

Elizabeth Bishop | Sample Answer 2019

“Bishop makes skilful use of a variety of poetic techniques to produce poems that are often analytical but rarely emotional” Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

Elizabeth Bishop once said herself; “I was made at right angles to the world and I see it so. I can only see it so.” I believe that Bishop has a camera-like eye for detail, this accompanied with her skilful use of language has resulted in some of the most memorable and beautiful poetry I have read on my leaving cert course. It is her keen eye that allows her these fascinating moments of awareness and thought-provoking bodies of work. What amazes me about Bishop is her ability to create masterpieces from seemingly banal objects, a skill that I think sets her apart from other poets. I certainly agree that Bishop produces poems that are analytical, however I have to disagree with the statement when it states they are “rarely emotional”. Through studying the poems “The Fish”, “The prodigal”, “The Armadillo”, “The Filling station”, and “First death in Nova Scotia”, I have found Elizabeth Bishop to produce poems that are both analytical and highly emotional.

“The Filling Station” is a prime example of how Bishop uses precise language and imagery to provide an analytical as well as emotional piece of work. *“Oh, but it’s dirty!”* instantly sets the tone and scene of the poem. The repetition of the words *“oil”* and *“dirty”* throughout the poem, truly underscore how pervasive the filth of the filling station is. Through her detailed description and skilful use of imagery, I not only gain a clear vision of the filling station but also who runs it - *“Father wears a dirty old monkey suit”*. As Bishop inspects *“the little filling station”*, she notices some *“comic books”* that lay upon a *“big dim doily”*. I find the contrast of these two objects quite jarring.

The comic books are likely to belong to the “*several quick and saucy and greasy sons*”, but what of the “*doily*”, “*taboret*”, and “*big hirsute begonia*” that occupy the same space. We mirror Bishop’s interest while reading this poem, and long to know more about the seemingly ordinary Filling Station.

Bishop’s eye leads to curiosity asking; “*Why the extraneous plant? Why the taboret? Why, oh why, the doily?*” It is this observation that allows her to see beyond the filth and squalor and see the Filling station as something more - a subset of the world in which we live. The closing line reads “*Somebody loves us all*”. This striking metaphor holds a truly beautiful message; despite the harsh realities of life, there is someone always looking out for us.

I find this uplifting ending to also be an emotional one, as I feel gratitude for the people who look after me in my life, much like the unknown woman looked after the filling station and her family.

Bishop’s ability to look past the ugliness of life and uncover a deeper meaning can also be seen in “The Fish”. This poem is deeply analytical as it is laced with interesting similes, images and observations. However we see Bishop become slightly more personal here also, she reflects on her own personal challenges and overcoming them while describing a “*tremendous fish*” she just caught.

The poet wonderfully brings the image of this ordinarily simple fish to life with well-chosen verbs and adjectives along with striking metaphors and unusual similes; “*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 becomes evident that Bishop does not view the fish as an object, but as a creature possessing admirable qualities. Not only does the poet's close examination of the fish lead to her appreciation of it, but she also begins to relate to it. She recognises qualities in herself within it, “*grim, wet and weaponlike hung five old pieces of fish line.*” Bishop had to deal with her own challenges in life with having an alcohol addiction, and just like the fish struggled to overcome adversity. I believe the fish became a symbol of hope and triumph for Bishop at this point; “*a five haired beard of wisdom trailing from his jaw*”. I find Bishop’s relationship to the fish uplifting and hopeful as she confronts her struggles and strives to overcome them.

The poem ends on a joyous line when Bishop releases the fish to overcome its challenges, just as she knows she must; *“everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow! And I let the fish go”*.

Bishop uses her own personal experience with addiction in “The Fish” to create an emotional, well written poem. This can also be seen in her poem “The Prodigal”. I gravitate towards the sensuous material laced throughout this poem. One can almost smell the *“brown enormous odour”*, see the *“glass smooth dung”* and feel the rotten, filthy barn beneath their feet. By calling on my senses Bishop allows me to enter the Prodigal's world, also letting me in on the emotions he is experiencing.

