



Sestina

by Elizabeth Bishop

Content Synopsis

The poem's setting is the inside of a simple, rural house. An "old grandmother" (2) sits in the kitchen with a small girl, her granddaughter, reading jokes from an "almanac" (5), a compendious book full of astrological and meteorological data that could also include general information and humor. However, there is some pain behind the laughter; the grandmother is "talking to hide her tears" (6). As they engage in the placid domestic activities of a rainy afternoon—having tea, reading, drawing pictures—the house itself, and the objects within it, comes alive. The voices of household objects speak to the child as she sits engaged in the creative act of drawing "another inscrutable house" (29). We hear these voices as they call out to the child: "It was to be, says the Marvel Stove. / I know what I know, says the almanac" (25-6). The short scene that the poem captures is both plainly realistic and charged with the fantastic. Each ordinary object in the small room becomes alive, filling the domestic setting with strange actions and associations. The poem's ending phrase—"another inscrutable house" (37)—refers to both the picture the child is drawing in crayon, and the house she is drawing it in.

Elizabeth Bishop, more than any other mid-20th century poet except perhaps Richard Wilbur, is known for her use of forms and formal structure. However, a mark of Bishop's mastery of

form is how lightly the poem wears it. Though it announces a formal enterprise in its title, "Sestina" is not a difficult or convoluted poem. In fact, it is deliberately simple, perhaps in an effort to reflect the language of the child, using only the present tense and creating a narrative of visual, rather than cerebral, events. The form itself demands the reoccurrence of images, most notably the "tears" that are initially hidden by the grandmother. These hidden tears turn up in the following stanzas in the grandmother's cup of tea, the child's picture, and the almanac's "little moons" (33); they permeate the house, and can be seen everywhere. This vision is present only to the child, however, who is continually "watching" (14). As the poem unfolds, "watching" becomes a kind of imagining, and then a kind of creating. The child sees "the teakettle's small hard tears" (14) and the "clever almanac" (18) which is also seen as a bird that "hovers half open above the child" (20). The first line of the envoi, the last three-line stanza, is a bittersweet combination of the productive process of planting and the stasis of grief: "Time to plant tears, says the almanac" (37).

A central question of "Sestina" is the position of the speaker. Although the poem is predominately in the point-of-view of the child, there are moments, such as the second stanza's "She thinks" when it shifts to the perspective of the grandmother (7). Also, some of the vocabulary—"equinoctial tears"

(7) and “inscrutable house” (39), for example—is decidedly adult. This shifting perspective, which moves between the child, the grandmother, and a narrating voice, gives Bishop a tonal freedom in the poem to speak in many different registers, and to employ both realism and fantasy in the poem.

Historical Context

“Elizabeth Bishop is spectacular in being unspectacular,” wrote the poet Marianne Moore in a review of “North and South,” Bishop’s first book (*Complete Prose* 406). Indeed, Bishop’s poems often are not spectacular, nor do they overwhelm with virtuosic cascades of language. However, today Bishop stands as perhaps the most celebrated mid-century American female poet. Moreover, she stands as the perhaps most relevant figure from that era, having survived the Modern, Formalist, Confessional, and Post-Modern eras with her reputation and admirers intact. During her lifetime, in comparison, esteem for her work was limited to a small number of admirers, her close friend and widely acclaimed poet Robert Lowell among them. Today, Lowell, as well as other then-popular poets like Theodore Roethke, Weldon Kees, and John Berryman lags behind Bishop in anthologies and academic studies; her poems are more widely read than any female author save Emily Dickinson. In a prophetic moment, Lowell, who himself was America’s premier poet at the time, wrote in a letter that Bishop’s language and images seemed to “belong to a later century.” This description has proved correct, as the 20th and 21st centuries have seen an incredible increase in the volume of study on her life and work. “Sestina” appeared in “Questions of Travel,” Bishop’s third collection, published in 1965, a decade after her last book, “Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring,” won the Pulitzer Prize. Its critical success added to her already-established reputation among many prominent poets in America such as Robert Lowell and John Ashbery. However, Bishop never was a tremendously confident

poet, nor a prolific one (her “Complete Poems” run fewer than 300 pages; Lowell’s over 1,000; Ashbery will probably triple that). Her practice of composition, focused as it was on the visual and on landscapes, was influenced less by autobiographical events than by changes in scenery, of which she had many.

