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Self-Identification in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry

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Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) is one of the most important American poets and short-story writers. She is the Poet Laureate of the United States (1949-1950), Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry (1956), National Book Award winner (1970) and recipient of Neustadt International Award for Literature (1976). Bishop is famous of writing poems implicitly referring to her personal life and suffering. The objective of this research is to study the life and poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and to show how her life is reflected in her poems through self-identification. However, the research is divided into three sections and a conclusion. Section one is an introduction. It consists of two parts. The first part sheds light on Bishop's life, how she grew up, her suffering, the things and persons she lost in her childhood, the places she lived in and their effect on her. The second part of this section deals with her literary career. It tackles her poems, short-stories, style and use of self-identification. Section two is completely devoted to Bishop's poem "Sestina". This poem describes the moment her mother is taken to the asylum. Here, Bishop constructs a picture of a grandmother and a grandchild on a gloomy autumn. She identifies her sadness with the rain, the failing light, the water drops on the iron kettle and drawings. However, the section tackles the paraphrasing, form and analysis of the poem. Section three deals with Bishop's poem "One Art". This poem is a villanelle. At the beginning, the poet talks about losing. She suggests that we get used to loss by losing little things like house keys and wasting time. You become comfortable with these losses and then you would be ready to cope with the big ones. By talking about loss, the poet indirectly identifies her own loss. In the end, she confesses that she is talking about a dear person. Anyway, the section shows the paraphrasing, form and analysis of the poem.

Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop is one of the greatest American poets and short story writers. Her life is not normal. She went through difficult experiences since her early life. She travelled and lived in many places. All these things are reflected in her poetry in an aesthetically indirect way. She identifies the thing she wants to reflect in her poetry through various objects and things.



Her poems "Sestina" and "One Art" are two of the best poems that she wrote in which she uses unique poetic forms: sestina and villanelle.

Elizabeth Bishop: The Woman

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) is an American poet and short story writer. She was born in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her father died when she was eight years old. Her mother became mentally ill and was institutionalized in 1916 and stayed there until her death in 1934. During this period, Bishop never met her mother or talked to her. At the beginning, she lived with her grandparents on a farm in Great Village, Nova Scotia but later on her parental family gained custody. So she moved with her father's wealthier family in Worcester, Massachusetts and she was unhappy there. So her grandparents sent her to live with her mother's elder sister. She lived with her in an impoverished area which is populated by Irish and Italian immigrants. Her aunt introduced her to the Victorian poets including Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Thomas Carlyle, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Bishop was very ill as a child; as a result, she received very little formal schooling. She entered Vassar College in 1929 where she studied music but immediately switched to English. She graduated in 1934. She travelled and lived in many cities which are described in her poems. She lived in France for several years in the mid 1930s with her friend Louis Crane who was a paper-manufacturing heiress. From 1949 to 1950, she was a consultant in poetry for the Library of Congress and lived in Washington. She went to Brazil and stayed there for fifteen years with her friend the architect Lota de Macedo Soares who took an overdose of tranquilizers and died in 1967. In Brazil, she was introduced to the language and literature of Latin America. After this, Bishop returned to the United States. She lectured in higher education for a number of years like the University of Washington, Harvard University, New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She died of a cerebral aneurysm in Boston in 1979. Her house was dedicated for her memory.

Elizabeth Bishop: The Writer

Concerning her literary career, it started with the publication of her first work in *The Magazine* in 1933. Bishop's first book *North & South* (1946) won the Houghton



Miffin Prize for poetry. It included important poems like "The Man-Moth" and "The Fish". Nine years later, she published her volume *Poems: North and South, A Cold Spring* which included the first book in addition to eighteen poems that constitute the "cold spring" section. This book won her the Pulitzer Prize (1956). Her book *Questions of Travel* was published in 1965 and it showed the influence of living in Brazil. It contained poems like "Arrival at Santos", "Manuelzinho", "The River Man" and her short story "In The Village". *The Complete Poems* (1969) won her the National Book Award. In 1977; her last book *Geography III* included frequently anthologized poems like "In the Waiting Room" and "One Art". This book won her the Neustated International Prize for Literature which no other American had won before. Bishop's *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* was published posthumously in 1983. Other posthumous publications included *The Collected Prose* (1984) and *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments* (2006).

