

"first death in nova scotia": a reading of elizabeth bishop



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There are many things that children do not understand. Their lack of experience makes them ignorant to what is happening around them, and even oblivious to the presence of death. When someone a child knows dies, it is a really rough transition: Where did he go? Am I not going to be able to see him again? What will happen next? When a person is young, that person's understanding is less developed, so there is a lot of questioning. "First Death in Nova Scotia" is about a little girl that just experienced her first loss, which was the death of her little cousin Arthur. The speaker introduces us, the readers, to the situation she has to endure and tries to make us understand what it is for her with a few childish analogies. Elizabeth Bishop confronts innocence with death in the hands of a little girl, who does not know a thing about death. Bishop gathers a variety of concepts and techniques in the poem demonstrate the innocence of the speaker.

One of those concepts is the language, a simple, childlike vocabulary which makes us understand her way of thinking. With her vocabulary, the speaker portrays her confusion and ignorance about death because of the metaphors and similes that she uses. In the fourth stanza she said, "He was all white, like a doll / that hadn't been painted yet" (31-32). This comparison shows the lack of description the speaker has to say about her cousin because she is a young girl who has had a really happy, enjoyable childhood and has never experienced such a sad and confusing thing. It is out of her comfort zone. Another example is in the third stanza, "Arthur's coffin was / a little frosted cake" (28). This language used shows how the speaker tries connect the situation with the things she is familiar with to create an image of her cousin so she can understand what is happening. This comparisons shows her

knowledge about death, which is really poor. This is how Bishop emphasizes the idea of death being a new thing to the speaker and how hard it is for her to explain what she sees. Confusion is another thing the author uses within the poem to show how difficult this situation is for the child, and how she is facing it for the first time. In the third stanza the speaker's mother tells her, "Come and say goodbye / to your little cousin Arthur" (22-23). She's so confused that she doesn't know what to do and her mother has to guide her into this process. This is also the only thing said referring her cousin's death, no one shows any emotion towards Arthur's death. It is as though the little girl is the only one that cares about him. This silence helps to intensify the little girl's confusion. In the last stanza the speaker says: "But how could Arthur go, clutching his tiny lily, with his eyes shut up so tight and the roads deep in the snow?" (47-50). She knows he's gone, but at the same time she doesn't know. It is that feeling some one gets when one knows that something happened but you don't know why it happened, what exactly happened, or what is going to happen next. She just knows that he left her and she is not going to see him again, she is uncertain of where her cousin is. But, the sentence that shows all of the speaker's confusion is in stanza number two, where she says: "Since Uncle Arthur fired / a bullet into him, / he hadn't said a word" (11-13). The reader gets the feeling that Uncle Arthur is the one who killed cousin Arthur because the author does not specify who the "him" is, but in reality is indicating the death of the loon that uncle Arthur killed earlier. This confusion is made so the reader would get a sense of what it is like to being the speaker, and what is happening in the speaker's mind. Another way the author indicates the little girl's confusion is the absence of words like "death", "dying", or "dead", with the title as an <https://assignbuster.com/first-death-in-nova-scotia-a-reading-of-elizabeth-bishop/>

exception. This vocabulary indicates that speaker is too young to understand the whole death concept, and she does not know how to refer to it.

The repetition of cold and neutral colors, like white, symbolizes the concept the speaker has towards death, which demonstrates that the speaker sees her cousin's death colorless and cold, something negative and depressing. This symbology isolates death making it stand out from other things; for example, white is a color different from others, a unique color. The cold can also mean the idea that when someone close dies, it seems like the whole world freezes. The speaker tries to contrast the white-theme with some red motifs like the "red eyed-loon" (29), or when she refers to the "red robes" of the royalty characters. However, this warm, life concept with the color red is much scarcer than the cold, death pattern made with the white color, making them the major topic of the poem. That is a really immature and innocent concept some one can have about death, because it is not just that. For many cultures, death is something powerful and majestic, and they venerate it, it can be as equal as life and birth. As an example of that, in the second stanza she states this description, "His breast was deep and white, / cold and caressable" We all know that when you died, you get cold because of a phase called the algor mortis or "death chill" but besides that she wants to connect and specify cold and white with death. There is constant referral the speaker makes about Jack Frost, who is related to cold, white, winter weather. In the fourth stanza, the speaker said he has always painted "the Maple Leaf (Forever)" and describes how he is starting to paint Arthur's hair "and left him white, forever" (34-40). This is how the girl makes death a separate thing of everything else. At the very beginning of the poem, the

speaker says, " In the cold, cold parlor / my mother laid out Arthur" (1). In this line, there is a reference Bishop makes about Nova Scotia, a really cold place in Canada which is also the poorest, most desolate and discontent province there is in the country, also the girl states that little Arthur has been separated from the rest of the family, building again the isolation of death. In the same stanza, the speaker says there is a dead red loon that has been placed in the same room as Arthur, and again the isolation is being brought into the poem.

Lastly, the rhyme scheme in the poem it is very simple and therefore it makes it easy to write, or think. Bishop uses words children, like the speaker, can understand and make, such as " cake" (28) with " lake" (30), and " small" (31) with " doll" (32). This shows the author's innocent, childlike, simple, and ignorant concept that young people have towards death. Many aspects of the poem fit in this concept, and makes a steady theme in the whole piece.

After reading " First Death in Nova Scotia" by Elizabeth Bishop, we can extract many themes from the poem. However, the revelation of death at an early age is the main issue. Bishop uses many techniques like confusion, simple vocabulary, rhyme scheme, and symbology to represent the theme. The confrontation of this techniques and the thesis statement give as an idea of the speaker's thoughts and guide us to understand the choose of words in the poem. The speaker take us in every situation she is experiencing and describes it in a very unique way, just like a child would.