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Writing Sample

M.A. Written Communication

### Elizabeth Bishop's Immersion into Knowledge

Elizabeth Bishop mostly grew up in Nova Scotia, and also lived in cities such as Key West, Boston, and Rio de Janeiro. All of these cities lie on the coast, the dividing line between the shore and the sea. Bishop has said, "I have always felt I couldn't *possibly* live very far inland, away from the ocean; and I *have* always lived near it, frequently in sight of it" (qtd. in [Ford] 239). For Bishop, the ever-present sight of the ocean is visible in much of her poetry; she uses the word "sea" over sixty times in her poems (Egan 17).

Bishop's sea represents an absolute form of beauty and can enable the speaker "to see into the life of things" (Egan 17). Roger Gilbert suggests that the sea in Bishop's poetry acts "as a medium of pure knowing wholly distinct from the compromised, constructed world above" (144). However, I believe Bishop uses the sea to represent pure knowing itself, instead of acting as a medium between the known and unknown. She uses the ocean as metaphor for knowledge. Not only does the sea symbolize knowledge, but also the human desire to discover the unknown. People see the ocean as an unknown realm that holds many mysteries. Immersion into knowledge, or into the sea, can be frightening; mainly due to fear of the unknown. Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses," "Sandpiper," "Seascape," and "The End of March," all use the sea as metaphor for an ever-changing knowledge, while stressing the importance of perspective in the quest for the unfamiliar.

"At the Fishhouses" begins on land and proceeds in a downward motion toward the water. The speaker describes her familiar surroundings at the poem's opening:

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. (64)

She uses her sight and even her sense of smell to describe the setting. This land setting comforts the speaker because of its familiarity to her. The beauty on the surface contrasts greatly with her view of the sea. According to Hugh Egan, Bishop's "distinction between land and sea, between being anchored and afloat, is further blurred and complicated" (55). The surface of the water captivates the speaker:

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 [. . .]. (64)

Bishop describes the sea as "opaque," giving the water a thick, heavy feeling. Here, the sea embodies the unknown or the unseen. However, what the speaker sees right in front of her, the rocks and the masts of ships, have "an apparent translucence." She can acknowledge the objects for what they are; she has knowledge about them because of their familiarity to her. The visible

objects have translucence because the speaker has the ability to see beyond everyday objects to find the truth. The ocean, as well as the knowledge it contains, is unfamiliar to her. The opaque, or unclear, water relates to the speaker's lack of understanding the unknown.

Throughout the poem, Bishop uses iridescence to capture what the speaker truly knows for certain. Bishop writes,

The big fish tubs are completely lined  
with layers of beautiful herring scales  
[.....]  
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,  
with small iridescent flies crawling on them. (64)

An iridescent object consists of multiple colors seen from different angles in the light; just like how knowledge can vary when seen from different perspectives or situations. Bishop reveals that knowledge can change, instead of remaining in a fixed state. Also, the ocean never stops moving and changing, especially along the shoreline. At the shoreline, the water washes back and forth causing erosion; the water eventually replaces the sand and pushes the land further away. In keeping with Bishop's metaphor, the sea takes the place of the land, just like new knowledge replaces the unknown.

Bishop includes a transitional stanza between the land and the shore. According to Roger Gilbert, the transition is "measured and gradual" (146). Not only does the action of the stanza have a downward trajectory, but so do the words themselves:

Down at the water's edge, at the place  
where they haul up 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. (65)

Bishop “registers the means of descent without evoking an individual act” (Gilbert 147). The speaker is not really walking down this ramp into the water, but the drum like cadence of the word “down” gives the poem more movement. The speaker moves away from what she already knows, down to the unfamiliar. Bishop uses this downward movement to convey a sense of foreboding and negativity. Moving upward would signify more of a positive experience of obtaining knowledge. Bishop suggests that the process of obtaining knowledge may lack positive experiences.

