‘Bishop uses highly detailed observation of people, places and events to explore unique personal experiences in her poetry. Discuss.’

Introduction

I wholeheartedly agree that Bishop makes vivid and detailed observations throughout her poems which offers readers a rich insight to her mind, and gives us a greater understanding of her past experiences. Indeed, Bishop’s graphic eye for detail often leads to profound moments of clarity and thought provoking bodies of work. I feel as though Bishop possesses a very unique gift; she effortlessly creates masterpieces from seemingly banal objects or events. It is this quality that adds great realism to her poems. While Bishop’s poems are very much centered on her own personal experiences, she still invites readers to question the world around them, and indeed to view life from a different perspective.

The Fish

‘The Fish’ is a prime example of how Bishop uses detailed observation to further explore a unique experience. In this poem, Bishop becomes infatuated and spellbound almost by a “tremendous fish”. Bishop wonderfully brought the image of this fish alive in my mind as she paints a picture through well chosen verbs and adjectives, along with striking metaphors and unusual similes, “his brown skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper”.

Bishop scrutinises the fish as she yearns to understand it;

“I looked into his eyes which were far larger than mine but shallower, and yellowed”.

It quickly becomes evident that Bishop doesn’t view the fish as an object, but rather as a creature possessing admirable qualities. Not only does Bishop’s close examination of the
fish lead to her appreciation of it, but she also begins to relate to the fish, and recognise qualities of herself within it, “grim, wet and weaponlike hung five old pieces of fish line”. This fish, like Bishop herself, has had to struggle to overcome adversity. It too has had to survive and fight back in a world which can be incredibly hostile. I think the fish becomes a symbol of hope, determination and triumph for Bishop at this point;

“a five haired beard of wisdom trailing from his aching jaw”

Bishop’s detailed descriptions further enhance the fact that she sees the fish as an embodiment of endurance and resilience. The poem ends on a joyous and celebratory note when Bishop releases the fish, allowing it to continue to overcome challenges, just as Bishop must;

“everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow; and I let the fish go.”

The Prodigal

The theme of endurance and resilience is echoed once more in ‘The Prodigal’. This poem tells the heart-wrenching story of an alcoholic, and the downtrodden and inhumane situation he finds himself in. Our senses are awakened in the opening line, as Bishop describes the stench that permeates the barnyard scene, “the brown enormous odour he lived by was too close for him to judge”.

We are immediately made aware of his appalling living conditions;

“the floor was rotten; the sty was plastered halfway up with glass smooth dung”

While this poem documents an anonymous man’s struggle with alcoholism, it is likely that it is representative of the problems that alcohol caused in Bishop’s own life. The shame and regret felt by the Prodigal is described as he “hid the pints behind a two-by-four”. Yet despite the awful situation the Prodigal endures, he still finds beauty and hope in the natural world;

“the sunrize glazed the barnyard mud with red, the burning puddles seemed to reassure”
Bishop seems to say here that despite suffering and pain, beauty and brilliance can be found anywhere if you simply open your eyes.

Bishop describes the uncertainty and lack of control that is so often felt by addicts by using the metaphor of “the bat’s uncertain, staggering flight”. Just as in ‘The Fish’, the Prodigal is determined to make a positive change and fight back. Bishop closes the poem on a determined and resolute note, yet isn’t naive of the challenges that still lay ahead;

“but it took him a long time finally to make up his mind to go home.”

In the Waiting Room

‘In the Waiting Room’ is a fascinating and complex poem which documents the moment Bishop became aware of her womanhood as a six year old child. Bishop succeeds in setting a scene of indifference and anonymity in the opening lines;

“the waiting room was full of grown up people, arctics and overcoats, lamps and magazines”

Young Bishop contentedly enthrals herself in a copy of The National Geographic, a decision which has a profound effect on her and her self awareness. She becomes horrified and repulsed by the primal images of female anatomy and sexuality “their breasts were horrifying”. She is overcome with a sense of panic and fear as to what consequences her gender will have on her life.

The volcanic imagery seems very metaphoric to me of the myriad emotions which raged through her young mind “it was spilling over into rivulets of fire.” Bishop’s detailed descriptions make it easy for me, as a reader, to both understand and relate to what she felt at this moment. Bishop is perplexed by the concept of femininity, and disgusted by the idea of sexuality “those awful hanging breasts”, which is understandable as this poem was written during a highly conservative time.
The mixture of fear and awe as to what women must endure and tolerate in the course of their lives is a familiar one, indeed it seems to bombard all girls at a young age. Bishop describes her aunt’s scream as a reflection of the terror she felt;

“it was me, my voice, in my mouth”

What interests me most about young Bishop’s precocious mind is how she uses her powers of observation as a coping mechanism. She focuses on concrete, undeniable facts “you are an I, you are an Elizabeth”. This poem can be seen as a metaphor for a child waiting for adulthood, and Bishop’s powerful observations and descriptions allow us to track all the unique emotions that are entailed in this process.

Filling Station

One of Bishop’s most charming poems is ‘Filling Station’. Bishop’s powers of observation are wonderfully showcased in this poem as she transports readers to this grimy old filling station. She does this through cleverly chosen verbs and adjectives;

“oh but it is dirty! This little filling station, oil soaked, oil permeated”

The repetition of ‘oil’ underscores just how pervasive the liquid was “a disturbing overall black translucency”. Not only did I have a clear image of the filling station in my head, but I had formed judgements of who ran it, “father wears a dirty, oil soaked monkey suit”. As well as focusing on the physical appearance of the place, Bishop manages to encapsulate the atmosphere. The filling station is imperfect, but it’s warm, family-oriented and cared for,

“on the wicker sofa, a dirty dog, quite comfy.”

Bishop’s keen eye for detail leads to curiosity “why the taboret? Why oh why the doily?” It is this observation that allows her to see beyond the filth and squalor, and to see the filling station as something more- a microcosm of the world in which we live. This striking metaphor holds a truly beautiful message; despite the filth and ugliness in this world, there is always someone there to care for us. I find this to be an incredibly comforting and heartwarming thought, as I’m sure Bishop did,
“somebody loves us all”

This is a truly touching closing message, particularly in a modern world where hate seems to be of growing prevalence. This poem is a wonderful example of how Bishop’s highly detailed observations lead to profound and thought provoking moments of clarity and realisation.

**First Death in Nova Scotia**

‘First Death in Nova Scotia’ is a saddening poem, again written through the voice of a child, as Bishop recalls her first experience with death. Bishop uses colour and contrast very effectively in this poem. The stark, icy white seems to symbolise the finality of death,

> “Jack Frost dropped the brush and left him white forever”

To have death described through the eyes of a naive and innocent child is incredibly poignant. Despite her lack of understanding of death, it is clear Bishop was profoundly affected by this event, “but how could Arthur go?”

**Conclusion**

I have thoroughly enjoyed studying the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. I hugely admire that she sees art and beauty in the most simplistic things. Her descriptions are so vivid, in fact, that it allows me to look at banal objects, places or people in a different and more fascinating light. She looks further beneath the surface and finds a sense of meaning and importance in the most unusual of places. Her poems are deeply personal, and often highly metaphoric, allowing me to relate to them as a reader. For me, reading Bishop’s poetry was almost like a written art piece, which is what made this poetic experience so enjoyable.