Two of Bishop’s most famous poems, “One Art” and “Sestina,” are examples of two of poetry’s most difficult forms, the villanelle, and the sestina, both of which demand a strict adherence to formal set rules. Unlike the villanelle, which relies on enchainment rhymes as well as the repetition of a refrain, the sestina, whose form was codified by French balladeers in the 13th century, relies primarily on repetition of the six end words of the first stanza. Each of these words—in this case, “house,” “grandmother,” “almanac,” “stove,” and “tears” in order of their first appearance—must be used to start a following stanza. Moreover, the last end word becomes the first end word in the following stanza, creating a link, as we see here in the last line of stanzas two and the first line of stanza three: “She cuts some bread and says to the child, // It’s time for tea now; but the child” (12-13). A sestina with six initial lines must have six six-line stanzas, with the end words alternating so that each stanza begins with a different word and no two have the same order. The final three-line stanza, also called an envoi, must contain the six end words in the reverse order of their first appearance, so that the last word of the poem is always the last word of the first line. Like the strange, cozy house that is the setting of the poem, the sestina offers an uncanny, almost claustrophobic space to the reader. When read aloud, the sestina has the power to alert the listener to the subtle connections of repetition, rather than the more familiar connections of rhyme.

Societal Context

Bishop wrote many of the poems in “Questions of Travel” while living in Brazil with Lota Soares,

to whom she dedicated the book. Unlike many of her contemporaries in America, who were actively opposing U.S. foreign policy and the escalating war in Vietnam in their poetry and actions, Bishop separated herself from the tumultuous events in the U.S. (although Brazil had its own political and societal unrest, including an overthrow of the government during her time there). The settings of “Questions of Travel” range in geography, and are arranged in two sections, “Brazil,” and “Elsewhere.” The poem “Sestina” appears, as do a few others set in Nova Scotia, in “Elsewhere,” along with poems set in Maine, Washington, D.C., and Massachusetts. However, the bulk of the collection is clearly situated in the culture and geography of Brazil, where she had established a real home for the first time in her life. There, she kept in regular correspondence with her American friends, especially Robert Lowell and Marianne Moore, but the people and the landscape of her adopted country shaped her writing. As the Brazilian landscape provided her with inspiration, she was also able to write about earlier, biographical landscapes in “Questions of Travel.” As Elizabeth Goldensohn points out in *Elizabeth Bishop: Biography of a Poetry*, the poems of Questions of Travel “reaffirm a spatial orientation over temporal focus” (193).

In an article in “The New Criterion” Gioia speculates that Bishop’s later ascendancy to her current reputation can partially be attributed to the academy’s increased interest in marginalized and displaced voices. Bishop occupied an almost constant status as an outsider, since she was often a stranger to her surroundings, living a peripatetic life from such a young age. Additionally, Bishop’s sexual orientation—she was a lesbian, in a time and place when homosexuality was neither condoned nor understood by the mainstream—has encouraged study of her poems using ideas from gender studies and Queer theory. However, Gioia concludes, these factors are secondary to the poems themselves in making Bishop so popular. Comparing

her to Keats, Gioia writes that Bishop possessed what Keats described as “negative capability,” a term describing the poet’s state of ambiguity and mystery. “She had a native genius for reflecting the rich complexity of experience without reducing it into abstraction or predetermined moral judgment,” writes Gioia, echoing Moore’s description, “She is inclusive by being artfully inconclusive” (8). The form of “Sestina” echoes this feeling of inconclusiveness by allowing only a only certain number of end-words; by limiting what she can say, Bishop is able to speak freely.

Religious Context

Although not an immediately religious poem, “Sestina” does touch on the mystical and magical presences of what might be called spirits. The almanac, in particular, with its omniscience, can be seen as a divine presence: it “hovers” (20), both “birdlike” (19) and perhaps angelic above the two women. As in another Bishop sestina, “A Miracle for Breakfast,” the ordinary, and in both cases domestic objects, are infused with spiritual meaning. The stove, which is a “Little Marvel,” echoes the description of a child but also describes the miraculous, ordinary inventions and rituals within these poems.