Closer to the water, the speaker describes the sea as “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,” which contradicts how the ocean looks in the first stanza: “silver” and “opaque” (65). This line has a feeling of fluidity because Bishop eliminates commas that she would normally place between the three adjectives (Gilbert 147). The lack of commas also gives the line a stream-of-consciousness feel to it, as if the words rushed into the speaker’s thoughts at a whim. Hugh Egan claims that the “quality that impresses in the first verse paragraph—the sea’s poetic precision and surface—can now be seen as its own protective ‘coat’ against the elements” (56). The colors of the ocean and what lies beneath may mislead the onlooker, which brings a certain mystery to the sea. Thus, “At the Fishhouses” proves that knowledge is mysterious; to discover the mystery one must become completely submerged to the point of understanding.

Even though the speaker believes in “total immersion,” she can not bring herself to fully enter the water. She lets herself become distracted. One distraction, a seal, dives down into the water only to “suddenly emerge / almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug / as if it were

against his better judgment” (65). Roger Gilbert writes, “The seal’s tentative probing of the dangerous world above the water closely mirrors the speaker’s reluctant engagement with the sea, an element she acknowledges to be ‘bearable to no mortal’” (147). I also suggest that the seal playfully invites the speaker into the water after she communicates with him through song. The seal replies in a nonverbal manner: “He stood up in the water and regarded me / steadily, moving his head a little” (65). The seal toys with the idea of immersion and reemergence to further convey how the speaker needs to take the plunge. In a way, the seal understands more than the speaker because his relationship with the ocean involves his whole self. The speaker needs to do the same the same thing to gain insights into the world.

After the distraction with the seal occurs in the poem, the speaker then thinks about the trees behind her. Bishop writes,

[ . . . ] Back, behind us,  
 the dignified tall firs begin.  
 Bluish, associating with their shadows,  
 a million Christmas trees stand  
 waiting for Christmas. (65)

Hugh Egan argues that the reference to Christmas can have two meaning. First, Christmas carries a religious comparison, and also that many of the trees will be cut down during the holiday season. The latter meaning refers to the destruction of the landscape, ruining its “principal beauty” (Egan 58). While I agree with Egan, I also want to propose how the mentioning of Christmas can represent a rebirth, especially for the speaker. Entering the water and finding the truth would definitely symbolize rebirth.

Bishop hypnotically repeats the line “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear” in order to “hint at the speaker’s tormented relation to the sea, betraying a compulsive, almost masochistic drive to enter its deathly space” (Gilbert 148). The speaker contemplates what it would feel like to enter the sea:

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. (66-7)

The speaker can only imagine what the water would feel like with her *hand* submerged. She wants to believe in “total immersion” but has no concept of the feeling. In fact, the speaker “has spent most of the poem in a display of poetic ingenuity that at once invites and evades a direct encounter with the sea” (Egan 57). In other words, Bishop’s speaker can not take the plunge because of familiar distractions, such as the seal seen on a regular basis, and the trees lined up behind her. Again, what she sees represents what she knows. These hesitations make her appear anxious and even afraid of what she can learn.

Bishop uses negative words like “ache” and “burn” to show that the quest for knowledge is challenging, even painful. In Bishop’s poem, the process of accessing knowledge seems painful because of the speaker’s hesitance. The process can include negative experiences, making it more difficult for a person to willingly immerse themselves. Seeing the world from a different perspective can lead to disappointment about the world. Even though the speaker may know the disadvantages of learning the truth, she needs to acquire experience and accept the

world as a part of her. The speaker can not just dip her hand into the water, but her entire body and being to achieve the ultimate truth.

The speaker looks at the ocean, and it “seems suspended / above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones. [...] above the stones and then the world” (65). Gilbert argues that Bishop compares the ocean to knowledge “as if to reinforce its status as a dimension of knowledge detached from and indifferent to all worldly particulars” (Gilbert 148). Instead of being contained and restricted in one place, the sea is suspended above the land. The image of an elevated sea gives the notion that knowledge may be unattainable, out of reach.

