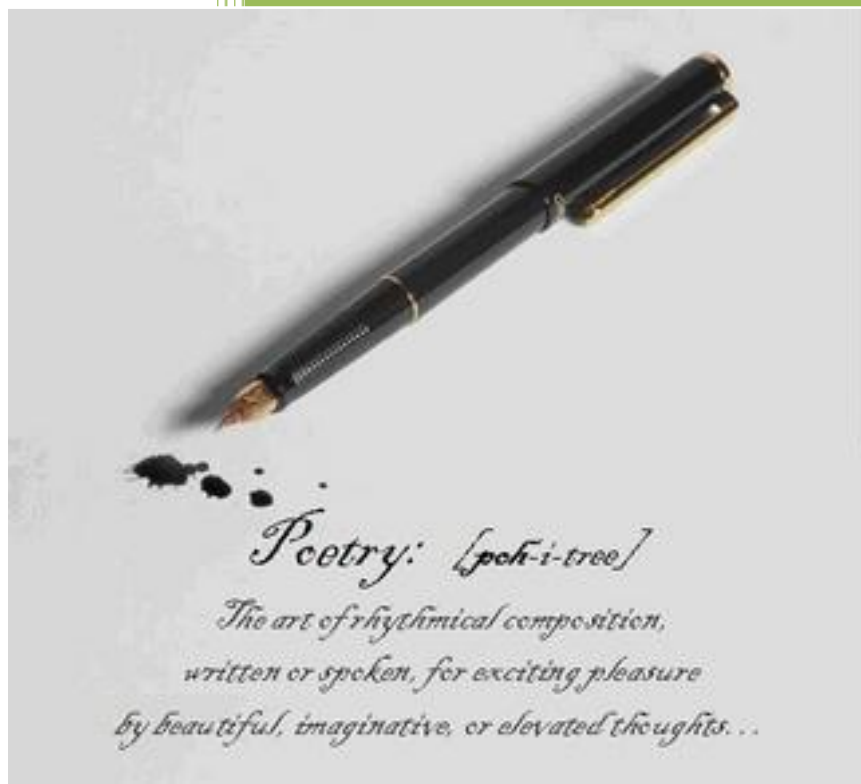


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## Poetry – Elizabeth Bishop



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## Elizabeth Bishop – Brief Biography

Elizabeth Bishop was born in Massachusetts in 1911. Her father died when she was a baby, and his death caused Bishop's mother to have a mental breakdown. When Bishop was five her mother was permanently institutionalised and was never reunited with her daughter. Bishop's maternal grandparents took care of her and she spent her early childhood with them on their farm in Nova Scotia.

Bishop was very happy there, and it was while living in Nova Scotia that she became a keen fisherwoman.

However, her father's family claimed custody of her in 1917 and took her back to Massachusetts.

Bishop was very unhappy there, and developed chronic asthma. As a result of this, she had very little formal schooling until she was a teenager.



When she was fourteen, Bishop was sent to boarding school, and from there she went on to study English literature at the exclusive Vassar college in New York. Bishop's father had left her a sum of money which lasted her for many years. This enabled her to travel widely and concentrate on her writing.

In 1951, Bishop met Lota de Macedo Soares, a Brazilian architect. The two women lived together in Rio de Janeiro until Lota's death in 1967. Bishop moved back to the United States when Soares died, and taught at Harvard University.

During her lifetime, Bishop received numerous awards for her published works. Her poems do not focus on her personal life in the same way that many of her contemporaries' work did. She did not write openly about her sexuality or her struggles with alcoholism or depression, and wanted to be remembered for the quality of her work rather than for the intimate details of her life.

## The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish  
and held him beside the boat  
half out of water, with my hook  
fast in a corner of his mouth.

He didn't fight.

He hadn't fought at all.

He hung a grunting weight,  
battered and venerable  
and homely. Here and there  
his brown skin hung in strips  
like ancient wallpaper,  
and its pattern of darker brown  
was like wallpaper:

shapes like full-blown roses  
stained and lost through age.

He was speckled with barnacles,  
fine rosettes of lime,  
and infested

with tiny white sea-lice,  
and underneath two or three  
rags of green weed hung down.

