

Elizabeth Bishop's Timeless Influence

Maham Michelle Gill

maham.michelle@rwu.edu.pk

Department of English, Rawalpindi Women University, Satellite Town, Rawalpindi

Shaheena Ayub Bhatti

Department of English, Foundation University, Rawalpindi Campus

Corresponding Author: * Maham Michelle Gill maham.michelle@rwu.edu.pk

Received: 16-08-2025

Revised: 21-09-2025

Accepted: 26-10-2025

Published: 19-11-2025

ABSTRACT

This paper closely examines Elizabeth Bishop's poems, utilizing the First Moment of Beauty by Immanuel Kant as a framework for analysis. A detailed textual analysis, which covers Bishop's poetic style as well as the thematic content, is carried out in this paper. The paper explores Bishop's profound use of evocative imagery as well as her eloquent language to transmit universal truths regarding human experiences. Thus, solidifying the relevance of Bishop's approach to contemporary poetry which involves exploring personal narratives against a backdrop of broader existential themes. Though this paper exposes the essence of the things Bishop is good at, it does not leave behind the continuation of the in-depth analysis of how she influences literary studies and social dynamics.

Key words: Elizabeth Bishop, Immanuel Kant, Contemporary poetry, American poetry.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a medium of artistic expression, and poetry specifically has fascinated even those who are not interested in literature, per se. It leads us into worlds of imagination, exploration, emotion, and contemplation. It is apparent that analyzing poetry is a singular feat, and one that requires a culmination of style and substance. The appreciation and understanding of poetry are more than the mere sum of its words. In order to unravel the perplexity inherent in poetry, this paper utilizes the First Moment of Beauty presented by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*. Choosing this aesthetic theory enables us to study the form, content, reception, universality, and novelty, among other things when studying a poem in isolation. In order to analyse selected poetry from the Kantian lens.

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop has been the subject of critical and popular acclaim for several decades. She has been successful in earning a place among the most important American poets of the 20th century due to her unique style, characterized by precise descriptions, vivid imagery, and unwavering focus on the natural world. Bishop's first collection of poems, *North & South*, was published in 1946 and garnered critical attention right away. She was praised by many critics for her precise description and her ability to capture the essence of everyday objects and experiences. However, some also criticized her lack of engagement with contemporary social and political issues. Despite the feedback, Bishop published her collection *Poems: North & South / A Cold Spring* in 1955 which received greater critical acclaim than the first collection.

The essence of poetry lies in its capacity to evoke vivid images. These images come alive in the mind of the reader which will be analyzed in this paper. "Quality" according to the Kantian Four Moments of Beauty involves the skillful use of imagery, figurative language, and descriptive elements in a poem to evoke emotions and sensations. Integrating sensory details heightens the sensory engagement for the reader. Vivid descriptions of texture, color, sound, taste, and smell facilitate readers' full immersion in the

world of the poem. Such descriptions breathe life into the poem, stirring feelings and arousing associations in the reader's consciousness. A poem's appeal transcends physical sensations and connects with readers emotionally. It connects with deeper emotional layers. Poets employ meticulous language and sensory details to elicit feelings and forge deep connections with their audience. Thus, a poetic work can generate an emotional response in the reader encompassing diverse sentiments like grief, joy, nostalgia, and emotional identification.

