



Elements of Fiction in Elizabeth Bishop's Poems

Before discussing the seemingly simple, but actually ingenious, sophisticated and thought-provoking poems of Elizabeth Bishop, that I do believe contain elements of fiction, I must admit that I am not a poet, although I do translate poems occasionally. Yet, at every difficult juncture in my life, I find myself turning to the poems of Emily Dickinson, Rumi or Hafiz for solace. Poetry is an extremely powerful mode of expression that, like fiction, can influence and inspire readers.

As one of the greatest poets of the last century, Bishop displays her command of English literature by expressing in the most simple, basic terms, profound changes in the perspective of her characters. I use the term character here because Bishop is not just a poet, but a storyteller. She depicts, within the confines of poetic rules that she sometimes stretches to the limit, scene after scene of human emotion.

Bishop's poem titled "Filling Station" contains every element of fiction. There is characterization (including major and minor characters), tension, a clear point of view, description of setting, and of course, plot. Her modest, yet potent descriptions depict situations that are easy for the reader to imagine.

The point of view character in this poem is identifiable from the very first line. There is a feminine quality to the voice. With the "Oh, but it is dirty!" the reader can almost visualize a dainty lady walking into a run-down gas station and expressing her

revulsion in a rather polite, diluted form. Gradually, as her perception of the filthy filling station goes through a cycle of evolution, she discovers “comfy” in dirty and a “doily” in the “oily.”

Bishop focuses on the very moment when her characters undergo a life-changing internal transformation. The main character is in a “state of equilibrium” somewhere prior to the start of the narrative. This state is disrupted as soon as she notices the extent of filth in the gas station. The entire poem centers on the internal changes she undergoes as she realizes there is more to the place than meets the eye.

Initially she perceives everything in a negative way. The place is described first as “dirty”, then “oil-soaked” and “oil-permeated,” then “disturbing,” and by the end of the first stanza, she appears alarmed at the danger the place poses. Her attention is then turned to the reality of family life, as her gaze penetrates the “oily” surface of the scene. The tectonic plates of what exemplifies her ideal world and what represents the opposite begin to rub against each other, creating tension. The place may be dirty, but there is also comfort, love, and “a big hirsute begonia”!

In a fashion similar to fiction, there is a tension here between two sets of values. Initially she is obsessed with the dirt, but then realizes this filthy gas station is actually a family’s home. There is a father with “several quick, saucy and greasy sons” helping him. The main character notices color in the comic books, colors that replace the “black translucency” she had first noticed upon entering the gas station. The poem takes on a feminine undertone with references like “impregnated” and “marguerites” in the stitching of the doily. There are also pieces of wicker furniture, albeit dirty. Obviously the place is domesticated and cared for by a woman. Someone is trying to transform the space.

The point of view character discovers music in the arrangement of motor oil cans, placed at an exact angle by caring hands, so that they are read as “ESSO—SO—SO—SO” like a soft tune. The cars moving in and out of the gas station pay no attention to the fact that the cans are so meticulously arranged. The wording in this arrangement announces that there is love and gentleness within those confines, a love that permeates not just the family’s life, but fills this onlooker’s heart, for she proclaims at the climax of this short story of a poem, “Somebody loves us all.” Thus, Bishop explains how the main character finally reaches a state of equilibrium during this episode.

In this piece, Bishop’s diction is not just simple and ordinary, but repetitious. She ultimately proves this technique to be effective, however, by using these recurring words as neat blocks that build her story. The word “dirty” is used multiple times, unapologetically. After all, the place is simply dirty, what better way is there to describe the scene.

Bishop’s choice of diction in “One Art” is also typical of her poetry. The theme, as in her previously referenced poem, is simple, yet sophisticated. Loss is at first trivialized and discussed in terms as ordinary as losing a key. Then it is taken to a whole new level. So much so that one can almost feel the senselessness, the horror and the emptiness that follows a loved one’s death.

Bishop’s poems are provocative. Assumptions are initially made that “losing” is an art and that there is mastery involved. She has to convince us as if the poem is a thesis. To master an art form, one has to engage in practicing it.

There is certainly a tone, a voice that is conversational and casual. The poem is not addressing anyone in a formal way. In the 4th stanza, the piece becomes personal.

After all, losing the mother's watch is not easy. By using "master" and "disaster" in the last two lines of the final stanza, Bishop indicates how the narrator is trying to become a master, a champion of the disaster, as he or she struggles to overcome the enormity of the loss.

Kim Dower writes in a September 6, 2013 article titled, "Poetry as Fiction," that *"the best poetry, like the best fiction, lifts us out of ourselves and our lives, while simultaneously connecting us to ourselves and our lives. If it's really good, we'll think about it for days, weeks, or years after we read it. We'll want to read it again, seeing new things each time. Poets embellish, create, and lie, just like our fiction-writing brothers and sisters. We want to give you a good ride—just like they do! We want to drum up emotion and fear; we want to terrify and console you!"*

It takes mastery of the English language to use basic terminology to evoke human emotion. Bishop's poems are simple, yet in that very simplicity lies her strength. She almost has a minimalist approach to words, the less, the better and the simpler, the better. Language that is stripped of fancy terms can provoke the most powerful human sensations. Not only does she depict changes in the narrator's perception, but she is also causing change in the perception of the reader as well. Bishop takes you on a journey within a few stanzas, such that her words stay with you as if you have read an unforgettable masterpiece of fiction.