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,

**venerable: old, and worthy of respect*
**homely: ugly, plain, unattractive*

the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks of his shiny entrails, *entrails:guts*
and the pink swim-bladder **swim-bladder : gas-filled buoyancy bladder*
like a big peony. **peony: large, attractive flower*
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed **iris: circular, coloured part of the eye*
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass. **isinglass: thin sheets of mica*
They shifted a little, but not *used instead of glass*
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 **crimped: wavy*

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,
from the pool of bilge *bilge: dirty water that collects in the lowest part of the boat*
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange, *bailer: bucket for bailing water*
the sun-cracked thwarts, *thwarts: seats in the boat*
the oarlocks on their strings, *oarlocks: hold the oars onto the side of the boat*
the gunnels - until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

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. Some critics have devoted a startling amount of time and energy focusing on the type of fish Bishop caught! The general agreement is (assuming the fish in the poem was real) that it was a grouper.[1] This last piece of information is of no use whatsoever to you in answering an exam question, but it is interesting nonetheless.

[1] "Some Observations on Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Fish'" *Arizona Quarterly* 38:4 (Winter 1982)

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 fishhook 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 the fish's 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. The peony is a large, showy and beautiful flower and this comparison makes us look at the fish in a different way. There may be beauty to be found in the most unlikely places.

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'. It has been noted that Bishop's choice of similes here show how difficult it is to see ourselves clearly. If the fish is a reflection of the poet, then she sees herself through what one critic calls the 'flawed instruments of vision, stained wallpaper, scratched isinglass, tarnished tinfoil'. [2]

The fish's expression, Bishop believes, is sullen or cross, his jaw strong. Then she notices something else. There are five old fishhooks, 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. It is obvious now to the careful reader that Bishop is relating to the fish and seeing her own life's struggles in his. We think again of his not fighting and wonder if he is so weary that he has just given up. If that is the case, was Bishop near to giving up the unequal struggles of life before she caught the fish and reflected on his strength?

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 fishhooks to medals are all striking as they transform the ugly and the aged into images of beauty and venerability.

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[2] David Kalstone, "Logarithms of Apology," Chapter 4 in *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), 87.

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 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 an 'end-rhymed, and almost visionary conclusion'. [3]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'.

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[3] *An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Uses of Tradition*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990.

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.

The poetry of our own time has developed a manner totally different from the ballad-singing of a Keats or a Yeats. It has a rhythm and even a language of its own. The gripping episode in The Fish *is sharpened by the stark, uncompromising pictures presented: the skin of the old fish hanging in strips "like ancient wall-paper," the flat eyes "backed and packed with tarnished tinfoil," the grim hooks "grown firmly in his mouth." Dispensing with rhyme, Elizabeth Bishop packs her short lines with feeling, startling us by their precision and moving us by their compassion.*

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 wall-paper:
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
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 weapon-like,
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.

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I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
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.

ELIZABETH BISHOP

The Prodigal

The brown enormous odor he lived by **odor: odour or smell*

was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,

for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty **sty: pigsty*

was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.

Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts, **snouts: pigs' noses*

the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare -

even to the sow that always ate her young - **sow: female pig*

till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.

But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts

(he hid the pints behind a two-by-four), **two-by-four: length of timber*

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

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.

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 anymore. 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.

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 *taboret: small stool*
(part of the set), beside
a big hirsute begonia. *hirsute: hairy* *begonia: flowering plant*

Why the extraneous plant? *extraneous: unnecessary*
Why the taboret?
Why, oh why, the doily?
(Embroidered in daisy stitch *daisy stitch: type of design in crochet*
with marguerites, I think, *marguerites: daisies*
and heavy with gray crochet.)
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 judgmental 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 anymore; 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, lighthearted 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.

First Death in Nova Scotia

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

Since Uncle Arthur fireda 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. **ermine: white fur from a stoat*
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 *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.

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 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 must 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.

