

## Elizabeth Bishop | Sample answer

**‘From the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop that you have studied, select the poems that, in your opinion, best demonstrate her skilful use of language and imagery to confront life’s harsh realities.’ (2017)**

The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop is fundamentally a combination of precise language and vivid imagery, skilfully intertwined throughout her poetry in order to directly confront life's harsh realities. With a camera-like eye for detail, she manages to authentically capture the reality of life, with a sense of relevance and relatability like no other. She flawlessly demonstrates her profound knowledge in poetic form and literary techniques while lacking the monotony that often infiltrates the poetry of a similar regard. The poems I believe best represent her style are "First death in Nova Scotia", "Sestina", "At the Fishhouses", "The Bight", "The Prodigal" and finally, "Filling Station".

The language of Bishop’s poetry is fundamental and unadorned. She tends to avoid obscurity and captures scenes in the exact light that she visualises them. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the simplicity of diction and accessibility of language render the poems superficial. Their apparent simplicity is deceptive. It's profoundly evident through Bishops poem "First Death in Nova Scotia" that unambiguous language has the potential to skilfully confront life’s harsh realities. Throughout the poem we witness a child's mind at work as she confronts the death of her “cousin Arthur”. She deliberately uses infantile language to create a convincing child persona. The directness of this young child renders the opening stanza a startling one. Although the language is simple, it holds great weight and is highly charged. “In the cold, cold parlour’ everything seems frozen, the corpse, the still photographs and the alarming “stuffed loon shot and stuffed by Uncle Arthur, Arthur’s father”. The child switches her attention quickly from Arthur to the mundane objects around her, as if they were all of equal importance. The constant repetition of his name, however, illustrates an instinctive understanding of the fact that something ineffable has happened to Arthur. Additionally, I found the simile comparing little Arthur to a “doll

that hadn't been painted yet" also very moving, confronting, as it does, one of life's most harsh realities: the tragedy of a child's death.

In the poem "Sestina", much like "First Death in Nova Scotia", Bishop employs the perspective of a child in order to confront life's harsh realities. In this poem, however, Bishop uses the archaic Italian poetic form to convey a sense of rigidity. 'Sestina' reads like the opening scene of a play while Bishop lists the props and setting of "a kitchen". The shift to the child's mind is registered by a change to a more figural language similar to that of "First Death in Nova Scotia". The child's approach to making sense of her world is peculiar and distinct from the grandmother's. Where the grandmother's "iron kettle sings" in what is a familiar and tired metaphor, the child's kettle produces "small hard tears' that dance like mad on the hot black stove". These energetic and unusual personifications separate the child from the grandmother and emphasises the contrast between domesticity and profound melancholy, between what is known and what is concealed. "Tears" recur in almost every image in the poem; the grandmother "hides her tears"; the child is watching the "teakettle's small harsh tears"; the teacup is "full of dark brown tears"; even the child's drawing depicts a man in a coat with "button like tears". Such use of repetition is both dramatically powerful and profoundly poignant and confronted me, the reader, with the harsh realities of life through the eyes of a child.

Bishop's desire to probe beneath the surface of everyday situations is what renders her poetry particularly appealing. An amalgamation of close observation and inner reflection often lead to her profound moments of insight. One of Bishop's most atmospheric place poems, "At the Fishhouses" depicts a solitary old man, mending his nets "in the gloaming". The title alone illustrates her preoccupation with "where", rather than "who", "why" or "when". As if inconsequential to the poet, the old man seems to be fading out of existence, a visual memory, with his "shuttle worn and polished". This understated image of a life coming to an end had a profound effect on me, forcing me to come to terms with the eventual finiteness of life. Additionally, the image of "a million Christmas trees" behind the poet is completely hyperbolic in order to evoke the abundance of nature. What is jarring, however, is the fact that they "stand waiting for Christmas", signifying the anticipation of death and decay in all living things. Here, there is an implied contrast between fleeting human mortality and the timelessness of sea as it will always remain "the same". This, in pair with the sonorous beauty of the language, creates a clear albeit unassertive confrontation of life's harsh realities.

Similar to “At the Fishhouses”, Bishop’s other place poem “The Bight” is subtle in the way in which it confronts life’s harsh realities. The subtitle of the poem “on my birthday” creates the expectation that this will be a personal poem of self-reflection and introspection. In reality, the poem is almost self-forgetful. The only point at which she enters the poem or draws attention to herself is in the phrase “it seems to me”. She marks her birthday with a celebration of the observable world as “untidy activity... awful but cheerful”. On a metaphorical level, the poet may be exploring her state of mind through the depiction of this natural scene. I found a strong visual element to the simile of “little white boats” “stove in” and appear “torn open” like envelope “letters”. Just as the boats are “not yet salvaged, if they ever will be” so the “letters” are “unanswered”. There is something melancholic about “unanswered letters” and “old correspondences”. While this hints at something immensely personal, she remains elusively in the background. By refusing to reduce the image to something autobiographic, she allows the image to cast its spell of confronting life’s harsh realities in an understated yet jarring depiction and allowed me to discover myself subjectively in the poem.

The word “dirty” is a key word that resonates throughout the poem. It is the final word of the first line of stanzas one and two. Just as “all is silver” in “At the fishhouses”; all is quite dirty here. The contrast of the “comic books” with the “big dim doily” is quite jarring. We can easily infer that the comic books belong to the “quick and saucy and greasy sons” but what of the “doily”, “taboret” and “big hirsute begonia” that occupy the same space? The words themselves are French and feminine and seem to belong to a different mind-set. The juxtaposition of these objects suggests to me the despondent reality hidden behind the facade. The comic books seem to be a touch of the present and the “dim doily” the “taboret” and the faded and neglected “begonia” represent, perhaps a maternal presence of the past. The poet later realises that some unseen person has done her best to create some semblance of domestic order in a “world of grime” as she mentions that “somebody waters the plant or oils it, maybe.” Again, we witness how skilful yet understated poetry can successfully depict the harsh realities of life.

In conclusion, it is evident that Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry is fundamentally a combination of precise language and imagery, skilfully intertwined throughout her poems in order to successfully convey the harsh realities of life. Despite the plethora of melancholy sentiments presented throughout her poetry, we try, as Bishop has done through the cathartic nature of divulging her inner-most thoughts and personal adversity, to “refuel” emotionally and spiritually in the knowledge that “somebody loves us all”.