
The Art of Loss in One Art by Elizabeth Bishop

Throughout our lives, day in and day out, we seem to lose something. The idea of losing material things or loved ones is an idea that we try to avoid thinking of. How we recover from these losses is what defines who we are. In her poem One Art Elizabeth Bishop uses writing strategies such as comparisons, rhyme schemes, and repetition to attempt to convince readers and herself that the art of loss is not hard to master, although it might be.

At the beginning of her poem, Bishop writes, “so many things are filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster” (Bishop 2-3). By writing this, the poet shows readers what her state-of-mind on losing things is. As the second stanza progresses, she mentions the loss of keys which seems insignificant, yet she encourages people to accept losing them. She encourages people to accept their loss and also the time we lose in trying to find the keys. Although the loss of keys is minor, by using this example, Bishop delivers the idea that even when we lose something so small, we also lose time. With that said, we should accept it, it is no disaster.

In addition, the poet continues to use a tone of sarcasm and irony throughout the the third stanza. When she adds “Then practice losing farther, losing faster” (Bishop 7), it seems as if Bishop is using words such as “practice” to give the idea that this is a craft to practice. This example is a form of irony because nobody wants to practice or master “loss”.

Throughout the fourth stanza, Bishop mentions how she lost her mother’s watch. The watch can represent a material memory that she had of her mother, but in deeper meaning could convey a meaning of the time she lost with her mother and their relationship. “The emphasis is on time, specifically family time, with the mother’s watch being lost, surely symbolic of a profound personal experience for the poet” (Spacey 1). The previous example furthers the interpretation that the watch signifies material, but also a memory of the time the author wishes she had with her mother. To add on, in the same stanza, Bishop states “And look!” (Bishop 10-11) to inform that she is still doing fine as she has accepted that loss.

Also, in the fifth stanza, Bishop continues to increase the emotional value of each thing she continues to list. Now, she writes, “I lost two cities, lovely ones” (Bishop 13) that could have different meanings. It seems that the poet is referring to having to move from a location in which she had many wonderful memories or perhaps somewhere she loved going but could no longer return. The hyperbole, “and, vaster, some realms I owned, two rives, a continent” (Bishop 13-14) continues to buildup the feeling of deep meaning as it is impossible she owned two rivers and an entire continent.

Finally, in the sixth stanza, the poet reveals the biggest loss of them all, her love. The buildup to finally get to this point seems that it was not only to help readers understand, but also to convince herself. The poet wrote from very small daily objects to memorable objects to then places where she lived. In doing so, it is as if she tries to convince herself that although she has lost all of these, she is still alive and smiling. The final stanza reveals a lot through small detail. The line “the art of losing’s not too hard to master” (Bishop 18) is where she attempts to convince herself and the readers that this is not too hard to do. By using the word “too” she

changes from every other line where she would state “the art of losing is not hard to master.” It seems as if now she knows that the art of losing is actually harder to master than she believed at the beginning of writing this poem. “Write it! (like disaster)” (Bishop 19) is where she finally decides that she can feel free to express herself and no longer have to convince herself that losing is something no wants to become good at.

In conclusion, the poet builds an incredible poem where she gives readers the opportunity to put themselves in the position of losing such insignificant objects to then losing a lover. She also builds up her revelation by repeating lines that ultimately lead to ever her questioning if maybe she has trouble believing that the art of loss is not hard to master. Towards the end, it looks like Bishop finally realizes that the art of losing is one she does not want to master nor keep experiencing.

Works Cited

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