

The Poetry of 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.

Resources

1. Cian Hogan's detailed notes on 'At the Fishhouses' along with a sample essay.

<https://connemarafm.com/Audio/Cian-Hogan%27s-Notes-on-Elizabeth-Bishop.pdf>

2. The Tutor Lab: Sample essay. <https://sites.google.com/view/thetutorlab/leaving-cert-english/bishop-sample-essay>

3. Studyclix sample 2019 essay:

<https://studyclix.blob.core.windows.net/static/content/file/uploads/f/fe7a573a-eeec-409c-97fd-fb33a2cb8156.pdf>

2023 – List of Prescribed Poems

Elizabeth Bishop

- The Fish
- The Bight
- At the Fishhouses
- The Prodigal
- Questions of Travel
- The Armadillo
- Sestina
- First Death in Nova Scotia
- Filling Station
- In the Waiting Room

Bishop

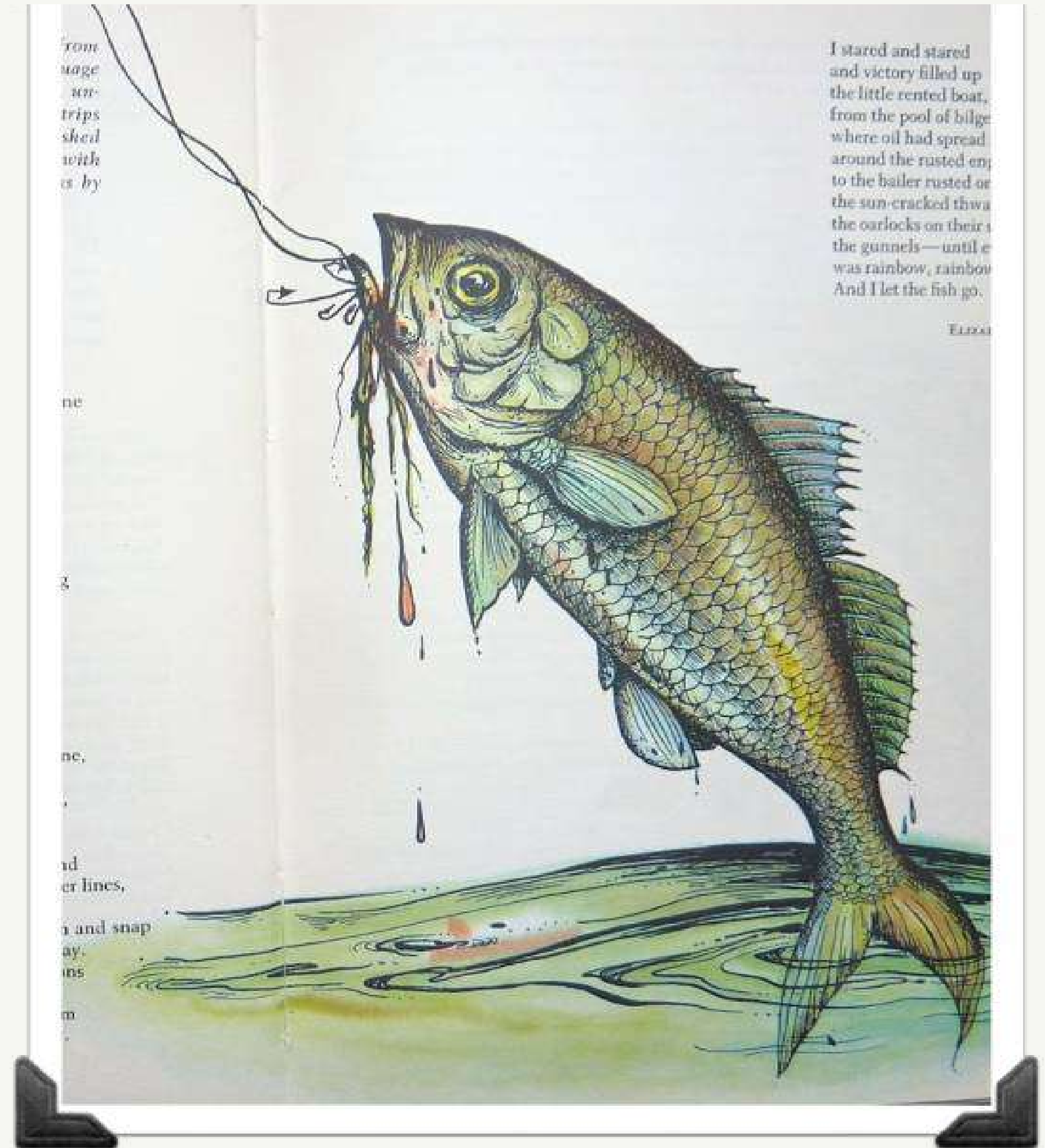
Themes and Style

❖ “[Bishop’s] voice affirms, hesitates, corrects itself: the image comes clear to us as it came clear to her, a process of adjusting perception until the thing is seen. Or the feeling is released” - Michael Schmidt

❖ Bishop asks us to focus not *on* her but *with* her’

Insights – Revelations Epiphanies

- ❖ The Fish - like her, it has fought to survive.
- ❖ The Prodigal - flashes of awareness of his situation but lacking true and lasting understanding
- ❖ First Death in Nova Scotia - child's realisation of the permanence of death
- ❖ At the Fishhouses – time passing, connections will be lost again

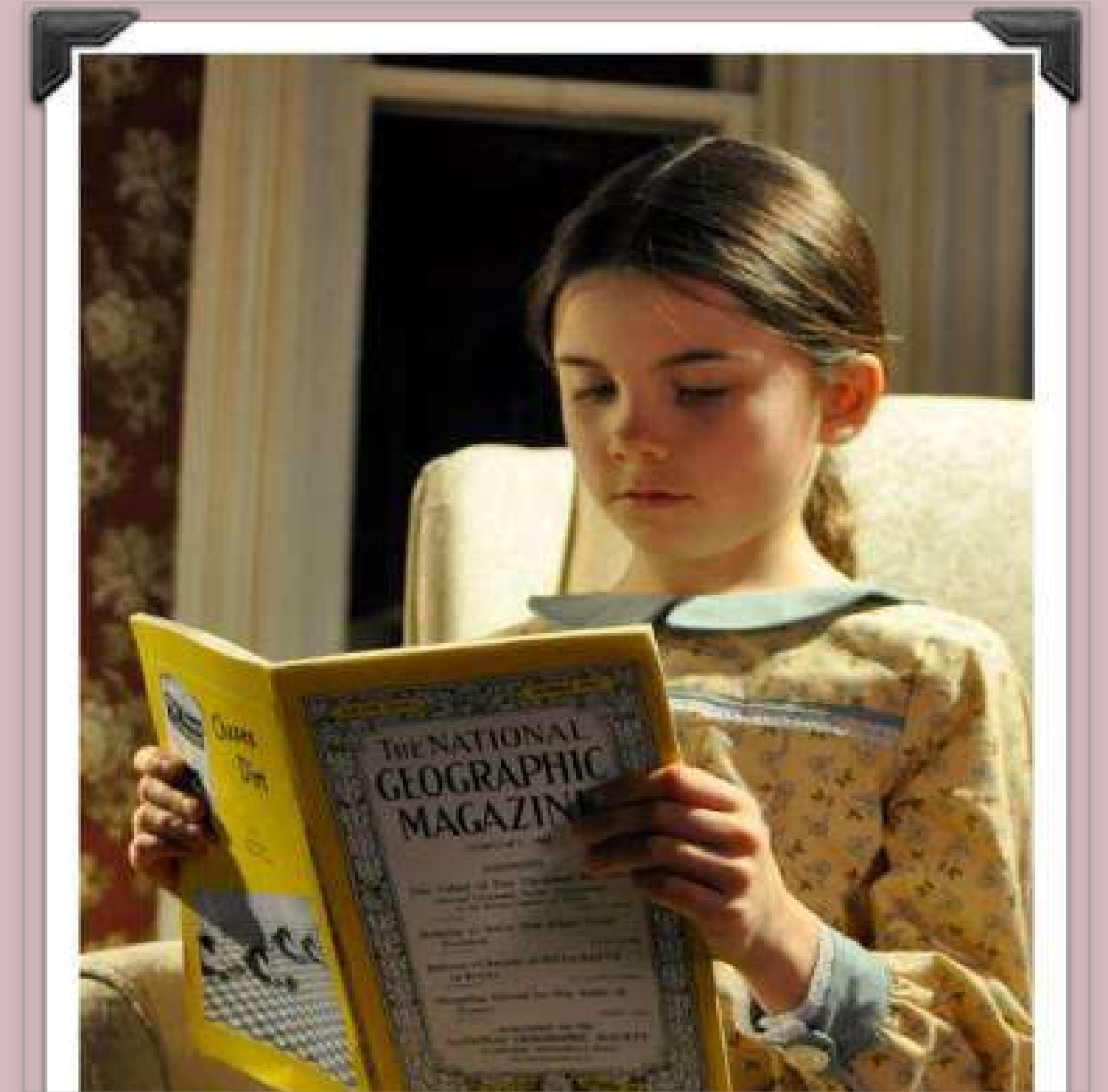


Filling Station - Somebody
loves us all

In the Waiting Room -
Child is overcome by
realisation that she is just
like everybody else

Childhood

- ❖ First Death in Nova Scotia - accurate portrayal of child's viewpoint of death; innocence followed by dawning realisation; incomplete understanding
- ❖ In The Waiting Room - vivid portrayal of child's epiphany
- ❖ Sestina – child perceives all is not well but does not understand; drawing shows longing for a home and a father; sense of foreboding increased by grandmother's hiding of her grief



Addiction

- ❖ The Prodigal - difficulty of fighting addiction even when hitting rock bottom
- ❖ Questions of Travel - addictive nature of travel - why do we insist on doing it?
- ❖ The Armadillo – destructive ritual that is nonetheless repeated each year



Home - Exile

- ❖ The Prodigal - self-imposed exile but longing for home nonetheless
- ❖ Questions of Travel - do we travel in search of home? Endless and fruitless quest
- ❖ At the Fishhouses – feels connected to the community but there is a feeling that this cannot last



Nature

- ❖ The Fish - connection between poet and nature - despite differences - beauty of nature – man’s negative impact in catching fish, pool of oily bilge in boat etc.
- ❖ The Bight – beautiful but somehow sinister – man’s negative impact: litter, sponges, shark fins
- ❖ Questions of Travel - lack of appreciation of nature by travellers, but moments in which beauty breaks through
- ❖ The Armadillo – destruction of nature – baby rabbit turned to ash; even the armoured armadillo is vulnerable
- ❖ The Prodigal – beauty of nature shines through in even the most unlikely places: lantern light in puddle
- ❖ At the Fishhouses – nature slowly encroaching on human constructions ‘emerald moss’, boats destroyed by the ‘last bad storm’



Style

- ❖ Precise descriptions
- ❖ Immediate: 'Be careful with that match!'
- ❖ Conversational: 'There are too many waterfalls here'
- ❖ Close observation leading to reflection
- ❖ Artist's eye
- ❖ Interest in the natural world
- ❖ Striking metaphors and similes
- ❖ Humorous



❖ *'The poems as we read them are working something out' - Niall*

MacMonagle

❖ *Bishop felt an outsider for much of her life and that is clear in her poetry. She writes indirectly rather than directly in 'The Prodigal'.*

However, she is also capable of being explicitly autobiographical, as we see in

'In The Waiting Room': 'you are an Elizabeth'

When discussing childhood, she captures the complexities, terror, panic and alienation of that period of her life.

‘Arthur’s coffin was / a little frosted cake, / and the red-eyed loon eyed it / from his white, frozen lake.’

What might you be asked?