Also, Bishop compares the water to fire “that feeds on stones and burns.” Erosion takes place where water meets the shore. The stones “appear to be the last solid reminder of land in water; but they too are being worn away” (Egan 58). Once the speaker learns about the unknown, her present knowledge will wear away. If the ocean represents the unknown knowledge, then I suggest the stones, or land, symbolize what the speaker presently knows. The truth known to her will erode until only the truth remains from her newly acquired knowledge.

Bishop puts her readers “on the threshold between aesthetic and cognitive modes of apprehension, feeling and recording the pull of each, yet unwilling to immerse itself completely in either” (Gilbert 148). In other words, Bishop presents a challenge between water and land or reason and beauty. The speaker vacillates between what she visibly sees, and what she can not see. If the ocean represents cognitive learning, then the ocean literally erodes the beauty, or the visible, to make room for deeper understanding.

Bishop has already mentioned the aching and burning feeling, the colors of the water, and even the taste of the ocean: “If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter, / then briny, then surely burn your tongue” (66). Seeing, touching, and tasting the ocean seem to be not enough; the

senses Bishop uses in the poem show “how inadequate are human antennae to comprehend larger questions of knowledge and existence” (Gilbert 59). Instead of using the senses separately, one must use his or her entire body and mind to gain understanding.

Bishop writes:

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, [...]
   
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since
   
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (66)

Here, another comparison between the ocean and knowledge is made. This time, however, the metaphor shifts to using knowledge to understand the ocean. Even Bishop used this metaphor in her own personal writings. At Lockeport Beach in 1946, she wrote in her notebook:

“Description of the dark, icy, clear water—clear dark glass—slightly bitter (hard to define). My idea of knowledge” (qtd. in [Ford] 254). She utilized her own perspective to compare the two, which obviously appears in “At the Fishhouses.”

The statement “our knowledge is historical” has a double meaning. Knowledge is historical “inasmuch as it occurs in time and is therefore subject to the transience of all temporal things, ‘flowing, and flown’; but it is also knowledge of history, of the lives and events that precede our own and give it meaning” (Gilbert 144). Thus, knowledge changes over time, like perceptions of history. History allows one to learn from the past but also to take aspects from history and apply them to everyday life, in order to avoid similar mistakes. Mark Ford explains that “This knowledge [. . .] is ‘historical’—always in process, and hence always eluding our grasp. There is finally no perspective possible that can quell or control this endless flowing”



(255). Knowledge is always in process, always moving and never stagnant. The ocean is what people “imagine” knowledge to be, which gives it a feeling that knowledge is an illusion.

Another poem by Elizabeth Bishop, “Sandpiper,” uses the same metaphor for knowledge only in a more anxious, determined way. The speaker of “At the Fishhouses” looks at the ocean from afar while the sandpiper runs right alongside the water. With the sandpiper, the reader gets a forward-backward feeling, much like the speaker of “At the Fishhouses” who wants to submerge herself but keeps hesitating. However, the sandpiper playfully runs along the shore “whereby eventual insight or epiphany is at once prepared for and delayed” (Egan 51). The sandpiper runs along the boundary between land and sea, the stage between the known and unknown, once again similar to the speaker in “At the Fishhouses.”

Egan claims that “the sea’s rhythmic wash and retreat act as a magnifying glass for the sandpiper’s manic investigation” (51). However, I propose that the sea’s movement relates more to a mirror for the sandpiper, rather than a magnifying glass. The movements between the water and the sandpiper reflect back on each other, further reinforcing their anxious relationship. They both flee from one another as if afraid to finally meet. Not only does the sandpiper seek knowledge and answers, but the water invites the sandpiper to venture towards the unknown, in the same way the seal behaves in “At the Fishhouses.”

