

“Elizabeth Bishop poses interesting questions delivered by means of a unique style.”

Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Your answer should focus on both themes and stylistic features. Support your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems you have studied.

In my opinion, the poetry that I have studied by Elizabeth Bishop is complex, honest and engaging. Throughout her poems, she poses intriguing, innovative and often thought-provoking questions. Her unique style is accomplished, yet subtle enough to convey the strength of her emotions that can be communicated to a wide range of audiences. Bishop’s childhood and upbringing plays a significant role in her poetry, with themes ranging from survival and addiction, to the beauty that can be identified in nature. In this essay, I will discuss Bishop’s ‘interesting’ questions and how she uses style, language and tone to convey the central themes and messages of her poetry. I will be examining; ‘The Fish’, ‘The Prodigal’, ‘The Armadillo’, and ‘First Death in Nova Scotia.’

In ‘The Fish’, Bishop describes the almost mundane experience of catching a fish. The narrative begins with, “*I caught a tremendous fish.*” This interesting choice of words immediately gives the image of quite a large fish, a good catch for any enthusiastic fisher. One might imagine that such a fish would put up a substantial fight but this fish “*didn’t fight*” and “*hadn’t fought at all.*” A domestic simile helps us to visualise the poor creature who’s “*brown skin hung in strips like wallpaper.*” She notices the “*five big hooks grown firmly in his mouth*” and assumes that the fish has evaded capture on five separate accounts. It is here that we begin to interpret the tone of empathetic understanding, as Bishop annotates the poem in a first person narrative style. I believe that this shows her dismay at the situation and how she can almost relate to the fish. Bishop uses personification to describe the fish as a veteran of sorts, “*like medals with their ribbons, frayed and wavering*” and his “*five haired beard of wisdom trailing from his aching jaw.*” He had survived five attempts on his life, a veteran of his own war, and did not have the energy

left to fight for the sixth time. There's pathetic fallacy in the description of his "*sullen face*" and "*aching jaw*." Sibilance and assonance contribute to the conveyance of the brutal truths of life's struggles, something Bishop herself struggled with. I believe that 'The Fish' follows Bishop's thought process and perhaps she uses these stylistic features to question and compare the underlying beauty of life against the cruelty of nature. The final dramatic line, "*And I let the fish go.*"

'The Prodigal' is based on the biblical story of the Prodigal Son. It explores Bishop's own struggle with alcoholism and I interpret this poem to be more of a self portrait in Bishop's creative and artistic mind. Addiction has been a reality of life since the beginning of time, but the word we associate with it, remains relatively new. Bishop is all too familiar with the devastating effects it can have on a person. The themes of addiction and self-inflicted exile are told in an almost bitter and regretful tone. It does raise the question; did Bishop regret her life of addiction or did it fuel her creative passion? The poem begins with strong olfactory images, "*The brown enormous odour he lived by was too close, with its breathing and thick hair.*" The first three lines rhyme but this is quickly dissolved as Bishop then chooses disorganised rhyme. Perhaps, this disorganised rhyme is supposed to mimic the dislocation and turmoil of an addict. In the second stanza, alliteration and similes are introduced, "*Faint forked lightnings, catching light*" and "*The lantern – like the sun, going away*", which help to convey shuddering insights into the Prodigal's addiction and loneliness. Unlike Bishop, the Prodigal only has to return home in order to end his suffering. In contrast to this, Bishop came from a broken home and was somewhat of a lone wolf. Her addiction could not be vanquished by returning to a particular place or person, hence the often dark and lonely themes throughout her work. I believe that she embraces her darkness, but wonders if it was worth the substantial amount of pain inflicted on her as a result. Although, 'The Prodigal' provides a disturbing insight into the reality of alcoholism, it ends on a somewhat positive and heartening note. The Prodigal returns home to find solace and love, something that Bishop could never do. The run on lines come to an end with one final sentence, "*But it took him a long time, finally to make his mind up to go home.*"