Deals with the familiar and the unusual and does so in an interesting and unusual way

Effectively evokes the complexities of childhood and adulthood

Is a curious and sympathetic observer

What might you be asked?

Description is never mere description; her poetry is a moral landscape, an emotional journey

Has a plain style in which vivid images appear

Painterly qualities in her work

Poems explore but do not come to conclusions

Asks us to focus not *on* her but *with* her

Questions

- **SEC 2019:** "Bishop makes skillful use of a variety of poetic techniques to produce poems that are often analytical but rarely emotional." Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Elizabeth Bishop on your course.
- **DEB Sample:** "Bishop is a perceptive observer of the realities of life in poems that are often illuminated by deep and thought-provoking insights." Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to both the themes and language found in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.
- **DEB Sample:** "Bishop makes effective use of language to explore people and places in a fascinating yet challenging manner." Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to both the themes and language found in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.
- **Examcraft 2023:** "Elizabeth Bishop's perceptive observations provide us with rich insights into the complexities of life." To what extent do you agree or disagree with the above statement? Develop your response with reference to the poems by Elizabeth Bishop on your course.
- **SEC 2016:** "Bishop uses highly detailed observation, of people, places and events, to explore unique personal experiences in her poetry." Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

2013 SEC

- ❖ “Bishop’s carefully judged use of language aids the reader to uncover the intensity of feeling in her poetry.”
- ❖ To what extent do you agree or disagree with the above statement? Support your answer with reference to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

Code UL for carefully judged use of language
Code IF for intensity of feeling

Indicative Material



- precise language highlights memorable/emotional encounters with places/people/animals



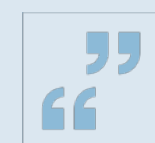
- absorbing reflections/preoccupations revealed through a wide range of tones/moods



- clearly-defined personal experiences suggest hidden depths of emotion



- control of emotions and the presence/absence of moralizing about childhood, nature and death

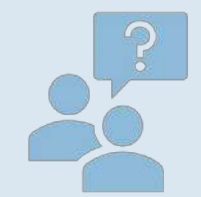


- moments of insight/epiphany heightened by vivid detail, striking imagery/symbolism Etc.

Building up to the essay



Choose a question



After the first poem has been studied, answer the exam question using that poem only

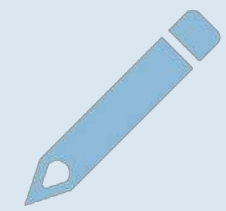


Correct students' attempts on the board



Discuss examples of excellence and places where improvement is needed

Building up to the essay



Students write brief reflections on their previous efforts before adding the second poem



Continue through all six poems



Discuss editing, selecting most relevant poems and adding an introduction and conclusion

Essay Writing



The question

- No matter how the questions are phrased, they are all basically asking you to do the same thing – talk about the poet's themes and style.
- Each question also requires you to prove that you have engaged with the works of the selected poet.



Varying your vocabulary



Identify **key words** and think of **synonyms** if possible. This will help to ensure that your language is varied while still focusing on the terms of the question.



Ask yourself what the coding for the question might be. Make sure that each and every point in your plan could be coded by the examiner. This will ensure that you are remaining focused on the question.

Sample

“Bishop is a perceptive observer of the realities of life in poems that are often illuminated by deep and thought-provoking insights.”

Synonyms for 'thought-provoking'

Intriguing

Fascinating

Interesting

Challenging

Compelling

Arresting

Unusual

Provocative

Engaging

Synonyms for 'deep'



PROFOUND



PHILOSOPHICAL



SERIOUS



REFLECTIVE



DISCERNING

Synonyms for 'insights'

Perceptions

Observations

Understandings

Wisdom

Understanding



TIP!

- Each of the poets you have studied has a signature style.
- They also deal with a limited number of themes.
- Work these out, and you will be prepared for any question.

Choosing your poems

Choose four to five poems which are relevant to the question.

You are making a case in your essay, so you must have a thesis.

The examiner is not interested in reading a re-hash of your poetry notes.

Organisation

HAVE A REASON FOR PUTTING THE POEMS IN A CERTAIN ORDER



Order

YOUR THESIS SHOULD BE THE THREAD
HOLDING YOUR ESSAY TOGETHER



Structure

There is no hard and fast rule here; use whatever structure has worked for you in the past.

Introduction: Refer to the question and outline your approach

Two paragraphs on each poem

Link sentence at the start of each new poem

Conclusion: it is effective to end on a quote if possible

Some suggestions

Move from poems written about the poet's childhood to poems written about middle age or old age.

Move from poems written when the poet was young to poems written when he / she was older

Move from positive to negative or vice versa.

Move from personal to public or vice versa.

Planning - continued

If you cannot make a link at the planning stage, forget that poem and move on to another one. This is the benefit of plans. If you just launch into your essay without a clear idea of where each poem is taking you, you will get a low grade

A poem-by-poem approach can make a daunting essay title seem quite manageable. Remember, you are aiming to write two strong paragraphs on each poem, as well as an introduction and conclusion.

You should aim to write on four to five poems in your exam answer.

What poems would you use next?

Think of the ORDER in which you would place your poems, and the links between them.



Introduction



You can - and should - work the terms of the question into your opening paragraph



Avoid the temptation to include too many points in your introduction. You must only mention themes / aspects of style that you intend to explore fully in the rest of the essay. Be wary of phrases like 'a multitude of themes' or 'many interesting ways'. Those are big claims. Can you back them all up? A focused thesis is a better idea.

Pitfalls



'I agree with the above statement'. It is best not to begin an essay this way, especially if the statement is not above your introduction!



Mentioning topics in your introduction but failing to deal with them in the answer



Writing an unbalanced answer in which you deal with one or two poems in great detail and skip quickly over others



Ranging over the whole poem and simply providing a summary instead of focusing on quotes/examples that prove your point

Body of the Essay

Each paragraph should advance your argument

The topic sentence in each paragraph should answer the question

Each paragraph should be linked to those before and after it

Use link words or phrases to connect your paragraphs: however; it is not only; we can also see; it becomes increasingly clear; as the poem progresses...

Essay Structure - Option

Introduction

Two paragraphs on each poem

Aim to use four or five poems in your answer

Conclusion

**STRUCTURING EACH PARAGRAPH –
THERE IS NO 'RIGHT' WAY, BUT THIS IS
ONE OPTION**

Step One: Topic sentence which addresses the question

Step Two: Explain your point in a little more depth (this may take more than one sentence)

Step Three: Use evidence, including quotations, to support your point

Step Four: Comment on the evidence/quote and explain how it proves the point you made in your topic sentence

Step Five: Use a link phrase to introduce your second piece of evidence / quotation (see next slide for link phrases) and give your second piece of evidence

Step Six: Comment on the evidence etc.

Option Two

- Decide on your **point**
- Choose your quote or quotes:
- Step two – Comment on your point, using your quote
- Step three – comment on your quote and show how it links to your point
- Step four – comment on the language in a little more depth. Mention a poetic technique if you can!
- Step five – offer another analysis of the quote

In Summary

- Write your point
- Add your quotation
- Write a simple statement about what your quotation suggests
- Discuss key words in the quotation and comment on technique
- Explain what your quotation suggests.

LINK PHRASES TO CONNECT EVIDENCE AND/OR QUOTATION

This idea is reinforced by / when...

This is cemented by / when...

X adds to the sense of...

This is further driven home by / when...

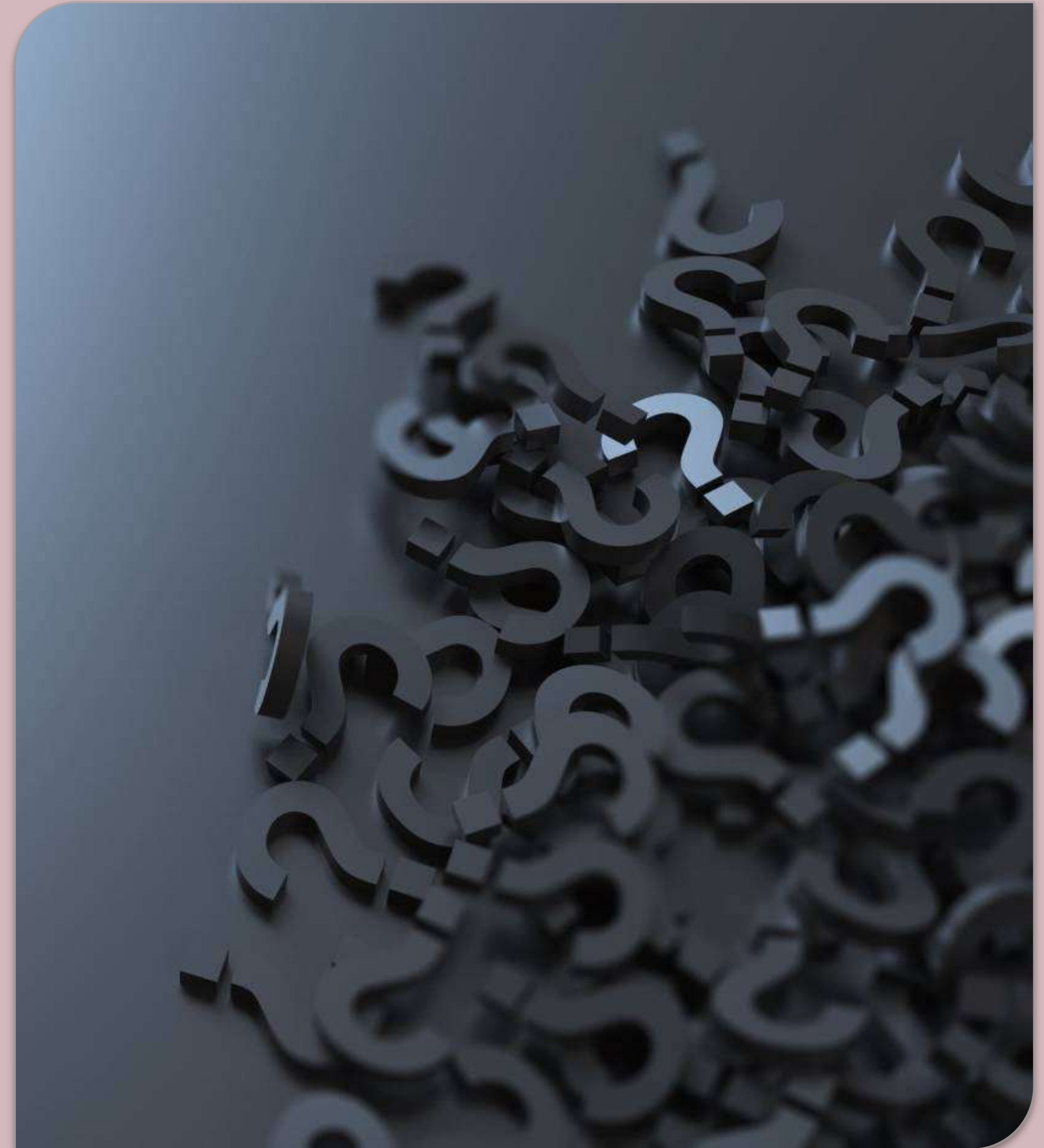
This message is even more powerfully
expressed by / when...

We see this same idea...

In much the same way...

Furthermore...

In addition...



Sample (DEB Pre)

“Bishop is a perceptive observer of the realities of life in poems that are often illuminated by deep and thought-provoking insights.”

Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to both the themes and language found in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

Indicative Material

- evocative exploration of realities of life, e.g. childhood, identity, death, passing of time, growth and the possibility of change, etc.
- her perceptions are illuminated by suggestive metaphors, memorable images, poignancy of her authentic poetic voice
- variety of subtle / lyrical tones (reflective, nostalgic, sympathetic, critical, wistful, ironic)
- precise language highlights memorable / emotional encounters with places, people, animals
- clearly-defined personal experiences suggest hidden depths of emotion
- control of emotions and the presence / absence of moralising about childhood, nature and death
- moments of insight / epiphany heightened by vivid detail, striking imagery / symbolism, etc.