While his gills were breathing in  
the terrible oxygen

- the frightening gills,  
fresh and crisp with blood,  
that can cut so badly -

I thought of the coarse white flesh  
packed in like feathers,  
the big bones and the little bones,  
the dramatic reds and blacks  
of his shiny entrails,  
and the pink swim-bladder

*\*venerable: old, and worthy of respect*

*\*homely: ugly, plain, unattractive*



*\*entrails: guts*

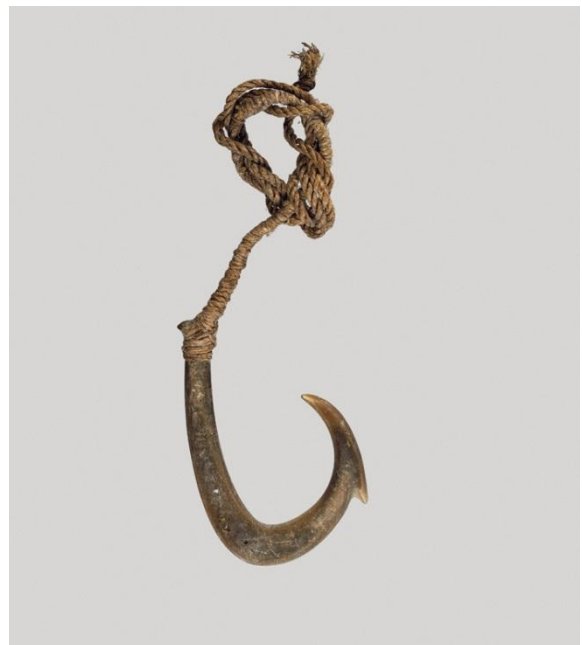
*\*swim-bladder : fish's gas-filled buoyancy bladder*

like a big peony.  
I looked into his eyes  
which were far larger than mine  
but shallower, and yellowed,  
the irises backed and packed  
with tarnished tinfoil  
seen through the lenses  
of old scratched isinglass.  
They shifted a little, but not  
to return my stare.  
- It was more like the tipping  
of an object toward the light.  
I admired his sullen face,  
the mechanism of his jaw,  
and then I saw  
that from his lower lip  
- if you could call it a lip -  
grim, wet, and weaponlike,  
hung five old pieces of fish-line,  
or four and a wire leader  
with the swivel still attached,  
with all their five big hooks  
grown firmly in his mouth.  
A green line, frayed at the end  
where he broke it, two heavier lines,  
and a fine black thread  
still crimped from the strain and snap  
when it broke and he got away.  
Like medals with their ribbons  
frayed and wavering,  
a five-haired beard of wisdom  
trailing from his aching jaw.  
I stared and stared  
and victory filled up  
the little rented boat,

*\*peony: large, attractive flower*

*\*iris: circular, coloured part of the eye*

*\*isinglass: thin sheets of mica used instead of glass. Another meaning of isinglass is a gelatinous ingredient in cookery made from the swim-bladder of a fish*



*\*crimped: wavy*

from the pool of bilge  
where oil had spread a rainbow  
around the rusted engine  
to the bailer rusted orange,  
the sun-cracked thwarts,  
the oarlocks on their strings,  
the gunnels - until everything  
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!  
And I let the fish go.

*\*bilge: dirty water that collects in the lowest part of the boat*

*\*bailer: bucket for bailing water*

*\*thwarts: seats in the boat*

*\*oarlocks: hold the oars onto the side of the boat*

## **Background**

Elizabeth Bishop was a keen fisherwoman. This poem was written when she lived in Florida, and it tells of a real experience she had when fishing off Key West.

## **Summary and analysis**

The poem is narrated in the first person, which gives a sense of intimacy and draws the reader into the tale.

The poet tells us of a fishing trip in a rented boat. She succeeds in catching 'a tremendous fish' and pulls him half out of the water with her fish hook lodged firmly in the corner of his mouth. She describes the fish as 'venerable'. This word is used to describe an elderly person who deserves our respect. Here, Bishop is giving human qualities to a non-human creature. This is called anthropomorphising.

