

Nature as a Surrogate to Motherly Love: the Orphaned Bishop's Phantasmagoria

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Abstract : *This paper is an earnest attempt to find how Bishop gives a significant role to nature and its creatures which ignores human will and deeds against nature, especially in especially in poems like "The Map," "The Imaginary Iceberg," "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Florida," "The Shampoo," "The Man-Moth," "The Weed and Love Lies Sleeping." She calls herself as a 'Nature Lover' because she views nature as her mother and teaches knowledge of life with ups and downs. She speaks of her own experiences with landscapes, seascapes, birds and animals which has a great appeal on the modern readers. As an eco-feminist, she portrays the alienation of human beings and nature caused by modern technology. Through nature, Bishop learned about life and death, presence and absence, love and loss, home and exile, time and space, tradition and modernity.*

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Elizabeth Bishop is an extremely notable American poet who is popular for her striking sense of witty and descriptive poems. She was the Poet Laureate of U.S. during the years 1949 and 1950. In her lifetime, she was honored with a Pulitzer Prize in 1956 for her *North & South (1955)* and a National Book Award for poetry in 1970. Noticeably, three of her books of poetry have geographical names: *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, and *Geography III*. Her poetry often utilizes natural landscapes and imageries to offer contextual relationship between the human beings and objects presented in it. Bishop shows her resistance for mankind's religious rituals which makes human beings alienated from nature and its purity. She views and personifies nature in versatile forms such as a mother, guide, mentor and friend because she was orphaned in her early childhood days. She foretells the readers about her unhappy and undecided future because throughout her life she is longing for a parent's undying love. She feels the sheer absence of parental love, affection and guidance in her case.

This study is an earnest attempt to find out how Bishop gives a significant role to nature which ignores human will and deeds against it. Her knowledge of nature is an expression of her experience, an exploration of its complexities and an attempt to understand nature with the help of her sensation, emotion, memory, dream and imagination. She tends to domesticate the strangeness of nature through language and description. Through nature, Bishop learns about life and death, presence and absence, love and loss, home exile, time and space, and tradition and modernity especially in poems like *The Map*, *The Imaginary Iceberg*, *First Death in Nova Scotia*, *Florida*, *The Shampoo*, *The Man-Moth*, *The Weed* and *Love Lies Sleeping*. *The Map* is a descriptive poem divided into three stanzas. The first and last are eight-line stanzas with repeated Petrarchan rhyme schemes (*abbacdde*), while the longer central stanza is written in free verse. Elizabeth Bishop records her thoughts of nature as that of a map's relationship to the real world. It celebrates the mapmaker's power to create illusion and fantasy as well as new ways of looking at what is real.

The poem begins with shapes and colors. For example, land is "shadowed green", and it "lies in water", which is blue. On first looking at the map, the poet notes water surrounding and supporting land. The second half of the first stanza enumerates a relationship between the land and the sea that is mysterious and unexpected. The land is active and it seems to lean, lift, and draw the water around itself. She keenly inspects the printed names, which "run out to sea" and "cross the neighboring mountains". The poet is excited to connect her fanciful perception with the real places the map represents. She subtly notices Norway running south in the

shape of a hare, and then getting back to the art of cartography in the following lines:

...and Norway's hare runs south in agitation,
profiles investigate the sea, where land is
Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors? (Bishop 3)

A critic, Travisano says that "Bishop became a traveler and an amateur naturalist and geographer who studied the plants, animals, people, politics and industries of the regions where she lived" (Cleghorn and Ellis 113). According to Margaret Miller, "She is contemplating the nature of her attachment to her indefinable emotion that is invested in the poem" (77). She feels herself in the place on the map and describes her struggle to locate herself in the world. As a woman who struggles persistently against physical and emotional liabilities to achieve a complete life with all its imperfections.

Though the map is an inanimate object the poet makes it an animate by her personification of land and sea. It exemplifies her mastery of organic form. It reveals her uniqueness of vision, her way of experiencing the world and of expressing that experience. The question whether empirical truth or imaginative truth is more valuable in humankind's efforts to chart the world around it is unanswerable.

The Imaginary Iceberg is an introspective work of art painfully handled by Bishop to depict man's inner struggle between fantasy and reality. Its white peaks have wits that "sare with the sun" while lying uneasily on the "shifting stage". The inwardness of the iceberg is both its fascination and danger. She uses the word "perpetually" in combination with "grave," - a play on words alluding to the perpetual care in maintaining the grounds of a cemetery. There is also another possible pun with her use of the word "grave" in combination with "jewelry" since the term grave also denotes the jeweler's process of engraving precious metals.

