Widely regarded as one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Bishop led a very turbulent life. She moved from place to place, struggled with alcoholism and experienced heartbreaking losses. However, despite the tragic circumstances of her life, she managed to produce a striking, crafted and idiosyncratic body of poetry. Her poems are defined by a perfection of tone, a highly refined degree of visual accuracy and moral, historical, social and psychological insights that have compelled the attention of generations of readers. In the early stages of her career, Bishop was regarded (and sometimes dismissed) as a ‘miniaturist’, or someone who concentrates on small poetic structures and descriptive detail. However, the careful reader of her poetry will notice that her work is by and large confessional. While her life story is charted in her poetry, her approach is an unusual one. Most of the poems on the course nominally address and describe seemingly unimportant subjects, such as a filling station, a tourist destination and a fish, to name but a few. However, these are always related in such a manner as to provide profoundly thought-provoking insights on life. A natural shyness kept Bishop out of the limelight, yet despite this, her work has steadily grown in popularity, so much so that it is now impossible to imagine a collection of English poetry that does not contain a poem by Elizabeth Bishop. Given that her work reflects so intensely on life, it can prove challenging, though once this challenge is met, the rewards outweigh any difficulties the reader may experience.
This short study guide is designed to accompany the podcast on Elizabeth Bishop which is available on this site. Should you find my podcasts and study notes helpful, you may wish to download additional resources which are available on my website, www.cianhogan.com You may also contact me through the website. Best of luck in the forthcoming exams!

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At The Fishhouses

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.
The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
to storerooms in the gables
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
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
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
growing on their shoreward walls.

The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales
and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
with small iridescent flies crawling on them.

Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,
cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where ironwork has rusted.

The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
He was a friend of my grandfather.
We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring
while he waits for a herring boat to come in.
There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.
He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,
from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
the blade of which is almost worn away.
Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the 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.
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,

element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals ... One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.

He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.

Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment.
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water ...
Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
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.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flow
Glossary

4 gloaming – twilight, dusk

6 shuttle – this is a specific reference to a device in weaving that holds the weft thread and is used to pass it between the warp threads.

10 cleated – having wooden or other wedges attached to the structure in order to allow one to gain a foothold.

10 gangplank – usually a portable structure such as a bridge or plank used when boarding or disembarking from a boat.

15 opaque – not transparent or impervious to light so that images cannot be seen through it.

18 translucence – allowing light to pass through, but only diffusely, so that objects on the other side cannot be clearly distinguished. The word can also mean having a shining appearance.

22 herring – a small edible fish with silvery scales.

24 iridescent – having a lustrous or brilliant appearance or quality, often in the colours of the rainbow.

28 capstan – a type of crane consisting of a vertical drum around which a cable is wound. This device is normally used to move heavy weights or to haul in ropes on a ship.

32 Lucky Strike – a well-known brand of American cigarettes.

37 sequins – bright, often gold ornamentation such as would be found on a dress or material.

52 total immersion – involvement in something that completely occupies all one’s energy and concentration. Here the poet is referring directly to the method of baptism practised by the Baptist denomination of Protestantism.

53 Baptist – a Protestant denomination that baptises people by total immersion when they are old enough to understand and declare their faith.

74 transmutation – a change from one form, substance, nature or state to another. This word has strong religious connotations for Christians.

77 briny – tasting salty or tasting like sea
1. Content

When she had finished writing ‘At the Fishhouses’, Bishop raised her arms above her head in triumph. More than any other poem by Bishop on the course, ‘At the Fishhouses’ provides us with a perfect example of her mature style. This is a complex piece that demands close attention and consideration from its readers. The poem is broken into three distinct segments that are separated by a line written in perfect iambic pentameter. In the opening section of the poem, the poet provides a detailed and objective description of an old fisherman, the Nova Scotia shoreline and the paraphernalia of the fishing trade. Following a short second section, we enter the third, more problematic segment of the poem. Written for the most part in stream of consciousness, the speaker provides us with a passionate description of the ocean at the same time she enters a moment of intense subjective meditation.

The poem opens, much like a camera coming into focus, by carefully setting the scene. We learn that even though it is cold, ‘an old man sits netting, | his net, in the gloaming almost invisible.’ The depiction is a timeless one which evokes a sense of continuity with a vanishing way of life. The fisherman continues his work to the backdrop of the setting sun and ‘the fishhouses with their steeply peaked roofs | and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up | to storerooms.’ The entire scene is bordered by the sea, which is ‘swelling slowly as if considering spilling over’ and is bathed in a ‘sliver’ light. For a brief moment it is as if the speaker becomes
transfixed by the movement of the sea. However, she forces her attention away from the sea to focus on ‘the benches’, ‘lobster pots’, ‘masts’ and ‘small old buildings’. In typical Bishop fashion, the speaker begins to concentrate on the minute details to be found on these various objects. She notices that:

The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales

The almost microscopic examination of the scene continues when the speaker tells us that the wheelbarrows are also lined with ‘creamy iridescent coats of mail and small iridescent flies’. The picture that the poet has painted is completed when she describes the area ‘behind the houses.’ We learn that there is an ‘ancient wooden capstan.’ Its two long ‘bleached handles’ are stained. The rusted ironwork is likened by the poet to ‘dried blood’.

