

# The effects of blindly obeying orders in the farmer's children



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BUSTER**

"The Farmer's Children" by Elizabeth Bishop reveals her outlook on the children's actions through literary techniques such as characterization. Upon being sent out to guard the barn's machinery on a winter night, Cato and Emerson did not question their stepmother, but obeyed her. There was an unhealthy filial relationship between the boys and their stepmother which led to physical and emotional damage in them. Their alcoholic father and neglectful stepmother lacked love and attentive care for their sons which ultimately resulted in the boys' deaths. Bishop incorporates the theme of a child's pure, unwavering compliance to their parents' requests. Her use of allusion, characterization of parents, and characterization of the children reveal this theme. In this narrative, Bishop contrasts the pureness of Cato and Emerson's hearts and the evil characterization of their parents to convey the theme of how blindly obeying orders can be treacherous.

Using allusions, Bishop applies striking similarities between classic fairy tale elements and her characters to expose the brothers' blind faith in their parents. Upon confronting his step sister about his missing gloves, the stepmother scolds Cato when, in reality, Lea Leola was to blame for stealing them. The stepmother rebukes, "Now Cato, see what you've done!... you boys hurry up and get out of here. I've had enough trouble for one day" (Bishop 289). This quotation alludes to Cinderella and her relationship with her stepmother. In "Cinderella," she didn't criticize her daughters when they tore Cinderella's dress for the ball; she was more devoted to her own children than to her stepdaughter. Similarly, the characterization of the farmer's wife aligns with the evil stepmother archetype since her daughters enjoy the warmth of a loving mother while her stepchildren, Cato and

Emerson, face the cold. Even with such unsupportive, unaffectionate parents, Cato and Emerson fail to confront their stepmother on the dangers of traveling down the icy road on a frigid winter night, ultimately contributing to their own deaths. Meanwhile as Judd's replacements, Cato and Emerson were oblivious to their father and Judd's drinking habits. The narrator explains, "Then he began to think of his father and Judd, off in town... he loved him dearly" (Bishop 292-293). This quote illustrates how Cato puts faith and trust in his father, unaware of the farmer's true motives. While Cato is loyal and faithful to his father, the reverence is not mutual. Another allusion in "The Farmer's Children" is the closely knit relationship between a father and his children which was also present in "Beauty and the Beast." In "Beauty and the Beast," despite his failing career, Belle constantly motivates her father to invent. Ironically, Bishop describes the father-son relationship when Cato recalls his admiration for his father as he and his brother freeze to death. The innocence within Cato and Emerson never doubted what their father claimed he did in town, but rather, mindlessly accepted his word. Thus, allusion is used in Bishop's "The Farmer's Children" as a technique to add meaning to the children's blind acceptance of their parents' attitude and orders to them.

The literary technique of characterization, used by Bishop to describe the parents, is effective in the story as it presents how undeserving the parents are of their children's obedience. Contrary to Cato's assumption, "[the father and Judd] went on 'business,' something to do with selling another strip of land, but probably mostly to drink; and while they were away Emerson and Cato would take Judd's place in the old barn" (Bishop 287). As previously

stated, Cato revered his father, but the father downplayed his parental role and thus, the same devotion was not returned. It never occurred to the boys that their father was not selling property; instead, they consistently took Judd's place without complaint. As for the stepmother, " she went to find an extra quilt to put over Lea Leola, Rosina, and Gracie Bell, sleeping in one bed in the next room. She spread it out and tucked it in without disturbing them" (Bishop 291). This proves the favoritism she has for her own children. After whisking the boys out the door without gloves or blankets, the stepmother returns to her beloved daughters with an extra quilt while they remained in the comfort of their home. These examples of the cold-hearted characterization of the parents reflect the resolution of the story when the children's dedication to their parents' wishes prompt their deaths.

Bishop also incorporates a characterization of the children's purity throughout the story to demonstrate their oblivion to the true nature of their parents' behavior. For example, the stepmother reminds the boys of their duty: "' I suppose you boys forgot you've got to get over to the barn sometime tonight,' she said ironically. Emerson protested a little" (Bishop 289). Emerson is not especially confrontive to his stepmother, rejecting her reminder or criticizing her for suggesting such a trip out in the merciless cold; instead he joins his brother in accepting their fate. Additionally, when Cato and Emerson exit the house, they "[try] to warm their noses against the clumsy lapels of their mackinaws, the freezing moisture felt even worse, and they gave it up and merely pointed out their breath to each other as it whitened and then vanished" (Bishop 289). This shows that despite the bitter winter, the boys dutifully proceeded with their task. The purity and cliché of

the children cost them their lives. Therefore, Bishop differentiates the characterization of the parents and the children through the parents' unreliability and the children's virtue.

Ultimately, the conflicting characterization between the couple and their children emphasizes an overall theme of how mindlessly following orders ends with adverse consequences in Bishop's "The Farmer's Children." By highlighting comparisons and contrasts between the two, the character portrayals and allusions to fairy tale elements help illustrate the theme. Bishop inspires the reader to question seemingly logical decisions and behaviors of their parents. Overall, by highlighting these instances of fairy tale comparisons and opposite characterizations, the story accentuates the importance of sensible decisions in the real world.