This iceberg cuts its facets from within.
Like jewelry from a grave
it saves itself perpetually and adorns. (Bishop 4)

In a 1940 letter to Marianne Moor, Bishop reveals that the iceberg metaphor is a symbol of her own struggle in her childhood days. Thomas Travisano in *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* and Robert Dale Parker in *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop* divide her poetic development into three phases: "The Prison", "Travel" and "History" (Cleghorn and Ellis 98). In this

poem, she brilliantly surfaces on her ideas about conceits and abstractions where personal experience is hidden and even absent. She exhibits the binaries of human life like depth and surface, near and far points of view, background and foreground, and external and internal territory of authority.

Bishop describes the iceberg as a “moving plain of snow” and culminates this first stanza with the notion that the awakened and active iceberg “may pasture on your [the world’s] snows?” (Bishop 4). In this way she draws attention to the fact that both the imagination and the world contain snow. This connection not only demonstrates the affinity between the world and the imagination but also the transmutation of the snow from the world into the imagination. Even as a mere child of four or five years old, Bishop is intrigued with the iceberg and the tragedy associated with it. She perceives the power and energy of the iceberg, not for its unyielding, destructive nature but for its latent illimitableness.

Bonnie Costello in her book entitled *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* explains this homogeneous connection in this way, “The ship would become like the snow ‘undissolved upon the water’, part of the ‘floating field’ on which the iceberg ‘pastures’. Experience, that is, would be drawn up onto the plain of imagination, on which the imaginary iceberg is erected and worshiped” (92-93). Bishop culminates the poem with the image of passengers waving from the ship’s deck as it departs. She writes in lines 28-30, “Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off / where waves give in to one another’s waves / and clouds run in a warmer sky”. This picture reveals that we must remain on the ship (in our bodies) despite the limitations of the flesh.

First Death in Nova Scotia describes the death of her young cousin and her first experience of death. Even as a child, Bishop is a keen observer, taking in every aspect of the cold parlor including the old chromo graphs and the stuffed loon. David Kalstone writes “her powerful relationship with visual art serves as a stimulus, a source of liberating emotional grief and shares her terrific childhood experiences of death” (220). The description of the lifeless loon as ‘cold and caressable’ effectively conveys the child’s confusion when confronted by death. As Catherine Cunicella says that “Bishop’s poems often undo the ties among gender, sexuality, and body” (57). This is clearly stated in the following lines:

His breast was deep and white
cold and caressable;
his eyes were red glass,
much to be desired. (Bishop 121)

In this poem, a male loon has a “caressable” breast and a doll- like little Arthur clutches a lily. It expresses the nature of her relationship with her mother. It pictures a tableau in which Gertrude initiates her daughter into the rituals around death. Her mother is trying to teach how to say good bye to dead ones while yet the life has to go on with positive thoughts.

“Come”, said my mother
“Come and say good- bye
to your little cousin Arthur” (Bishop 122)

The child tries to come up with a happy, fairytale ending to this tragic happening by imagining that the royal figures ‘invited Arthur to be / the smallest page at court’ (Bishop 122). However, she sadly concludes that her lifeless cousin, trapped in the embrace of death and clutching his ‘tiny lily’ will be unable to travel ‘roads deep in snow’. It is the child’s perspective on death which makes this poem both interesting and poignant.

In the poem *Florida*, Bishop deals with two basic contrasting notions that Nature and art are oddly interwoven. She talks only to birds and animals. It is written in a depressed state of mind because she has no intimate friends and relatives of her age. She simply pours her emotion and grievances by talking to living creatures in nature that surround her. She is well-versed in anthropomorphizing humans with animals in words such as ‘birds hysterical’, ‘tanagers embarrassed’ and ‘turtles helpless and mild’. She encloses a brochure gift to Moore advertising Ross Allen’s alligator wrestling skill and his ability. Her letters to Moore predict the ambivalent description of *Florida* makes use of pelicans, the turpentine camps and specimens from a flower show (Miller 114). She intellectually uses the colors of black and white as metaphors to life and death.

Cold white, not bright, the moonlight is coarse-meshed,
and the careless, corrupt state is all black specks
too far apart, and ugly whites; the poorest. (Bishop 25)

Bishop interweaves a paradoxical mixture of animated and beautiful creatures especially birds. By her artistic description of the entire coastline of Florida, she gives a clear view from seeing each and every animal, flower and swamp to readers. At the same time, she does not fail to tell the decaying condition of Florida because of war and modernization as found in the below mentioned lines:

Enormous turtles, helpless and mild,
die and leave their barnacled shells on the beaches,
and their large white skulls with round eye-sockets. (Bishop 24)