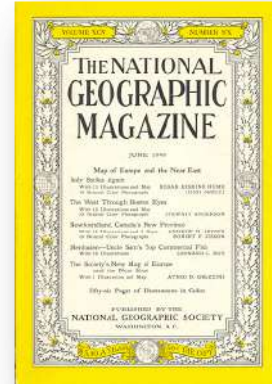
As she mentions the maple leaf, the child's mind drifts away for a moment. She connects the maple leaf to the Canadian national anthem of the time. This stream of consciousness is typical of the way small children make associations and find it difficult to keep their attention on any one thing for a 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.

In the Waiting Room

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist’s appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist’s waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.
My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited I read
the National Geographic
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
-“Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;



CREATING THE ARISTOCRATIC POINTED HEAD

Early in life the young Mangbetu patrician must submit to the tightly wound fiber cords which force his skull into the elongated shape dictated by tradition. The process is not a comfortable one. Children undergoing this long ordeal will draw back uneasily if one attempts to touch their heads. Occasionally they even cry, and a crying baby is scarcely ever heard in the Congo.

black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.
And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I--we--were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.

I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world.
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?

How--I didn't know any
word for it--how "unlikely"...
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

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

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

"The poem presents a young girl's moment of awakening to the separations and the bonds among human beings, to the forces that shape individual identity through the interreleated recognitions of community and isolation."
Lee Edelman from "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room.'" Contemporary Literature 26.2 (Summer 1985): 179-196.

Title:

To be in a waiting room is to be in a state of transition. What awaits us on the other side of the door may be positive or negative. The fact that this poem is set in a dentist's waiting room does seem to suggest that what lies ahead is discomfort at best and pain at worst. This is reinforced by Aunt Consuela (Bishop's Aunt Florence in real life) letting out a cry of pain, albeit a short one.

The young child in the poem (a six year-old Elizabeth Bishop) is about to enter a stage of her life where she leaves the rather self-absorbed innocence of childhood behind and sets tentative foot in the more adult world. It is not a world with which she identifies in the least, yet, but she has an epiphany while in the waiting room which leads her to see for the first time her place in the world and the various futures that await her. Is there an inevitable path she must follow or has she any control over her own destiny? The poem contains a number of profound, philosophical questions as Bishop wrestles with this issue.

Summary and analysis:

The poem opens with simple statements of fact telling us the time and place in which the events in the poem took place. The language is matter-of-fact and practical, as befits a six-year old child. The scene is one of normality and childhood boredom: the young girl is stuck in a room full of 'grown-ups' with whom she has nothing in common. They adults sitting there are not seen as

individuals but are grouped together as wearers of overcoats and galoshes.

Bishop's aunt is in the dentist's surgery and the poet passes the time by reading the National Geographic. The accurate recollection of a child's view of the world is captured in the comment on the length of time Aunt Consuelo seems to be taking in the surgery and also in the girl's pride in her ability to read even though she is only six.

The pictures and articles in the magazine depict a world that seems a million miles from the mundane dentist's waiting room in Massachusetts. The first image is of a volcano erupting and this immediately introduces a note of danger. The outside world can be a threatening, violent place. Next, the little girl looks at a photo of the African explorers Osa and Martin Johnson in their strange attire of pith helmets and riding breeches. A picture of a dead man slung on a pole with the caption 'Long Pig' underneath suggests that the corpse is to be cannibalised. This is a deeply disturbing image, although it is not clear whether or not the young poet would have known that 'long pig' refers to the similarity between human flesh and pork. Either way, the dead man being carried so ignominiously would be bound to unsettle a child. The images which follow are equally grotesque and full of implied pain and cruelty inflicted on people by members of their own race. In certain parts of the Congo, babies' heads were wound with string to artificially elongate the growing skull. In other parts of Africa, women placed metal rings around their necks – adding to the number all the time – in order to stretch their necks in a way considered beautiful by those around them. The result appals the young poet, as do the photos of topless African women with 'awful hanging breasts'. There is a strange compulsion in the images nonetheless and now that she has begun reading, Bishop feels 'too shy to stop'. Perhaps she feels that if she puts the magazine down or looks up she will draw