In this work, a systematic textual analysis of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is employed as method using devices and techniques like imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and narrative structure to discover the themes. By conducting a comparative analysis, this study concentrates on the stylistic features and the core content in Bishop's poems, for example-"Sestina," "Love Lies Sleeping," "Letter to NY," "Lullaby for the Cat," "Sleeping on the Ceiling," "Anaphora," and "The Shampoo." These poems are the primary sources for a collection of data, which is explored meticulously in an attempt to reveal as many of the emotions, themes, as well as depth features in Bishop's poems as possible. This approach combines close reading, and comparative analysis among the poems from the collection and placing them within their historical context to provide deeper insights into Bishop's creative process, her private life, and the impact of her work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One unspoken premise of writing beautiful poetry is having a beautiful setting to be inspired by. After spending a long time in Brazil, Bishop witnessed the Northern Spring for the first time since 1952, and was inspired - marveling at "the sea of lilacs". Infatuated with nature, she completed more poems in a season than "she had in a decade". She wished that she "could keep on like [that] forever" (Bishop). One spring Bishop expressed her gratitude to Rich for sharing with Bishop her newly published essay *Diving into the Wreck*. In the same letter Bishop commented on Rich's 1972 essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, published in Harvard's literary journal 'Harvard Advocate' on "Feminine Sensibility". In this Rich wrote about women writers urging them to unite "in refusal of self-destructiveness of male dominated society", and "to see — and therefore live — afresh". She also wrote about Bishop, stating directly "Much of woman's poetry has been in the nature of the blue's song: a cry of pain, of victimization, or a lyric of seduction." Rich continued "Today, much poetry by women — and prose for that matter — is charged with anger", applauding the development that "we need to go through that anger". She refers to Jane Austen and Shakespeare noting the "detachment" and "objectivity" in their works, and makes the reader realize that such coolness in writing is not for their times since it would "betray" their "own reality". It was time for women to "stop being haunted" by "internalized fears of being and saying themselves". Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth Bishop, while agreeing completely with the aforementioned, made it a point that their poetry stayed a safe distance away from being confessional, and hence bordered on being polemical. They both shared a reluctance to join the "School of Anguish" as Bishop lamented, and both were determined to keep their private lives private. Contemporary poetry, on the other hand, delves deep into the details of a poet's intimate lives, and feels pride in being vulnerable. The lack of objectivity in selected poetry by Rupi Kaur hints at the lack of her ability to find beauty in her environment and her life. There were, in Bishop's time as well, writers she knew who "drink worse than [I do], at least badly and all the time, and don't seem to have any regrets or shame — just write poems about it". A decade later Charles Bukowski would do the exact same as Bishop noticed. According to Bishop, the principle of confessional poetry is "the idea that we live in a horrible and terrifying world, and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world" - Interview with Time.

Engaging Imagery and Language

Elizabeth Bishop writes very personal poems about her loneliness, and about the impact of the emotionally repressed childhood she had. The idea of not having a place to call home, and a feeling of

dislocation is repeated in a number of poems. The traumatic events of her childhood had had a very profound, and arguably quite negative impact on her psyche and on her adult life. Bishop's style of writing is particularly impressive as she adopts an archaic Italian form of poetry called the Sestina. The Sestina has strict rules of having 39 lines and six stanzas of six lines each, and a final stanza of three lines with repetition of the final word of each line in a certain order. Exploring this aspect of Bishop's poetry establishes her as a brilliant craftsperson who has mystery of her language. Her choice of this very restrictive format is deliberate and therefore designed to reflect the restrictive emotional atmosphere of her childhood. For example, in the poem "Sestina" the repetition of the reference to rain, the poet uses pathetic fallacy or the weather or the season to create atmosphere and mood. A key element of this poem is repetition as is evident by the reference to rain and grandmother and the little stove, and the tears - particularly the tears which are the most important of the six words that are repeated with children. The poem is also full of powerful symbols and metaphors. Most of the poems by Bishop are autobiographical and inward looking, she is an introspective poet. Another element that runs consistently throughout her work is the narrative. The beating of the rain on the roof captures melancholy and conveys a depressed and unhappy atmosphere of the house. The use of the word beat is symbolic of the fact that sadness cannot be ignored.

The poem "Love Lies Sleeping" by Elizabeth Bishop has depth of idea and is profound in its exploration of "the little chemical garden in a jar/ [that] trembles and stands again, / pale blue, blue-green, and brick." (23-25). The poem is rife with imagery of nature, and has hints of Bishop's stay in New York and Brazil. Readers feel a sense of wonder and contemplation which is further strengthened by the use of words like "neon shapes/ that float and swell and glare" (7-8) and "reaching up so languidly up/ into a weak white sky" (17-18) and thus create a dreamy atmosphere. The poem is specific to the narrator's experience based on her observations, but there is a touch of universality in the themes of perception vs reality and in the juxtaposition of the mundane and the extraordinary, as apparent in the following lines "The cloud of smoke moves off./ A shirt is taken of a threadlike clothes-line." (33-34). The language used in the poem is rich and paints vivid pictures with descriptions like "The sparrows hurriedly begin their play." (25) and "From the window I see/ An immense city, carefully revealed, / made delicate by over-workmanship, / detail upon detail, / cornice upon facade, / reaching up so languidly up into/ a weak white sky, it seems to waver there." (12-18).