There is a slight change in direction in the poem when the speaker addresses the old man. We learn that this man was a friend of her grandfather. Their conversation centres on the decline in the population, and codfish and herring. Once again, Bishop’s attention is drawn from the surface details to the minutiae of her surroundings. She notices the ‘sequins’ on the old man’s vest and ‘thumb’ and in the process begins to think about countless fish that this man has ‘scraped’ with the worn blade of his ‘black old knife’. As the poem progresses it is as if the poet is drawn closer and closer to the sea’s edge. In line 40, which marks the beginning of the short second section of the poem, a perceptible shift occurs. The speaker describes the area near the ‘water’s edge […] where they haul up the boats’. In a slow, measured fashion her attention is drawn ‘down and down’ towards the water. Line 47 marks the beginning of the third section of the poem, which most readers find challenging. It opens with a description of the water, which is seen by the speaker as being:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,

element bearable to no mortal,

to fish and to seals […]
The sea has long been viewed as a metaphor for human consciousness, and as the speaker is drawn to the water’s edge, she begins what will amount to a deeply introspective meditation on knowledge and the nature of identity. Noticing a seal that she has seen ‘evening after evening’, she reveals that the creature was inquisitive about her and strangely that, much like her, he believed ‘in baptism by total immersion’. As the seal seems interested in music, ‘she used to sing him Baptist hymns’, in particular ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God’. The seal’s reaction is to regard the speaker steadily. Disappearing momentarily, only to ‘emerge almost in the same spot’, he ‘shrugs as if it were against his better judgement’. Meanwhile, the speaker seems to remain transfixed by the water. She repeats her initial impression that it is ‘Cold dark deep and absolutely clear’.

For a brief period, in line 60, the poet gives consideration to the landscape behind her. Here the dignified fir trees stand as if waiting for the arrival of Christmas. However, before she becomes too distracted by this, her gaze returns to the sea:

The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.

This surface description of the sea yields to a more detailed examination of the nature of the water itself. In the poet’s view, the water is a transmutation of fire that would cause one’s hand to burn and one’s wrist to ache. These lines, which most readers find very difficult to decipher, become clearer when the speaker tells us that she identifies these properties with knowledge itself. All of this is what we imagine knowledge to be:

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts.

forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Like the waters that encircle the world, knowledge itself is continually moving and flowing. All knowledge is indeed historical, as it is based on the learning and
efforts of those who have gone before us. It is difficult not to be impressed by the sheer artistic beauty and metaphorical intensity of these lines.

2. Stylistic Features

Poets as diverse as John Ashbery, James Merrill, C.K. Williams and Jorie Graham have named Bishop as a major influence on their work. They variously have praised her perfection of tone, her social, moral and psychological insights, her visual accuracy and her formal invention. All of these characteristics are present in 'At the Fishhouses'. Even a cursory reading of this poem suggests to the reader that it contains a complex philosophical meditation on the nature of knowledge. In the opening half of the poem, the poet presents the reader with a highly objective account of the Nova Scotia coastline. In doing so, she appeals to all the senses. It is important to realise that these details create the preconditions for what Seamus Heaney has described as the 'rhythmic heave' that occurs in line 46. The rusted ironwork, the ancient wooden capstan and the old man who knew the speaker's grandfather create an unconsciousness awareness in her mind of the historical nature of knowledge. Thus, as the speaker takes in the scene and talks to a man who knew her dead grandfather, she is made aware that all life is transitory and that generations come and go. Furthermore, knowledge, which will become the central theme of the poem, is alluded to in the encounter with this man. We learn that he was a 'friend of [her] grandfather', that he has seen a 'decline in the population' and that he has scraped 'the principal beauty from unnumbered fish'.

In line 46, the lucid and vivid awareness that has characterised the first section of this complex poem gives way to a more disconnected stream of thought. Once again, it is important to stress that although a clear distinction exists between the first and third segments of the poem, they are in fact connected. With thoughts of the past, her 'grandfather' and 'the decline in the population' on her mind, the poet becomes mesmerised by the sea. Beautifully evoked in the opening lines of the poem where Bishop echoes the long 'o' of 'although' with the broad 'o' of 'gloaming', 'cold' and 'old', the sea now takes on a
symbolic value. It comes to represent knowledge in general and in Seamus Heaney’s estimation hints at the ‘rebirth of a religious impulse’ in a secular world. While it is very difficult to untangle the poet’s train of thought in these lines, a discernable pattern does emerge upon closer reading. The sea comes to represent the unknown and, in some respects, the unknowable. Religion, which once provided many of the answers to the more philosophical questions that life poses, has been replaced by cold reason in the twentieth century. In the poem, the traditional symbols of religion and Christianity are either replaced or pushed to the background:

Back behind us [...] | [...] associating with their shadows,  
a million Christmas trees stand  
waiting for Christmas.