The fish doesn't fight, a fact which clearly surprises the poet as she repeats it: 'He didn't fight, He hadn't fought at all.'

Instead, the fish merely hangs limply on the line, thereby giving the poet a chance to observe him more closely. He is obviously an old fish: large, heavy and ugly yet deserving of respect. She notices his skin, ragged and peeling; and it reminds her of old, floral wallpaper. The fish is also infested with sea-lice and barnacles and has seaweed hanging from his stomach. All the time - as she is observing these details about the fish - he is slowly dying, gasping for air through bleeding gills.

Bishop now begins to wonder what his insides would be like. She thinks his flesh would be white, the flakes overlapping tightly like a bird's feathers, and his entrails (guts) would be vivid by comparison, red and black. Unusually, she imagines his swim-bladder as resembling a big peony.

Now the poet looks into the fish's eyes, trying to engage him in some way. She sees nothing but large, yellowish eyes which are clouded and don't reflect her own stare. At this point the fish's eyes move but still he doesn't look at Bishop; instead it is as if he is looking towards the light. Bishop uses assonance and alliteration to add to the musical quality of the poem here: 'backed and packed with tarnished tinfoil'.

The fish's expression, Bishop believes, is sullen or cross, his jaw strong. Then she notices something else. There are five old fish hooks, some with a little line still attached, hanging from his lower lip. The hooks have obviously been there for some time as the fish's skin has grown around them and they are now firmly embedded. These hooks are like war medals; they tell of battles the fish has fought and won in the past. The lengths of line still attached are strong yet the fish clearly broke them in his struggle; one of them is still crimped from the force which caused it to snap. To Bishop, these hooks are symbols of the wisdom and experience the fish has acquired in his long life.

The poet uses imagery very effectively to paint a picture of the fish in our minds. The similes and metaphors which compare the fish's skin to floral wallpaper, the barnacles to rosettes, the swim bladder to a big peony and the fish hooks to medals are all striking as they transform the ugly and the aged into images of beauty and venerability.

Once the poet begins to observe the fish closely, she starts to empathise with him, and her release of him becomes inevitable. She wants to relate to him and tries to look into his eyes to see something she can engage with, perhaps a mute pleading or some other signal. She sees nothing and realises now that she is trying in vain to give the fish human qualities. This may be why she says 'if you can call it a lip' when she is talking about the five fish hooks in his mouth: she is acknowledging what she has been doing.

Bishop realises that she does not need to communicate with the fish, does not need him to return her stare in order for her to relate to him. She is awed by his age and the evidence of his previous battles and realises that he is not so different from herself, from all of us. He too has struggled to survive in a world that can be incredibly hostile and now he is tired, too tired to fight any more.

By now the fish has been hanging for some time and the poet notes that his jaw must be aching. She stares at him intently and suddenly she is filled with an overwhelming sense of victory. Everything around her seems beautiful- even the oil slick on the stagnant water in the boat is a spreading rainbow. In this poem we see how closely Bishop observes the world around her and how this scrutiny leads her to greater insights into the human condition.

The poem ends on a joyful note. Everything is transformed; even the rusty, ancient boat is 'filled with victory' and the rainbows on the oil slick seem beautiful. The repetition of the word 'rainbow' is important: it is almost like a victory cry and reinforces the sense of joy at the conclusion of the

poem. The victory is Bishop's for catching the fish, and the fish's for winning all his previous battles. She lets him go; he is literally 'off the hook'.

### **Theme**

The theme of this poem is a celebration of the shared ability of the poet and the fish to triumph over adversity.

### **Tone**

At the start of the poem the tone is one of awe and respect as the poet is filled with admiration for the aged fish she has caught.

The tone at the end of the poem is celebratory: Bishop is proud of herself for catching the fish and she is delighted to be able to release such a survivor who has endured so much hardship and fought so strongly in the past.

### **Short Questions**

**Answer ALL of the following: [Each question carries 10 marks]**

1. How does the fish behave when it is caught?
2. What kind of person is the fisher, in your opinion?
3. '...from his lower lip  
-if you could call it a lip-  
grim, wet, and weaponlike,  
hung five old pieces of fish-line'

What do these lines tell you about the fish?

