

Abstract

The purpose of this extended essay is to examine Elizabeth Bishop's changing poetic treatment of her experiences through a close reading of style in poems from both her early and late work. This essay seeks to reveal a larger transition in Bishop's poetry, eventually answering the question "how does Elizabeth Bishop explore her attitude towards her experiences through her poetic style?" Secondary readings of Bishop's poetry by critics as well as interviews with Bishop will be used as supplementary materials for this essay.

While Bishop's early and late poetic styles contain opposing characteristics, her use of metaphor based on cultural experiences is present throughout her work, suggesting that she has always sought to use experience as a way to connect with her audience but could not always use her own.

This essay concludes that a use of passive description, abstract subject matter, and a theme of enclosure in her early work allowed Bishop to address her ideas without the use of her personal experiences. In contrast, a use of active description, subject matter based on personal experiences, and a theme of movement rather than enclosure in her later era suggests Bishop's increased ability to use her own experiences to create meaning in her poetry.

Word Count: 204

Early Work

Bishop's early style suggests that she is was not yet comfortable with her experiences or did not have a sufficient amount of experiences to discuss poetically. It is common in her early work to have a speaker who raises questions about description. According to Thomas Travisano “Bishop's example encouraged Lowell and others to let the image speak for itself in what might be called a semiopen structure, involving the presentation of a succession of images without direct authorial comment” (Travisano, 8). A reader may find this style less accessible, as it is not based on Bishop’s experiences but rather in abstract or metaphysical subject matter. Cultural human experiences are addressed through the lens of dreams or imaginary subjects in this era, supporting the claim that Bishop could not yet discuss her experiences poetically.

Encompassing the use of small spaces and limits in her writing, a theme of enclosure is prevalent in the majority of Bishop’s early poetry. This style tends to remove a necessity for allusions to Bishop’s experiences by creating literary walls around each poem.

A use of metaphor based in cultural experiences (associating poetic ideas with markedly human things such as jewelry, motherly gestures, etc.) is one way in which Bishop’s poetry connects directly to her audience without discussing her personal experiences. This characteristic is present in Bishop’s early and late poetry, suggesting that while Bishop sought to connect with her readers on the basis of experience, she did not always include her own personal experiences.

Passive Description

The technique of “passive description” is characterized by Bishop's alienation from her subject matter via a speaker who raises questions about description. This questioning also frequently encompasses to the scene of the poem itself; a style exemplified in Bishop’s poem “The Weed” (Bishop, 20-21). This setting of this early dream poem implies a question of whether or not the subject

is actually seeing or experiencing what they describe at all.

“A slight young weed
had pushed up through the heart and its
green head was nodding on the breast.

(All this was in the dark.)”

The use of darkness in this passage reminds the reader that any descriptive claims should be questioned, as the subject can not necessarily see what they are describing. This technique has undermined any of the subject’s descriptions, removing all authority from the subject and by extension from Bishop. In “The Map” (Bishop, 3), Bishop allows her subject to question his or herself rather than implying these questions with the poems setting.

“Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows at its edges”

In this poem Bishop’s poetic subject undermines his or her own authority by questioning a descriptive claim. This technique would allow the reader to impose their own authority, thereby removing the necessity for Bishop to discuss her personal experiences (her authority) in the poem. Taking this style further, in “The Imaginary Iceberg” (Bishop, 4), Bishop puts full authority into the subject matter (the iceberg) itself rather than imposing her own.

“Icebergs behove the soul
(both being self-made from elements least visible)
to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.”

Bishop's alienation from the subject of this poem is quite strong, as exemplified by her description of the iceberg as “self-made from elements least visible” This style of creating a self-determined subject removes Bishop from an authoritative position. In “The Man-Moth” (Bishop, 14-15), subject matter lies completely in the illusory, putting the reader in a position of imposing their own experiences on the

poem rather than using Bishop's for understanding.

“The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way
and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,
without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort.
He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards.”