As Christian hymns enter the poet’s mind, she is not greeted by some divine creature, but more amusingly by an ordinary seal. Rather than concentrate on the unknowable, imponderable and mystical questions that have been the preserve of Christianity, the poet chooses to examine knowledge and reason. The ocean provides her with a fitting symbol for knowledge. Like knowledge, it is in continual flux, always moving always changing. In Peter Denman’s view, ‘the poem ends with a magnificent speculation on the nature of knowledge. How do we know what we know? How do we hold on to experience?’ The poet feels that, like the cold water, all knowledge comes at a price. Learning is a difficult process that at first tastes bitter and is often painful. Human knowledge is always contingent upon the achievements of our ancestors. In this sense, the poet is vindicated in feeling that all knowledge is historical.

3. Essay Writing
‘At the Fishhouses’ is perhaps Elizabeth Bishop’s best-known and most memorable poem. As such, it is worthy of inclusion in any personal response to Bishop that you may be asked to make. If you decide to include this poem, try to bear the following points in mind.

a. The poem provides us with a complex commentary on the nature of knowledge.

b. This is a highly crafted poem that draws on many language devices in order to enhance its rhythmic effect.

c. The level of detail in the poem is typical of Bishop’s poetry in general. Make sure you understand how detailed descriptions in the first half of the poem reinforce the philosophical meditation that takes place in the final section.

Elizabeth Bishop Sample Essay

‘Elizabeth Bishop poses interesting questions delivered by means of a unique style.’

Elizabeth Bishop’s honest and engaging poetry poses interesting questions delivered by means of a unique style. This style which is accomplished yet subtle enough to convey the strength of her emotions in a manner that captivates, is used by Bishop to question ideas about identity, religion, home and even knowledge itself.
In more than one of the poems by Bishop, selected for study for the Leaving Certificate course, we are presented with deep and searching explorations of childhood. And frequently, these explorations result in thought provoking and fascinating questions about, amongst other things: the past’s ability to impinge on the present, the meaning of home and the notion of identity. Perhaps nowhere are such deep and searching questions more obvious than in the poem, “Sestina.” The poem is structured around the very effective conceit of a child’s drawing. The opening lines set the tone for the entire poem. In the dying of the year, autumn ‘rain falls on the house’. It is dar k in this house and the ‘old grandmother | sits in the kitchen with the child’. Any hope of warmth suggested by the “marvel stove”, jokes and laughing is quickly dispelled in the final line of this first stanza when the speaker tells us that the grandmother is merely ‘laughing and talking to hide her tears’. The entire poem is steeped in an atmosphere of loss and sadness and one of Bishop ‘s real achievements in “Sestina” is the degree to which she makes use feel this sadness. She defines her grief through a series of precise and evocative adjectives: ‘falling’, ‘small’, ‘hard’, ‘rigid’, ‘winding’, ‘marvellous’, ‘inscrutable’. Furthermore there is a poignant inevitability to the sadness that pervades the poem; because as the speaker tells us, the entire scene was ‘known to a grandmother’ and ‘was to be’. However, in a very interesting manner that is typical of Bishop’s unique style, the strict use of the sestina form prevents this poem from becoming too sentimental. In this manner, Bishop asks us to question many universal concerns such as the degree to which the the past creates the present, the notion of identity and of course what constitutes home.

Similarly, in “First Death in Nova Scotia”, Bishop’s childhood memories lead us to interesting and highly charged questions questions about death and the after-life. Where “Sestina” omits a mother figure, “First Death in Nova Scotià” links the mother to the child’s first encounter with death. The poem, told entirely in the past tense, opens by telling us that Arthur was laid out in the ‘cold, cold parlor’. The scene is carefully and vividly depicted in the opening stanza. The body of the speaker’s dead cousin Arthur lies beneath:

[...] the choromographs:
Edward Princes of Wales,
With Princess Alexandra,
And King George with Queen Mary.