Scientific & Technological Context

Bishop was a poet interested in the folk sciences, rather than cutting-edge technological or scientific advances, of her day. She prefers in her poems to dwell on anachronistic versions of science: “Geography III” begins with the misstatement that the earth is “Round, like a ball” (6) instead of elliptical. Furthermore, her preferred engagement with science is one of childhood scholarship, and she returns repeatedly to the young age when we learn the fundamental (and sometimes wrong) facts about our world. The “clever almanac” (18), whose pages include calendars of the moon’s phases, tide tables, and times of dawn and dusk, emblematic

of this knowledge, is a kind of rural schoolbook. The farmer's almanac would also have advice on crops, rainfall patterns, and any number of articles, jokes, and stories to while away long winter nights (or rainy fall days, as in "Sestina"). The almanac's information infuses the scene: it has predicted the "equinoctial tears" (7) of the grandmother; later "the little moons" (33) which illustrate the lunar cycle, fall into the child's drawing.

Biographical Context

Although she maintained that one need not know the biography of a poet in order to appreciate the poem, Bishop's life certainly informs and enlarges the scope of her own poetry, which alludes obliquely, when it does at all, to biographical experiences.

From an early age, Bishop had to deal with loss and displacement. When she was five years old, her mother was committed to a sanitarium in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, after a prolonged period of mental illness. Her father was already gone, having died when she was eight months old, so Bishop was left in the care of her mother's parents, who took her to the Nova Scotia town of Great Village. This age and landscape are described in "Sestina," and in the prose stories "Primer Class" and "In the Village" (*Collected Prose*). Her grandmother had a glass eye, which, Bishop wrote, "made her especially vulnerable and precious to me" (Goldensohn 138). However, Bishop moved from Nova Scotia in 1917 to Worchester, Mass, to live with her father's parents, and then to her aunt's house a year later. At the age of eight, she had lived in four households with four different families; the themes of travel and loss became intertwined at a young age. As author Bonnie Costello notes, Bishop's poetry, despite domestic settings as in "Sestina," illustrates that "a house is no shelter from pain and loss" (199).

In 1930, Bishop enrolled at Vassar, where she majored in English Literature and co-founded

the school's literary magazine, "Con Spirito" and served as the editor of the college yearbook. The most important event of her college life occurred in 1934, however, when she first met the poet Marianne Moore. The friendship between them lasted until Moore's death, and was instrumental in bringing Bishop to New York, where she moved after graduation. Moore wrote an introduction for the first publication Bishop received, a group of poems in the anthology "Trial Balances." Moreover, the two women discussed and criticized each other's work; Bishop was heavily influenced by the interplay between formal structure, rhyme, and rhythm that is a hallmark of Moore's work.

Bishop traveled extensively throughout her life. In the three years following her graduation, she lived mostly in Paris, and took multiple trips throughout Europe, Morocco, and Florida, where she lived briefly in Key West. In 1942, on a trip through Mexico, Cuba, and Haiti, she met Lota de Macedo Soares, a Brazilian woman from a prominent family in Rio de Janeiro. In 1951, the two would begin living together in Brazil. By this time, Bishop was an acclaimed, if not wildly popular poet, having been offered a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947, an appointment as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress in 1949 (similar to the current position of Poet Laureate), and an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1950. However, she continued to have trouble with depression and alcoholism, problems that had not been helped by her lifestyle in New York. Her trip to Brazil was part of an around-the-world tour she hoped might be a welcome break from the pace and anxieties of the city—she later wrote to Lowell "I was miserably lonely there most of the time" (Goldensohn 9). However, upon arrival, Bishop had a violently allergic reaction to a cashew she ate, and was hospitalized for five days. Soares, who Bishop had planned to visit, invited her to extend her stay and recuperate her home, which was a meeting place for many Brazilian

architects and writers. Bishop accepted and ended up staying for over a decade.