The description in this excerpt (the train's “full, terrible speed”) is undermined by the imposition of the imaginary (“without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort”) rather than by direct questioning. The use of imaginary subject matter is quite common to Bishop's early work and provides a medium of expression that separates Bishop's personal experiences from her poetry.

Imaginary Scenes and Characters

Writing with imaginary or dream-based scenes and characters allows Bishop to address and discuss her ideas poetically without the necessity to include her own experiences. Evidence of her implementation of the technique can be seen in both the word choice and plot of her poems. In “The Man-Moth” (Bishop, 14-15) her diction supports the imaginary setting and characters in the poem. She uses words like “inverted,” “queer,” “impossible,” “flutters,” and many others to create a tone of uncertainty and intangibility to the reader.

“He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.”

In this excerpt, the moon is described abstractly while simultaneously being associated with cultural experiences. In the first two lines the subject of the poem “does not see the moon,” but at the same time observes its properties. He “feels” the light of the moon on his hands but cannot tell whether it is warm or cold. The poem describes the moon as “vast” and the light as “queer,” further implying a

contradiction between the subject's sensory perception and imagination. These contradictions are what makes the scene imaginary and removed from Bishop's personal experiences. A similar technique is used to build the setting of "The Imaginary Iceberg" (Bishop, 4).

"This iceberg cuts its facets from within."

The subject of this particular poem exemplifies imagination's role in perception. Only the very tip of an iceberg can actually be seen from a ship (the observers of the iceberg in this poem are on a ship), while the majority of it hides below the water. Because this poem describes something that is for the most part hidden from perception, it is treated as an imaginary scene. Bishop accomplishes this by giving the iceberg intrinsic value (as seen in the excerpt). Doing this removes a necessity for Bishop to involve her own experiences to create understanding. Similarly, in her dream poem "The Weed" (Bishop, 20-21), Bishop removes herself from the scene before she begins to discuss her ideas.

"I dreamed that dead, and meditating,

I lay upon a grave, or bed..."

The very first line sets the reader up for a dream poem rather than a poem involving Bishop's personal experiences. This setup allows the reader to apply their own experiences to the poem to create understanding. Similarly, in "The Map" (Bishop, 3), Bishop leaves the reader to explore the poem by using an imaginary tone.

"Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?

--What suits the character of the native waters best."

The personification of the "countries" and "waters" in this poem creates an imaginary tone suggesting that Bishop (although she is describing something that is not innately imaginary or intangible) is not comfortable delving into her own experiences to describe the map. She once again removes herself from the poem and allows the reader to use their own experiences rather than hers to gain understanding.

Theme of Enclosure

A theme of enclosure and imprisonment (the literary use of small spaces and figurative walls) is widespread throughout Bishop's early poetry, allowing her to limit the implications of her descriptions and preventing a need to involve her own experiences in her writing. In her poem "The Weed," the theme of enclosure comes up in the first few lines and is emphasized before she continues exploring her ideas.

"I dreamed that dead, and meditating,
I lay upon a grave, or bed,
(at least, some cold and close-built bower)."

The setting of this poem has been limited within the walls of "some cold and close-built bower." The clear description of the setting prevents a necessity for Bishop to discuss her experiences and memories that would connect with a more loosely defined setting. This theme of enclosure can be seen throughout the poem with words such as "idle," "unchanged," "dark," and "black," all reminders of some small dark space. Her poem "The Man-Moth" (14-15), carries a similar tone enclosing tone.

"He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
proving the sky quite useless for protection."

In these lines the sky becomes a protective and solid entity under which all of humanity is enclosed. The man-moth's hope of escaping through a small hole in the top of the sky attests to the sky's solidity, especially since he fails to escape later in the poem. Just like "The Weed," (Bishop, 20-21) the enclosure of the scene of "The Man-Moth" under the dome of the sky allows Bishop to explore imaginary ideas without involving her own experiences.

"...We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom..."

