

# Intense description method in elizabeth bishop's poems

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

“ In Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry, intense description leads to the uncovering of universal truths. Discuss...”

I agree wholeheartedly with this statement. It is clear to me from my reading of Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry that her use of acute description in her poetic works leads to the revealing of universal truths. This is achieved through her prolific use of varied poetic techniques that help to create the incredible , vivid and often emotionally charged imagery for which she is known. I found this to be most evident in the poems ‘ The Fish’, ‘Filling Station’, ‘ In The Waiting Room’ and ‘ First Death in Nova Scotia’. I felt that the intense description used in each of these poems helped further my understanding of Bishop as a person as well as my understanding of some basic universal truths.

‘ The Fish’ is a veritable “ rainbow” of a poem. Bishop’s rich use of colour, “ fine rosettes of lime”, helped me to see this “ tremendous fish” in a more tangible way, so that I could engage fully with this fable and understand the universal truth that it teaches. The myriad of textures used to describe the physicality of the fish, “ coarse white flesh packed in like feathers”, “ pink swim bladder like a big peony”; linked the fish to other creatures, in this example, birds and plants. This is a metaphor to show the reader that while we humans are all different and individual, we are all interlinked and face the same adversities. The reference to a rainbow in the concluding rhyming couplet, “ until everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow”, is symbolic of hope and new beginnings, showing the reader the prevalent truth in Bishop’s epiphany, that there is hope and strength to be found in the human spirit.

The use of affecting similes in 'The Fish' also added to my understanding of the universal truth that the human spirit, like the fish, can triumph over any adversity. The description of the skin of the fish hanging "like ancient wallpaper" was affecting to me because it's a homely image, that calls to mind the everyday, ordinary people. This showed me that all human beings are capable of endure life's struggles and ultimately overcome them. The description of the hooks in his mouth, "like medals with their ribbons" indicate that this is not the first struggle that the fish has had to bear. The fish continues on living despite his "five" past battles. This showed me the common truth discovered by Bishop, that all humans have the strength required to carry on fighting.

The universal truth that "somebody loves us all" is uncovered in the poem 'Filling Station' through Bishop's use of intense description. The use of contrasts throughout the poem indicate the often fruitless efforts of a nameless person to make the world a nicer place in which to live. The descriptive image, "grease impregnated wickerwork" shows that the efforts to make the filling station a nicer place are defiled by oil and "grease". The "big dim doily draping a taboret" is a heavily alliterative image that shows the heaviness of the dirt in which the people live. The image of the "dim doily" being 'heavy with gray crochet' indicated to me that the doily was once white, but has been overcome by the grease and is now "gray". Just as the world was once pure and "white" but has been made "heavy" and "gray" over time.

The use of sibilance in ' Filling Station' also contributed to my understanding of the insight into human nature offered by Bishop. The two main instances of sibilance in the poem are used to signify contrasting things. This shows Bishop's ingenuity in being able to use the same technique twice over to convey differing points. The line " several quick and spicy and greasy sons assist him" adds to the slippery air of oil and dirt that permeates the poem, making it more real for the reader. In the penultimate line, " Somebody arranges the rows of cans so that they softly say ESSO-SO-SO-SO...", Bishop uses a feminine, soft sound to indicate a desire for order among the disorder, a need to create some kind of beauty in an ugly world. This showed me that the efforts made by humans to brighten up our world are what makes us who we are as a species. This is the universal truth that Bishop wished to explore.

The poem ' In The Waiting Room' is symbolic of childhood, a confusing experience that is often seen as a " waiting room" for adulthood. The use of colour in the evocative descriptions in this poem, like in ' The Fish' added greatly to my understanding of it's theme but, in a contrasting way. The three main colours used in the poem are " black", " gray" and " yellow". The restrained use of colour shows the intense confusion of Bishop as a child. " Black" signifies fear, pain and death while the " yellow margins" indicate the dawning of a new consciousness and the realisation of new insights. " Gray" is used to highlight the other people's otherness, " shadowy, gray knees". This lets the reader feel the speakers isolation as a child in an adult's world. This universal experience resonated with me as a reader.

The intensely negative depictions of the outside world as seen from the “National Geographic” highlight the confusion of the child when faced with adult issues. Through reading, the child becomes immersed in a world that is utterly foreign to her through the repulsive yet compulsive images in the magazine such as “the inside of a volcano” and a “dead man slung on a pole”. The provocative and descriptive image of the “awful hanging breasts” shows Bishop's equal disgust and interest in being on the cusp of womanhood. This shows a fear of what's in store that is an integral part of the human experience. I felt that the repetition of “round and round” indicated circularity, the circle of life, the universal truth that we as humans are all connected and share the same experiences.

The poem ‘First Death In Nova Scotia’ deals with one of the most difficult universal truths that we have to face; death. This poem was written about Bishop's first encounter with death, the death of her cousin “Arthur”. Her cousin's real name was Frank, Bishop used poetic licence and changed his name to Arthur to suit the fairytale aspect of the poem. I felt that the fairytale aspect of the poem shows the child's confusion at what has happened. The references to royalty, “Edward, Prince Of Wales with Princess Alexandra, and King George with King Mary” shows a detachment to what's happening, a need to distract herself from the awful reality. The universal truth in this is that humans fear and are uncomfortable with death and will go to any lengths to avoid it. “The gracious royal couples” of the poem's conclusion are contrasted with the image of little Arthur, “clutching his tiny lily”. This is a surreal image that depicts the child's mindset in a way that

helped me to understand young Bishop's coping mechanism for death: escapism.

Bishop emphasises Arthur's small stature and youth in order to convey the senselessness of his death to the reader, " Arthur was very small. He was all white, like a doll that hadn't been painted yet." This affecting simile indicated to me that Arthur was too young to have been " painted" with life's experiences. His life was cut too short. This line was affecting to me and called to mind the final lines in Seamus Heaney's poem ' Mid Term Break' in which Heaney refers to his brother's coffin as a " four foot box, a foot for every year". The terrifying finality of death is captured in the line, " Jack Frost had dropped the brush and left him white, forever." Particularly in a child so young, this image was heart-wrenching to me as a reader. The highly emotionally charged descriptions of this poem helped me to grasp the uncomfortable truth of childhood death.

In conclusion, I agree that Elizabeth Bishop's use of intense description leads to the uncovering of universal truths for the reader. She achieves this with her use of varied poetic techniques and unusual imagery. I found this to be prevalent in the poems, ' The Fish', ' Filling Station', ' In The Waiting Room' and ' First Death In Nova Scotia'. The universal truths uncovered in each of these poems was made memorable to me through Bishop's intense descriptions and have stayed with me long after reading.