### **Long Questions**

**Answer ONE of the following: [Each question carries 20 marks]**

1. Imagine you are the fish. What do you think the fish is thinking as it is stared at and examined, and then released by the fisher? Write down the fish's thoughts.
2. Write Elizabeth Bishop's diary entry, telling of her fishing experience that day. Reveal her feelings on catching, examining and releasing the fish.
3. Does the ending of the poem come as a surprise? Why do you think the speaker 'let the fish go'? Explain your answer by reference to the poem.

## The Prodigal

The brown enormous odor he lived by  
was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,  
for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty  
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.  
Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts,  
the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare -  
even to the sow that always ate her young -  
till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.  
But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts  
(he hid the pints behind a two-by-four),  
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red  
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.  
And then he thought he almost might endure  
his exile yet another year or more.

But evenings the first star came to warn.  
The farmer whom he worked for came at dark  
to shut the cows and horses in the barn  
beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,  
with pitchforks, faint forked lightnings, catching light,  
safe and companionable as in the Ark.  
The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.  
The lantern - like the sun, going away -  
laid on the mud a pacing aureole.  
Carrying a bucket along a slimy board,  
he felt the bats' uncertain staggering flight,  
his shuddering insights, beyond his control,  
touching him. But it took him a long time  
finally to make up his mind to go home.

*\*odor: odour or smell*

*\*sty: pigsty*

*\*snouts: pigs' noses*

*\*sow: female pig*

*\*two-by-four: length of timber*



*\*aureole: a halo around a saint's head*



## Background

1. The biblical story of the Prodigal Son tells of a young man who asked his father for his inheritance early and then left home. He spent all his money on drink and bad living, and ended up working for a farmer, caring for and living with his pigs. One day he woke up and realised how he had wasted his life, and decided to go home. He was welcomed with open arms by his loving father.
2. Bishop struggled with depression and alcoholism throughout her life. Because of her family circumstances (see brief biography) she had no real home to go to. This poem is based on an incident which occurred in 1946. Bishop was visiting her family's farm in Nova Scotia and was offered 'a drink of rum, in the pig sties, at about nine in the morning.' This experience, combined with her psychoanalysis, led to Bishop's writing 'The Prodigal'.

## Summary and analysis

The poem focuses on the time in the Prodigal Son's life before he came home. It deals with his debased condition – living with pigs – and tells of his growing awareness that he must rise above this way of life and go home again. The Prodigal here is a metaphor for an alcoholic, specifically the poet herself.

The poem is divided into two parts, each taking the form of a sonnet. The first sonnet graphically describes the appalling conditions in which the Prodigal finds himself. He is reduced to the condition of an animal; he lives so close to the pigs now that he is unable to distance himself and view them objectively. The smell of them may be overwhelming to most people, but he cannot judge that any more. He has lost the ability to stand back and look at his own life and see clearly how dreadful it is.

As in the other two poems on the course, Bishop uses detailed, sensuous imagery to bring the scene to life. There is something both wonderful and horrible in the description of the wall 'plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.' The pigs may be filthy and revolting – one of the sows 'always ate her young' – but they are nonetheless some sort of company for the poet. The alliterative description of the pigs' eyes 'light-lashed' and their 'cheerful stare' shows that the Prodigal has sunk so low that he can regard even these animals as appropriate companions. There is a sense of camaraderie between them; they watch him cheerfully and he scratches a sow on the head.

Yet even in the midst of all this filth, the Prodigal retains some sense of humanity and some awareness that this is no way to live. He hides his alcohol behind a plank of wood, perhaps in an effort to fool himself and those around him about the extent of his drinking. At the same time, he sees

that there is beauty in the world. The sunrise makes even the mud in the barnyard glow red, and the 'burning puddles seemed to reassure'. Still, it is sad that the only warmth and beauty in the Prodigal's life comes from temporarily shining muddy puddles; and the only affection from pigs.

It is a mark of the strength of the human spirit that the Prodigal can find anything to admire in his surroundings, but this also leads him to feel that perhaps he can 'endure / his exile yet another year more'. He is not yet ready to turn away from alcohol and face up to the reality of his situation.