"The Map" (Bishop, 3) presents a unique case in regards to enclosure in that the subject matter of the

poem is in and of itself a limited entity. This poem focuses on the lines and borders of the map, of the land “drawing” the water around itself, of the various enclosures presented in the scene, and the further imprisonment of being “under a glass.” This stylistic enclosure would prevent a reader from questioning further implications of the map, thereby removing a necessity for Bishop’s experiences to create understanding. In contrast to the intrinsic limited nature of the map, the scene of Bishop’s poem “The Imaginary Iceberg” (Bishop, 4) must be enclosed with language.

“This is a scene where he who treads the boards
is artlessly rhetorical. The curtain
is light enough to rise on finest ropes
that airy twists of snow provide.”

By setting this poem up as a “scene,” Bishop is able to limit its physical scope. The use of metaphor (“the curtain,” “finest ropes”) in these lines supports her limitations, as she condenses the vast open of the poem into the limited space of a theater stage. This metaphor extends even further; rather than incorporating her personal experiences, Bishop is allowing the scene to play out on its own without her influence

Cultural Metaphors

A use of metaphors based in cultural (presumably the American culture that Bishop has grown up in) human experiences allowed Bishop to connect to her audience through metaphor and imagery without her personal experiences. The continuity of this style through Bishop’s early and late poetry suggests that she always aimed to discuss cultural human experiences but could not use her own experiences to accomplish this in her early work.

“The Peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
like women feeling for the smoothness of yard goods.”

In these lines, taken from “The Map” (Bishop, 3), Bishop associates peninsulas with a cultural experience. This use of metaphor involving a shared cultural experience would allow the reader to connect with the imagery without using Bishop’s experiences. For example, in “The Imaginary Iceberg” (4) Bishop assigns many culturally human characteristics to the iceberg, but does not address her personal experiences.

“The wits of these white peaks
spar with the sun. Its weight the iceberg dares
upon a shifting stage and stands and stares.”

By applying culturally human characteristics to the subject of this poem, Bishop is opening up an opportunity for understanding despite her audiences previous experiences with icebergs. If a reader had never had the opportunity to see an iceberg, Bishop's use of cultural metaphors would have allowed them to create an image from memories and the experiences of their own. This technique removes the necessity for Bishop to supplement her own experiences to create understanding.

“Up the facades,
his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him,
he climbs fearfully...”

The “photographer's cloth” metaphor in “The Man-Moth” (Bishop, 14-15) exemplifies Bishop’s technique of conveying meaning through shared culture rather than through her personal experiences.

“It grew an inch like a blade of grass;
next, one leaf shot out of its side
a twisting, waving flag, and then
two leaves moved like a semaphore.”

This excerpt from “The Weed” (Bishop, 20-21) cultural metaphor is used in the same way as previous poems. A “blade of grass,” “semaphore,” and “waving flag” are all objects that would likely be

experienced by a some of Bishop's audience, suggesting that they are not only a part of Bishop's personal experience.

Late Work

Contrasting her early work, Bishop's later poetry begins to include her personal experiences. Characters and scenes in this era are described actively; her poetic subjects no longer question their descriptions and she does not rely on imaginary or dream-based scenes to remove a necessity for her own experiences (in fact, many of the poems are actually based on her experiences).

Unlike the theme of enclosure in her early work, Bishop's late work displays a theme of movement. This technique incorporates the change of setting mid-poem, movement-oriented diction, and questions that consider ideas outside of the discussed scene. Bishop is no longer limiting her scenes, but rather, exploring the various implications of her observations as they correlate with her personal history.

While the implementation of cultural metaphor in this phase of Bishop's writing may be the same, the implications are not. The metaphors were used as the core method of conveying imagery in her early work, in her later work they are used alongside Bishop's personal experiences to create understanding. This implies Bishop's increased comfort with exploring her personal experiences poetically.

Active Description

Bishop's later work takes on a new and more involved descriptive style. While her early poems contained subjects who questioned her description, her later does not. Additionally, Bishop begins to use herself as a basis upon which to expand the description of her subjects. Some examples of this

technique can be seen in her poem “The End of March” (Bishop, 179-180).