Elizabeth Bishop is affected by two poets: Mariana Moore and Robert Lowell so that we have to refer to these poets before studying Bishop's poetry. Helen Vendler believes that Bishop's poems transgress "her commitment to exactness" (2006, p: 2). She argues that Bishop does not give the readers an obvious insight into her personal life. In a conversation about her revision process, she said "If I have shown my work to anyone for criticism, it's usually to call Lowell or Miss Moore" (Wehr, 1981, p: 323). These two poets embody different literary styles. Bishop describes Moore as "fundamental[ly]... a poet who has brought a brilliant precision to poetic language by meticulous conservatism... [and] maintaining the ancestral, 'out of date' virtues of American culture" (Ribeiro, 1964, p: 6) while Lowell, her other influence, "had... embraced poetry in the grand style, thinking in terms of the largest gesture, history and politics" and he started what Bishop calls the nonsense of the confessional poetry (Miller, 1993, p: 198). Bishop's relationship with both poets created her own writing style that has shifted both Lowell's "confessional nonsense" and "Moore's "meticulous conservatism". Actually, Bishop's poetry is a unique blend of these elements. Her poems are "valued for their brilliant surfaces, keen observations of the physical world and formal perfection" (Travisano, 1995, p: 903). She provided perfect representations of her physical world through her poetry. She has ability to present realistic and vivid images of the scenes she describes. To her "The physical world was real, and language,



if used carefully, could describe it well enough to communicate something essential" (Gioia, 2006, p:25). Bishop's poetry is confessional. It is an outlet to express her personal experiences and emotions. Bishop does not immediately place herself into her poetry although "connections between Bishop's themes and images, and her autobiography, are obvious to anyone who reads her letters or visits the archive at Vassar" (Costello, 2003, p: 334). However, Bishop's poetry can be divided into two groups according to their treatment of the subject matter. The first group can be defined as being descriptive and objective which follows Moore's style. This would include poems like "The Map", "The Fish" or "Filling Station". The second group includes "Insomnia", "One Art", "Sestina" and "Crusoe in England". In fact, although Bishop is influenced by Moore and Lowell but she proves the idea that "poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original" (Bloom, 1997, p: 7). Bishop acts as an example of two of Harold Bloom's "Six Revisionary Ratios". In her relationship to Moore, one sees Bloom's idea of Tessera; a poet relies on his or her poetic precursor "to retain [his or her] terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor failed to go far enough" (Bloom, 1997, p: 14). Bishop contained Moore's precise language not only to provide objective descriptions but also to reveal personal and emotional observations. By moving beyond the basic elements of Moore's poetry, Bishop again falls into another Bloom's category, that of Clinamen. This concept suggest that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves. Bishop implies that Lowell went accurately in the direction of confessing autobiographical elements but that went wrongly in the direction of extremely explicit confessions. Bishop revises her style of poetry by imbedding her confessions deeply into images and descriptions. She successfully combines her two revisions of Moore and Lowell to create a style of poetry suited to her realistic desire.

Through this method of writing, Bishop was able to confess three main themes that existed throughout her life: her unsettled childhood and relationships with her family, the loneliness she felt throughout her life, and an instability and lack of structure which resulted from the two former themes. Bishop expressed the themes through submerging her emotions deep into the terms and language she uses. Bishop's



method in her poetry is called self-identification which is defined as "how you see yourself or identifying yourself with someone or something else" (yourdictionary.com).

It is the "identification of oneself with some other person or thing" (thefreedictionary.com). This means that she indirectly compares with other things and objects to imply that she is similar to them. She indirectly explains her life and sufferings. This is very obvious in her poems "Sestina" and "One Art".

Critical Analysis

"Sestina"

Paraphrasing

In "Sestina", it is September and it is raining heavily. This gloomy weather identifies Bishop's sadness. The little Bishop and her grandmother are sitting in the kitchen beside the little marvel stove. They are reading jokes from the almanac and laughing but the grandmother is doing so to hide her tears. The rain drops beat on the roof of the house. This identifies the tears in Bishop's eyes. Drops of water appear on the iron kettle to identify Bishop's tears. Both the drops of rain and the drops on the iron kettle are similar to tears in her eyes. Bishop describes the teacup as full of tears which identifies Bishop's tears. The child draws a man with buttons like tears. She also sees the stars falling like tears. This poem ends with the grandmother singing and the child drawing a house. The word "tears" is repeated for so many times in the poem to identify the child's sadness. In fact, this poem describes the moment Bishop's mother is taken to the asylum. The grandmother is trying to prevent the child from noticing that but the child knows what is going on.

Poetic Form

The form of this poem is sestina which is a complex form of verse first worked out by the troubadours. It consists of "six stanzas of six lines apiece with an envoi of three lines. The rhyme scheme requires that the same six end words occur in each stanza but in a different order according to a fixed pattern" (Cuddon, 2013, p: 650).



Arnaut Daniel invented this form in 1200. It is used by Dante and Petrarch. Kipling, Pound, Eliot and Auden who are very important poets also used it.

Analysis

In this poem, there are buried and articulated sorrows. At the same time, the grandmother and the granddaughter are hiding and revealing what they know of each other. We as readers understand the sadness without knowing its source but if we return to Bishop's biography we will immediately guess the reason of their sadness.