attention to herself and her reading matter, or perhaps she cannot bear to meet the eyes of those in the waiting room lest they know what she is reading. When she has read through to the end, Bishop focuses on the familiar and unthreatening cover of the National Geographic and its bright yellow margins. There is a sense in which the margins put a neat frame around the contents of the magazine and somehow make them more controlled and less threatening. Similarly, the date on the cover is a concrete and inoffensive focal point. It roots the poet in the present and brings her back to the dull but normal surroundings of the dentist's waiting room.

At this stage in the analysis of the poem, it is worth noting that despite the detailed descriptions of the February 1918 issue of the National Geographic, the facts we are presented with are not quite true. Certainly, Bishop visited the dentist with her aunt – it is mentioned elsewhere – but the February 1918 issue of the magazine did not show pictures of African women or babies. When Bishop was questioned about this in an interview, she claimed to have mixed up the February and March editions of the National Geographic. However, the March edition also does not contain any images of African women or babies. The critic Lee Edelman claims that the very attempt to pin down the literal truth of the stories of the oppression of women and children is a part of the very mind-set that causes such oppression in the first place. Edelman says that by trying to prove the factual truth of the young Bishop's memories we are guilty of trying to put female cries of pain in their place. His argument is that anyone who does so is ignoring the fundamental truth in what Bishop is saying and is seeking refuge in literal truth rather than facing the uncomfortable facts.

Back to the poem. Suddenly, there is a cry from 'inside'. The 'inside' here could be the dentist's surgery or the inside of the poet's mind. It is the sound

of Aunt Consuela's voice as she makes an exclamation of pain. With the characteristic harshness of the young, Bishop notes that Aunt Consuela is 'a foolish, timid woman' who could be expected to make such a noise. The noise she makes does not surprise Bishop but what does take her completely by surprise is the realisation that the voice could be hers as easily as Aunt Consuelo's. At this moment, Bishop identifies with Aunt Conseulo and recognises the similarities between them. Might she grow up to be just like her aunt? Or is the cry *'oh!'* the young poet's anguish on reading the magazine and seeing the lengths to which people – particularly women - have to go and the pain they are forced to suffer in order to fit in with societal norms? Again, it has been argued that it is irrelevant to obsess over the origin of the *'oh!'* as it is the voice of all of those who have been forced into constraint – literal and metaphorical.

The young Bishop is overwhelmed by a sudden realisation that she is part of the human race and not separate from it, as she might have believed up to now. The horrifying pictures of women in the National Geographic are not that different from what she will become when she is older. The grown-ups she dismissed as hardly worthy of a second glance are, like her, human beings. Will she be like them when she grows up? The girl feels like she may faint and is clings to hard facts such as the cover of the National Geographic and her upcoming birthday to stop herself becoming lost in the overwhelming rush of emotion.

There is a note of defiance in the poem when the young poet asks herself *why* she should be 'one of them'. She steals a shy glance at the adults around her but only sees dull, grey, shadowy legs in 'trousers and skirts and boots'. The important realisation for the little girl is that she is not, as she may have thought, unique. She is like her family, like the adults in the waiting room

and even like the rather terrifying figures in the magazine. She wonders about the similarities between herself and others and asks how it is that she happens to be in the waiting room in Massachusetts while in other parts of the world people are suffering strange and unnecessary mutilations. There is no attempt to answer these questions and the feeling of faintness rises up again. The waiting room seems too hot and everything around her begins to turn dark. Suddenly, the shock subsides and the poet feels normality returning. Just as the poem began with details about the time and place, so it ends with a restating of those facts. The only difference, and it is a significant one, is that the First World War is included in the description. It is a reminder that even though the poet is in a place that may appear dull and unthreatening, war is raging elsewhere in the world. The outside world is a dangerous place and now the poet knows that she cannot remain apart from it forever.