Bishop ends up the poem with five distant voices that threaten human life as well as nature. It includes “friendliness, love, mating, war and a warning” (Bishop 25). She warns that the futuristic world will be filled with selfish love, blood and war and scientific mating of animals in the name of hybridization and modernization. In *The Shampoo*, Bishop’s childhood motif is introduced as the eroticized maternal love. Basically she does not feel the love of motherly touch and care, so she gets the care and love from her close friend Lota de Macedo Soares. *The Shampoo* was written during the initial days of Bishop residing in Brazil. The original title of the poem was *Grey Hair* (Goldenshon 135). In 1951, the forty-year-old poet went on a world cruise. As she suffered an allergic reaction to cashew fruits at the first stop of her trip, i.e. the Santos harbor in Brazil, the poet was forced to stay in the country to recover and cancel the remaining voyage. This stay would eventually be prolonged for another eighteen years. One of the great factors that persuaded her to move to Brazil was the architect Lota de Macedo Soares, whom she knew while living in New York. Meeting again, the two women fell in love with each other and eventually became a couple. (Travisano 134-5)

In *The Shampoo*, Elizabeth Bishop addresses her lesbian partner Lota, whose great black tresses have begun to bear the signs of grey ageing. Her tone is tender and her language is contemplative. She marvels at the marks of age with a sigh, not a scowl. She infuses the poem with imagery of lichens and Astros. She observes the marks of ageing and then tries to expose an emotional current that runs deeper than its transient, physical counterpart. It serves as vehicle for a subtle and sentimental declaration of love to her best friend, Lota. She boldly “registers the culture, politics, people and language of her newly adopted country New York”. (Cleghorn and Ellis 123)

In the first stanza, Bishop likens the grey hairs of her partner to marine lichens—insinuating their way through the threads of her hair and spreading forth in “grey, concentric shocks”. It juxtaposes the growth of grey in a dear friend’s hair with the growth of lichens on the rocks. The grey hairs are termed oxymoronically to be “still explosions.”

The still explosions on the rocks,
the lichens, grow

by spreading, gray, concentric shocks. (Bishop 66)

Unlike traditional love poetry, age and its manifestation in a person's white hair are not ignored but celebrated by becoming the poem's center of focus. Thus, the white hair is metaphorically turned into "shooting stars", a bearer of hope for future love. The contrast between black and white introduces duality and it characterizes their lesbian relationship. *The use of alliterations such as "precipitate and pragmatically" or "so soon so straight" eventually helps to form a certain sense of belonging and stability into this oppositional world by establishing paired units:*

666 *Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
Battered and shiny like the moon.* (Bishop 66)

The first two stanzas elevate the lovers into a cosmic and metaphysical state of love. At the end of the poem, the passion roots itself in a domestic and earthly way. *The closeness of these two persons describes her lover's hair in great detail. Using the confident vocative "come" makes a direct appeal to the lover by reaffirming the presence of the lover and the bond of the couple.*

The Man-Moth was first published in Bishop's first collection of poems *North and South*. She demonstrates her horrible struggles, anxieties and yearnings in the defeated superhero that is persistent and philosophical. Though he is an imaginary creature, she uses this crazy idea of a man and a moth merged together to talk about human behavior in a way that is both honest and entertaining. He is brave, determined and has a unique perspective on the world that allows him to handle even the most difficult and frightening things with ease and grace. He is also quite willing to share his wisdom with us if we are willing to pay attention. Most importantly, the Man-Moth never gives up on his dreams.

He believes the moon is a hole in the sky and he is trying to get up to see what is on the other side. He is nervous and afraid but he paints a dramatic picture as he scales up the buildings. He does odd things like insisting on sitting backward and never taking his hands out of his pockets, seeming very alien even though this is his home. The good news is that he does not seem to mind if you shine a flashlight in his eyes. The meaning of all of these things depends on how we interpret what is going on.

Paton argues that for Bishop, "to rethink the animal is to rethink the human. Rethinking the potential of the animal means rethinking mindedness and physicality,

domination and ethics, otherness and identity” (*Beppo* 197). By describing this human – animal hybrid, Bishop brings to light the hidden or repressed aspects of human nature. She seeks to blur or obfuscate nature as an object of scientific knowledge in realist terms. Many of her representations of encounters with animals tell the limitations of human vision toward nature.

The Weed, a surrealistic poem about the heartbreaking effects of love from Bishop’s first collection *North & South* shows a person’s physical and mental joining with nature that is aberrant. She brilliantly teaches the natural cycle of life and death in human life. As an orphan, she keenly observes every living creatures and plants that surround her and learns the cycle of life and death from nature. She personifies nature as her mother which provides the knowledge of death as part of life that happens to everyone and everything that is living. Eventually everything comes to an end, but changes happen and life goes on. After we die, our last thoughts and activities can continue to have an impact on the world.