The word 'But' at the opening of the second section signals a change of mood. There is, for the first time, a note of real hope that the Prodigal may see the error of his ways. The imagery becomes more light-filled and positive than in the first section of the poem, reflecting the more optimistic viewpoint. A star is personified as it comes 'to warn' the Prodigal that he is on the wrong path. This reminds us of the star of Bethlehem which led the wise men to the infant Jesus. The implication here may be that a wise man will heed the warning or the guidance offered to him, but the Prodigal is not quite ready to do that yet. It will be 'a long time' before he attains enough wisdom to change his ways and go home. The star is not the only allusion to the Bible in this section; the farmer's lantern leaves a circle of light on the mud that is like a saint's halo or 'aureole', and the animals in the barn are as safe and comfortable as those on Noah's ark.

The Prodigal is not comfortable, however. There is a growing realisation that he does not belong here and that he should be seeking a better life. The only other human – the farmer – shuts him in the barn at night along with the animals while he goes back to his home and family. The only family the Prodigal has is the collection of barnyard creatures, but this is not enough for him now. The farmer's lantern vanishes, leaving him in the dark once more. The pigs are unaffected by troubling thoughts; they stretch out and snore happily in their sleep, feeling safe and secure.

The Prodigal's awful situation is emphasised by the fact that he carries a bucket 'along a slimy board' and is moved by 'shuddering insights' as he senses the bats flying around him. The bats' flight is 'uncertain' and 'staggering', reflecting the poet's drunkenness and his stumbling through life without direction.

Although he may be becoming more self-aware, the Prodigal's decision to go home does not come quickly. This is only the beginning of the path to recovery. Obviously, the lure of home – or of sobriety- is not as strong as the lure of alcohol at this stage.

The ending of the poem is interesting. Rather than finishing on a rhyming couplet, for example, the poem ends without a true rhyme. A rhyming couplet is associated with closure and can be a neat way to wrap up the ideas in a poem, but there is no neat ending here. The Prodigal may have made up his mind to go home, but the solution is not without problems too, possibly. Home, love and security for Bishop was not as clear-cut as it might be for most people. (See brief biography.)

## Theme

Like 'The Fish', this poem focuses on the strength of the human spirit and our ability to recover from even the most seemingly hopeless situations. The Prodigal is reduced to the level of an animal by his alcoholism, but there is still hope.

## Tone

The first section of the poem is bleak and depressing. The Prodigal is living in squalor, and there seems little hope of his bettering himself. However, the mood becomes more optimistic, albeit cautiously so, in the second section. There is a note of hope as the Prodigal begins to see the error of his ways. The ending is positive; the Prodigal eventually decides to go home and to become a part of society once more.

## Short Questions

**Answer ALL of the following: [Each question carries 10 marks]**

1. What do you learn about the poet from reading this poem?
2. Comment on the Biblical allusions in this poem.
3. 'But it took him a long time / finally to make his mind up to go home.'  
What do you think the poet means by this final line?

## Long Questions

**Answer ONE of the following: [Each question carries 20 marks]**

1. Imagine that you are the Prodigal. Write **two** diary entries that you think he might write about the events in this poem.
2. *'The Prodigal is a poem about the endurance and strength of the human spirit.'*  
Do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer with reference to the poem.
3. Choose two images from the poem that you found particularly effective. Write out the images in full, and then explain your choices.

## Filling Station

Oh, but it is dirty!

--this little filling station,  
oil-soaked, oil-permeated  
to a disturbing, over-all  
black translucency.

Be careful with that match!

*\*oil-permeated: soaked through with oil*

*\*translucency: shine/gloss*

Father wears a dirty,  
oil-soaked monkey suit  
that cuts him under the arms,  
and several quick and saucy  
and greasy sons assist him  
(it's a family filling station),  
all quite thoroughly dirty.

*\*monkey suit: overalls*

Do they live in the station?  
It has a cement porch  
behind the pumps, and on it  
a set of crushed and grease-  
impregnated wickerwork;  
on the wicker sofa  
a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide  
the only note of color--  
of certain color. They lie  
upon a big dim doily  
draping a taboret  
(part of the set), beside  
a big hirsute begonia.