Bishop and Soares lived together intermittently in Rio, in Petropolis, and in a 17th century house in Ouro Preto, Brazil. At the beginning, Bishop's life in Brazil had a cathartic effect on her health and poetry; she began to confront her longstanding addiction to alcohol and her depression. As her career flourished, though, their relationship began to deteriorate. The publication of "Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring," which combined her first book with new poems, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1955. "Questions of Travel," her third collection, was also well received, and dealt with familiar themes of travel, displacement, and tourism: "Should we have stayed home and thought of here?" she asks in the title poem (14). However, there were significant strains in her relationship with Soares at this time, who was afflicted by her own problems with depression and anxiety relating to her job as a city planner. Bishop spent less and less time in Brazil, teaching instead at universities in the U.S. and coming back to Brazil intermittently. In September of 1967, while visiting Bishop in New York, Soares overdosed on sleeping pills in an apparent suicide.

After her partner's death, Bishop lived primarily in Boston, teaching at Harvard and writing the poems that would be published in *Geography III*. She continued to travel extensively (a partial list of places includes Yugoslavia, Ecuador, Norway, Sweden, and the Galapagos Islands), and in 1976 received the prestigious Books Abroad/Neustadt Award, the first American and first female recipient. On October 6, 1979, she died at home in Boston.

Andrew Allport

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Discussion Questions

1. The sestina, like many poetic forms, began as an oral form, and its repetitions were intended to keep a listener attentive to the poem. On the page, the end-words may appear more obvious than aloud. Listen to Bishop's "Sestina" and try to keep track of the six end-words. How does the poem emphasize, or de-emphasize them?
2. What are the differences between how the words appear in each stanza? Do they take on additional and/or alternate meanings?
3. How does Bishop manipulate the tone or mood of the poem? What would you describe as the central feeling(s) in "Sestina"?
4. In the poem, Bishop uses only simple, present tense and short, declarative statements. Bishop's language is emphatically plain: Marianne Moore said she was "spectacular in being unspectacular." How does her style here prove this paradox? What is "unspectacular" about the poem?
5. Who is speaking in "Sestina"? What different points of view is the reader given?
6. Why does Bishop choose to animate the "Marvel Stove" and the almanac with speech? What are the stove and book saying, and what purpose does their speech serve?
7. At the beginning of the poem, we learn that the grandmother is "laughing and talking to hide her tears" (6). Is it important that we know why she is crying? How does the poem avoid, or perhaps answer obliquely, this question?
8. Why is the title of the poem simply "Sestina"? Why do you think Bishop chose to call it this, instead of, say, "Fall in Nova Scotia," or "Drawing Lesson"? What sorts of information does the title give us, and what does it leave out?
9. How does the form of the poem affect its content? That is, how do the requirements of the sestina—the six-line stanzas, the repeated end-words—affect the scene and action of the poem?

Essay Ideas

1. “You’d just wish they’d keep some of these things to themselves,” Bishop told *Time* in 1967 for their cover story on Robert Lowell, whose Confessional style included brutal truths about his own troubled life, even excerpts from his wife’s anguished letters. In the ensuing 30 years, poetry, at least in the popular imagination, seems to mean something closer to the free verse confessions of Lowell and Sylvia Plath than Bishop’s formal poem, “One Art.” In what ways does Bishop keep things to herself in this poem? What clues—or even confessions—does she make to the reader?
2. Bishop’s “Armadillo” is a poem in conversation with Robert Lowell’s “Skunk Hour.” The poems are addressed to the other poet, and the vision of the natural world, as it is exposed to humans, is central to both. What fundamental differences are there in the poets’ styles? How do the poems speak to these differences?
3. The end-words of a sestina are enormously important, since they are repeated so often. What is the connection between the six words here: “house,” “grandmother,” “almanac,” “stove,” and “tears”? Do the words change throughout the poem? What kinds of changes do they undergo?
4. In many poems, including “The Man-Moth,” “Questions of Travel,” and “Sestina,” tears play a crucial role in Bishop’s imagery. Using these examples or others of your choosing, analyze the appearance and meaning of these tears, which not always emotional.
5. Write a sestina. Try to be creative in the way you use the end-words, varying your syntax without sacrificing clarity. The end words must be used in reverse order in the final three-line stanza, the envoi.
6. Compare the scene in “Sestina” to that of “Manners” and “First Death in Nova Scotia,” the preceding and following poems, respectively, in “Questions of Travel.” How do the poems describe a similar place, and what differences/similarities in style do you see between them?

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