"Sestina" conveys images of suffering and loss and it is interesting when reading for biography. However, the sestina form shows that "Bishop made the intimate remote through the indirection of elaborate forms" (Dickie, 2002, p: 71). By using a traditional form and a third-person narrator, Bishop removed herself from the poem's personal content. The title "Sestina" is very general and it does not show that she is expressing her own experience. The opening stanza of "Sestina" is:

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

The poem starts with an observation of the scene from the outside and then the focus is narrowing as we are introduced to the grandmother's thoughts. She is trying to cheer up both herself and the child. Also she is she is trying to hide her sadness. After this, we are moved to the child's perspective. The child's sadness is reflected in the way she regards things around her when she sees the drops of water on the kettle as tears and a man with buttons like tears. In the end of the poem the "inscrutable house" remains a mystery and the kitchen scene is observed by an outsider:

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.



Helen Vendler states that "of all the things that should not be inscrutable, one's house comes first. The fact that one's house always is inscrutable, that nothing is more enigmatic than the heart of the domestic scene, offers Bishop one of her recurrent subjects" (1983, p: 33). The "inscrutable house" is certainly the key image of this poem and it signals that there is something unnatural about the child's house and, synonymously, her family.

Six components are repeated in every stanza: a house, a grandmother, a child, a little Marvel Stove, an almanac and finally tears. The one that makes the scene look unnatural is tears. There is a parallel between the rain that beats on the roof outside and the tears inside the house which emphasize the themes of suffering and loss in the poem. Water, in different forms, is everywhere associated with tears such as rain on the roof, the dancing water-drops from the kettle and also the grandmother's cup of tea. Harrison comments that "the poem's object bears the weight of its subject's emotion" (1993, p: 129).

The child observes that "the little moon falls down like tears /from between the pages of the almanac/into the flower bed the child/has carefully placed in the front of the house". The poem contains fairy tale elements and elements typical of children's literature. This is because Bishop adopts the child's voice in the poem and makes it as authentic as possible. It is one way of distancing herself from the story that is being told. She leaves it to the reader to interpret what is reported in the poem. This poem is really impressive because it is written in a complex sestina. Long sentences and run-on-line lines are used. Travisano praises "the marvels of colloquialism" (1988, p: 48) that Bishop achieves in "Sestina" and he claims Bishop to be the only poet he knows who can adopt such a difficult and archaic form and yet give the impression of easy story telling.

"One Art"

Paraphrasing

In "One Art" Bishop states that the art of losing is not hard to master. We can only bear big losses when we get comfortable with losing things of little worth to us like



losing a key or losing time. We gradually get used to the art of loss. The poet shifts to the personal things like losing a mother's watch, homes and loved ones. The final stanza shows what kind of loss actually troubles the speaker. It is the loss of a loved one. The speaker concludes that it is not a disaster although it looks like that.

Poetic Form

The form of this poem is villanelle. It consists of "five three-lined stanzas or tercets and a final quatrain. The first and third lines of the first tercets recur alternately in the following stanzas as a refrain and form a final couplet" (Cuddon, 2013, p: 763). A number of English poets have experimented with it notably Oscar Wilde, W. E. Henley and W. H. Auden. The villanelle form is used as an attempt to control strong feelings. The nineteen lines of the villanelle form are used as an attempt to control strong feelings.

Analysis

"One Art" obviously refers to the poet's own life. Critics and readers of Bishop agree that this poem explores the loss of objects, places, and persons she experienced throughout her life and how she survived them (Goldensohn, 1992, p: 244). The poem opens with the statement "The art of losing is not hard to master" which is repeated four times in the poem but the last line has a variation "the art of losing's not too hard to master" as if the speaker attempts to moderate herself. The poetic persona tries to change losing something into an art that can be mastered: "Lose something every day. Accept the fluster/of lost door keys, the hour badly spent. [...] Then practice losing farther, losing farther...". The title of "One Art" shows the poet's opinion that loss is something one should get used to handling. Lloyd Schwartz comments:

The real audience at this lecture on the bearability of loss, it turns out, is the expert herself – she has been trying to convince herself that any loss can be endured. And finally, she is forced to admit that she was right; she really may not have believed it, or wanted to



believe it, before. Apparently any loss, no matter how great –even this loss– can be lived through. (1988: 178).

The poem concludes with addressing someone whose identity is not revealed: "Even losing you I shan't have lied". Many critics say that she is addressing her friend Lota de MacedSoares. The preceding lines about the lost houses, cities, two rivers and a continent refer to Bishop's dwelling in Brazil and its tragic ending.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Bishop proves the idea that literature emerges from suffering. She suffered a lot since her early childhood and this suffering continues throughout her life. She loses her father and mother and all the dear ones that she loves. This makes her a very sensitive and emotional person and leads her to write the poems that are read and loved till now. It is true that she is affected by other poets but she has her own style in which she indirectly makes us experience what she herself experienced. Her poems "Sestina" and "One Art" are creative poems which reflect her losses. The first is about the loss of her mother while the second tackles the loss of her friend. In these two poems she uses very unique forms of literature: sestina and villanelle. The use of these very difficult forms shows that she is strong and able to handle the difficulties of her life.



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