*\*doily: decorative cloth put under bowls to protect the table*

*\*taboret: small stool*

*\*hirsute: hairy    \*begonia: flowering plant*

Why the extraneous plant?  
Why the taboret?

*\*extraneous: unnecessary*



Why, oh why, the doily?  
(Embroidered in daisy stitch  
with marguerites, I think,  
and heavy with gray crochet.)

*\*daisy stitch: type of design in crochet*

*\*marguerites: daisies*

Somebody embroidered the doily.  
Somebody waters the plant,  
or oils it, maybe. Somebody  
arranges the rows of cans  
so that they softly say:  
ESSO--SO--SO--SO

to high-strung automobiles.  
Somebody loves us all.



### **Summary and analysis**

The poem begins in a judgemental tone, the poet sounding slightly shocked at the pervasive dirt and oily grime of the filling station. Her use of an exclamation mark highlights the startling nature of the all-encompassing filth, as does her repetition of the word 'dirty' which really drives the message home.

Bishop goes on to describe the way in which the filling station is dirty, specifically that every surface is covered in oil. She tells us, in a light-hearted note, that a carelessly thrown match would be fatal.

In the second stanza we are introduced to the owners of the station- a father and several sons. The father is wearing a filthy pair of overalls or dungarees that don't fit him any more; the sons are 'quick and saucy' and all of them are 'quite thoroughly dirty'.

Having been initially taken aback by the dirt of the filling station, Bishop now begins to observe it more closely. She wonders if the men live in the station; she notices some evidence of family, a set of wicker furniture on the porch and a dirty dog lying on the couch. She describes the dog as being 'quite comfy'.

In the fourth stanza the poet spots some comic books which provide the only note of colour, as everything else is black with dirt and oil. She notices that the comic books are on a low, three legged stool, which is itself covered with a big doily. There is also a large, slightly scruffy begonia on the doily.

Now Bishop begins to wonder why on earth such a grimy, unprepossessing place as the filling station should have a potted begonia, a little stool acting as a side table and - above all - why there should be a doily. She describes the doily in more detail: it is crocheted and embroidered with daisy stitch. She believes that there must be an unseen hand responsible for these incongruous and dainty touches; it seems so unlikely that the men she has seen earlier could have arranged them. She wonders who embroidered the doily and who waters or, she jokes, oils the plant. The implication is that it is a woman, perhaps the wife and mother of the family. Even the cans of oil are arranged carefully so that the word 'Esso' is to the front of all of them. When the words on the cans are read aloud they say, 'ESSO-SO-SO-SO' which sounds soothing and in the past might have been said to highly-strung horses to calm them down. Now the words only speak to 'highstrung automobiles' but the impression of care and attention is there nonetheless. As Bishop says in the final line, 'Somebody loves us all.'

The woman (we assume it is a woman) who tries to make this place a home may also be responsible for arranging the oil cans so carefully. The sibilance (repeated 's' sounds) in the final stanza add greatly to the musical quality of the poem and reinforce the impression of loving, soothing care.

There is an interesting mix of styles in this poem: the relaxed conversational way in which Bishop warns us to be careful with that match and the description of the dog as 'quite comfy' contrast with her exact, poetic language at other times, for example the 'over-all black translucency' of the station and the doily 'heavy with gray crochet'. There is kindness and humour in the poem: Bishop suggests the plant may well be oiled instead of watered. The language is never cruel; Bishop is startled by the dirt but quickly sees beyond it to the loving touches, to somebody's attempt to bring order and beauty to such an unlikely place.

## **Theme**

The theme of this poem is that people can create beauty and a sense of love and caring even in the most unlikely surroundings.

## Tone

The tone of this poem is conversational, light hearted and ultimately optimistic. Bishop shocked at the dirt of the station initially but on closer observation, sees the little homey touches and is cheered by this evidence of love and care.

## Short Questions

**Answer ALL of the following: [Each question carries 10 marks]**

1. What impression of the filling station and its inhabitants do you get from reading the first two stanzas of the poem? Refer to the text in support of your answer.
2. '*Somebody loves us all.*'  
In your opinion, does this line provide a good ending to the poem? Explain your answer.
3. What impression of the poet, Elizabeth Bishop, do you get from reading this poem?