A loss of life prefaces the action in these lines “I dreamed that dead, and mediating, / I lay upon a grave, or bed,/ (Bishop 15). The variables presented by her can be viewed as disorienting which allows the reader to adjust the “I” in the poem to a dream-like state. Without a beating heart, without passions and emotions, the speaker is able to align with nature. The lines that follow show new life growing which wakes the speaker from “desperate sleep”.

In the cold heart, its final thought
stood frozen, drawn immense and clear,
stiff and idles as I was there;
and we remained unchanged together
for a year, a minute, an hour. (Bishop 15)

The awareness of a “slight young weed” emerging from her chest symbolizes how life thrives out of her death. According to the poem’s speaker these things happen in darkness so that the experience is felt rather than seen. It shows that life does not come from the sun but rather comes solely from the death of another living entity. A plant begins to grow out of the corpse. Old life is replaced by the new. From the falling of one comes the success of another. The plant grows out of her heart, the symbol for love, almost as if to show that through love, life is born. In describing the weed’s growth, she positions the reader face-to-face with it:

The stem grew thick. The nervous roots
reached to each side; the graceful head
changed it’s position mysteriously,
since there was neither sun nor moon

to catch its young attention. (Bishop 16)

The poet uses the 'weed' as a metaphor for a growth of the heart and implies that the heart can nurture something unnatural in the dark. She also indicates a permanent relationship between the heart and earth: "The rooted heart began to change / (not beat)..." (Bishop 16). The metaphor becomes more complex when the speaker's physical heart bursts and releases water that threatens to uproot the 'weed'. The presence of water represents a baptism or rebirth which clings to the "leaves" and drips onto the speaker's 'face'. A revelation is contained in the small spheres of liquid as revealed by the presence of 'light':

... each drop contained a light,
a small, illuminated scene;
the weed-deflected stream was made
itself of racing images. (Bishop 16)

Bishop's heavy use of punctuation, specific words and descriptors allows the poem its precise rendition of an imagined, metaphorical experience that is distressing: "The pain of division is acutely present in some of Bishop's earliest poems..." (Rich 128). The end of the poem seems to sum up the main idea well. The weed says that "I grow, but to divide your heart again" (Bishop 16). This shows that the weed's only goal is to grow and break up her heart more. The weed continues to grow, and life goes on without people. Life is not everlasting and our impact on the world is not lasting. The world moves on after we die, and continues to change. *Love Lies Sleeping* presents a surreal view of New York City. The first eleven stanzas of the poem depict the materialistic world of city people. As soon as the speaker wakes up, she describes the emerging sunlight with immense beauty by personifying it as a person who yawns and stretches himself toward the skies. The city becomes even more surreal as Bishop describes the city wavering:

Where it has slowly grown
in skies of water-glass
from fused beads of iron and copper crystals,
the little chemical "garden" in a jar
trembles and stands again,
pale blue, blue-green, and brick. (Bishop 13)

Bishop brilliantly highlights the change of color in the sky due to the rising sun in the city. She compares it to a chemical process by which it reflects various shades like pale blue, blue – green and brick and it looks like a "the little chemical "garden" in a jar". In the next stanza, Bishop wants to reveal something threatening

in the city through the loud “Boom!” that disrupts the sparrows’ play (Bishop 13). Even the sleeping city workers feel a jolt of fear as the hair on the back of their necks rise instinctually as they slumber. The sounds of the poem remain just as disorienting when she describes the “day-springs of the morning strike/from stony walls and halls and iron beds, /scattered or grouped cascades,/ alarms for the expected/” (Bishop 13).

The city dwellers are termed as sinister queer cupids because they fail to share their love with the beloved ones because of their materialistic job. From sunrise to sunset, they work like a machine. It is a description of a victim of love whose head is hanging over the side of a bed; the speaker seems to empathize with this figure. This figure ravages by love in the city which is helpless as he views New York as “inverted and distorted”. Bishop notes that she wants her poetry to show “the mind thinking” (Millier 77), and the final lines of the poem reveal the speaker pondering over this inverted view of the city. She reveals the “movement of the mind” through her purposeful line breaks and diction. The rhythm conveys the disordered inversion that lies beneath the surface of the city.

Bishop stresses the importance of the solitary individual voice in the above mentioned poems. She is marked by wit, energy, courage, and dedication. Her poetic world is the real world in which she draws with meticulous detail. She makes a rebellion against tradition and social conventions. In place of orthodox religious values, she looks for value and guidance in intense private experience through the eyes of nature. Nature often provides this intense experience and acts as a great teacher and moral guide to Bishop. It has been said that Bishop’s practice of poetry follows Wordsworth’s advice that poetry should embody controlled passion. She highlights her own psyche with a more sustained travel to scenes of childhood, memory and desire. This study concludes with a portrayal of Bishop’s poetic mind that deals with the day-to-day issues such as modernity, spirituality, a sense of place, and identity which is explored through her treatment and presentation of nature.

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