I believe that in 'The Armadillo', Bishop is questioning humanity's destruction of nature. Bishop uses run on lines to depict her thought process, as she witnesses the Brazilian feast day of St. John, a popular celebration in many Brazilian cities. Using vivid imagery, Bishop details the "*frail, illegal fire balloons*" that were released into the mountains, causing the death and eradication of nature and wild animal. The tone of the poem is that of the defenceless animals on the

mountains, who have been trapped by the fire caused by the falling “*fire balloons.*” A strong theme in this poem is war. ‘The Armadillo’ was written in 1957, during a time in which there was a looming possibility of war between the US and the Soviet Union. In my opinion, the armadillo is a symbol of how innocent civilians could be caught in a deadly crossfire and how little they could do to protect themselves from potentially catastrophic forces. Although the locals are aware of the results of their actions, they nevertheless continue to release the deadly lanterns into the sky. The opposing forces at war had the same mindset. The rhyming scheme in the beginning is a simple two line pattern but it changes in the second stanza, continuing to break down, almost echoing the theme of destruction. Contrast is also used throughout the poem, with a description of a baby rabbit “*so soft*” before being “*ignited into intangible ash.*” This contradicts the earlier, much more gentle, image of “*the paper chambers, like hearts.*” The vivid image of the ill-fated armadillo, shaking his fist at the fire, a gesture which proves to be equally as ineffective as the people protesting against the use of nuclear power, “*O falling fire and piercing cry and panic, and a weak mailed fist clenching ignorant against the sky.*” How could humanity be so cruel and dismissive of suffering? Bishop’s stylistic use of italics at the conclusion of the poem, accurately conveys the animal’s defencelessness amid the annihilation around it.

‘First Death in Nova Scotia’, is a poignant, restrained and beautifully evoked recollection of a disturbing childhood memory. Interestingly, it is the only poem in which Bishop references her mother. The poem is told from a child’s perspective, still utterly innocent and uncertain. Repetition is used to immediately set the tone and convey the grim atmosphere of the poem, “*In the cold, cold parlour, my mother laid out Arthur.*” As with most of Bishop’s poetry, the first person narrative gives a personal feel to the poem. The young Bishop doesn’t fully understand the concept of death, so instead focuses on the scene around her, “*Below them on a table, stood a stuffed loon, shot and stuffed by Uncle Arthur.*” The incredible use of visual and tactile imagery gives the reader a concise insight into the mindset of the young poet, I almost feel like I’m standing beside her in the parlour. She wonders about the concept of death, not quite able to wrap her head around it. In the second stanza, she turns her attention to her deceased cousin, still so young, “*He kept his own counsel, on his white frozen lake, cold and caressable...much to be desired.*” Using similes, Bishop imagines the fictional character of Jack Frost painting young Arthur’s hair, before getting distracted and leaving the boy “*white, forever.*” She questions the finality of death, not wholeheartedly convinced by the explanations given to her by family members. She wonders at the idea that the British Royals had “*invited Arthur to be the smallest*

page at court.” Therefore, the question she asks herself is; “*How could Arthur go, with his eyes shut up so tight, and the roads deep in snow?*” Perhaps she had an inclination that it was a lie, but decided that believing it was easier than trying to comprehend the truth of the matter. This childlike way of thinking is demonstrated by the somewhat infantile language used throughout. The poem is well structured in its exploration of the poet’s awareness, while the controlled imagery and dreamlike tone convey both the uncertainty and innocence of youth.

In conclusion, I believe that Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry does indeed pose interesting questions, each delivered by means of her unique style and insight. Even as a small child, Bishop questioned the concepts surrounding her, which continued into her adult life. Although never definitive in her answers to such questions, the main objective and themes of her poetry are always made abundantly clear. I believe that her stylistic features, such as the first person narration in ‘The Fish’, the disorganised rhyming scheme in ‘The Armadillo’, along with the strong olfactory imagery in ‘The Prodigal’ and the infantile language in ‘First Death in Nova Scotia’, demonstrates her unparalleled style. This, along with her questioning nature, is what makes her poetry so distinctive and memorable. Bishop endured many tragedies and torments in her personal life and although they do play a significant role in her poetry, they are not the focal points on which she wrote. I find it somewhat doleful that Bishop did not acquire happiness in her life, but I believe that she found comfort in expressing her feelings through poetry.