

# Elizabeth bishop's personal poetry

Profession, Poet



Elizabeth Bishop has often been linked to the poetical canon of the 'confessional poets' of the 1960's and 70's. Confessional poetry focused largely on the poet, exposing his/her insecurities and personal vulnerabilities. Bishop, however, was better known for her insistence on remaining outside of this movement. To be called a confessional poet "would have horrified the very proper and obsessively discreet author" (Gioia 19). She seemed to express the view that the tragedies within a poet's mind should not be found on the page. As Bishop once famously said regarding confessional poets: "You wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves" (Costello 334). Despite her convictions, Bishop's personal life was so wrought with tragedy and alienation that she sought a way to express her experiences through her work. Poetry, especially during this period of total lyrical exposure, became the perfect medium for her to work through her pain. Her peers had set the standard for audience reception of such personal poetry, and Bishop sought to utilize their idea of self-recovery in her own, much more subtle, way. Importantly, we must recognize both the slight commonality and the distinct difference between Bishop and the confessional poets. Confessional poetry often "dealt with subject matter that previously had not been openly discussed in American poetry. Private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships were addressed in this type of poetry, often in an autobiographical manner" ("A Brief Guide"). Considering this, we see a connection between Bishop and other confessional poets. Despite her resolution to be known outside of the confessional canon, her work somehow lends itself to expressing personal experiences and emotions. The difference

is that Bishop extends herself beyond the label of “confessional” largely by using formal poetic techniques to acknowledge and work through her personal pain. She utilizes many formalistic forms, particularly narrative tone and understatement, to express private experiences in a rather subtle and personal manner. Through her use of these techniques in the poems “In the Waiting Room” and “One Art” we can see how Elizabeth Bishop’s wielding of personal experience functions beyond the bounds of ‘confessional poetry’ and becomes more about reconciling the sense of loss in her life.” In the “Waiting Room” is a poem that reads like a personal narrative from the point of view of a young girl. Here we see a child who, while waiting in a dentist’s office for her aunt, has an epiphany about her gender identity. Bishop presents this poem as a scene, giving immense details from the exact location—“Worcester, Massachusetts”—to the time of year—“It was winter. It got dark early” (Bishop 159). This prose-like narrative suggests that Bishop is telling us a story, presumably one about herself as she gives the speaker her own name. If we see this poem as autobiographical, then we can understand how there are two points of view: there is the perspective of the young Elizabeth and that of the adult, and these two points of view function to reconcile Bishop’s sense of identity. This is a poem of a child learning what it means to live in the world as a woman, as well as an adult using this memory to come to terms with her present female identity. While the child sits in the waiting room, reading a National Geographic with photos of women being tortured, she begins to question the identity she once believed she had: “But I felt: you are an I, you are an Elizabeth, you are one of them.” (Bishop 160). She refuses to consider herself one of these women, because

to become a woman is to become the other, the oppressed. Her fears are reinforced when the violence the magazine describes against those “black, naked women” in the outside world connects with her own world — as she hears a cry of pain coming from her aunt in the dentist’s office (Bishop 159). She finally sees that the constituents of the gender she must accept are “all just one”, a diminished and oppressed group of women; she feels as though she is drowning under the “big black wave” of responsibilities that coincide with being a woman. As Bishop recalls this memory, we can see how the narrative tone of this work functions as a way to reconcile coming to terms with her own identity. While examining the incident in a story-like quality, she is able to disconnect herself from the experience. She is able to declare that she is no longer that terrified young girl fearful to become marginalized but rather a grown adult that defies being “a foolish, timid woman” by expressing her emotions through her art (Bishop 160). As an adult woman, she has experienced first-hand those responsibilities the young Elizabeth understands to be frighteningly oppressive and harsh. Now that she has lived as a woman, and has written of her personal anxieties, Bishop is able to accept the inevitability of her role in society. She is able to move on through her life, just as the poem, in its final stanza, portrays the world moving on after the young girl’s epiphany. “One Art”, if examined in the context of Bishop’s life, is certainly a much more personal and heartbreaking poem than anything else in her cache. Published in her book *Geography III* in 1976, “One Art” was written after Bishop had moved from Brazil—supposedly the only place she ever could call a home—and after her ex-lover Lota de Macedo Soares had committed suicide. In the wake of these events, it is not

hard to imagine “ One Art” as a way for Bishop to master the sense of reoccurring loss in her life. This poem is “ distinctively Bishopian in its restraint, formality, classicism. Yet...deals openly with loss and has been rightly called...painfully autobiographical.” (McCabe 27). We see through her repetition a sort of rationalization for the tragedies in her life. By combining losing “ a continent” and her lover with things as trivial as “ lost door keys” or “ an hour badly spent”, Bishop attempts to marginalize her own pain regarding those losses (Bishop 178). In other words, in the poem, losing a lover is as common and mundane as losing a watch. A reader familiar with Bishop's loss can easily see the ironic disregard of pain she is expressing through the lines “—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture I love) I shan't have lied.” (Bishop 178). In her offhanded manner, she is using these understatements to force the pain of loss—and by extension her own pain—to become much less significant. Bishop also brilliantly utilizes the strict formality of this type of villanelle poem to work through her emotions. It seems as if the fixed form is trapping the pain within the poem, forcing her to acknowledge and “ master” it so she can move on (Bishop 178). Yet the subtle beauty of Bishop's technique lies in what Kathleen Spivak calls her “ surprising irregularity” and how “ Bishop, a perfectionist, chose the breaking of metric” as “ significant and deliberate” (Spivak 507). Near the final lines, the emotions that are reined in by the strict villanelle form begin to break free. Now, mastering the art of losing has gone from being “ not hard” to “ not too hard”, suggesting that there is still a feeling of pain and difficulty each time she is forced to deal with loss. This pain can only be concealed for so long, and although “ displays of naked emotion are unthinkable” and the

cry of grief is ultimately “subdued, suppressed and denied” (Spivak 508), it still manages to find its expression in the last few heartbreaking lines, as the narrator stumbles, repeating words, breaking punctuation, and literally telling herself to “Write it!” (Bishop 178). The beauty of Bishop’s “One Art” lies in her ability to both conceal and reveal her true emotions while attempting to master the art of loss, a pain that the poem itself proves can never fully be controlled. Reading Elizabeth Bishop’s work is like taking part in a great poetic archaeological dig. Both the reader and the poet are searching through the words, digging through the intent, and discerning truths behind the language in order to excavate the poet’s consciousness—her life: “In a confessional and narcissistic age...her poems are more personal than autobiographical (Gioia 26). Bishop’s poetry was about more than revealing her mistakes and pain to the world, and labeling her a ‘confessional poet’ would be simplistic. Rather, her work displays a mastery at “concealing and revealing” the personal (Spivak 496). It carefully subdues personal emotions, yet acknowledges them in a way that reconciles the experiences in the poet’s life. Bishop had the astonishing ability to express these experiences and grapple with her emotions through her poetry, and yet do so while maintaining a distinct sense of conduct and discretion.