

# Speech introducing the poetry of elizabeth bishop

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



My fellow students and writers, welcome. The honour of speaking to you, the poets of the future, has been bestowed upon me and I hope I will not disappoint. As Stephen Spender once said 'I fear I cannot make an amusing speech as I read that all geniuses are devoid of humour'. Today I will be speaking about one of the greatest female poets of the twentieth century, and one of my own personal favourites, Elizabeth Bishop. 'There's nothing more embarrassing than being a poet really'.

The words of this modest poet convey the shy hidden qualities of a woman who was spectacular in being unspectacular. Bishop was never preoccupied with the obsolescent idea of being a poet. This gave her a sincerity that transposed to her poetry in expressing the emotional journey that was her life. Her poetry echoes a life well lived with extremes of emotion from the joy of heightened awareness, to abject isolation and depression. Elizabeth Bishop was born in America in 1911. Her father died shortly after her birth and at the age of five Bishop lost her mother to mental illness.

These harsh lessons of life, so early learned, left a void in Bishop's life, the void of a settled loving family. Her poem 'Filling Station' explores the themes of love and family which depicts her longing to be loved and to belong. The poem describes a family living amongst the oil and dirt of a filling station. At first she dismisses the filthy place 'Oh but it is dirty!' But as in much of her poetry Bishop looks beyond the obvious to find a beauty and homeliness within all the dirt. In this poem she comes to the conclusion that 'Somebody loves us all'.

This short sentence has gained the power of a proverb for me in my life and I'm sure it will hold resonance with many of you too. This comforting thought, wise and true, shows how Bishop reveals the truth through her close observation of the little things in her quest for self-discovery. Bishop's original way of viewing situations is also clear in her poem 'The Prodigal'. Have you ever wondered what happened to the prodigal son during his transgression from home? Well Bishop did in this clever poem which focuses on the lowest part of the prodigal son's life.

This effectively simple poem describes mankind's need for companionship, she herself being a self-proclaimed outsider. As an outsider Bishop led a very unsettled restless life described as desperately and energetically nomadic. She once said 'All my life I have lived and behaved very much like the sandpiper - just running down the edges of different countries and continents'. Here Bishop confesses of a great desire to travel, discernibly in search of the home she never had. Bishop wrote the poem 'Questions of Travel' which depicts the time she spent in Brazil.

Although it was a place of immense beauty, she often felt separate and outside of it. She asks 'Should we have stayed at home wherever that may be? ' which shows Bishop's great loneliness in searching for belonging. In this poem she also questions the human need to travel to strange foreign places. It foregrounds the issue of whether the tourist's quest stems from an innocent desire to savour landscapes of difference or whether it might have a darker motive, resembling the imperialistic desire to conquer and acquire other lands.

She then asks if it is childishness that causes us 'to rush to see the sun the other way around'. More humorously this poem signifies the limitations of human knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures. After all are we not all guilty of inwardly complaining of the intrusive tourists that plague our country annually? Bishop asks 'Is it right to be watching strangers in a play in this strangest of theatres? ' However Bishop's argument promoting the merits of travel will banish the negative thoughts of even the most xenophobic among us.

I feel many will enjoy the theatrical differences conveyed in this poem as Bishop is so wry and honest about the differences between locals and tourists. A striking photographic quality of images is atypical of Bishop's poetry. Her poem 'The Fish' uses language that is imagistic and precise in describing the confrontation between an amateur fisher and a 'tremendous' battle-worn fish. The poem is rich in imagery, simile and metaphor and uses layering of images which describes in intricate detail the newly caught fish.

Bishop is an empathetic imaginative observer as she describes the fish inside and out down to 'The dramatic reds and blacks of his shiny entrails, and the pink swim bladder like a big peony'. The final line 'until everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow! And I let the fish go' describes a moment of epiphany and revelation common to Bishop's poetry. Bishop pronounces a merciful verdict on the life of the venerable old fish which contrasts strongly with man's attempt to conquer nature. This moral poem is one to think about the next time you go fishing.

My favourite poem by Elizabeth Bishop is 'First Death in Nova Scotia'. The full complexity of childhood is effectively evoked in this simple poem about the death of her cousin. This is a poem we can all relate to as it captures a child's first experience of death. Although written in her fifties, Bishop manages to capture the confusion she felt as she attempted to understand the finality of death. This poem has quite a chilling quality which echoes the wrong sequence death has taken in extinguishing the life of a child.

The final stanza, although chilling, is one of my favourite pieces of poetry. The vulnerability and fear created as the child doubts the presence of an afterlife is true of my experience of death and I'm sure other's. The child Bishop asks 'But how could Arthur go; clutching his tiny lily with his eyes shut up so tight and the roads deep in snow?' This final line filled with poignancy is a perfect example of Bishop's simple but effective style. Oscar Wilde is quoted as saying 'One should rejoice in the beauty, the joy and the wonder of life; the less said about life's sores the better'.

However, Bishop manages to do both successfully in her striking and distinctive poetry that will give much pleasure for years to come. Her poetry covers topics from death to family and from travel to morality. Her keen eye for detail, her accurate observations and her simple, concise description of the world around us makes Elizabeth Bishop's poetry an animated read. Her poetry boasts genuine feeling which originates from her own harsh experiences in life and often expresses a greater understanding of life and death.

Her pleasing style makes her poetry a firm favourite among many amateur writers and poetry lovers. I hope I have instilled in you today the joys of reading the poetry of one of the most influential females of the last century. I will now leave you with a final quote from Elizabeth Bishop's poem called 'Poem'. This poem maps the reader's experience of reading poetry, from indifference to recognition of a common humanity. 'Life and the memory of it cramped, dim, on a piece of Bristol board, dim, but how alive, how touching in detail--the little that we get for free, the little of our earthly trust'