First Death in Nova Scotia

Plan

- Reality of life – coming to an understanding of death/ the permanence of death
- Illuminated by poignant imagery; adopting the persona of a child

Two examples that highlight this:

- Image of the loon shows the child's lack of knowledge
- Concern about Arthur in the afterlife – child imagines the dead child suffering physically

Sample Paragraph

First Death in Nova Scotia

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.

Personal Response

Suggestions

- Comment on the effect the poet's language/ideas might have on the reader
- Use emotive language
- There is no need to say, 'I think'' or 'In my opinion' throughout. There is nothing wrong with these phrases, of course, but they can lead to repetition in your answer.

Consider Alternatives

- One of the most fascinating aspects of Bishop's poetry is...
- Bishop's exploration of addiction is both compelling and thought-provoking...
- This image is deeply moving because...
- We are left wondering...
- The poem forces us to examine our assumptions and prejudices...
- The appeal in this poem lies in the simplicity of the language used to explore complex ideas...

Worksheets

- Useful at this stage in the year in particular
- No need to write the whole essay
- Gradually remove scaffolding
- Plan in class - finish planning at home
- Plan in class – write on first poem only
- Next worksheet – plan in class and write on one different poem only
- Etc.

The Poems

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Note

Size constraints in these slides mean that the line breaks
are not always accurate.

Refer to your poetry book for the correct layout.

The Fish

From *North and South* (1946)

Glossary

- venerable: old, and worthy of respect
- homely: ugly, plain, unattractive
- entrails: guts
- swim-bladder: gas-filled buoyancy bladder
- peony: large, attractive flower
- iris: circular, coloured part of the eye
- isinglass: thin sheets of transparent gelatin obtained from the swim-bladder of a fish
- crimped: wavy
- bilge: dirty water that collects in the lowest part of the boat
- bailer: bucket for bailing water
- thwarts: seats in the boat
- oarlocks: a U-shaped brace that holds the oars onto the side of the boat

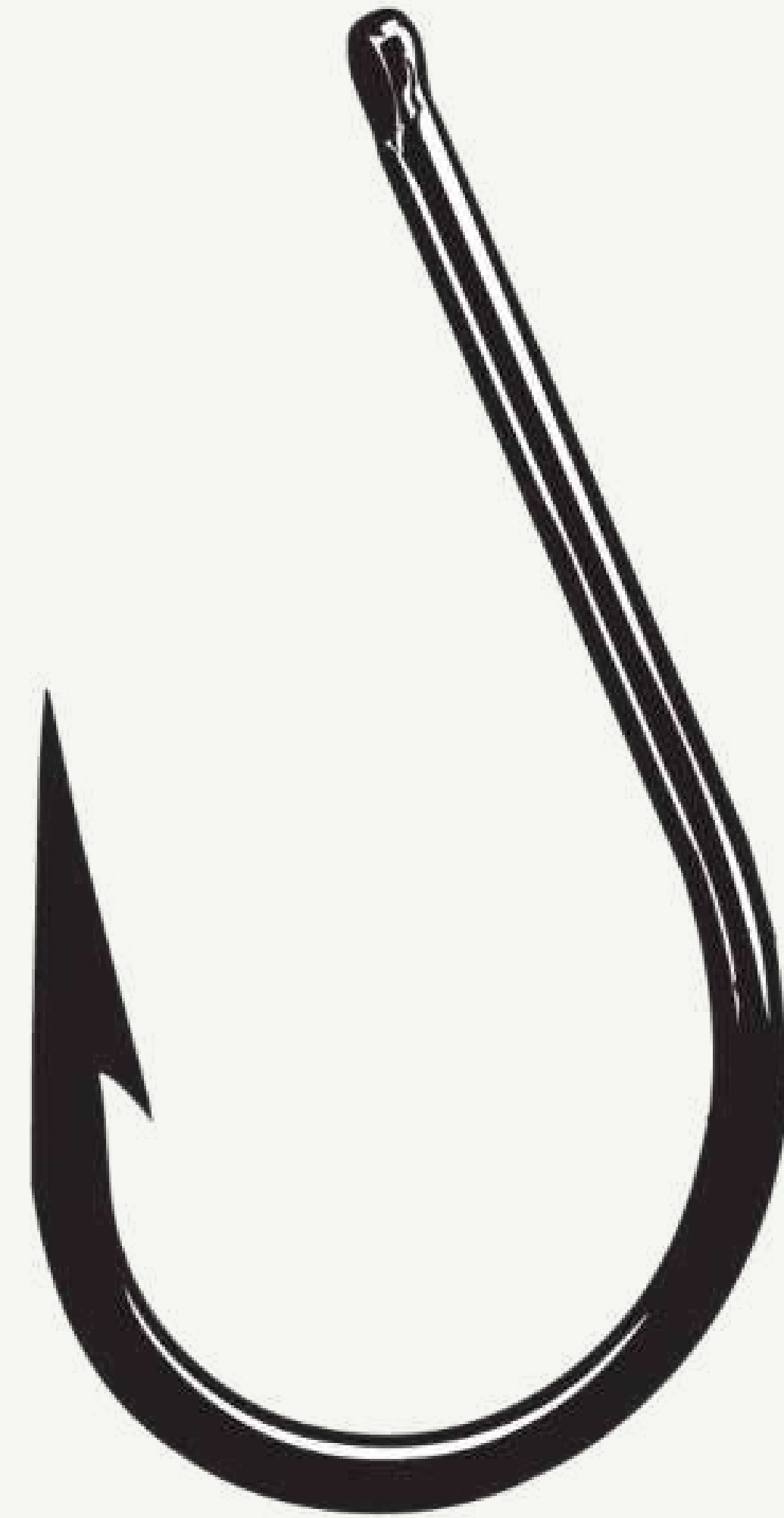
A red wooden rowboat with a light-colored interior is shown on a body of water. The boat is viewed from a side-on perspective, slightly from the front. The water is dark and has some ripples. The boat's reflection is visible in the water below it.

Note

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.

Lines 1-6

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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.

- First person narration adds intimacy, draws us in
- Elation – 'tremendous' is replaced by surprise
- He didn't fight.. / He hadn't fought at all.' Concise, matter of fact language captures the fish's acceptance of his fate.
- Anthropomorphising – giving the fish human qualities, beginning to relate to him and see him as more than a trophy



Lines 7-15

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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.

- Obviously an old fish: large, heavy and ugly yet deserving of respect: 'venerable'
- Close observation: skin is ragged and peeling; and it reminds Bishop of old, floral wallpaper.
- Poet sees the beauty in the seemingly ugly


A background image of a lake with hills in the distance and a scale of justice in the foreground. The scale is positioned vertically, with a white tassel on the left pan and a silver teardrop-shaped weight on the right pan. The text "Lines 16-21" is overlaid in white on the lake.

Lines 16-21

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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.

- The fish is also infested with sea-lice and barnacles and has seaweed hanging from his stomach.
- Again, there is a hint of beauty in the description of the barnacles: they are 'fine rosettes of lime', picking up on the rose imagery used when closely examining the fish's skin



Lines 22-33

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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.

- 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.



Lines 34-42

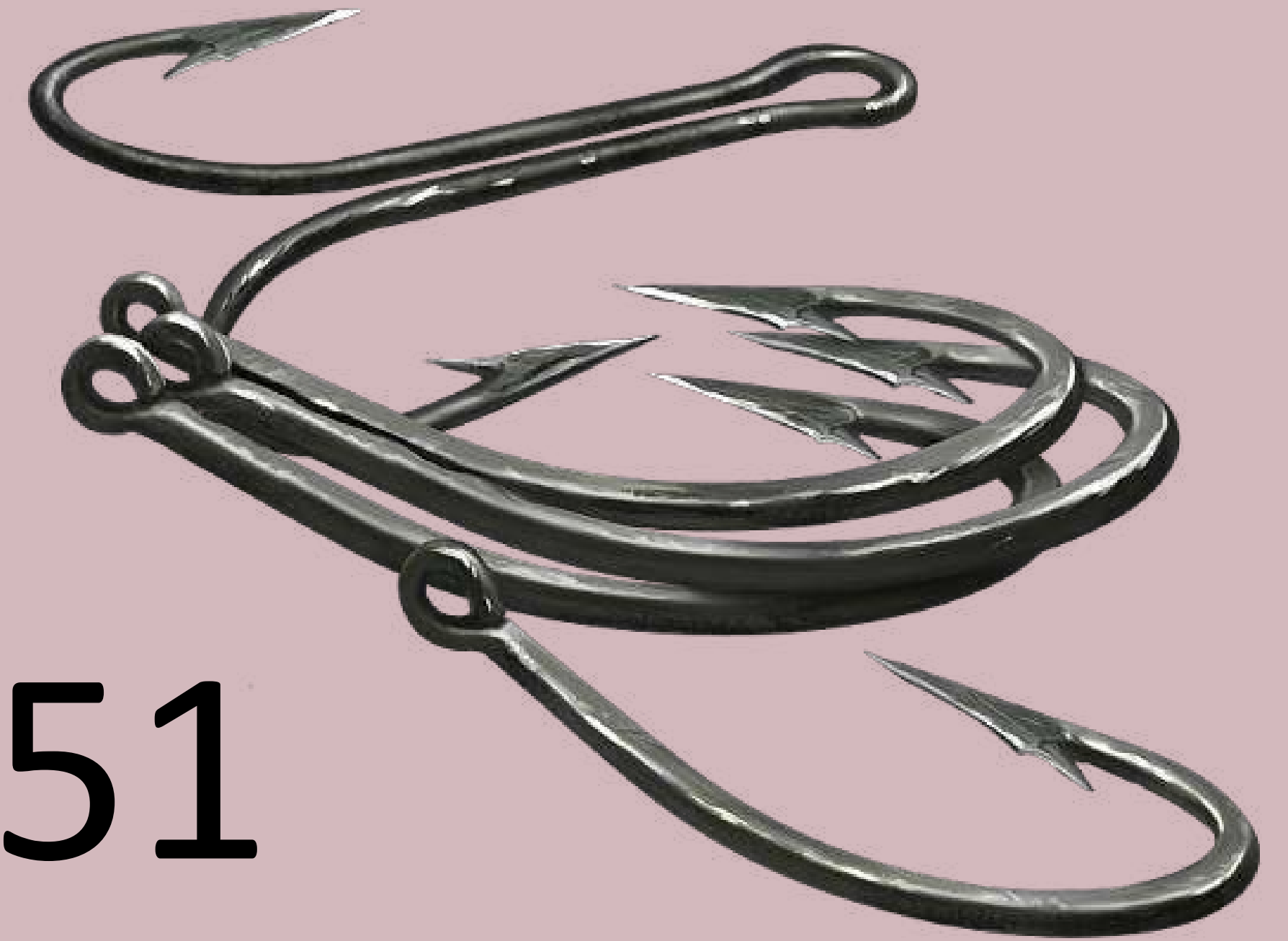
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I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.

- 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.
- Assonance and alliteration add to the musical quality of the poem: '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'.

Lines 43-51

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-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,

- 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.
- Once the poet begins to observe the fish closely, she starts to empathise with him, and her release of him becomes inevitable.
- Poet wants to relate to the fish but searches in vain for a connection. 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.

Lines 52-60

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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.

- The hooks have obviously been there for some time as the fish's skin has grown around them and they are now firmly embedded
- 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.

Lines 61-67

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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,

- Hooks are like war medals; they tell of battles the fish has fought and won in the past.
- 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?

Lines 68-76

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The poem ends on an 'end rhymed, and almost visionary conclusion'.

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

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.

- 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'.

Themes and Exam Focus

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

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.