The first line of “Sandpiper” describes the ability to obtain knowledge, but the sandpiper needs to realize this ability. Bishop writes, “The roaring alongside he takes for granted” (131). The ocean roars, making a sound distinctive enough for the sandpiper to realize the close proximity of knowledge; instead he continues running while “attempting to see the universe in a grain of sand” (Egan 51). Knowledge can not fit into a proverbial grain of sand, but in the vastness of an ocean and beyond.

When the water washes up near the sandpiper, he just “runs straight through it, watching his toes. / --Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them” (131). Instead of noticing the water, or the knowledge to be obtained, he concentrates on what he sees and already understands.

Bishop continues:

The world is a mist. And then the world is  
minute and vast and clear. The tide  
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.  
His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,  
looking for something, something, something. (131)

The world around him is a complete blur, except for the grains on which he focuses. The bird is “obsessed” with details (131). Bishop uses this poem to stress that more knowledge and truths lie outside of the known.

Mark Ford explains the “the poem is itself about controlling panic in the face of elemental, indifferent, potentially overwhelming forces” (238). The sandpiper does have some sense of control regarding the strong rush of the ocean on to the shore. His anxiety forces him to continue foraging for details. However, the ocean in front of him looks overwhelming and possibly dangerous. The shoreline seems treacherous, especially from the viewpoint of a small bird. Nonetheless, when knowledge appears so closely, to the point where it practically crashes on top of the bird, it seems difficult to ignore.

From the perspective of the sandpiper, or from one closed off from larger possibilities, to concentrate on the unknown seems difficult. Bishop wants her readers to believe that attaining knowledge comes from looking through a broader scope, and not just focusing on the smaller details. The nature of knowledge requires looking at the bigger picture. The smaller details

continue to add together like grains of sand forming a beach. However, right off the beach lays the ocean or the immense truth, so the sandpiper will have to commit to the rushing sea at some point in order to obtain knowledge.

Another poem, "Seascape," also combines the elements of the sea and perspective in accordance to accessing knowledge. Bishop allows the reader to see two different perspectives in nature: one as a bird and the other as a lighthouse. These two perspectives differ according to how they view nature, or in the poem, heaven. In regards to the two viewpoints, the poem easily shifts in tone, and the poem can be physically divided into two parts. The first part is light and free, while the second half becomes darker and restricted.

According to the speaker, the white herons can fly "as high as they want and as far as they want," leaving the reader with a sense of the birds' independence (40). The speaker describes the birds in relation to light, beautiful images. From the air, they see "tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections", and the view is described as "celestial" or even heavenly (40). From what they see, heaven is beautiful. When the poem shifts to a darker tone, the lighthouse becomes the main focus. The speaker gives a physical description of the lighthouse:

But a skeletal lighthouse standing there  
 in black and white clerical dress,  
 who lives on his nerves, thinks he knows better.  
 He thinks that hell rages below his iron feet,  
 that that is why the shallow water is so warm,  
 and he knows that heaven is not like this. (40)

The "skeletal" lighthouse painted "in black and white clerical dress", makes the reader think about the lighthouse as frightening and strict. Since the lighthouse remains rooted in one place,

he has a different view of heaven than the herons. Bishop writes, “Heaven is not like flying or swimming, / but has something to do with blackness and a strong glare” (40). While the herons have a view of heaven from the sky, the lighthouse has a view from the earth. He can only see his own light or darkness. When night falls, “he will remember something / strongly worded to say on the subject” (40). In other words, he will cast his own light, or give his opinion. He can not fly or swim, or even appreciate heaven from where he stands, but more importantly, he knows the truth. Even though his distance from heaven seems farther away, he has closer ties to reality.

