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Essay Breakdowns

LC English - Poetry

Elizabeth
Bishop 2017



Understand the Key Words!

- This will help you to **accurately address the question**.
- Comment on **all aspects** of the question to achieve full marks

The Question

Think Like the Corrector!

- What are the **codes on the marking scheme** going to be?
- The coding for this question will be **L** (language), **I** (imagery) & **R** (realities).



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.

In your answer you need to discuss Bishop's use of language and imagery (i.e. **poetic techniques**).



Make the link!

Show the examiner that you understand how the poetic techniques help Bishop to explain life's harsh realities (i.e. **themes**).



- Give a **general overview** of what the essay will be about.
- Keep it **short** and **snappy**!



Introduction



- Nice **reinforcement of the question's key words**.
- The **question needs to be addressed** in the opening lines of the introduction.

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 **listing of the poems is needless**. This 'shopping-list' of poems makes the introduction look cluttered and wastes time.
- It is **better to mention some of the poems in a dispersed fashion** throughout the introduction.



This sample answer immediately showcases a **wide range of vocabulary**. This shows the corrector that you have a **superior command of the English language**.

First Death in Nova Scotia

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 Bishop's 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.

Effective link made between language (**repetition**) and Bishop's ability to confront life's harsh realities (a child confronting the notion of death).

Be More Direct!

Elaborate on **one language technique per paragraph** instead of superficially discussing multiple examples.

Personal Response!

Expand on the **personal response**. This shows the corrector that you have formed an opinion on the poem.

Sestina

Great **reference to poetic techniques** - 'form', 'metaphor', 'repetition' and 'personification'.

A missed opportunity to give a **personal response**. This would give the answer more authenticity.

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.

Effective **reinforcement of the question!**

Integrated quotes read so much better than quotes at the end of a point.

At the Fishhouses

Lovely use of vocabulary. Some **impressive phrasing** is used.



Nice **personal response**! It's so important to convey how the poem made YOU feel.



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.



This paragraph is too long. Keep it **direct and simple**! Too many ideas can cause the answer to lose focus.

The Bight

Almost **too many quotes**.
One or two per paragraph will suffice!



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.

Expand on which of 'life's harsh realities' is being referred to here.



Impressive analysis of Bishop's use of metaphor and simile here.



Filling Station

Very **impressive insight** into how the images of the 'taboret' and the 'hirsute begonia' contrast to the facade of the dirty filling station.

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.

The word 'jarring' was used in the previous paragraph. **Vary your vocabulary for maximum marks.**

More focus required on the 'harsh reality of life' being referred to here.

Mention **one or two of your essay's key ideas** in the conclusion.

Reinforce the **question's key words/phrases** in the conclusion

Conclusion

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".

The conclusion is the last thing the corrector will read, so make sure you **try to end your essay on a high note!** A quote or a summarizing insight can work well here.



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