Key Terms

First person

Anthropomorphising


Observation leads to
reflection

Life struggles

Venerable

Insights into the
human condition

Celebratory

A photograph of a fishing boat, likely a lobster boat, tilted on a beach. The boat is dark-colored with 'BS60' written in white on its side. The cabin is tilted, and the boat is surrounded by fishing gear and ropes. The background shows a rocky coastline and the ocean.

The Bight *On my birthday*

Written in 1948

“It is one of Bishop’s best poems because it is life affirming and shows that no matter what the sea throws up in the flotsam and jetsom of life there is always something of value to be found there.”

Posted on [November 24, 2012](#) by [hecubapublishing](#)

In a letter to Dr. Anny Baumann, she added a P.S.

'I wrote it last year, but I still think if I can just keep the last line in mind ('all the untidy activity continues, awful but cheerful'), everything may still turn out all right.'

Posted on [November 24, 2012](#) by [hecubapublishing](#)

Glossary

- Bight: a bay formed by a curve in the coastline
- marl: clay soil
- pilings: wood or concrete columns driven into the ground to provide support for a structure
- Baudelaire: French poet (1821 -1867)
- marimba music: a wooden musical instrument that is similar to a xylophone.
- ocher: ochre – a yellowish, orange colour
- dredge: a device to clear unwanted material from the sea or river bed
- claves: musical keys, also known as clefs
- impalpable: unable to be felt by touch
- frowsy: scruffy and neglected in appearance
- jackstraw gaffs:
- plowshares:
- stove in:

Lines 1-8

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At low tide like this how sheer the water is.

White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.

Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
the water in the bight doesn't wet anything,
the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.

One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire
one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.

- Bishop draws us into the scene with her precise detail but also her use of the phrase 'like this' which implies that we are standing with her, looking at the same scene at the same time. There is a sense of immediacy in the first line.
- Implied danger: water is like gas, the boats and the pilings are dry 'as matches'
- Personification: the marl glares – could mean both shining in the bright sun and looking angrily at the poet
- Baudelaire had keen sensory perception and was an astute observer of the world around him. These traits are reflected in his poetry and are referred to by Bishop when she imagines the gassy smell of the water being expressed by marimba music.
- Slight detachment in the use of the word 'One' as opposed to 'I'.

A brown pelican with a long, dark beak is swimming in water. The water is blue with reflections of light, creating a shimmering effect. The pelican is facing left, and its reflection is visible in the water below it. The text "Lines 9-15" is overlaid in white on the pelican's body.

Lines 9-15

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The little ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock
already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves.
The birds are outsize. Pelicans crash
into this peculiar gas unnecessarily hard,
it seems to me, like pickaxes,
rarely coming up with anything to show for it,
and going off with humorous elbowings.

- The idea of music is picked up again in as Bishop turns her attention to the 'little ocher dredge' which sounds as if it is playing jazzy, dance music in 'perfectly off-beat' notes.
- This should be the pelicans' environment but there is a sense that they are somehow out of place in a world increasingly taken over by man: they 'crash' into the shallow water and rarely catch any fish.
- Pelicans' awkwardness perfectly captured in the phrase 'humorous elbowings': the birds seem too large and clumsy to succeed in their endeavours.

A large frigatebird is shown in flight against a clear blue sky with some light, wispy clouds. The bird is dark-colored with a white patch on its chest and a long, hooked beak. Its wings are spread wide, and it is flying towards the right side of the frame.

Lines 16-23

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Black-and-white man-of-war birds soar
on impalpable drafts
and open their tails like scissors on the curves
or tense them like wishbones, till they tremble.
The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in
with the obliging air of retrievers,
bristling with jackstraw gaffs and hooks
and decorated with bobbles of sponges.

- The pelicans hit the water 'like pickaxes' and now the man-of-war birds are described as having tails 'like scissors'. Even nature is somehow mechanical in this place dominated by human activity.
- The birds' wings 'tense' and 'tremble', picking up the idea first touched upon in the marl's 'glare': man and nature are at odds with one another.
- Human activity, unlike that of the pelicans, produces results: the sponge boats 'keep coming in' with their catches.
- The boats are personified: they are like obliging retriever dogs, delighted to bring back what their owners have killed.
- Action and activity captured perfectly: 'keep coming in', 'bristling with jackstraw gaffs', 'decorated with bobbles of sponges'.

Lines 24-31


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There is a fence of chicken wire along the dock where, glinting like little plowshares, the blue-gray shark tails are hung up to dry for the Chinese-restaurant trade.

Some of the little white boats are still piled up against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in, and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm, like torn-open, unanswered letters.

- Harvesting of shark tails is most environmentally unsound, cruel and wasteful. Man and nature are once again pitted against one another.
- Again, the figurative language – ‘glinting like plowshares’ – describes the natural world in human terms. Link to ‘pickaxes’ and ‘scissors’: all tools used in work but, in the case of the pickaxe and the plowshare, that work can chip away at or rip up the natural world.
- Messiness of scene (there had been a very bad storm the previous year) reminds Bishop of a messy desk.



Lines 32-36

www.aofesnotes.com

The bight is littered with old correspondences.

Click. Click. Goes the dredge,

and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.

All the untidy activity continues,

awful but cheerful.

- Letters, correspondences imply connections. The bight contains important messages for Bishop.
- Onomatopoeia brings the dredge to life as it continues on its way.
- Punctuation highlights the sharp noise of the dredge: harsh 'ck' at the end of 'Click' underscore the unnatural nature of the mechanical sounds.
- Long vowel sounds: 'jawful of marl' reinforce the idea that the dredge is part of the 'awful but cheerful' activity on the bight.
- The birds were compared to mechanical devices and now the dredge, like the sponge boats, is compared to an animal with a 'jawful' of catch. The pelicans' hunts were largely unsuccessful but the man-made dredge succeeds.
- The dredge may be a symbol of the poet's digging into her past and the 'untidy activity' of her own life.
- Realistic approach: life is messy but we can still find happiness in it. 'On my birthday' makes sense in the context of the activity continuing year in year out.
- See the next slide for more comment on 'awful but cheerful'.

Bishop worked against an inclination to self-pity. Her favourite lines from her poetry are from the end of 'The Bight' (1949): 'All the untidy activity continues/awful but cheerful.' The epigram represents more than a personal survival strategy – it's something like a worldview. In a letter to Anne Stevenson in the 1960s, Bishop writes: 'My outlook is pessimistic. I think we are still barbarians, barbarians who commit a hundred indecencies and cruelties every day of our lives, as just possibly future ages may be able to see.' She goes on to invoke George Herbert's 'Love Unknown', translating his figure of the life touched by God into secular terms: 'But I think we should be gay in spite of it, sometimes even giddy – to make life endurable and to keep ourselves "new, tender, quick".'

Gillian White in the London Review of Books – May 2006

Themes and Exam Focus

Life is 'awful but cheerful': acceptance of our imperfections.

No real epiphany such as we find in other poems by Bishop on the course.

Detailed and appreciative description of the natural world.

Awareness of man's effect on nature.



Key Terms

Precise detail

Immediacy

Sensory
perception

Personification

Implied
danger

Realistic

'Awful but
cheerful'

At the Fishhouses



Glossary

- gloaming: dusk, twilight
- shuttle: device used in weaving
- cleated: having wood fastened on to act as a support or prevent slippage
- opaque:
- translucence: light shining through
- iridescent: showing luminous colours that seem to change when seen from different angles.
- Capstan: a broad revolving cylinder used for winding a rope or cable, powered by a motor or pushed round by levers
- sparse: thinly dispersed or scattered
- Lucky Strike: American cigarette brand
- total immersion: a form of baptism practised by some Christians: the person is submerged in the water
- indifferently: in a way that shows lack of interest
- associating: uniting
- transmutation: change into another form
- briny: very salty water, like sea water



Lines 1-8

www.aoifnotes.com

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.
The air smells so strong of codfish
it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.

- Precise description to set the scene
- Timeless: old man mending his nets, engaged in physical labour
- Language appeals to the senses: 'air smells so strong', 'almost invisible, a dark purple-brown'
- Long 'o' sounds and internal rhyme create mournful atmosphere: 'Although', 'cold', 'old' 'gloaming'
- The man is old and alone, hinting at isolation and ending: is this way of life vanishing? He is 'almost invisible' already



Lines 9-12

www.aofesnotes.com

The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up to storerooms in the gables for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.

- Detailed, precise description continues
- Motion of the shuttle is picked up in the reference to the wheelbarrows that will be 'pushed up and down'.
- Musical quality: alliteration in 'five fishhouses' and long 'e' sounds in 'steeply peaked', 'cleated'



Lines 13-20

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All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
among the wild jagged rocks,
is of an apparent translucence
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
growing on their shoreward walls.

- Description of the sea: 'All is silver' is magical and mysterious
- There is beauty to be found in these functional fishhouses and their surroundings
- Typical of Bishop to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, the magical in the mundane
- Sense of nature taking over: 'an emerald moss / growing on their shoreward walls'



Lines 21-25

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The big fish tubs are completely lined with layers of beautiful herring scales and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered with creamy iridescent coats of mail, with small iridescent flies crawling on them.

- Beauty is found in the most unlikely of places: the fish tubs are lined with 'beautiful herring scales', the wheelbarrows covered with 'creamy iridescent coats of mail', the flies crawling on the scales are also 'iridescent'.
- Detailed, close observation: focuses in more and more until even the flies are a source of wonder.

Lines 26-31

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Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,
cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where the ironwork has rusted.

- Bishop's focus shifts and she examines the old wooden capstan.
- Imagery hints at suffering and loss: 'ancient', 'cracked' 'melancholy stains, like dried blood', 'rusted'
- Everything here has meaning for Bishop but there is still a detachment. No sense of epiphany or revelation yet.
- Slow-paced descriptions, taking in every detail of the world around her.

Lines 32-40

www.aoifesnotes.com



The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
He was a friend of my grandfather.
We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring
while he waits for a herring boat to come in.
There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.
He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,
from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
the blade of which is almost worn away.

- Human connection for the first time in the poem: she offers the man a cigarette and they talk
- Bishop places herself in the poem by mentioning that the old man was a friend of her grandfather.
- The pair talk of unemotional, practical matters such as the decline in the fish population
- Man versus nature: the fish population has declined and the old man has scraped the beautiful scales from 'unnumbered fish' with a knife so well-used for the task that the blade is almost worn away
- Sense of life ebbing away as time passes, just as the man's blade is worn away, so his time is coming to an end.
- The man's vest and thumb are sequined by the fish scales: gently humorous use of a word more commonly associated with ballgowns and glitzy events – nothing could be further from the old man sitting by the fishhouses at dusk.

dreamstime.com

Lines 41-46

www.aofesnotes.com

Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water, thin silver
tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet.

- The words 'down' (repeated in these lines) and 'descending' imply that Bishop is now beginning to delve deep into her subconscious
- Long vowel sounds – sense of solemnity – slow pace of the poem

Lines 47-54



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Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in
music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

- ‘Cold dark deep and absolutely clear’ – chilling description of the water (will be repeated later in this section, stressing its importance)
- This is not her environment; only the fish and the seals are at home here
- Seal, like the old man and Bishop herself, is a solitary figure
- Reference to religion does not imply that it brings inner peace or joy
- Total immersion is a form of baptism practised by some Christian groups. Here, it is symbolic of immersing oneself in knowledge, probably as a result of psychoanalysis. (Bishop was undergoing therapy at the time.) This process will not be comforting or easy, the water is ‘Cold dark deep and absolutely clear’.

Lines 55-62

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He stood up in the water and regarded me steadily, moving his head a little.

Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug as if it were against his better judgment.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us, the dignified tall firs begin.