Bishop uses the contrast between light and dark to represent a lack of understanding or knowledge. The birds flying in the sky see everything as light and brightly colored, as if they see the world through a false lens. Their movement relates to the sandpiper’s because they all constantly move and only focus on the details instead of the big picture, like the “bright green leaves” and the “arches of the mangrove roots” (40). These details alone do not blend together to form the knowledge that the lighthouse possesses. The lighthouse remains in one spot in the water, and can only see darkness. However, this darkness ironically allows him to see the truth. “Seascape” contradicts the connotations associated with light and darkness. Usually, light symbolizes something positive, but in “Seascape” it represents unknowing and a sense of blindness. The birds remain blind to knowledge and have no desire to learn the truth, since they believe in what they see. On the other hand, the lighthouse surrounds himself with darkness, but has the ability to see through to the truth.

According to the lighthouse, “hell rages below his iron feet [...] and he knows heaven is not like this.” His knowledge and perspective about heaven comes from his place in nature where the ocean rages underneath him. He “thinks he knows better,” but “he knows that heaven

is not like this” (40). He knows for a fact that heaven is not what it seems. If only the herons had the desire to see the reality, then their knowledge about the world would change.

Five years before Elizabeth Bishop died she published “The End of March,” a poem Mark Ford calls her “final ode to the eastern seaboard” (257). Some critics, such as Mark Ford, claim it as a companion poem to “At the Fishhouses.” However, I have to disagree since the setting has no similarities with “At the Fishhouses,” nor does it include the same type of movement.

The poem begins with the speaker already on the shore, walking towards a house that remains in her memory. Bishop writes about a “shrunkened” ocean, instead of the “swelling” or “singing” sea from “At the Fishhouses” (Ford 257). The perspective is smaller: “Everything was withdrawn as far as possible, / indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunkened” (179). If an older Bishop uses the speaker as a medium, I suggest that her perspective has changed with age. Either some of the knowledge was lost over the years, or Bishop wants to stress the importance of acquiring more knowledge early in life.

While “The End of March” takes place along the shore, Bishop concentrates more on the beach than the water. Bishop writes,

For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,  
the drab, damp, scattered stones  
were multi-colored,  
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,  
individual shadows, then pulled them in again. (180)

The colors of the stones here relate to the colored quartz that the sandpiper finds on the beach. Ford argues that “the ‘multicolored’ stones dramatise a sense of life as suddenly—if only

briefly—radiant with possibility” (259). As in “Sandpiper” the stones give hope to the speaker, allowing her to see the beauty that the sun illuminates only for a brief moment. Also, Ford claims that “Knowledge here is awareness of the fictive nature of our imaginings” (259). Since the speaker remembers her dream house looking a certain way, she becomes disappointed when she actually sees it. The house has been boarded up. Suddenly, there is a dispute between imagination and reality. Seeing the realism of the boarded up dream house disappoints the speaker.

Walking along the shore, the speaker follows a piece of string down to the water. Ford states a distinct comparison between the speaker and Bishop herself. He writes, “Bishop finds herself led by her tangled kite string to a vivid apprehension of how her creativity emerges form and figures forth the interplay of elements” (259). I disagree with Ford regarding Bishop as the speaker since the poem lacks evidence to support Ford’s claim. Bishop compares the string to “a sodden ghost,” possibly referring to memory or the knowledge the speaker used to possess. The speaker sees the kite string, “But no kite” (179). The process of obtaining knowledge is incomplete since the string just ends; it has no continuation. While Ford presents a decent argument on “The End of March,” he lacks enough proof and evidence to support how the poem relates to “At the Fishhouses.”

Bishop’s ocean poetry reveals a hesitant relationship between the speaker and the sea. The speakers presented in “At the Fishhouses,” “Sandpiper,” and “Seascape” have the ability to use the ocean to “see into the life of things.” The sea holds mystery and confounds those who look upon it. The movement of the sea enhances one’s observation, but can also appear as unsettling or fearful (Egan 47). Elizabeth Bishop’s intention for these poems is to provide her readers with a beautiful metaphor for a difficult, deep subject. Knowledge, or the ultimate truth,

can bring negative aspects of the world into the light. However, Bishop would rather have her readers recognize this reality, than have them never enter the water.

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