The poet relates to the Prodigal's feelings of shame and regret which are suggested as he *“hid the pints behind the two-by-fours”*. The image of *“the sunrise glated the barnyard mud with red, the burning puddles seemed to reassure”*, is one of hope to me. I believe the poet is trying to express that there can be beauty amongst harsh reality. Bishop's use of light and colour offers hope to the Prodigal, however also highlights the difficult reality of trying to change one's situation for the better. Bishop's honesty here makes “The Prodigal” universally significant, allowing the range of emotions felt by the poet more accessible to many readers.

The poem concludes on a determined and resolute note, yet the poet is not naive to the challenges that still lay ahead; *“But it took him a long time/finally to make his mind up and go home.”*

One aspect of Bishop's writing that I feel is quite unique is her clear moments of awareness, where her opinion has been altered from what she originally thought at the beginning. I believe this expertly conveys the poet's thought process while writing while also making the poems familiar to readers. “The Armadillo” and “First death in Nova Scotia” both possess this quality.

At the beginning of “The Armadillo” Bishop is struck by the delicate beauty of the fire balloons overhead, which the Brazilian people release annually in honour of Saint John; *“The paper clambers flush and fill with light.”* However the poet is foreshadowing the disaster to come with her reference to Mars, the planet of war. This is often linked to impending violence and catastrophe - *“Venus going down, or Mars”*.

Every second and fourth line rhyme; “*year*”- “*appear*”, “*night*”- “*light*”. The rigorous structure makes “The Armadillo” one of Bishop's most analytical poems. However I believe the poet uses such a structure to contain and shape a very emotional and upsetting experience. Personally, the turning point/moment of awareness in this poem occurs in the sixth stanza. Here the simile “*it splattered like an egg of fire*” indicates the once elegant fire balloons have a terrifying, destructive quality. This quick change in observation builds worry in me as I read the poem.

The Armadillo is described with typical precision; “*a listening armadillo left the scene/rose-flecked, head down, tail down*”. The poet's observant eye takes in every aspect of the scene, even noticing a baby rabbit is “*short-eared*” and has “*ignited eyes*”. These observations serve to highlight the fear within the animal but also the poet herself. The final stanza is blocked out in italics.

Bishop cleverly does this to indicate the final lines are from the perspective of the scared animals. The final lines read “*a weak mailed fist,/clenched ignorant against the sky!*” This emotive image is strengthened with the use of the exclamation mark at the end. We feel sympathy for the helpless animals who have fallen victim to this, seemingly beautiful but in reality damaging, Brazilian tradition.

“First death in Nova Scotia” is written about a young Bishop’s first experience with death. Here we can find her moment of awareness in the final lines of the poem. Bishop describes the parlour as “*cold, cold*” in the first line. The repetition here underlines the chilling, frightening and mysterious experience the poet is undertaking. The colours red and white are expertly repeated throughout the poem. The red eye of the loon, the red Canadian maple leaf, the red of the royal robes in the chromographs. These are all symbols of warmth and comfort, which are in stark contrast to, and serve to highlight the whiteness of young Arthur’s face. As well as the whiteness of the lily and the deep snow.

The image of the lifeless loon as “*cold and caressable*” effectively conveys the child’s confusion when confronted with death. Through closely observing and reflecting on the situation in which she finds herself in, the young Bishop receives a sense of the terrible finality of death. The naive child attempts to think up a happy, fairy tale ending to the tragic event by imagining that the royale figures on the wall “*invited Arthur to be/the smallest page at court*”. This childlike

response to death makes me long to be as naive as Bishop was at this age. By playing on an experience that most readers would be able to relate to, Bishop makes the emotions experienced in this poem that bit more appreciable.

Bishop concludes this doleful poem with a question; *“but how could Arthur go?”*, further illustrating the innocence of the child and the finality of her cousin's death.

I have thoroughly enjoyed studying the poetry of the talented Elizabeth Bishop. I hugely admire her ability to see art and beauty in the simplest of things. Her vivid descriptions struck me as a reader, as well as her unusual similes and metaphors. I feel as though she endured a lot of hardship in her private life (the trauma of the loss of her parents, alcoholism, her sexuality, and lack of a proper home) yet she overcame these issues and was able to distil from these experiences - beautiful poetry. She has a painter's eye for detail and skilfully employs it to deal with the harsh realities of life, often finding hope through her poetry. Bishop pulled at many of my emotions through her poetic talents, while also making her work analytical and therefore accessible to me as a reader. For this reason, and the reasons I have stated above, I disagree with the statement.