- Anthropomorphising the seal: earlier Bishop said he was 'interested in music' and 'a believer in total immersion', now he reappears to look at her 'as if it were against his better judgement'.
- The seal disappears and Bishop again faces the chilling realisation that she must face the 'cold dark deep and absolutely clear' waters of self-knowledge alone.

Lines 63-70

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Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.

- The trees behind Bishop are waiting to be cut down for Christmas. This could be read as man's treatment of nature, but the trees could also be a symbol of Bishop leaving the religion of her childhood behind
- Bishop becomes more personally involved at this stage in the poem, using the first person pronoun 'I'
- The sea water symbolises the sea of knowledge
- Bishop has revisited the same areas of knowledge repeatedly but this does not appear to offer much comfort: the sea swings 'indifferently' and 'icily free' above the stones.



Lines 71-77

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If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand
would burn

as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray
flame.

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

- Complex imagery
- The water is so cold that if you dip your hand in, even briefly, it would seem to burn
- If the sea represents self-knowledge, then that journey to self-awareness is painful and difficult. It burns, aches and is bitter

A sunset over the ocean with the sun low on the horizon, casting a golden glow across the sky and water. The sky transitions from a bright orange near the sun to a deep blue at the top. The water is dark with some lighter patches reflecting the sunset light.

Lines 78-83

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It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

- Bishop explains that knowledge is like this: it is not static but moves like the sea and is ever-changing
- Mother Nature is not a warm, maternal figure here: 'rocky breasts', 'cold hard mouth'
- It is impossible to fully understand life: as soon as we know something, it becomes part of the past and is replaced by something else - 'our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown' just as the sea ebbs and flows.

Themes and Exam Focus

Knowledge may be illuminating 'clear' but it can also be painful.

It is impossible to fully understand life

Bishop longs for home and a sense of belonging. However, though she may have a connection with this place, it is in decline and offers no real security or comfort.



Key Terms

Beauty is found
in the most
unlikely of places

Melancholy

The
extraordinary in
the ordinary

Delving deep into
the subconscious

Complexity of life

Knowledge, self-
awareness can be
bitter and painful

Linked Tasks

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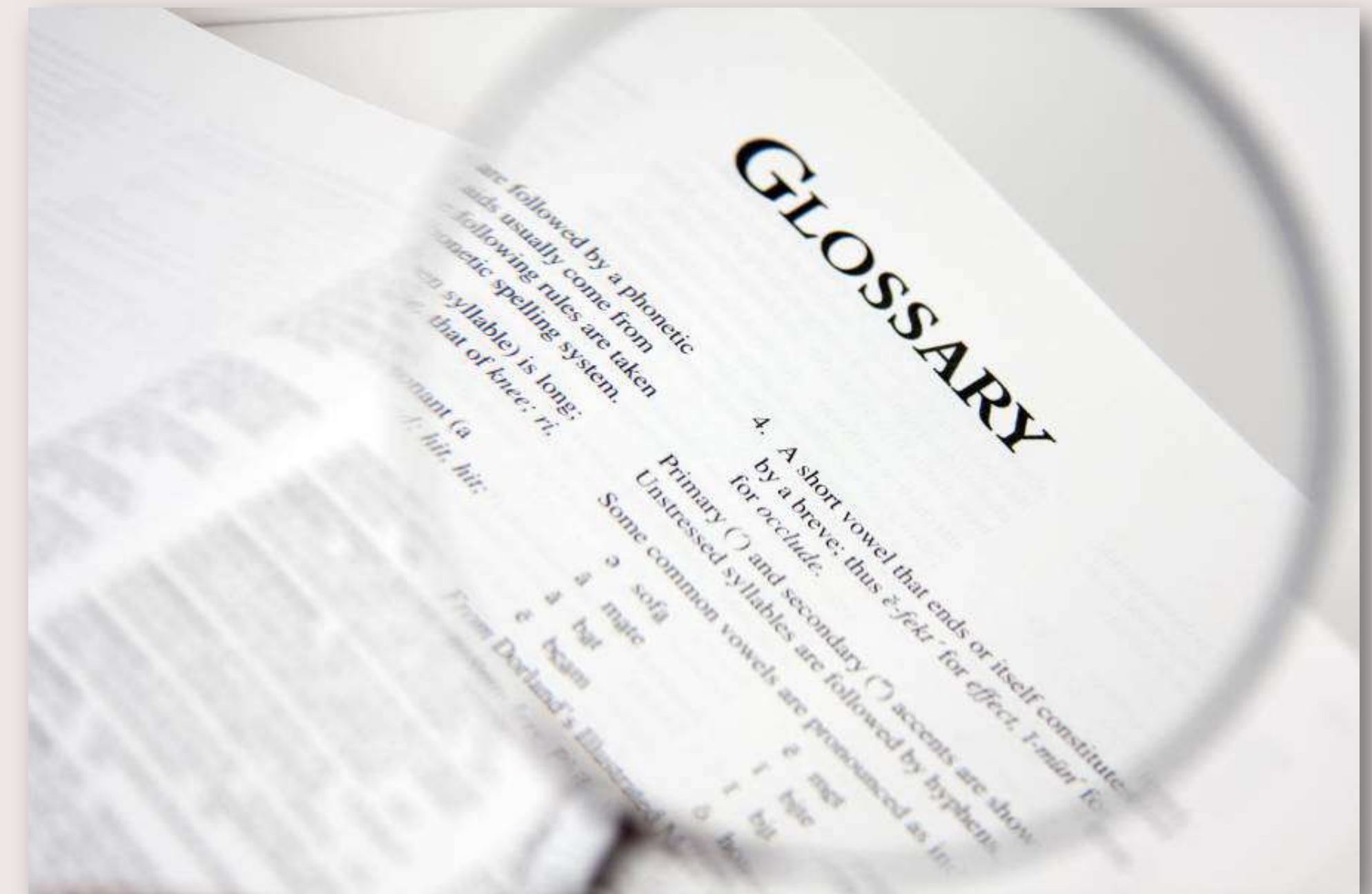


The Prodigal



Glossary

- 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

- 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.
- 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'.

A pig with light brown and white patches is lying on a brick floor. The pig's head is on the left, and its body extends towards the right. The floor is made of reddish-brown bricks. The pig's eyes are closed, and it appears to be resting or sleeping. The text "Lines 1-8" is overlaid in the center of the image in a white, sans-serif font.

Lines 1-8

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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.

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.

- Reduced to the condition of an animal
- So close to the pigs that he cannot view them objectively
- Detailed, sensuous language brings the scene to life
- Wall is 'plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung' – both wonderful and horrible
- 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.

A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, glowing path of light across the sky and reflecting on the water's surface. The water is dark, and the reflection of the sun is a bright, circular spot. In the distance, a small boat with a person on board is visible on the water. The overall scene is serene and peaceful.

Lines 9-14

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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.

- 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'.
- 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.

Lines 15-21

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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 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 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.

Lines 22-28

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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.

- More Biblical allusion; 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'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.)

Themes and Exam Focus

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.

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.



Key Terms

Prodigal has lost objectivity

Descriptions are both wonderful and horrible

Cameraderie

Retains some humanity

Strength of the human spirit

Biblical allusion

Questions of Travel



“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

Glossary

- here: Brazil
- inexplicable: cannot be explained
- disparate: essentially different in kind; not able to be compared
- baroque: A period in the arts, visual and musical, from about 1600 to about 1750, marked by elaborate ornamentation and efforts to create dramatic effects
- Pascal: Blaise Pascal, 17th Century French Philosopher, Mathematician 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'.



Lines 1-9

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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.

- The poem opens with a rather unusual statement in which the traveller announces that there are 'too many waterfalls here'.
- The phrase 'too many' is negative, almost as if the poet is overwhelmed and cannot take in the view.
- 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.



Lines 10-17

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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?

- 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’?

A close-up photograph of a hummingbird hovering near a cluster of yellow flowers. The bird's wings are spread, showing intricate feather patterns. Its body is primarily green with a dark throat and breast. The background is a soft, out-of-focus brownish-gold.

Lines 18-25

www.aofesnotes.com

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?

- 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.



Lines 26-29

www.aolifesnotes.com

Oh, must we dream our dreams
and have them, too?
And have we room
for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

- 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.




Lines 30-41

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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.)

- 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.



Lines 42-46

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-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.

- 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 tone is relaxed and conversational: Bishop does not specify the type of bird - perhaps she does not know – but that does not matter.
- 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 priest 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’.

A traditional wooden cage, possibly used for transporting animals, featuring a woven mesh structure. The cage is made of light-colored wood and shows significant wear, with dark, charred or stained areas along the edges and corners. The mesh is made of light-colored, possibly bamboo or rattan, strips. The cage has a rectangular shape with a flat top and a flat bottom. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Lines 47-54

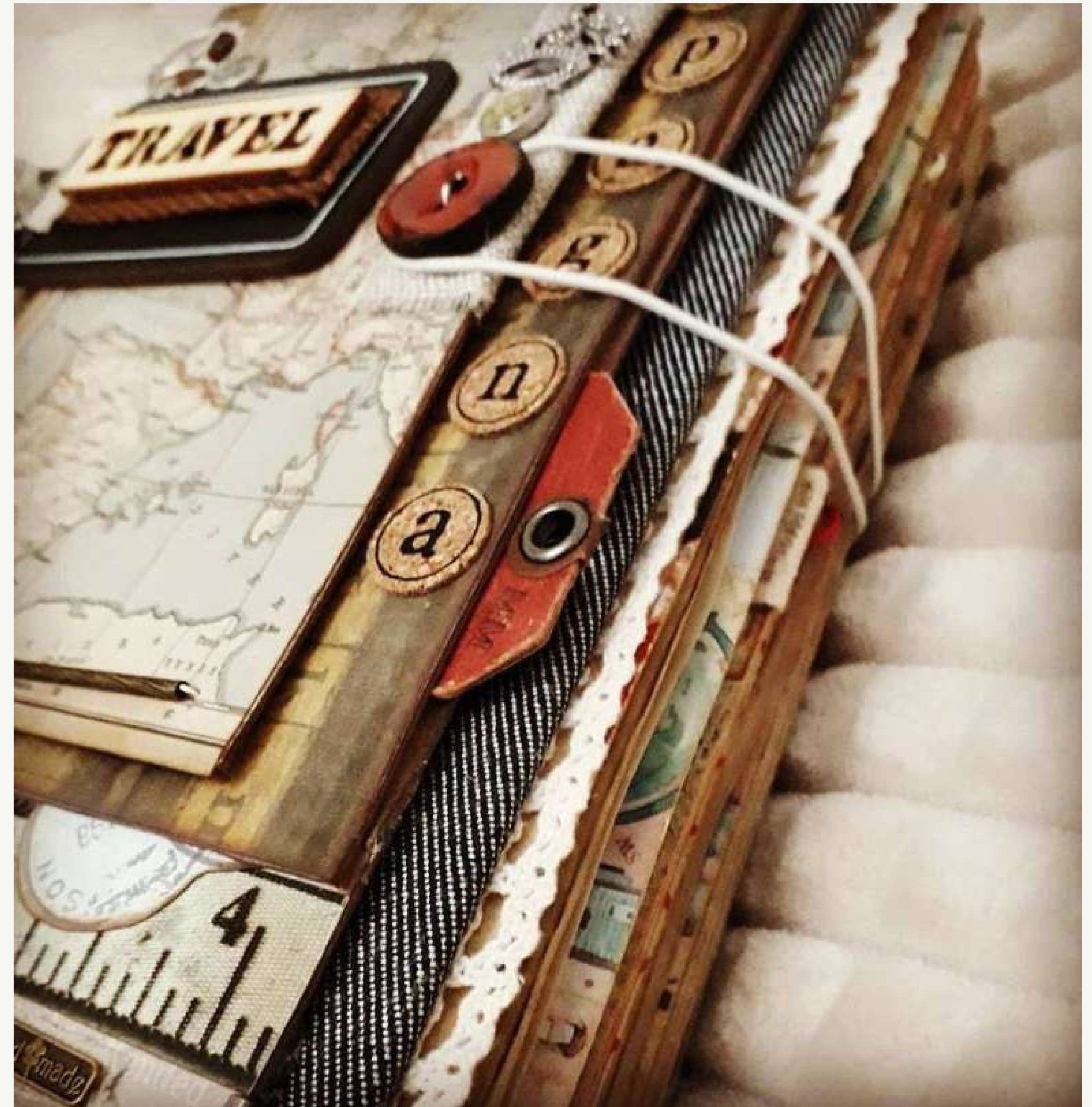
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-Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
blurr'dly and inconclusively,
on what connection can exist for centuries
between the crudest wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.
--Never to have studied history in
the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.