“The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side”

In these lines Bishop’s own experience expands the meaning of the “rackety, icy, offshore wind.” In this poem the reader gains understanding through the connection between the wind and Bishop’s experience, rather than needing to involve their own experiences to fully understand a more loosely defined subject. In her poem “Santarem” (Bishop, 185-187), Bishop attempts to guide the reader by including her opinion of the scene.

“That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther;
more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile
in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajos, Amazon,
grandly, silently flowing, flowing east.”

This passage comes at the beginning of the poem, setting up the reader’s view of the scene. Rather than an ambiguous imaginary landscape, it is apparent that this poem comes from Bishop’s personal experiences. Because of this, descriptions no longer need to be questioned but can be expressed with full certainty.

“Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible...”

These lines from the poem “At the Fishhouses” (Bishop, 64-66) directly contrast excerpts from Bishop’s early era poem “The Weed.” While the scene that Bishop is describing is dark, she retains full faith in her descriptions and does not question them. This is a marked change from her early work, suggesting a new-found comfort with the certainty of her experiences and memories. Similarly,

Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room" (Bishop, 159-161) presents an unquestionable faith in her personal experiences.

"The waiting room was bright
and too hot..."

In these lines the waiting room is described as "too hot" rather than "hot," suggesting Bishop's personal involvement in the description of the scene.

Personal Experiences

The involvement of Bishop's personal experiences in her later work contrasts a lack of them in her early work. These experiences add a touch of reality to her poetry, creating a different tone than her early imaginative works.

"The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
He was a friend of my grandfather."

In these lines from "At the Fishhouses" (Bishop, 64-66), Bishop's personal involvement is clearly seen ("he was a friend of my grandfather) and would allow a reader to take meaning from the poem without involving their experiences. In this way Bishop guides her audience to conclusions rather than allowing them to create their own. In "In the Waiting Room" Bishop discusses cultural experiences as she did in her early work, this time viewing them through her personal history.

"But I felt: you are an *I*
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*."

In these lines connections are drawn between Bishop's personal experiences and greater cultural experiences, a style that would not have been found in her early work.

"Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed

a track of big dog-prints (so big
they were more like lion prints).”

Bishop’s experience helps create meaning in her poem “The End of March” (Bishop, 179-180). The “rubber boots” contrast the “wet sand,” just Bishop's following of the “big dog-prints” creates movement in the poem. Once again, Bishop’s personal experiences are connected with cultural experiences to create meaning.

“Of course I may be remembering it all wrong
after, after—how many years?”

This excerpt from “Santarem” (Bishop, 185-197) seems contradictory. Is Bishop undermining all of her descriptions and removing her descriptive authority with this statement, just as she would in her early poetry? While it appears that way, this poem is actually a memory, something drawn directly from Bishop’s personal experiences, giving Bishop room to self-question without undermining her ability to describe the scene.

Theme of Movement

The theme of movement is characterized by the use of action words, shifting from once scene to another, and motion-based metaphors. This new theme that contrasts to her theme of “enclosure” could require Bishop to delve into her experiences to explain the implications of her poetry. In “Santarem” (Bishop, 185-187), Bishop uses a plethora of motion adjectives in her description of the rivers and begins to step outside the scene by referencing historical events.

“Two rivers full of crazy shipping—people
all apparently changing their minds, embarking,
disembarking, rowing clumsy dories.”

This excerpt exemplifies the use of “motion adjectives.” Words like “changing,” “embarking,”

“disembarking,” and “rowing,” all convey a sense of motion and freedom to the reader, allowing the scene to trail off into both past and future events.

“I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green...”

This excerpt from “The End of March” (Bishop, 179-180) shows Bishop's new-found comfort in both stating her dreams and desires directly (without framing the use of imaginary subject matter) and a new technique of delving into her emotions to create meaning. A similar style is used in her poem “At the Fishhouses” (Bishop, 64-66).

