Elizabeth Bishop

Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts. When she was very young her father died, her mother was committed to a mental asylum when she was five, and she was sent to live with her grandparents in Nova Scotia. Thereafter, she moved between the houses of relatives for the rest of her childhood. This could be a reason why some of her poetry is concerned with the theme of displacement. Elizabeth Bishop published her first poems at the age of seventeen and she earned a bachelor's degree from Vassar College in 1934.

She was independently wealthy, and from 1935 to 1951 she lived an essentially nomadic life; travelling to France, Spain, North Africa, Ireland, Italy and then settled in Key West, Florida, for four years. This restlessness can be found in her poetry as often times we hear a lonely, observant voice. Bishop's sexuality and her alcoholism were further elements that contributed to her sense of isolation. Like Wordsworth, many of her poems contain a solitary figure. Her poetry is also filled with description of her travels and the scenery that surrounded her, as with the Florida poems in her first book of verse, *North and South*, published in 1946.

She was influenced by the poet Marianne Moore who was a close friend, a mentor, and a stabilizing force in her life. Unlike her contemporary and good friend Robert Lowell, who wrote in the “confessional” style, Bishop's poetry avoids explicit accounts of her personal life, and focuses instead with great subtlety on her impressions of the physical world. She was a painfully shy person and gave very few readings of her poetry in public.

In 1951 she made her first visit to Brazil where she moved in with a young Brazilian woman named Lola Soares, whom she had first met in NY in the 1940s. Bishop was in fact a lesbian, but never made much of it in her writing. This period of her life was very settled. Much of her later work including Questions of Travel and Armadillo recreate experiences and perception from her stay in Brazil.

Her images are precise and true to life, and they reflect her own sharp wit and moral sense. She lived for many years in Brazil, communicating with friends and colleagues in America only by letter. She wrote slowly and published sparingly (her *Collected Poems* number barely a hundred) but the technical brilliance and formal variety of her work is astonishing. Her “Collected Poems” appeared in 1959 and in this year also she on the National Book Award, but her personal life deteriorated as her literary success grew. She was criticized in Brazil as a patronizing and racist foreigner.

Oftentimes her poems would take several years to complete. For years she was considered a “poet’s poet,” but with the publication of her last book, *Geography III*, in 1976, Bishop was finally established as a major force in contemporary literature. She wrote poems that echoed the rhythms of natural speech and used end-rhyme, cross rhyme and slant-rhyme to create a special and effective musicality.
She received the 1956 Pulitzer Prize for her collection, *Poems: North & South/A Cold Spring*. Her *Complete Poems* won the National Book Award in 1970. That same year, Bishop began teaching at Harvard University, where she worked for seven years. Elizabeth Bishop was awarded The Fellowship of The Academy of American Poets in 1964 and served as a Chancellor from 1966 to 1979. She died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1979, and her stature as a major poet continues to grow through the high regard of the poets and critics who have followed her.

**Key Points about the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop:**

1. Her lifelong interest in travel presented her with one of her most important poetic themes.
2. She showed a desire to see everyday objects through fresh eyes and had a keen sense of curiosity that is evident in much of her poetry. Oftentimes she is a sympathetic observer who goes to extremes to describe the scene for the reader in beautiful and precise detail. Many of her poems deal with emotive subjects. There is an element of spontaneity and naturalness in the tone yet this is held in control by techniques. The matter of fact tone avoids sentimentality.
3. Her sense of isolation is painfully evident in much of her poetry, particularly those that concern a solitary figure.
4. She used rhythms that mimicked natural speech. This lends her poems a conversational tone.
5. Oftentimes she is a sympathetic observer who goes to extremes to describe the scene for the reader in beautiful and precise detail.
6. There is a strong sense of immediacy in her poetry (the here and now).
7. She was preoccupied with the natural world, which she presented in very minute detail. We find a very close observation of nature and animals in these poems.
8. Her poetry is very dense, deep and concentrated. The poems often begin with detailed description and progress to meditation and reflection. She moves out from the immediate experience to more general questions.
9. Her style has been well described as “calmly beautiful”. It is quiet, introspective, reticent and detached. Although the style is detached and she seems to be at a distance from her subject, the poems carry strong emotions.
10. She uses startling imagery. This can give a dreamlike, surreal quality to her poetry. Landscapes often become dreamlike as she observes and describes them, so the poem moves from realistic description to a surreal atmosphere.
11. She scrutinizes and interrogates things in her observant poetry.
12. Travel has an enormous influence on her writing, offering her that vast range of experience and location that marks her work. Her nomadic life and her travels in exotic and remote places are reflected throughout her poems.
13. She had originally studied to become a composer and as a highly accomplished painter. Both these talents are evident in her writing. From her musical training we find a wonderful sense of sound effects and rhythm. Even more striking is her painter’s eye. This is evident in her most precise and vivid descriptions of light and texture and her meticulous observations of objects, places and natural creatures.

14. Her early childhood loss of both parents and her subsequent changes of home with different relatives are reflected in her recurring themes of loss, longing, separation and death. There is always great sadness and bewilderment in those poems where she places a child at the centre of an experience.

15. **STYLE:** Though she was not often attracted to formal patterns, there are variety of verse forms found in Bishop’s poetry: sonnet, sestina. She used a variety of metres but often favoured trimeter lines. (The Armadillo) This sometime resulted in those long, thin poems. She was happiest using free verse. The surface of a Bishop poem is often deceptively simple. A favourite technique is ‘making the familiar strange.’ She used rhythms that mimicked natural speech lending her poems a conversational tone.

**Past Exam Questions for Elizabeth Bishop:**

2009: ‘Elizabeth Bishop poses interesting questions delivered by means of a unique style” Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Your answer should focus on both themes and stylistic features. Support your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems you have studied.

2006: “Reading the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop.” Write out the text of a talk that you would give to your class in response to the above title. Your talk should include the following:

Your reactions to her themes or subject matter.
What you personally find interesting in her style of writing.
Refer to the poems by Elizabeth Bishop that you have studied.

2002: ‘The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop appeals to the modern reader for many reasons.” Write an essay in which you outline the reasons why poems by Elizabeth Bishop have this appeal.

**Other possibilities:**

1. “I like painting probably better than I like poetry” – Elizabeth Bishop. Discuss he painterly aspects of Bishop's work.

2. “Bishop almost exclusively uses images from mature as the focus for her poetry.” Discuss with reference to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

3. “Bishop makes the ordinary extraordinary in her poetry.” Discuss how Elizabeth Bishop achieves this in the poetry that you have studied on the Leaving Cert course.
4. ‘It is through Bishop’s magnetic imagery and use of conversation that her poetry leaps off the page for the reader.’ Discuss with reference to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

5. ‘The difficult experiences of both childhood and adulthood are explored in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop.’ Discuss with reference to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

6. “Bishop’s strength as a poet is shown through her ability to transform familiar and everyday scenes into ones that are spectacularly unique.” Discuss with reference to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

7. “Bishop is always the observer in her poems. Doomed to always be outside the action, looking in, and lonely.” To what extent would you agree with this statement? Discuss with reference to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

8. “The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop can be summed up as containing surprising sounds and rich musicality” Discuss with reference to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

9. “Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry moves from intense description to moments of private discovery.” Discuss with reference to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

10. “Although primarily concerned with description the word of Elizabeth Bishop are always profoundly engaging and moving for the reader.” To what extent would you agree with this statement? Discuss with reference to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.