

# Main themes in one art

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## **‘ One art’ by Elizabeth Bishop**

‘ One art’ is a poem that explores the way people get accustomed of losing people or objects they love, through losing insignificant things. She talks about losing objects such as ‘ door keys’ or her ‘ mother’s watch’ which Bishop suggests we should prepare ourselves for loss we are still exposed to and its pain and grief. The speaker immediately addresses their attitude and tone in the poem with the first line ‘ the art of losing isn’t hard to master’. The situation the speaker is confronting is the inevitability of loss and how it may hurt, but life continues.

The first stanza provides a clear opening statement of the poem, which declares that loss isn’t a big deal and we should get used to it. She advises that we should get used to loss by practising losing less important things such as, ‘ a mother’s watch’ or the ‘ house keys’ or a bit of wasted time so you become comfortable with the insignificant losses and be ready when the big issues come along. The losses in the poem become more and more significant. First is the things we remember, like names and places, then it’s more specific items such as a mother’s watch or homes.

The imagery displayed in this poem is taking real life situations in which you lose something and produce some sort of emotion or importance behind it, like losing a watch shouldn’t hold that much significance to certain people, but losing a continent carries much weight and is a big deal. Words in the poem that seem to have the most meaning are ‘ loose’, ‘ disaster’ and ‘ master’. These words respond to the overall message and tone of the poem.

Bishop portrays the repeated use of imagery by first recognising the art of losing insignificant things to shifting to more profound things.

The speaker encourages the 'you' in the poem. In the last stanza the 'you' is her lover who had committed suicide to practise losing. Bishop uses the villanelle form where the first and third lines of the first tercet are repeated. Structurally the poem begins with insignificant losses such as keys, hours, names, and then progresses to more important things such as people and things. At the end of each line, words rhyme with either 'master' or 'intent'. Bishop repeats the word 'like' to avoid the shocking disaster: the loss of a person still deeply loved. On the first and third lines of most stanzas, there's a rhyme scheme of A, B, A except the last stanza has four lines and a rhyme scheme of A, B, C, C.

One art is a villanelle poem. It is made up of triplets and a final quatrain. The poem has 16 lines divided into 6 stanzas with three lines each except the last stanza has four. Iambic pentameter is also used throughout the poem. The poem is lighthearted in the beginning and then fades into a more serious tone near the end. The tone progressively changes as the poem continues, becoming more personal to the speaker. The last stanza is sorrowful. Bishop uses short, straightforward sentences and a repeated structure in which we explore different losses.

Bishop never admits she feels sad about the many losses mentioned in this poem. The poet reminds us that sadness plays an insignificant role here.

"The art of losing isn't hard to master" This confident statement covers up any emotion that losing might create.

“ I miss them but it wasn’t a disaster” The poet admits that she misses the places she loved and lost, she is still hesitating to say that any loss is disastrous. We are not sure how the poet lost these places and why they are inaccessible for her.

This poem consciously avoids describing the pain of losing a beloved person or thing but constantly attempts to remind us how much we care about the people, places and things in our lives.

“Then practise losing father, losing faster: places, names and were it was you meant to travel”, here loss is re-defined not only as the loss of objects or even time but of memory itself. “I lost my mother’s watch. And look! My last or next to last, of three loved houses went” These curious statements lead us to wonder what significance these objects have for the poet. We are certain that the watch is a symbol for her relationship with her mother.

One art doesn’t dive straight in and attack the big issues, like the loss of a home or a loved one but instead begins with little things that we often lose. As the poem goes on, the objects mentioned become more and more meaningful. We observe that by the end that the loss of simple objects such as a key or watch become a metaphor for the loss of other things the poet loves such as past homes or lovers.

In lines 2 and 3 the poet personifies the lost objects, stating that they “seem filled with the intent to be lost” meaning they want to get lost.

In the final stanza the poet reveals that the poem is actually about the loss of a loved one. The poet mentions not only specific homes but also beloved

cities and a continent that she's lost. This makes us wonder how she owned these places. These places are maybe symbolic of the memories she had of them or the relationships she once had there.

One art is a simple enough poem with the themes loss and love. The flow is catchy and consistent. It wasn't terribly long and annoying altogether and I enjoyed it. The poem focuses mainly on the art of losing which means practice makes perfect. No matter how much we practise the art of losing, we can never really be prepared for losses.