- 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.

Lines 55-63

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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’ as the traveller is imagined as taking out a notebook to record reflections.

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)

--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?"*

- 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 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, Mathematician 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.

Lines 64-67



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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 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.

Themes and Exam Focus

The poem explores the ideas of travel and home. Bishop is initially judgmental but becomes more philosophical as she reflects on the complexities of the issue.

The poem looks at man's impact on the natural world and societies with which we come in contact.



“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 Terms

Opens with
negative imagery

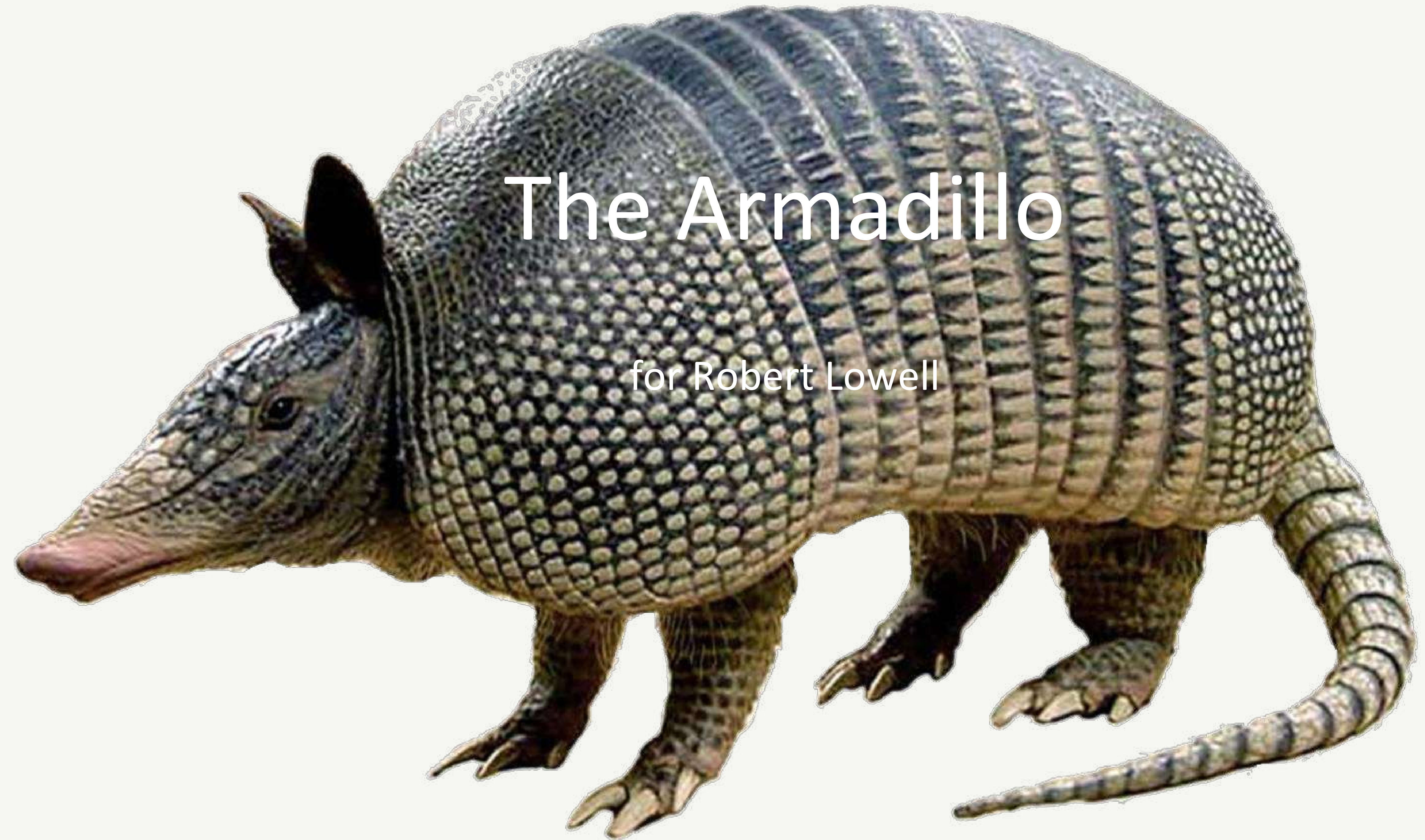
Complexity in
seemingly simple
questions about
home

Judgmental tone

Finds beauty and
meaning in the
oddest places

No clear answer to
the questions

Formal, italicised
conclusion



The Armadillo

for Robert Lowell

Glossary

- For Robert Lowell: Bishop's friend, also a poet
- time of year: St John's Day – June 24th
- the pale green one: Bishop is probably referring to the planet Uranus
- kite-sticks of the Southern Cross: constellation in the form of a kite
- intangible: cannot be touched or held
- mimicry: imitation

Background

The poem was published in *The New Yorker* in June of 1957. Americans were in the middle of the Cold War and very concerned about the potential for nuclear war. World War II had ended with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Americans and the Soviets were developing even more powerful weapons.

Originally, 'The Armadillo' was not dedicated to Bishop's friend Robert Lowell. Lowell's views on war were well-known to Bishop. He had become a conscientious objector when the Allies began fire-bombing German cities in WWII and, in the 1960s, was a vociferous opponent of nuclear weapons.

Lowell admired 'The Armadillo' and dedicated one of his poems to Bishop, claiming it was influenced by the style of 'The Armadillo'. In return, Bishop dedicated her poem to Lowell when it was being printed in her 'Questions of Travel' collection in 1965. Lowell was delighted with the dedication and saw the poem as describing 'the [nuclear] bomb in a delicate way'. Bishop said that was exactly her intention.



Lines 1-8

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This is the time of year
when almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height,
rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts,
the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts.

- The poet observes the illegal fire balloons that are sent into the sky every St John's Day.
- The soft 'f' sounds in the alliterative 'frail' and 'fire' capture the fragility of the fire balloons. Yet, for all their frailty, they are capable of raining death and destruction on the land beneath them, as we will see later in the poem.
- The paper lanterns fill with the flickering light of the flames.
- The simile comparing the fire balloons to hearts may indicate the fickle nature of love. The light is not constant and steady, but rather 'comes and goes'.

A deep space photograph of a starry field. The background is dark black, filled with numerous small, distant stars. A prominent, bright green star is located in the upper-middle section. In the lower-left quadrant, there is a faint, diffuse, and irregularly shaped galaxy or nebula. The overall scene is a rich field of stars, likely a star cluster or a field of stars in a galaxy.

Lines 9-16

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Once up against the sky it's hard
to tell them from the stars—
planets, that is—the tinted ones:
Venus going down, or Mars,
or the pale green one. With a wind,
they flare and falter, wobble and toss;
but if it's still they steer between
the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,

- Conversational, relaxed tone that we also see in 'The Fish' (if you could call it a lip) and 'Questions of Travel' (fat brown bird). Bishop presumably means Uranus when she refers to the 'pale green one'. She crafted her poems carefully over long periods of time, so this decision not to identify the planet correctly is deliberate. The effect is to make us feel as if we are observing the scene with her; it adds immediacy and realism to the poem.
- The progress of the fire balloons is uncertain: they are driven by the wind. They drift upwards and become indistinguishable from the stars and the planets.
- The alliterative 'flair and falter' evoke the sound of puffs of wind such as those that direct the balloons' path or cause them to 'wobble and toss'.



Lines 17-24

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receding, dwindling, solemnly
and steadily forsaking us,
or, in the downdraft from a peak,
suddenly turning dangerous.

Last night another big one fell.
It splattered like an egg of fire
against the cliff behind the house.
The flame ran down. We saw the pair

- The leisurely description of the fire balloons continues. However, a note of danger is introduced. If there is a downdraft, the balloons come perilously close to earth. The poet recalls that one fell last night.
- The description of the falling balloon is wonderfully vivid. The onomatopoeic 'splattered' and the simile likening the balloon to 'an egg of fire' whose flame 'ran down' the cliff behind the poet's house capture the destructive potential of the lanterns that might fall anywhere. This time, they were close to the house but the implication is that they could fall even closer another time.



Lines 25-32

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We saw the pair
of owls who nest there flying up
and up, their whirling black-and-white
stained bright pink underneath, until
they shrieked up out of sight.
The ancient owls' nest must have burned.
Hastily, all alone,
a glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, tail down,

- The description of the owls 'whirling black-and-white / stained bright pink underneath' is beautifully poetic but it avoids the true horror of the injured creatures frantically fleeing their burning nest.
- The owls' nest is ancient but, in a brief moment, it is destroyed by man's carelessness.
- The onomatopoeia in 'shrieked' adds to the sensuous detail which is a trademark of Bishop's style.
- The armadillo finally makes an appearance. He too is fleeing his home. Again, the description makes his suffering seem somehow beautiful: he is 'glistening' and 'rose-flecked'.
- There is a careful and perfectly judged economy of language in Bishop's portrayal of the armadillo. His fear and distress are perfectly captured in a few simple words: 'Head down, tail down'.

A close-up photograph of a brown rabbit sitting in a field of green grass. The rabbit is facing left, and its ears are upright. The background is a soft-focus green field with some yellow flowers. The text "Lines 33-40" is overlaid in white on the rabbit's body.

Lines 33-40

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“The ‘too pretty, dreamlike mimicry’ is both the poem’s attempts to render the animals and the fire balloons’ imitation of the destructiveness of war”

Elizabeth Bishop, “The Armadillo,” The Bomb, and Robert Lowell
by Julie Kane

and then a baby rabbit jumped out,
short-eared, to our surprise.

So soft!—a handful of intangible ash
with fixed, ignited eyes.

Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!

O falling fire and piercing cry

and panic, and a weak mailed fist

clenched ignorant against the sky!

- Most vulnerable of all, a baby rabbit appears. Unlike the armadillo, which has at least an armour of sorts, the tiny rabbit is 'So soft' and at the mercy of the flames. It is soon reduced to nothing more than 'a handful of intangible ash'.
- The tone of the poem changes abruptly. Bishop criticises her own poetic account of the destruction the fire balloons have wrought. It does not accurately portray the true horror of the event. She also, perhaps, says that the implied comparison between the balloons and the bomb is insufficient to describe the horror of 'falling fire and piercing cry / and panic'.
- The 'weak mailed fist / clenched ignorant against the sky' may be the armadillo's futile and uncomprehending reaction to the destruction of its home and the pain it suffers, but it may also be Bishop's way of saying that her efforts to explore the threat of war in a poetic form.

Themes and Exam Focus

The poem explores man's relationship with nature. Here, it is overwhelmingly negative.

The threat of nuclear war, very much to the forefront of public consciousness in the 1950s, is the central focus of the poem. Just as death rains from the sky in the poem, so it could do were war to break out once more. The helplessness and hopelessness of individuals is captured in the final lines, in particular the description of 'a weak mailed fist/clenched ignorant against the sky'.