Questions of Travel

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.
-For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
aren't waterfalls yet,
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be.
But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,
the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
slime-hung and barnacled.

Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?
What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life
in our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around?
The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?
To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,
inexplicable and impenetrable,
at any view,
instantly seen and always, always delightful?
Oh, must we dream our dreams

and have them, too?
And have we room
for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the trees along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty,
not to have seen them gesturing
like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
--Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
of disparate wooden clogs
carelessly clacking over
a grease-stained filling-station floor.
(In another country the clogs would all be
tested.
Each pair there would have identical
pitch.)
-A pity not to have heard
the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
who sings above the broken gasoline pump
in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
three towers, five silver crosses.

-Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
blurr'dly and inconclusively,
on what connection can exist for centuries
between the crudest wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,

the whittled fantasies of wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.
--Never to have studied history in
the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.
--And never to have had to listen to rain
so much like politicians' speeches:
two hours of unrelenting oratory
and then a sudden golden silence
in which the traveller takes a notebook,
writes:

"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home
Wherever that may be?

"The title poem, "Questions of Travel," was first published in 1956, about four years after Elizabeth had taken up residence in Brazil. The tourist has now become the passionate observer and, in a sense, has lost her innocence. The poem is a wonderful mosaic of things that one can see and hear along a Brazilian highway." – From Ashley Brown, "Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil" 1977

Summary and analysis:

The poem opens with a rather unusual statement in which the traveller announces that there are 'too many waterfalls here'. We never learn exactly where 'here' is, although it is generally thought to be Brazil, where Bishop was living when she wrote the poem. The phrase 'too many' is a negative one, almost as if the poet is overwhelmed and cannot take in the view. In fact, all of the imagery in the first stanza is negative. There is an impression of haste, pressure and sadness as well as a feeling that travelling is endless and ultimately rather destructive. The streams are 'crowded', much as tourists might be at a beauty spot, and they are hurrying 'too rapidly' down to the sea. Might this be a reflection on the way in which travellers rush from destination to destination without ever stopping to take in the true nature of the places they visit? The clouds on the mountaintop exert a pressure, and they look like 'tearstains' as they tumble down the mountain. Bishop reflects that the water in the clouds will eventually turn to waterfalls in time and that if the clouds and streams keep up their relentless travelling, the whole world will be submerged and the mountains will be covered in barnacles and slime, like the underside of ships.

The second section of the poem focuses on the questions of travel. Bishop asks nine questions and asks us to consider them. All but the first end in question marks. The first question appears to be a practical one – 'Think of the long trip home' – but on closer reading we wonder what exactly Bishop means by 'home'. Is she simply saying that any journey to a place requires an equally long journey home or is she saying that all travel is in fact an attempt to find a home that the restless wanderer cannot find?

Bishop asks if it would have been better to stay at home and rely on imagination and reading to experience the places to which she has travelled. She goes on to wonder if it is right to be watching the locals as if they are performers in a play. They, after all, are merely going about their daily lives and earning a living. Is it right for those who have sufficient money to take holidays and to travel to regard these people as 'strangers in a play'? She compares the need to travel to a child's impulse and points out the ridiculousness of rushing to another hemisphere just to see the sun 'the other way around. Why do we need to see the beauty of the tiniest green hummingbird in the world? As she asks the question, Bishop answers it, in a way. The hummingbird might be minute and insignificant in the greater scheme of things, but it is exotic and beautiful and worth seeing. This, then, is the question with which Bishop wrestles. We should be content to sit at home and experience such things through the pages of a magazine or a television screen, but it is not the same thing.

Bishop's tone becomes a little more judgmental as she moves from nature to man-made wonders. She imagines the tourist staring at a building and finding it 'inexplicable'. It is 'impenetrable' and the tourist will never fully understand its significance to the local people. Yet, the travellers will declare that the building will be 'always, always delightful' to those who have 'instantly seen' it. This paints the traveller in a negative light. He or she is the sort of person who will admire something that they know to be culturally significant even if they are incapable of understanding the reason for its importance.

