

Elizabeth bishop analysis essay sample

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Elizabeth Bishop is an intriguing and enigmatic poet whose poetic voice is distinct and individualistic. In many ways Derek Mahon's assessment of Bishop as "the shy perfectionist with her painter's eye", is her most fitting and apt legacy. Bishop's work is replete with vivid imagery and striking metaphors and the keenness of her perception of the world around her is remarkable. Her poetry is carefully wrought often combining rich and detailed imagery with thematic indirectness. In my opinion, Bishop is a poet of the ordinary, the mundane and the banal, who writes about the universal themes of loss, loneliness, belonging and pain. We often search Bishop's poetry to understand her life and we use her life to understand her poetry. An outsider for much of her life, much of her work is focused on her struggles with herself and the rest of the world. Her depression, alcoholism, sexuality and her relationship with her parents all compounded to the poet's alienation and desire to belong, and it is this sense of never belonging that is so eloquently captured in much of her most poignant and memorable poems.

Much of Bishop's work is preoccupied with motherhood, the role of the mother, her presence and influence, sometimes in the most unlikely of places. On a denotative level, 'Filling Station' is a descriptive but trivial and charming little appreciation of motherhood. On a connotative level, however, the poem may be interpreted as an allegory of human life, in which the filling station is a microcosm of the sordidness and squalor of the world. Any attempts to decorate or adorn this world may be as Patrick Murray argues, "a metaphor for our early efforts to find beauty out of ugliness and aesthetic harmony out of randomness". We strive to distinguish between beauty and ugliness. Our whole world is divided between the two. But within our

identification of what is ugly, comes our human desire to turn this into beauty, to change it. In my opinion, in ' Filling Station', Bishop is investigating why we feel we are compelled to do this.

The language is simple but effective the poet describes the banal picture of the filling station. My first impression of the omniscient narration was a harshly judgemental voice combined with a tone of superiority and disgust. She creates a context, describing her surroundings as " oil-soaked" with an " overall black translucency".

It is obvious that the poet's curiosity is aroused as she poses a series of questions interrogating the uniqueness and mystery behind the mundane scene she is presented with. She wonders, " Do they live in the filling station". The scene transforms from a " dirty" and disgusting place to a " comfy" one, a place of nurture. " Comfy" is a colloquial phrase to emphasise that the filling station is a place of calmness and a relaxation, a home, rather than a place of strict rules and order, a work place.

The first image we are presented with is that of the sordid, decrepit world of the filling station. We are then introduced to the inhabitants. The Father in " an oil-soaked monkey-suit" and his " greasy sons". The whole scene is described as thoroughly " dirty" and masculine and is completed with a " dirty dog" relaxing on the wicker furniture. The dog comprises the family unit, further emphasising that the filling station is a home. As the poet becomes more drawn into the scene, she begins to focus on objects that illustrate the desire or aspiration for a different, finer or better life. These

ordinary objects bring order to the chaotic scene which is so common to Bishop's poetry. " Why, oh, why the doily?"

The final line encapsulates Bishop's sense of an affectionate presence, " Somebody loves us all". We are left with an image of a female presence, or on a broader sense the " somebody" may imply a divine perspective where filth and ornament are reconciled. The poem ends with a tolerant and optimistic view of humanity which is very unusual to Bishop's poetry.

" First Death in Nova Scotia", Bishop's elegy for her young cousin Arthur is one of the simplest yet compelling and moving poems the poet has ever written. Articulated from a child's perspective and containing one of the few direct references to her mother, the poem focuses on the child's first experience of death and her efforts to comprehend death.

The language of the poem is simple and matter of fact, the descriptions childish and innocent. The atmosphere is bleak and grim, " In the cold, cold parlour my mother laid out Arthur". The repetition of the word " cold" enhances the creation of a chilling and disturbing setting. References to the loon and the comparisons the child makes between it and Arthur reflects the struggles of the child to comprehend death. The loon like Arthur " hadn't said a word".

As the child becomes more confused by her cousin's death, her attention begins to drift towards the loon. She becomes completely preoccupied by it. She focuses on its silence, the violence of its death, its motionlessness, and its colours. " Shot and stuffed by Uncle Arthur, Arthur's father". Is she

wondering if her Uncle Arthur brought the death of her young cousin as he did the loon?

Bishop's ability to de-familiarise the familiar is evident as the domestic world, the familiar world of the parlour and the family are de-familiarised by the presence of the coffin and corpse. The poignancy of the moment is further enhanced by the references to the speaker's mother who is associated with pain and loss.

“ Sestina” is a memorable and enigmatic poem, both for its diversity of form and style. Bishop adopts the sestina style, an archaic and difficult form, to fashion her recollections and reflections of her childhood. A sestina has six unrhymed stanzas of six lines each and a seventh stanza, an envoy, of three lines that utilises the six end words of the first six stanzas. Articulated from the perspective of her childhood self, “ Sestina” is a melancholic and nostalgic reflection of Bishop's childhood, evoking a time and atmosphere before her mother's final departure from their home and from the poet's life. While the narrator's voice is that of the poet, the voice is that of a detached observer rather than an active or emotive participant in the action she narrates. She stands outside the action, apart from the experience, using third person narrative and never personalising the child of grandmother of the poem.