Key Terms

Leisurely
description of the
fire balloons

Vivid imagery

Implied danger

Conversational,
relaxed tone at the
start

Poetic description
hides the true
horror

Economy of
language when
describing the
armadillo

Futile gesture

First Death in Nova Scotia



*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.*

Glossary

- *chromographs: reproductions of pictures
- *loon: a type of water bird
- *ermine: white fur from a stoat

Lines 1-10

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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.

- 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' underscore 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.

Lines 11-20

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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.

- 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.

Lines 20-30

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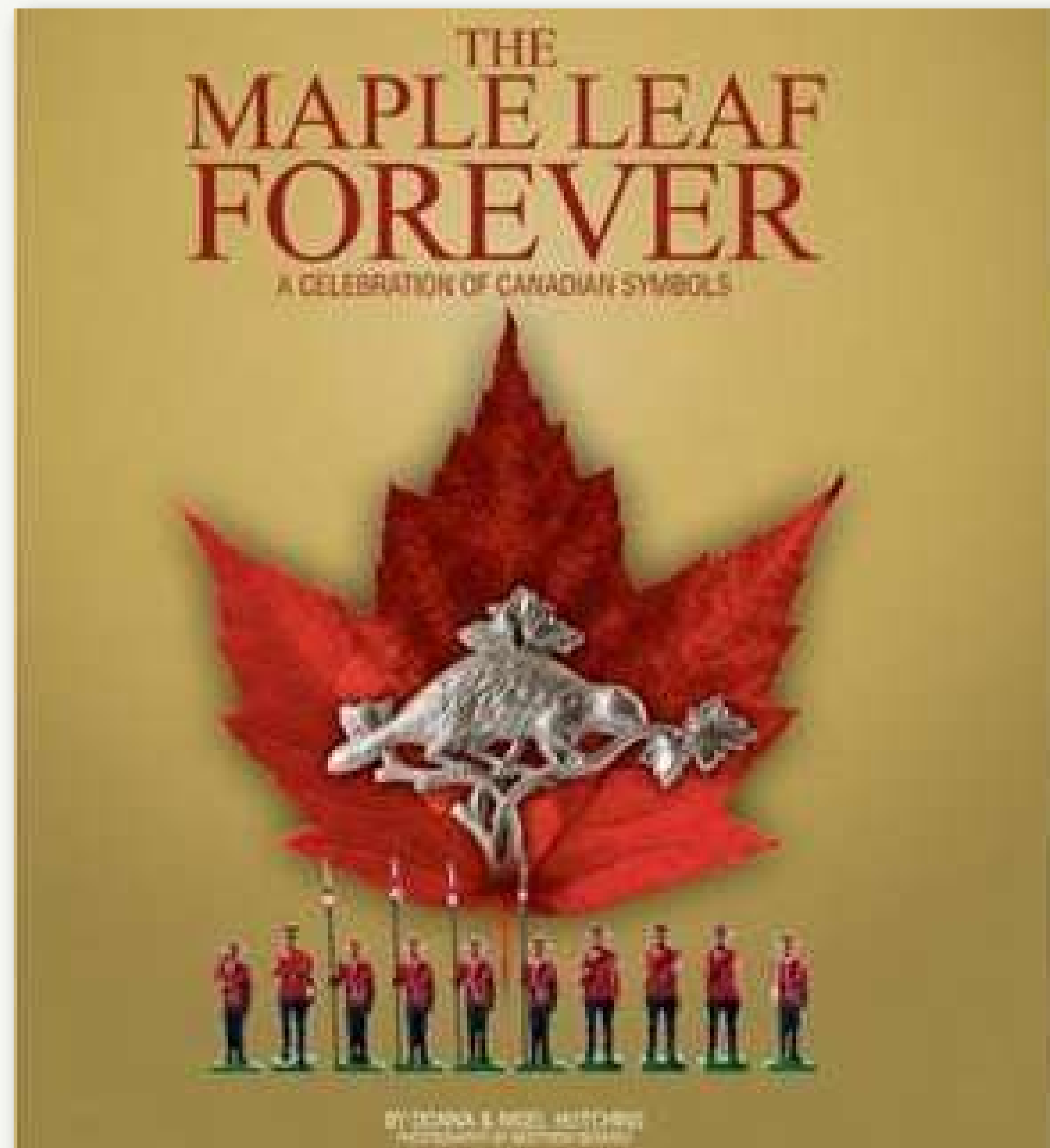


"Come," said my mother,
"Come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur."
I was lifted up and given
one lily of the valley
to put in Arthur's hand.
Arthur's coffin was
a little frosted cake,
and the red-eyed loon eyed it
from his white, frozen lake.

- 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 haunting.
- 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.

Lines 31-40

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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 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.

A red dress with a white fur collar and a floral patterned skirt. The dress is shown from the waist down, with the red skirt flowing down to the floor. The white fur collar is thick and has a scalloped edge. The floral pattern on the skirt is in shades of brown and gold. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Lines 41-50

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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?

- 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.

Themes and Exam Focus

The poem explores childhood innocence and a child's gradual realization that death is permanent.



Filling Station



Glossary

- oil-permeated: soaked through with oil
- translucency: shine / gloss
- monkey suit: overalls
- taboret: small stool
- hirsute: hairy
- begonia: flowering plant
- extraneous: unnecessary
- daisy stitch: type of design in crochet
- marguerites: daisies

Lines 1-6

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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!

- 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.

Lines 7-13

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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.

- 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'.
- The sibilance 'several quick and saucy / and greasy sons assist him' adds to the image of slippery, oily surfaces.
- The poet cannot even be bothered to count the sons – there are merely 'several' of them – but as the poem progresses, we learn they are dear to an unseen person who makes some effort to make this place a home.



Lines 14-20

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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.

- The filling station may be dirty and little more than 'a cement porch/behind the pumps' but on the 'crushed and grease-impregnated wickerwork;/on the wicker sofa', lies 'a dirty dog' who is happy and very much at home. The filthy surroundings are unimportant to him as he is 'quite comfy'. The contented dog introduces the idea that this is a place of love and care.



Lines 21-27

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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.

- 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.
- Behind the scenes, a caring hand introduces little touches which show that this father in his ill-fitting, 'oil-soaked monkey suit' and his 'several quick and saucy / and greasy sons' are loved by someone.



Lines 28-33

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Why the extraneous plant?

Why the taboret?

Why, oh why, the doily?

(Embroidered in daisy stitch
and heavy with gray crochet.)

with marguerites, I think,

Somebody embroidered 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.
- 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.

Lines 34-41

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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.

- Bishop 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.
- She realises that somebody cares for this place and, by extension, the unappealing father and sons. Even the oil cans are arranged. 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 sibilance (repeated 's' sounds) in these lines add greatly to the musical quality of the poem and reinforce the impression of loving, soothing care.

Themes and Exam Focus

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

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.



Key Terms

Exclamation marks capture the poet's shock and revulsion

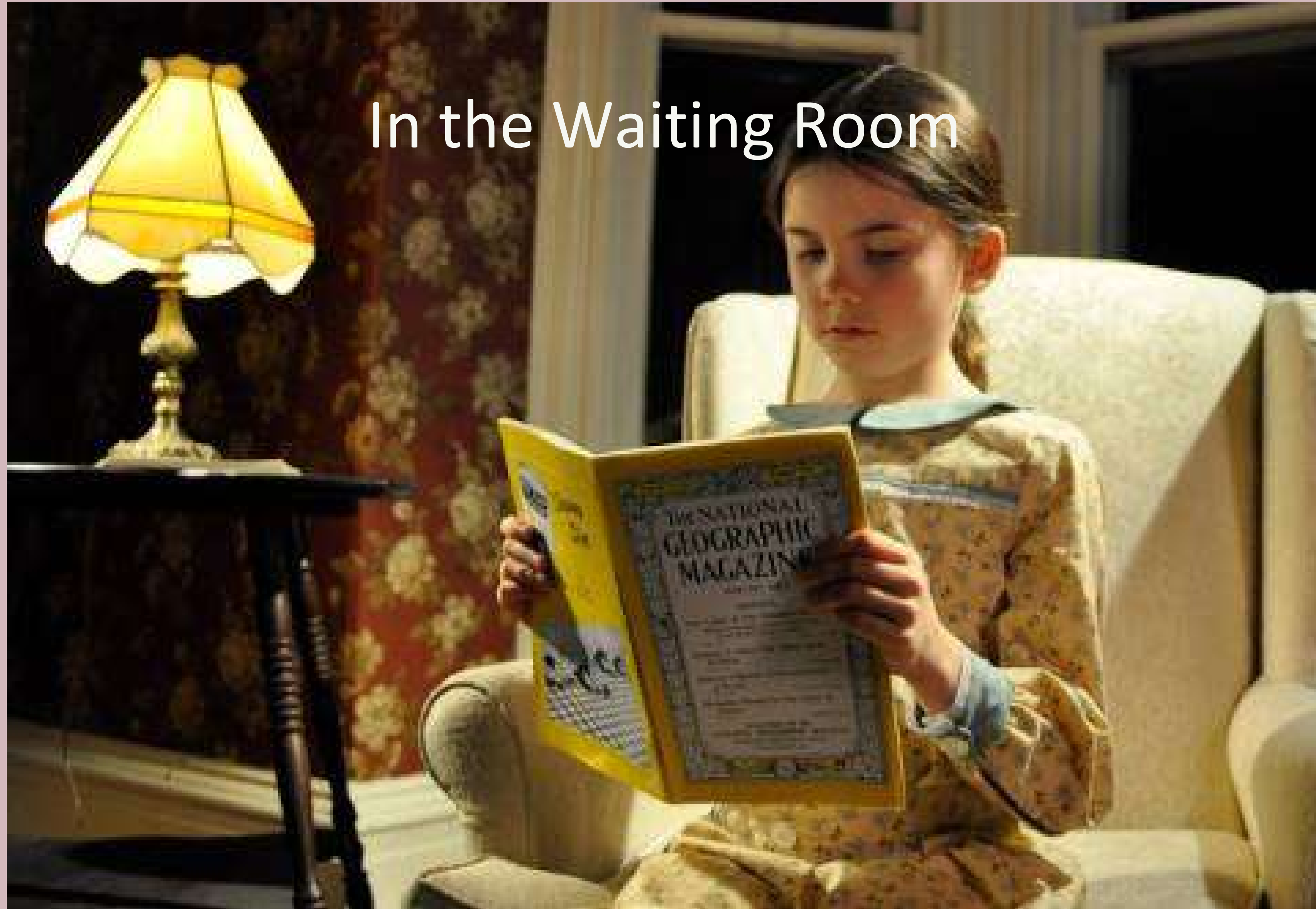
Repetition of 'dirty' and 'oil' drive home the unappealing nature of the place

Humorous description

Interesting mix of styles

Moves from judgment to understanding

In the Waiting Room



Glossary

- arctics: waterproof shoes
- Osa and Martin Johnson: a well-known husband and wife – explorers and naturalists
- Pith helmets: sun hats traditionally worn by westerners during the colonial era
- 'Long Pig' – slang for human meat eaten by cannibals



“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 interrelated 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.*



Lines 1-10

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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.

- 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. The adults sitting there are not seen as individuals but are grouped together as wearers of overcoats and galoshes.

Lines 11-20



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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.

- 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.