Another famous poem "Letter to NY" by Elizabeth Bishop, has engaging imagery, and this poem cannot be understood without knowing about Louise Crane "Bishop's companion in later years. Louise Crane was a prominent American philanthropist. Crane was a friend to some of New York's leading literary figures, including Tennessee Williams and Marianne Moore." The pair had spent a brief time together living in Key West Florida, which Bishop absolutely loved as she later told an interviewer, "I liked living there. The light and blaze of colours made a good impression on me, and I loved the swimming." Bishop focused intently on her work while on the island, and was described by Louise Crane as "a magnet for all odd people, animals, and incidents" The poem "Letter to NY" is Bishop's contemplation about the days and ways of her then partner Louise Crane. In this poem the poet uses the literary device apostrophe which is when the speaker addresses an absent person. The poem employs imagery like "a moral owl" (8) for the car's speedometer glaring as if keeping a check on where and how far to go, "queer" and "green" trees (9). After line eleven "suddenly you're in a different place" (10) since the poem employs a different tone altogether, and focuses less on the imagery and more on exploring deeper ideas, but again shifts back to vivid imagery like "brownstone house" (17), "gray sidewalk", "watered street" (18), and a "glistening field of wheat" (20).

It is worth noting that in every published and printed version of the poem the word 'goes' in the line "taking cabs in the middle of the night/ driving as if to save your soul/ where the road gose round and round the park" (5-7) is misspelt as "gose". One of the reasons for this choice of word in stanza two, line

three can be because the word “gose” is the name for a warm fermented beer that uses half malted wheat, and this reference to gose ends not just in the second stanza, but reappears in the last stanza as well “like a glistening field of wheat. / –Wheat, not oats, dear.” (20-21). In fact, a large variety of the pale ale beers are made from malted oats and can very well be a snippet of a conversation in which Bishop is being corrected by a loved one (Louise Crane), in distinguishing the different kinds of beers. It seems odd that Bishop would not know her beers, but then again, she was an alcoholic and, in decadence one does not care whether it is fermented wheat or fermented oats that bring forth oblivion. This instance in the poem is an example of Bishop’s craftsmanship and how she masterfully blends memories in her poems.

The underlying meaning in the poem “Song for the Rainy Season” can be understood through Bishop’s time spent with Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares. Being Bishop’s partner for over fifteen years, the two spent a wonderful time together in Petropolis. Soares is “remembered as the landscape architect and designer of what she had hoped would be Rio de Janeiro’s Central Park”, which was later called “Flamengo Park” (Abrahams). It was her influence that propelled Bishop to contemplate how architecture like nature can be both pleasing and secure. The writing space which Soares built for Bishop is situated beneath a rock and near waterfalls which served as an inspiration for writing “Song for the Rainy Season”.

The poem has many literary devices such as alliteration in “Hidden, oh hidden” (1), “blood black bromelias” (6-7), “owls, and the lint” (8), “shrilling for love” (29), etc. the repetition of vowel sounds which creates a rhythmic effect, for example “rain-, rainbow-ridden” (5), “vapor climbs up the thick growth” (15-16), “effortlessly turns back” (17), “holds them both” (18), “rejoice? For a later era will differ” (45-46), etc. The themes explored in the poems are predominantly related to nature and its ability to provide shelter as well as beauty.

Bishop’s poem “Lullaby for the Cat” is one of several poems about animal characters like “The Fish”, “Roosters”, “Armadillo”, “Giant Snail”, “Giant Toad” and “The Moose”. These poems, which on the surface and from the title appear to be an exploration of the respective animals, for an accomplished writer like Bishop, are not merely about the animals and their characteristics. In fact, they are about human nature, the nature of love, of loss, industrialization, the brutality of mankind, and many more profound ideas. Exploring these themes in Bishop’s poems is possible only through the use of literary devices, such as figurative language, sound and sight imagery, metaphors, etc. The poem “Lullaby for the Cat” is however, slightly different from the rest in this series, mainly because the titular character is situated in a domestic setting and not the wild outdoors. Another reason why this poem is different from the rest of Bishop’s poems is because “Lullaby for the Cat” provides a sense of emotional comfort and reassurance, and offers respite from the intellectual stimulation present in most of her poetry. The poem begins in a soothing tone, much like the indoors where the narrator is seated with her cat. The second line “Close your great big eyes” (2) highlights the importance of rest, implying a feeling of security and ease. The narrator addresses the cat as “Darling Minnow” (5) suggesting a strong connection with and a wish for Minnow’s happiness and peace. Moreover, the lullaby evokes a sense of tenderness, reassurance, and comfort. The intention of the poet seems to be to create a calming and comforting atmosphere, and the effect is achieved through the use of gentle terminology such as “Minnow, go to sleep and dream” (1), “Joy and Love will both be yours/...Happy days are coming soon–/ Sleeping, and let them come...” (9-12), through reassuring promises “Just cooperate,/ Not a kitten shall be drowned” (6-7), and a soothing rhyme scheme of ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, which lends musicality and contributes to the lullaby like quality of the poem.