Bishop asks why we are not content to dream but must go further and attempt to make the dream a reality. It seems to be an essentially human thing to need to experience things for ourselves. The next question presents us with a lovely image of 'one more folded sunset, still quite warm'. This

brings to mind clothes carefully packed away in a suitcase or maybe even a folded pastry, for example, for which we might just have room. It could also mean that we pack away memories of beautiful sunsets in our mind and are warmed by them not just when we see them first but when we think back to them later on. We will not quickly grow tired of such things.

Bishop's view becomes increasingly positive towards travel when she reflects that it would have been a pity not to see the beautiful pink-flowered trees waving an exaggerated fashion. Bishop is utterly captivated by them.

Now Bishop moves to a more unlikely but equally enthralling scene and one which shows her trademark ability to find beauty and meaning in the oddest places, just as she does in 'Filling Station', 'The Prodigal' and 'The Fish'. As in 'Filling Station', it is a place at which she stops for petrol that catches Bishop's eye. She delights in the different sound made by each of the pump attendant's wooden clogs as they hit the floor and considers that this imperfect but charming sound would not be heard in a more developed country where the clogs would all have been identical and quality-tested.

It would also, Bishop thinks, be a shame not to have heard a fat, brown bird singing in a birdcage over the broken gasoline pump. The intricate, woven design of the cage reminds Bishop of 'Jesuit baroque' which is not only a reference to an architectural style known for its ornate detail but is also a reminder of the role played in Brazil's history by another group of travellers: Jesuit priests who – from the 16th century onwards – were involved in the conversion and colonization of that country. Travel should not be only about geography, but also about history. Bishop shows here – through a casual

reference – that she knows and appreciates the country more fully than many of those who gaze uncomprehendingly at a place they find 'inexplicable and impenetrable'.

In the next section, Bishop ponders the connection between the ornate cage and the crude clogs. How can it be that the same people can make both and not see anything odd about putting so much time and effort into creating something beautiful but impractical but not bother to perfect the practical and necessary shoes? There is no clear answer, as Bishop shows us with her use of the words 'blurr'dly' and 'inconclusively'. She plays with the word 'blurredly', deliberately blurring it to drive home her point. The intricate designs of the cage are like 'weak calligraphy' as they tell us in their own way of the colonial influences that can be seen everywhere. Looking at the cage is like looking back into the country's past.

As Bishop thinks of all of the things it would have been 'a pity' not to see or experience, she repeats the phrase thus driving home her message. Even the relentless downpour of rain which she humorously compares to politicians' speeches, brings joy as when it ends the sunshine and silence is appreciated more than ever. The critic James McCorkle says that there are two voices in the poem, both Bishop's: 'The poem becomes an interiorized debate – the two voices are less separate characterizations than they are a compound self that interrogates itself and reveals, not affirmation, but doubt'. He believes that the 'golden silence' after the rainfall also silences the voices, and that the poem now returns to 'writing and uncertainty'[4] as the traveller is imagined as taking out a notebook to record reflections.

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[4] James McCorkle, "Concordances and Travels: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," Chapter 1 in *The Still Performance: Writing, Self and Interconnection in Five Postmodern American Poets* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989)

The poem now moves to its more formal, italicised conclusion. With this change in form comes a change in perspective. We are reading the quoted words written in the traveller's journey rather than listening directly to Bishop. This distance between us and the poet means that the speaker now could be any traveller, which makes the reflections more universal than specific to Bishop. The traveller wonders if it is lack of imagination that makes us journey to see things? Are we incapable of staying at home and visualising them? Blaise Pascal, the 17th Century French Philosopher, Mathemetician and Physicist is referred to at this point. He famously said, 'The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room'. Bishop does not seem to agree with this view and once again seems in favour of travel as she asks if Pascal could have been 'not entirely right' in what he said.

