

# Free essay on one art by elizabeth bishop

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Elizabeth Bishop wrote her poem "One Art" during the tumultuous times of her relationship with Alice Methfessel, who was her muse, her friend and her lover. It is considered to be one of Bishop's best poems, reflecting on the period of estrangement, during which Alice Methfessel was engaged to be married, which came as a shock to Bishop. Working on this poem, in the form of a villanelle, which is a poem consisting of nineteen lines with only two rhymes, helped Bishop in these distressed times, only to bring them back together in their unconventional "happily ever after" story. The poem was Bishop's solace as she was trying to sway herself into believing that some things are meant to be lost and thus, she should feel neither resignation nor pain, but that she should accept it as inevitable. The poem's imagery is simplistic enough, but its symbolism is piercing in its endeavor to show that "The art of losing isn't hard to master;/ so many things seem filled with the intent/ to be lost that their loss is no disaster" (Bishop 166).

The poem deals with the pain of loss, despite its seemingly unsophisticated language and imagery, while the autobiographical note only adds to the poem's application to reality. The feelings in the poem are very strong, yet Bishop keeps them under strict control, trying to give the impression that her personal feelings are also under control, while in fact, this is not so. The pain is hard to endure, but she wants to be a survivor, and is trying to present ways in which she would get used to the idea of losing things, people, memories. She wishes to become numb to this and not feel the pain anymore, thus taking control of her life.

She commences the poem in this manner of a survivor, that losing things is no disaster, meaning that it is not the end of the world and all one has to do

is be stronger than the pain. She continues with “ Lose something every day,” reminiscing of a doctor who gives advice on how to lead a healthy life, what to consume and what to steer clear of, almost like a prescription for a life without the pain of loss (Bishop 166). She advises her readers to start this new way of life with small steps: “ Accept the fluster/ of lost door keys, the hour badly spent” (Bishop 166). Meaning, one should accept the small losses as something insignificant and not get upset about them. Only when one learns how to deal with small losses can one move on to handling properly the big losses. Additionally, she repeats over and over again the line “ The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” as if trying to fortify the idea that this seemingly impossible endeavor is not impossible at all (Bishop 166). Because, if her reader forgets how easy controlling loss is, she is there to remind him again and again. The more times she repeats this phrase, the more effective it becomes for the reader, as well as for herself.

Consequently, she is moving on in this series of loss she fervently endeavors to overcome: “ Then practice losing farther, losing faster:/ places, and names, and where it was you meant/ to travel. None of these will bring disaster” (Bishop 166). These lines turn the readers’ attention toward more serious loss. It is no longer door keys and an hour spent in vain. Now, it is places and names, meaning people and memories she has of them. The mind can only remember a certain amount of information, while the rest it stores in the realm of the unconscious. Bishop is trying to convince herself and her readers, that forgetting and loss are inevitable and thus, should provoke no pain. She mentions losing her mother’s watch, which was probably an heirloom of great emotional value to Bishop, yet she convinces

herself it is of no importance, just like it is of no importance that she lost her house. She continues speaking of lost cities, rivers and a continent, realms she could not possibly own, but only feel as her own. In this way, she is juxtaposing owning places with owning people, because both are impossible. A person can never be owned by another person, and a relationship is merely an agreement of two people that they symbolically belong to each other. But, this is only applicable as long as they both have feelings for each other. As soon as the emotions wane, the “contract” of the two of them “belonging” to each other ceases to be valid.

She ends her poem with “Even losing you” and this is the breaking point (Bishop 166). All her words were leading up to this moment, preparing her to say that she has lost someone very dear and important to her. Finally, she rounds up her poem with “the art of losing’s not too hard to master/ though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster” (Bishop 166). She adds the “Write it!” part as a gestural idea that she as a poet can survive any disaster by writing about it. She can overcome through her poetry, and can share the knowledge that she has gained, the knowledge of loss and how not to feel pain, with the world. This is her reward and her therapy.

Elizabeth Bishop’s prescription-like poem “One Art” speaks of a seemingly simple idea: overcome the pain of loss through preconditioning. By learning how to deal with small losses, one can gain knowledge and strength on how to deal with heart-rending loss. Life is full of loss; it is inevitably intertwined in the very fabric of human existence. But, it is all about how a person deals with this loss: he can be a depressed shell of a man or can use his heartache and “Write it!”

## **References:**

Bishop, Elizabeth. Poems, Prose and Letter. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, LLC., 2008. Print.