Lines 21-31

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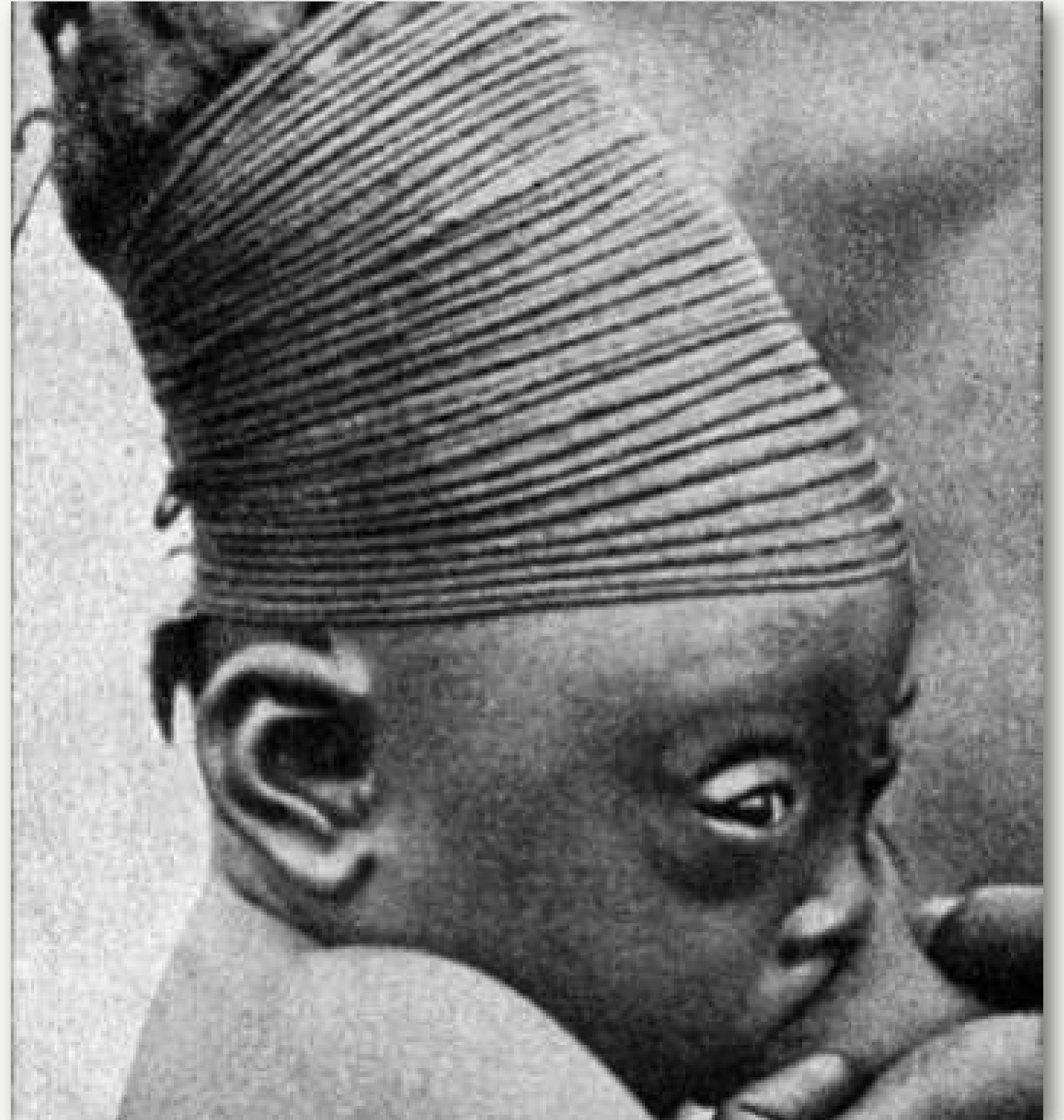


Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
-“Long Pig,” the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.

- 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.

Lines 32-42

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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;

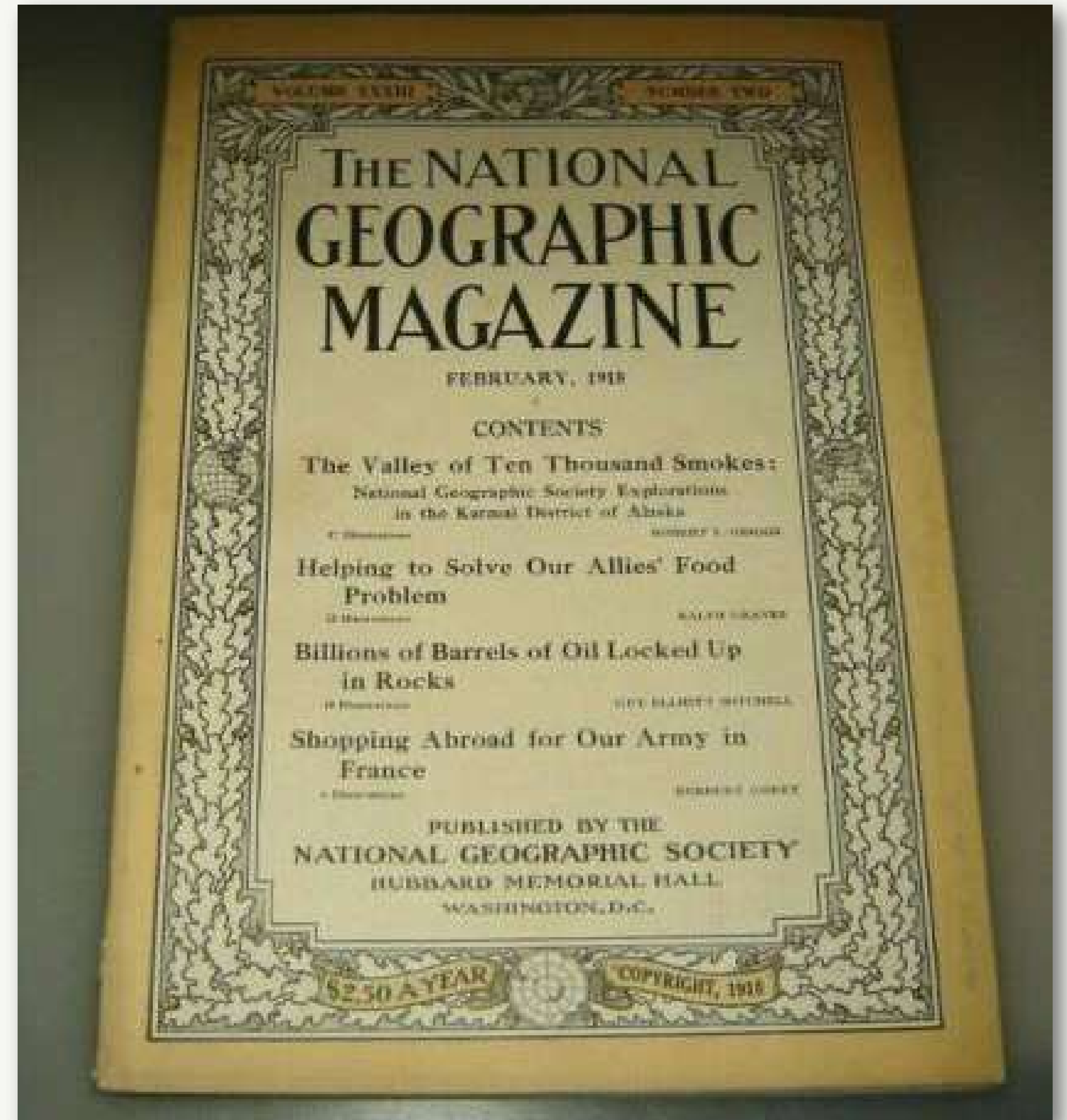
even then I knew she was

a foolish, timid woman.

- 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.
- 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.

Lines 43-53

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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.

- 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 Consueala's. At this moment, Bishop identifies with Aunt Conseula 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?
- 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.

Lines 54-63

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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?

- There is a note of defiance in the poem when the young poet asks herself why she should be 'one of them'.
- Again, she grounds herself in hard, undeniable facts such as her upcoming birthday to stop herself becoming lost in the overwhelming rush of emotion.

Lines 64-71

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I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.

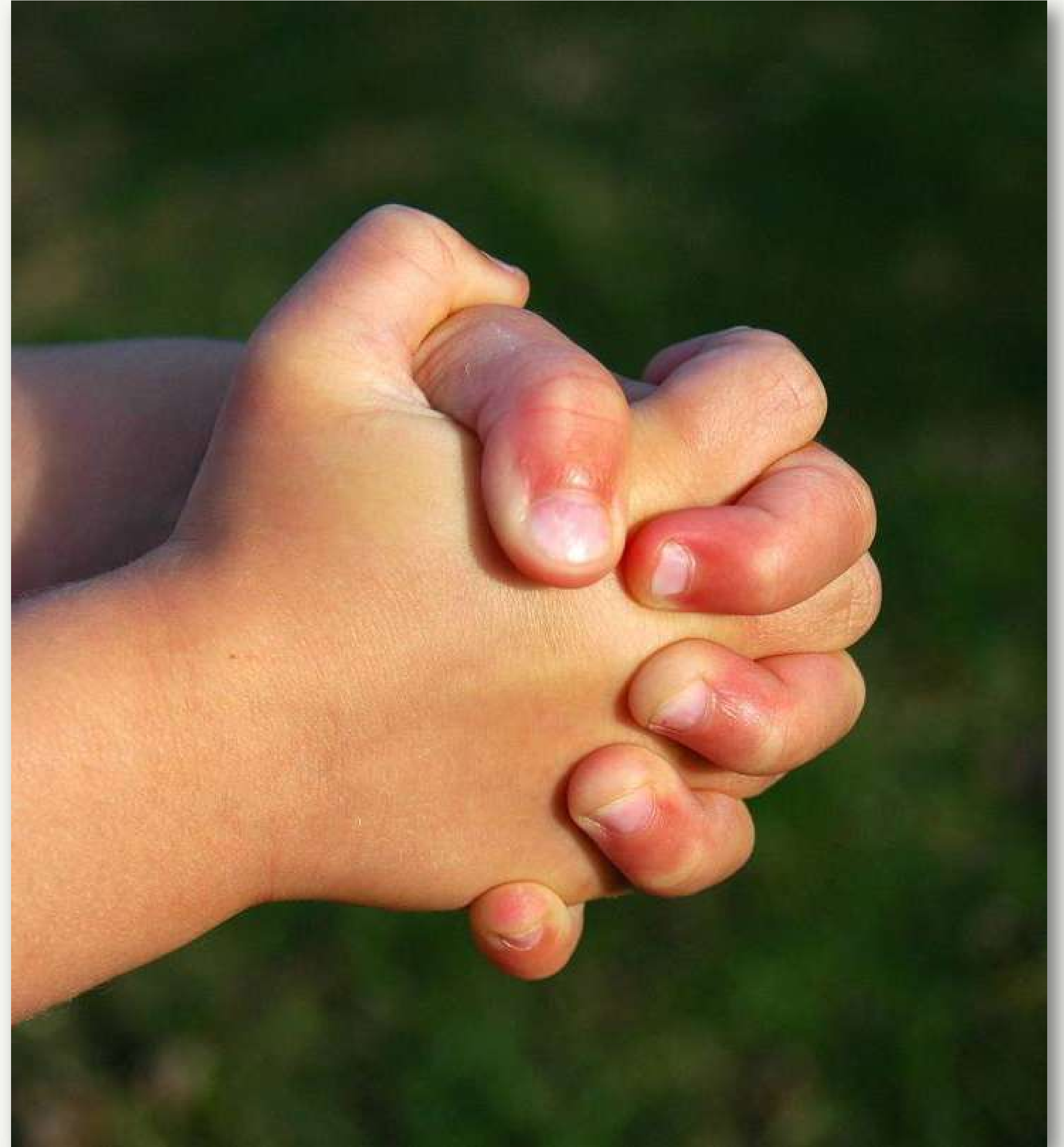
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.

I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

- 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.

Lines 72-83

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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?

- The young girl has an epiphany in the poem. She may wish to be individual, but she knows now that she cannot escape the fact that she is in some ways 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.

Lines 84-93

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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.

- 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.

A night scene of a harbor with a boat's lights reflecting on the water. The water is dark, and the lights from the boat create bright, colorful reflections. The text "Lines 94-99" is overlaid in the center.

Lines 94-99

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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.

- 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.

Themes and Exam Focus

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.