The final lines of the poem pose another question, which is appropriate, given its title. Bishop says that our choice of places to travel is 'never wide and never free'. After all, we bring our own experiences with us and are limited and restricted in a number of different ways. We can't just go anywhere, any time. However, that need not mean that we should stay at home. Indeed, Bishop questions where home really is, asking 'wherever that may be'. If home is not a fixed place, then why should we feel constrained to stay there? Some critics read this final line as a confirmation that Bishop – effectively orphaned at a young age and moved between relations in Canada and America during her formative years – never felt truly at home anywhere.

"All my life I have lived and behaved very much like the sandpiper just running down the edges of different countries and continents, looking for something." – Elizabeth Bishop

Key Literary Terms

Remember, this is not a comprehension exercise. You are analysing a poem, so must show an awareness of poetic techniques. Below is a list of basic literary terms with which you should be familiar.

Alliteration: The repetition of consonant sounds, particularly at the start of words.

Allusion: A reference to another piece of literature, work of art, person, place etc.

Ambiguity: A word or expression which has two or more possible meanings.

Anthropomorphism: Giving human qualities or feelings to something which isn't human.

Assonance: The repetition of vowel sounds.

Colloquialism: A local or regional expression which may not be understood by outsiders.

Consonance: The repetition of consonants or consonant patterns, usually at the end of words. The words need not rhyme or contain the same vowel sounds. 'Think, blank'; 'Stroke, luck'.

Convention: An established technique, literary device or practice.

Couplet: Two lines, usually rhyming and having the same metre, which form a complete thought.

Genre: A particular category of writing. Each genre has its own style, form etc.

Imagery: Figurative language (metaphors, similes etc.)

Lyric: A poem in which personal and subjective feelings are expressed. Lyric poems are usually short and songlike.

Metaphor / Simile: Drawing a comparison to suggest a likeness. 'She's an

angel'. A simile is like a metaphor except that the comparison is usually introduced by 'like' or 'as'. 'My love is like a red, red rose.' A metaphor is usually considered stronger than a simile.

Octet: A set of eight lines.

Onomatopoeia: A word which sounds like its meaning: 'squelch', 'slap', 'thud', 'screech', 'cheep'.

Paradox: A seeming contradiction. "Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again." (C.S. Lewis to his godchild, Lucy Barfield, to whom he dedicated *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

Persona: A character assumed by the poet. Derek Mahon adopts the persona of Bruce Ismay in 'After the Titanic'.

Personification: The representation of an abstraction or a thing as a human or some sort of divine being. For example, the idea of death is often represented by the Grim Reaper.

Quatrain: A group of four lines of verse.

Sestet: A group of six lines of verse.

Sibilance: Words which make or contain an 's' or 'sh' sound. 'The hissing snake…'

Sonnet: A poem consisting of fourteen lines arranged according to a prescribed scheme. Shakespearean sonnets consist of three quatrains and a couplet. The couplet usually sums up the main idea (theme) of the poem or looks at the theme in a fresh way.

Symbol: Something which represents something else. Symbols have a deeper meaning than signs and can sometimes provoke strong, emotional responses.

Tercet: A group of three lines of verse. The lines often rhyme.

Tone: The attitude or feeling implied by the style of writing. A tone may be melancholy or optimistic, for example. The tone may change one or more times during the course of the poem.

Villanelle: A formal, ordered poem which consists of nineteen lines divided

into five tercets (three-line stanzas) and a quatrain (four-line stanza). There are only two rhymes throughout, and two refrains. The two refrains are used as the first and third lines of the first stanza, and thereafter alternately repeated as the final line of the remaining tercets. The refrains come together again as the final two lines of the quatrain. (This sounds quite complicated until you look at the poem and see how straightforward it actually is.) Villanelles are associated with thoughts of death and grief.

Volta: This comes from the Italian word for 'turn'. A volta is the turn in thought in a sonnet that is often indicated by such initial words as 'but', 'yet' or 'and yet'.