## Long Questions

**Answer ONE of the following: [Each question carries 20 marks]**

1. 'Good poetry creates vivid pictures in our minds.' In your opinion, is this true of *Filling Station*? Support your view by reference to the text of the poem.
2. Imagine you are Elizabeth Bishop. Write a diary entry, based on your reading of the poem, in which you describe your experience of stopping at this filling station.
3. Which of the following statements is closest to your own view of the poem:
  - *Life is full of surprises*
  - *Everyone needs love*
  - *We shouldn't judge by appearances*

Explain your choice, supporting your answer by reference to the text.

## First Death in Nova Scotia

In the cold, cold parlor  
my mother laid out Arthur  
beneath the chromographs:  
Edward, Prince of Wales,  
with Princess Alexandra,  
and King George with Queen Mary.  
Below them on the table  
stood a stuffed loon  
shot and stuffed by Uncle  
Arthur, Arthur's father.

*\*chromographs: an old way of reproducing pictures*

*\*loon: a type of water bird*

Since Uncle Arthur fired  
a bullet into him,  
he hadn't said a word.  
He kept his own counsel  
on his white, frozen lake,  
the marble-topped table.  
His breast was deep and white,  
cold and caressable;  
his eyes were red glass,  
much to be desired.



"Come," said my mother,  
"Come and say good-bye  
to your little cousin Arthur."

I was lifted up and given  
one lily of the valley  
to put in Arthur's hand.  
Arthur's coffin was  
a little frosted cake,  
and the red-eyed loon eyed it  
from his white, frozen lake.

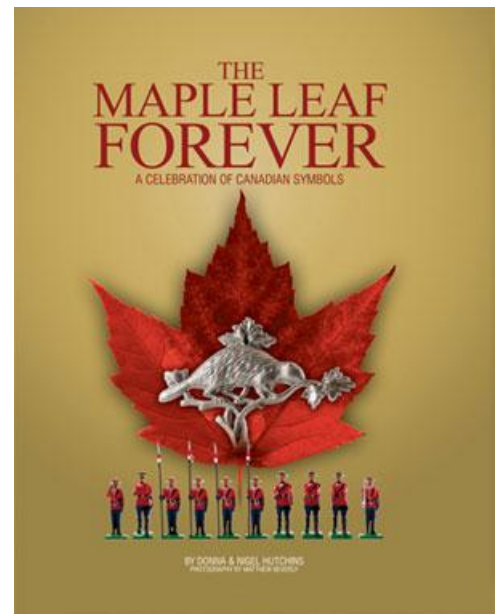


Arthur was very small.  
He was all white, like a doll  
that hadn't been painted yet.  
Jack Frost had started to paint him  
the way he always painted  
the Maple Leaf (Forever).  
He had just begun on his hair,  
a few red strokes, and then  
Jack Frost had dropped the brush  
and left him white, forever.

The gracious royal couples  
were warm in red and ermine;  
their feet were well wrapped up  
in the ladies' ermine trains.  
They invited Arthur to be  
the smallest page at court.  
But how could Arthur go,  
clutching his tiny lily,  
with his eyes shut up so tight  
and the roads deep in snow?

### **Background**

This poem was included in Bishop's third collection of poetry - *Questions of Travel* – in 1965. Bishop was in her fifties, and trying to come to terms with events in her early childhood. 'First Death in Nova Scotia' is an elegy for her young cousin Arthur (his real name was Frank) who died when Bishop was four.



*\*ermine: white fur from the stoat's winter coat*

## Summary and analysis

The poem begins in a simple but stark way. The room in which the young boy's body is laid out is described as being a 'cold, cold parlour'. The repetition of the word 'cold' and the broad assonance of the long 'o' sound in 'cold, cold' and 'chromographs' underscores the solemnity of the mood.