The poem “Sleeping on the Ceiling” is rich in symbolism, for example, in the verse “the Jardin des Plantes has locked its gates.” (7) the narrator feels confined in her current space due to the barriers and restrictions which prevent her from reaching out and living profoundly. Another significant symbol is found in the line “Those photographs are animals.” (8) because the word “photographs” which refers to

still life and a moment caught in time, is in stark contrast to the word “animals” which brings to mind the vivid image of life unbound.

The poem “Anaphora” has similar imagery and starts by depicting the beginning of every morning including the different noises and images that go along with daybreak, for example, “birds”, “bells”, and “whistles from a factory” (2-3), all of which symbolise the beginning of another day for all of nature, for children going to school, and for all the workers who propel the nation forward. The visual representation of skies with a golden hue in the lines “such white gold skies our eyes/ first open on, such brilliant walls” (4-5) and walls that are dazzling elicit an emotion of astonishment and charm.

In “The Shampoo,” Bishop’s tone is delicate and her language pondering. She addresses her partner Lota whose long black tresses are beginning to show signs of grey, in the lines “The shooting stars in your black hair/ in bright formation/ are flocking where, / so straight so soon? (13-16). In this affectionate poem Bishop wonders about the passing of life, and the loss of vitality, but in doing so, does not love her partner any less, but finds even more tenderness brewing in herself. Her tone is tender and her language contemplative, as in the lines “And since the heavens will attend/ as long on us, / you’ve been, dear friend, / precipitate and pragmatical;” (7-10). Bishop mixes the sonnet with symbolism of lichens and the moon, first to notice the signs of maturing in “The still explosions on the rocks, / the lichens, grow/ by spreading, gray, concentric shocks.” (1-3) then, at that point, to uncover a profound current that runs further than its transient, physical counterpart in the lines “They have arranged/ to meet the rings around the moon, although/ within our memories, they have not changed.” (4-6). “The Shampoo” serves as a vehicle for an unobtrusive and nostalgic statement of affection, which Bishop declares even against the visible signs of ageing. In the main refrain, Bishop compares the silver hairs of her partner to marine lichens - implying their direction through the strings of her hair and spreading forward in “gray, concentric shocks.” (The strands of dark that uncover themselves are “shocks” both because they are tufts of variety which have always been there but have gone unnoticed up until this point, and their presence and the implications are shocking.) In the first stanza of the poem, the silver hair is named ironically to be “still explosions” (1). This is to mention that they develop unobtrusively, indistinctly as blossoms do - until their development is seen, so, all in all the response of the spectator is a blast of feeling. In line 5, Bishop uses the moon, as a metaphor for Lota’s face, to support the idea of a silent maturation. The “rings around the moon” (5) are as a matter of fact the lines and kinks that have started to show themselves upon her maturing look.

Similar to how lichens spread, changes in the moon’s waxing and waning cannot be fully observed in their movement and can only be observed after the full change has occurred. The following stanza from “The Shampoo” refers to the celestial realm. It highlights their lasting presence as opposed to the fleeting nature of the human condition. The comparison between nature, the heavens, and Bishop’s lover is an attempt to show that Lota, her partner, was not impulsive; she was practical and pragmatic. She had none of the hurrying and hurried characteristics of men, but had the calm stoicism noticeable in the natural world.

“They have arranged
to meet the rings around the moon, although
within our memories, they have not changed.
And since the heavens will attend
as long on us,
you’ve been, dear friend,
precipitate and pragmatical;

and look what happens. For Time is
nothing if not amenable.” (4-12).

The last lines of the stanza establish the symbol of celestial bodies within the lover’s jet-black hair. Those stars are depicted as assembling in a luminous arrangement. These photographs are reflective of the magnificence and evanescent quality of time. Furthermore, the “big tin basin” in which the poet desires to wash her lover’s hair is worn out because it is “battered and shiny” (17), but still since it concerns her lover, the poet does not see any fault in the basin being worn out, she makes a beautiful comparison to “the moon” (18). The visual representation emphasizes the concept of transience. Like the moon itself grows and shrinks in a recurring fashion, it highlights the temporary quality of living. The poet utilizes powerful visual representation and provocative words to evoke a perception of profoundness and introspection. The contrast of natural events, human connections, and heavenly bodies forms a multi-dimensional investigation of the flow of time. Additionally, it underscores the transient quality within human existence.

Through Bishop's blending of personal stories and the reflection of the human condition, Bishop continues to serve as a compass for poets who see in her life the intricacies and beauty of their writing, thus ensuring her eternal validity in the unceasingly evolving landscape of modern poetry.

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