Once again, Bishop’s style is dominated by a restrained simplicity to the language that she uses. We learn that her dead cousin “Arthur was very small,” that “he was all white like a doll” and that “Jack Frost had left him white forever.” The broad vowel sounds and predominance of cold adjectives are juxtaposed in a unique way with the nursery rhyme-like rhythm to offer a chilling glimpse of a child’s first encounter with death. In keeping with the emptiness we find in “Sestina,” Bishop refuses to provide any comfort for the child. And yet while this is a genuinely sad poem to read, it is difficult not to be struck by the fact that “First Death in Nova Scotia” leads us gently towards deep questions about where the speaker’s dead cousin is going. Preparing to greet him formally, the assembled royalty are present in formal clothes of ‘red and ermine’. Clutching the flower that the speaker placed in his hand, Arthur is forced to decline their offer to attend the court:

But how could Arthur go,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?

The fact that Bishop fails to offer us the comfort of an after life makes it more difficult to accept Arthur’s death. Arthur is not invited to heaven rather to “court.” And in the end we are forced to ask ourselves if there anything beyond death other than the coffin for little Arthur?

In many of the poems by Bishop on the course, she asks us to consider the nature of identity and how our very humanity is shaped by it. Very often, as in “Questions of Travel”, the idea of the journey becomes a metaphor for the exploration of the self. The observations of nature and the natural world in this poem are very interesting because they take us beyond the postcard images of mass tourism. Initially, the reader is presented with vivid images of “crowded
streams”, “trees”, “the fat brown bird” and “one more folded sunset”. However, the poet very quickly goes beyond these postcard images in order to acknowledge the intrinsic value of travel itself. For Bishop, travel involves exploration and this exploration is, in her estimation, “part of what it is to be human”. She believes that we are determined to “rush to see the sun the other way round”. And she even goes so far as to say that such travel yields powerful insights into the human condition. In the final two stanzas of the poem, set off in Italics, Bishop reaches a profound conclusion. She dismisses Pascal’s ideas about travel and finally she claims that the choice about who we are is in reality never made freely:

Continent, city, country, society, the choice is never wide
And never free.

Here Bishop examines, in a simple and straightforward manner, some very difficult concepts. The final two lines of the poem are both poignant, when considered in the light of Bishop’s nomadic life, and searching. The idea that she should find the notion of “home” perplexing, while very moving, is also thought provoking; because it forces the reader to consider all the different chance circumstances that contribute to the question of identity.

Bishop’s poems do not merely confine themselves to explorations of self and identity. She is also a skilled observer and these observations frequently yield deeply philosophical questions. One of the most interesting stylistic techniques that Bishop employs is her tendency to make the familiar look strange and while this of course is not unique to her it is nevertheless very effective. For example, in “At The Fishhouses” the poem opens with a very familiar setting only to yield to an almost surreal meditation on the question of knowledge. We learn that even though it is cold, ‘an old man sits netting, | his net, in the gloaming almost invisible.’ The depiction here is a timeless one that evokes a sense of continuity with a vanishing way of life. The fisherman continues his work to the backdrop of the setting sun and ‘the fishhouses with their steeply peaked roofs | and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up | to storerooms.’ The entire scene is bordered by the sea, which in a moment of marvellous sibilance is ‘swelling slowly as if considering
spilling over’ and is bathed in a ‘sliver’ light. For the briefest of moments, it is as if the speaker becomes transfixed by the movement of the sea. However, she forces her attention away from the sea to focus on ‘the benches’, ‘lobster pots’, ‘masts’ and ‘small old buildings’. Then, in line 40, which marks the beginning of the short second section of the poem, a perceptible shift occurs. Here the speaker describes the area near the ‘water’s edge [...] where they haul up the boats’. In a slow, measured fashion her attention is drawn ‘down and down’ towards the water. The detailed descriptions of the fishhouses and the microscopic examination of the “wheelbarrow”, “the old man’s hand” and the “capstan” now give way to a strange, almost unrecognisable place. Then in the final section of the poem the beautiful “surface of the sea” becomes like what “we imagine knowledge to be”. It is “dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free drawn from the cold hard mouth of the world.” This is such an unusual yet completely apt metaphor for knowledge that it forces us to question many of our preconceived notions about how we view understanding and learning. Knowledge, Bishop seems to be suggesting, is difficult yet always changing and “flowing”. Similarly in her poems “The Fish” and “In the Filling Station” the familiar also becomes almost surreal. In “The Fish” we witness a kind of transformation where the “tremendous fish” that was battered and venerable is released and the familiar world of the fishing boat is altered until becomes “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow.” And “In The Filling Station”, the detailed almost photographic description of the “oil soaked, oil permeated” “little filling station” gives way to a completely different viewpoint. Suddenly, in the final lines of this poem, Bishop leads us to question whether or not the station is indeed symbolic of the fact that “someone loves us all.”

There is no doubting that Bishop’s poetry is challenging however, her poems reward the attentive reader’s efforts. Her keen eye for detail, her restrained, yet deeply emotional poems and her mastery of form deserve our attention and admiration, because they pose interesting questions delivered by means of a unique style.