The poet's eye for detail is evident, even at a young age. Although the language is simple and childlike, as befits a poem written from a child's perspective, the observant little girl notes the furnishings of the room and recalls them perfectly. Everything she sees is lifeless, cold or dead, just like her little cousin. The child's attention is not focused on the dead body, but is caught instead by the other objects around her, particularly the 'stuffed loon' shot and killed by the dead boy's father.

In the second stanza the child looks at the loon more closely. Interestingly, she personifies it, calling it 'he' instead of it. In this way, it is linked to her dead cousin. The bird 'hadn't said a word' since it was killed. Although this is hardly surprising, it shows us that the child does not fully understand the implications of death. There is something mysterious and secretive about the loon: 'he kept his own counsel' suggests that he does have something to say, but chooses not to share it. Again, the coldness of the room is reinforced by the description of the bird on the 'marble-topped table' as being 'on his white, frozen lake'. The bird is a metaphor for the dead boy, who is similarly inanimate and cold.

The child finds the loon attractive; his breast is both 'cold and caressable', and his red eyes are 'much to be desired'. The loon's eyes are the only mention of any colour other than white in the poem. Their redness may be linked to the redness of the mourners' eyes when they are weeping over the dead child. Even when focusing on the bird, the dead boy is always in the small girl's mind.

In the third stanza, the silence and stillness is broken by the child's mother speaking directly to her. It is significant that Bishop's mother is only brought to life in a poem about death. It suggests that memories of her mother are linked to absence and loss. The little girl's mother has to lift her up to see her cousin – a poignant detail which reminds us how young she was when brought face to face with death for the first time. (The title of the poem 'First Death in Nova Scotia' tells us that this is the poet's first experience of death.)

The little girl places a small lily of the valley in her dead cousin's hand. The lily of the valley is a small flower, and not at all exotic. It is entirely appropriate that the child should leave this as an offering rather than a large, showy bloom. Again, it emphasises the smallness of the poet and of the dead boy.

The coffin is described in childish terms: it is 'a little frosted cake' and she imagines that the 'red-eyed loon' wants it for himself. The loon seems slightly frightening now as he looks covetously towards the coffin. The image of his red eyes is a haunting one.

The child is attempting to make some sense of the situation, and by linking the coffin to something she understands – 'frosted cake' – and imagining the loon's feelings on seeing it, she tries to bring some sort of order and normality to a situation that is unfamiliar and disturbing. The presence of the coffin in the setting of the parlour is strange and may well scare the small girl.

The fourth stanza describes the little boy in his coffin. The imagery here is childlike: Arthur is 'like a doll, that hadn't been painted yet'. In her innocence, the young girl believes that it is Jack Frost who paints the leaves red in the autumn, and she imagines that he broke off part way through painting Arthur. Instead, Arthur is like a porcelain doll whose features are not brought to life by the application of red lips, a bloom to the cheek and so forth. At the start of the stanza, the poet says that the dead boy is like a doll who hasn't been 'painted yet': the word 'yet' suggesting that she still does not fully comprehend the finality of death. Arthur will never be brought to life. Later in the stanza, she imagines Jack Frost dropping his brush and leaving Arthur white 'forever'. In contrast to the word 'yet', 'forever' shows us that there is a part of the child's mind that is now beginning to realise Arthur is gone forever.

As she mentions the maple leaf, the child's mind drifts away for a moment. She connects the maple leaf to the Canadian national anthem of the time. This stream of consciousness is typical of the way small children make associations and find it difficult to keep their attention on any one thing for a long time. The word 'forever' is used twice in this stanza, reinforcing the permanence and finality of death. Arthur is never coming back.

In the final stanza, the child attempts to make sense of the situation by imagining a fairy-tale ending for Arthur. Perhaps the royal couples will take Arthur to be a knight in waiting, 'the smallest page in court'. It is interesting that there is no notion of heaven here. However, the young girl cannot quite believe in this fairy-tale ending. On some level, she knows Arthur is dead. She questions her own fantasy, wondering how the little boy could go and join the courtiers when his eyes are tightly shut 'and the roads deep in snow'. This is a particularly poignant image, and the sadness is underscored by the use of the words 'smallest' and 'tiny'. By ending the poem on a question, the poet suggests that the child still has many unanswered questions about death. What does seem clear, however, is that there is no happy ending.