

From Pens to Brushes

Everything in this world impact and influence each other upon contact. Whether if it is music, point of view on certain issues, war, art, literature, or even a conversation, it will have an influence on the people involved. An artist is able to portray the image of a sunset, a man with an arm blown off by cannon, or a political cartoon. It is all dependent on who and what the artist is interacting with and what they are exposed to. As Henry David Thoreau said, "We perceive and are affected by changes too subtle to be described." Even if a conversation about the weather occurred, we could react positively or negatively such as whether it will be a sunny day or a rainy day. As Elizabeth Bishop travelled from Key West (Florida), Ouro Prêto (Brazil), to Maine/Boston, her writing and water color paintings were affected by her location.

Majority of Elizabeth Bishop's paintings are done with watercolor, gouache and ink. Other drawing instruments she used were pencils, pastel, and crayons but primary watercolors and gouache. After her mother died and Elizabeth Bishop graduated from Vassar College, she spent in Key West, Florida. She went to Key West on a fishing trip with a friend. Bishop produced "The Fish" and "The Bight" and painted many things such as a church on Olivia Street, Harris School, Key West Armory on White Street, a cemetery with raised graves and decorations, and tombstones while in Key West. Throughout these paintings of buildings and tombstones, there is a common theme of nature within them. All of these paintings have potted plants, bushes, and trees. Three of the above mention paintings include tombstones within them. This is the period of time where Bishop was coping with her mother's (Gertrude Boomer Bishop's) death. Her mother was placed in an asylum which was the last time she saw her mother. The tombstone is a symbol of death or those who have passed away. But even though there are tombstones in the painting, such as "Graveyard with Fenced Graves", the tombstones are covered with grass and tall trees. There are two conflicting images in her paintings, death and Nature. Even though her mother is gone, Bishop is still alive and breathing and that is why she includes the plants and trees.

A famous poem of hers, "The Fish", also show these signs of opposing images. Within this poem, Bishop used many similes and metaphors to describe a tremendous fish she caught. She describe "his brown skin hung in strips/ like ancient wallpaper," "and [the fish was] infected/ with tiny white sea-lice" "[and] the frightening gills, / fresh and crisp with blood". From these few lines, she describes this fish with five big hooks in its lip "if you could call it a lip" with its skin colored with an awful color of old worn-out brown wallpaper, cover with sea-lice, and bleeding from the gills. She personifies the fish as if it was old, wounds, was about to die. In addition, the engine leaked out oil which reflected a rainbow around the engine and she let the fish go. The image of death and life is used as a foil where even the fish might die if it was release, it can try its best to survive and continue on living.

The next location that Elizabeth Bishop lived at was Ouro Prêto, Brazil. Around this time period, she fell in love with Maria Carlota Costellat de Macedo Soares (Lota). The feeling of her paintings changed as they were not imbued with the theme of Nature. In the painting, "Lamp", she illustrated a

lamp on a wooden table. An irregularity with paintings from this period of time apart from the others is not that there are no plants in it but that there are messages within them or that they were painted for someone. For "Lamp", Bishop inscribes a message to Lota which read: "For Lota: / Longer than Alladin's burns, / Love, & many Happy Returns / March 16th 1952 / Elizabeth." Paintings around this period of time such as in 1963 "Meadow with a Rock" and "Cockscombs", they are lively paintings of plants and flowers with bright colors. Both of these paintings are inscribed to Oscar Simon, a Brazilian friend, with the message: "For Oscar, with love, / Elizabeth Bishop". The "Meadow with Rock" depicts a rock cover with moss near the center of the canvas with three tall flowers in front. Everything in this portrait is bright and out in the sun. The atmosphere appears to be lively and peaceful. Similar with the pastel painting, "Cockscombs", it illustrates a glass vase full of cockscombs on a table. The cockscombs are extraordinarily large and are bursting out of the vase. The rich deep red petals contrast to the pale yellow wallpaper in the background and the dark green stems are placed on top of a burnt brown table. Overall, the cockscombs appear at a closer distance and capture the viewer's attention.

During her stay in Brazil, she wrote *Brazil*. In the poem, "Questions of Travel", Elizabeth Bishop transitions from one image to the next. She starts off with waterfalls and crowded streams to clouds spilling over the mountain tops for this scenic background. In the next stanza, she pulls the reader closer to her illustration of "watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres", "the tiniest green hummingbird in the world" or "some inexplicable old stonework, / inexplicable and impenetrable, / at any view". Her ability as an artist influences her poetry as she describes objects while conveying the question of travelling or staying home. The debate is reinforced by the imagery while contrasting to "it would have been a pity / not to have seen the trees along this road" "and never to have had listen to rain / so much like politicians' speeches: two hours of unrelenting oratory". If one were to stay at home, there would not be many things to do beside the daily chores of life and listening to the news or staring out the window. Instead, when travelling, we can experience these breathtaking views of waterfalls with clouds engulfing the tips of mountaintops or witnessing the tiniest hummingbird in the world. Going back to the paintings, picnicking in the meadow and picking cockscombs to bring back to the house would be experiences from travelling.

During the last end of Elizabeth Bishop's life, she was in Boston and Maine. The gouache painting, "Red flowers on Black", portrays the Devil's paintbrush which she created in Maine a year or two before her death. The interesting point of this painting compared to the rest of the paintings that she did in her lifetime is that the background of it is black. The center of the canvas is taken up by the Devil's paintbrush. During this period of time, Lota attempted suicide in 1967 and died in the same year. Having lost the love of her life and moving back to the United States, Elizabeth Bishop must have felt lonely. She had a hard childhood where her mother was kept in an asylum and died without her knowing, living in Worcester where she did not feel comfortable at all, losing Lota and being blamed for it by friends in Brazil, this was a hard period of time for Bishop. Even though she kept writing and teaching, the flower on a black background symbolizes that there were emptiness.

"In the Waiting Room" was published in *Geography III* in 1976. Bishop places herself in the shoes of a young girl accompanying her Aunt Consuelo at the dentist back in Worcester, Massachusetts. She describes the room as she waited. She depicts the *National Geographic*, dated February 1918, with their articles and photographs of volcanoes erupting with lava and ashes flowing down the volcano, of Osa and Martin Johnson suited up to go horseback riding and of a dead man hung on a pole. She also

describes the emotion of being shy of the “black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire”. Throughout the poem, she came to sense that she was herself, that she was Elizabeth, a self-realization. Combining this poem with the painting of “Red flowers on Black”, she was self-reflecting on life and she reflected upon her memories.

Locations did play a role in influencing Elizabeth Bishop’s works as a writer and as an artist. Also her ability in art also influenced her description within her poetry. Her paintings of tombstones in grassy areas coincide with the wounded fish being let free. Her depiction of the places she traveled and visited became objects and setting for her artwork and poetry. At the end of her lifetime, she reminisced of her past and the memories that helped create who she was and what she missed or lost. In life, every little thing can and may influence us in ways that are too subtle for us to know or help us greatly in the path we choose.