylum until her death in 1934, and the two were never reunited. Bishop struggled with her identity mainly due to the fact that she was a lesbian and a writer. Throughout her life she suffered bouts of depression and illness, chronic asthma caused her to have to spend long periods of time in bed. She moves the reader from the external image to the internal image. Her work has a highly visual quality with a painter-like approach. Her use of imagery is striking. She has a photographic eye for detail and many of her poems are self referential. The 4 poems I have studied are " the filling station", " The fish", " the prodigal" and " sestina". The Filling Station The theme of this poem is a statement about life. The poet brings to life the ordinary mundane scene of a petrol station and she subtly alludes to the family life that exists there. Her objective is to convey the idea that love exists beneath the grim dirty façade. This is a love that is feminine powerful and only visible when one examines the scene with care. This could be a universal theme that explains the necessity of love to lift grim reality to a higher plane. Bishop's keen eye for detail is evident in this poem " oil soaked, oil permeated to a disturbing all over black translucency", " father wears a dirty oil soaked monkey suit". At the end of the poem it is obvious that Bishop has moved from external description to an

internal or personal reflection in the line “ somebody loves us all”. Bishop uses onomatopoeia to create a calm soothing atmosphere this is linked to the feminine presence. This is a contrast to the dirt and noise of the main domain of the garage “ arranges the cans so that they softly say Esso-so-so-so.. “. Bishop changes from being an objective observer of a scene to become involved in doing this she also draws the reader in and engages them. Bishop uses feminine objects in order to create the notion of a female presence. This is suggested subtly to the reader not told thus the reader's attention is engaged with the question Who is the somebody? “ a big dim doily draping the taboret”, “ a big hirsute begonia”, “.. embroidered in daisy stitch with marguerites”, “ heavy with grey crochet”. The theme of this poem could be the admiration of raw courage. In the poem the fish fights to achieve its freedom and the speaker in the poem then revels in its achievement “.. victory filled up the little rented boat and I let the fish go.. “. There is a sense of respect for those who have suffered and this could have meaning for Bishop's own life. Bishop's keen eye for detail is again evident in this poem “ his brown skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper”, “ the frightening gills, fresh and crisp with blood”, “ the dramatic reds and blacks of his shiny entrails, and the pink swim-bladder like a big peony”. There is an obvious tone of awe and respect for the old fish “.. I stared and stared and victory filled up the little rented boat.. “. It is a long conversational poem. It is free verse and it is almost a verbal painting of the fish when you note the poet's use of colour. Layer upon layer of physical detail is constructed until the fish almost jumps out of the page at the reader and back into the water. Bishop uses repetition to reinforce her points “ Here and there his brown skin

hung in strips like ancient wallpaper, and its pattern of darker brown was like wallpaper". The use of rhyme at the end contributes to the sense of release. " until everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!, And I let the fish go". Her use of metaphor is striking " a five-haired beard of wisdom", " oil had spread a rainbow". This is a poem of pure vision and it appeals to the readers eye. There is a type of epic heroism associated with the fish. Sestina The sestina's theme revolves around six main images: the house, the grandmother, the child, the stove, the almanac and tears. The first impression this poem left me with was that " tears" were everywhere, literally and figuratively. The word " tears" were repeated in every single stanza, suggesting the overwhelming and haunting sadness that clouds the theme. A grandmother and a child are inside the house; there is a torrential downpour outside and the grandmother seems to be mourning over the death of somebody. Bishops keen eye for detail is again evident in this poem " 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". she uses the continually uses the literary technique of repetition. Throughout the entire poem she repeats the words, " almanac", " stove", and " tears". The use of tears in this poem represents the hidden sadness of a child. The tears of the tea/kettle are compared with the tears as well as the old grandmother hiding her tears. It is obvious that something tragic has happened in the family. The child draws something that seems to upset the Grandmother greatly. It is obvious that a close family member has died. The child is not yet aware of this fact. The " stove" is repeated to act as a distraction to the Grandmother. She tends, and adds more wood to the stove to distract herself from the

pain. The child then shows the picture “ proudly to the Grandmother” but then she “ busies herself about the stove”. The almanac also plays an important role in this poem. It is said it “ hovers half open above the child, hovers above the old grandmother”. This “ almanac” serves as the recent event that has affected both the people it is hovering over. This “ almanac” seems to act as the record of this horrible event, and it won’t go away. These repeated symbols add to the theme that repressed feelings must be expressed or they will haunt you.