“We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring
while he waits for a herring boat to come in.”

The subjects of this scene are discussing an idea that could not be perceived through imagery alone, but requires the addition of Bishop’s experience to create understanding. Rather than enclosing the scene with literary walls (as she would do in her early poems) Bishop delves into the external implications of the poem via her personal experiences.

“The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February 1918.”

At the end of her poem “In the Waiting Room” (Bishop, 159-161), a work focused very thoroughly on the events occurring in an enclosed space, Bishop feels that she needs to tie the scene into the world at large; a key aspect of her “theme of movement.”

Cultural Metaphors

Bishop's implementation of human experience-based metaphors in her late work reflects her early work; she connects aspects of nature, other observations, and ideas with cultural human experiences. However, in her later work, these metaphors are used alongside her own experiences. This new style implies Bishop's new-found comfort with associating her experiences with cultural experiences in her poetry. In "At the Fishhouses" (Bishop, 64-66) Bishop metaphorically associates knowledge with her experiences with the sea.

"If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free..."

Here, Bishop is associates knowledge with "dark," "salt," "clear," and many other cultural human sensory experiences. However, in the previous lines, she has discussed her own experience with the sea in order to supplement a reader's interpretation of the presented metaphor. A similar technique is used in "In the Waiting Room" (Bishop, 159-161).

"The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another."

It is apparent that the metaphor of this passage could not convey meaning without Bishop's experience. While a reader could visualize a "big black wave," it is possible that they would not understand its relevance with the scene had Bishop not described the waiting room as "bright and too hot." This exemplifies Bishop's use of cultural metaphor in partnership with her own experiences to create understanding.

“They could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that now he was behind them
--a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints...”

The “lion sun” imagery used in “The End of March” (Bishop, 179-180) is further expanded in this excerpt by what Bishop saw on the beach (“those big, majestic paw-prints”). Once again, the collaboration of Bishop's personal experiences and cultural metaphor has created understanding.

“...A week or so before
there'd been a thunderstorm and the Cathedral'd
been struck by lightning. One tower had
a widening zigzag crack all the way down.”

This scene from “Santarem” (Bishop, 185-187) contains Bishop's description of the Cathedral. However, this description would not have a significant impact if Bishop had not described it further with her own experiences. Additionally, the historical reference (“a week or so before...”) draws the reader along Bishop's memory of the scene, giving the imagery a contextual basis and making it more understandable.

Conclusion

This essay has addressed the question “how does Elizabeth Bishop explore her attitude towards her experiences through her poetic style?”

In Bishop's early work, poetic subjects frequently questioned descriptive claims, a style suggesting the unreliability of their descriptions. It seems that truthful descriptive claims could not be made in this era because of a lack of experiential support. However, the inclusion of personal experiences in Bishop's later work removes a necessity for descriptive questioning.

Through her career, Bishop transitioned from a theme of enclosure and imprisonment to a theme of movement. This transition marked a change in Bishop's willingness to include her personal experiences in her poetry. Her early style of enclosure removed the ability for the reader to explore the historical and external implications of the poetry, thereby removing a necessity for Bishop to explain these implications through her experiences. In her later work, Bishop explores both historical and future events and discusses her personal experiences.

Just as enclosure turns to movement, Bishop's use of the imaginary changes to a use of real life events through her career. While she confined herself to imaginary and dream-based scenes in her early work (removing a necessity for her personal experiences to create understanding), Bishop later began to base her poems on real-life events. This change removed authority from the reader in creating meaning, as her later work guides the reader to a conclusion rather than leaving it open-ended.

As she stepped from her early to her late era, Bishop began incorporating her personal experiences in her poetry. This treatment of personal history brought with it a new poetic style including, but not solely based on, a theme of movement, the involvement of personal history, and an increased descriptive certainty. These characteristics suggest that Bishop became more comfortable with her personal experiences, or accumulated sufficient experiences to discuss as her poetry career continued.

Word Count: 4000

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