

Why Teach Poetry? Part 1: Explication of a Poem by a Contemporary Poet: Elizabeth Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses”

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Abstract

This paper gives support to the question of whether or not poetry should be taught. In addition, it explores activities for teaching poetry to Japanese university EFL students along with assessment tasks. Explications of three contemporary poems by famous poets are undertaken: Here, in Part 1, Elizabeth Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses;” and in a future issue, Part 2, Gwendolyn Brook’s “The Lovers of the Poor,” and Seamus Heaney’s “Digging.” The goal of the study is to encourage Japanese university EFL students to learn how to explicate poems and to provide an approach for EFL teachers to teach poetry in their second language classrooms.

Why Teach Poetry? Explications of Contemporary Poems, Part 1

Poetry is a wonderful thing. As I sit here and think about what poetry means to me, I trace my life, my journey, with poems. It was in high school that I learned to love Robert Frost. When I was an undergraduate I studied Frost again and loved him. And later, in my early-20s, I developed a love of poetry after picking up a random book at Barnes & Noble. It was E.E. Cummings. I

discovered strange new others. I had no money to buy their books so I wrote the poems into my notebook while standing in the aisles of the bookshop. My favorite poems I then transferred to a piece of paper that I folded up and stuck in my pocket so that everywhere I went I could pull it out and read them. This was way before smartphones. I used to pull the paper out in my job as a part-time waiter. A waiter's job involves a lot of standing around, and a waiter looking at a piece of paper is not too much of a distraction to the customers or the manager. The poems kept me stable on my feet, grounded in spirit. I still remember how important poetry was to me. That was 30 years ago. Over the years I had tried to have poetry published here and there. I did go back to school and studied creative writing. Now I write and publish my poems on my website. I'm also an editor for a literary journal and have published other people's poetry.

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Words are the blood cells of society, a result of individual creativity channeled through a collective heart. This was what I was thinking when walking the streets, pondering the question, *Why teach poetry?* I don't have a good answer. But I love poetry, so my response comes from a place of adoration and respect for its long tradition. In the past, only a select few could expect to publish their poems. Few could even write their own names, instead signing documents with an X. But nowadays, we are all writing. What has spurred this sudden explosion? Of course it is technology. But without the will to express ourselves in words, no amount of technology would ever be enough to be creative. Technology has though recently been making progress, finding a writer called ChatGPT (Klein, 2023). But that is another story. In Naylor and Wood's 2012 book on teaching poetry, they state that "poetry offers something that other forms of writing do not" (p. 1). Fiction writing, the form I am most familiar with, is a way that writers can use the lie to reveal the truth. Characterization is important. And depending on the type of writing you aspire to, so too is plot. But what about poetry – what does it give us that other forms do not? Poetry is described as a

“social phenomenon” (p. 1). It reminds me of the social learning theory, where we are more likely to learn if we have models of observation, for example, and the mental processes that occur to help us learn before mimicking the behavior (McLeod, 2023). No man is an island, so the saying goes. We are all part of an intricate social system, and as teachers we are the primary models of social learning. Therefore, teaching poetry will not only help students learn to put poetry in public view, in contrast to poetry as a “mode of self-expression in private” (Naylor & Wood, 2012, p. 5), but utilize social interactions to bring back the oral tradition of poetry. I have read several of the beautiful and lyrical Middle English lays which date back to just before the beginning of the Modern Age of English. Reading them alone in isolation does not compare to reading them aloud, or seeing them performed aloud. The written word comes to life.

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Paul Klee, the Swiss-born German artist, had a revelation when he visited Tunisia for the first time: He gradually detached color from the physical objects of his art in his push toward abstraction (Rewald, 2004). This resulted in a transformation in Klee’s artistry. I bring up Klee because I remember in my early 20s seeing in a painting a quote of his that went something like this: *We leave the world below, and move beyond instead, the land of the Great Yes!* What Klee was getting at was that the world below (the words were written above a painting), was the world that he, the artist, was leaving behind. Klee says “we” to mean the world of artists, because I believe that in Klee’s mind everyone was an artist if they chose to see themselves as one. He was passing the torch, as it were, to future artists, getting closer and closer to what could be seen as Heaven, or enlightenment, or whatever you want to make of *the land of the Great Yes!* The art he made was what was being left behind, each piece and thus each artist contributing to push ever closer to this *Great Yes!* Yes, with poetry as with art. Poetry offers something similar. Naylor and Wood describe it when quoting Heany, who states “An experience of words and rhythms like these is arguably

more than physical. It represents a metaphysical extension of capacity, an arrival at a point beyond the point that had been settled for previously” (p. 9). You can think of it similarly to Klee’s notion, that the words written in poems by poets everywhere are contributing to a communal push toward an understanding that is beyond the physical world that the poems might be inspired by, and toward a world in which words might be irrelevant, a world beyond explanation. It is a paradox. That is what poetry reminds me of and why teaching it is important.

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There was no poetry in my house growing up. Naylor and Wood remind us that there are many children (like me) “who do not get experiences of literature and poetry at home” (p. 9). As teachers, we must introduce poetry to our students. By doing so, we ensure that the whole of humanity is involved in striving toward Klee’s *Land of the Great Yes!*

Many poets have written manifestoes. I remember during my MFA, I took a class on writing poetry, and we had to write one. I don’t remember the details about what I wrote, but I was reminded of this by Naylor and Wood, when they said that

to have a philosophy of teaching English that is our own, to give us a rationale for why we teach as we do, is crucially important for us to remember and reflect on what we do in the classroom, and by extension, with poetry. (p. 11)

Written into our manifestoes must be why we approach teaching poetry as we do. I have learned in my doctoral work about curriculum theory as explained by Schiro (2013) and his four ideologies: Learner-centered, scholar academic, social efficiency, and social reconstruction. I will not go into detail about these but give a quick introduction to two that Naylor and Wood bring up in their text: learner-centered and scholar academic. Learner-centered, as the name suggests, places the child at the center of learning. This takes power or decentralizes the classroom away from the teacher and toward the students. At the opposite

extreme would be the scholar academic ideology which is concerned with passing down knowledge of a culture – the cultural treasure – from generation to generation. Naylor and Wood hint at such an approach through explication of poems where the teacher is the knowledge expert and the students are merely bystanders, eloquently stating how “the teacher, the keeper of the poem, ‘owns’ the poem, [while] the children merely ‘rent’ it” (p. 13). How do teachers, then, pass on the knowledge to the students? The key is that knowledge is generated by the reader, as we learn in Naylor and Wood’s book. And each reading of a poem is a unique experience. Such an experience “focuses on the child” and encapsulates the learner-centered model described by Schiro. It is an engaging and important way of teaching, and this is one reason why we must teach poetry, which lends itself to creating knowledge and unique experiences.

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Poetry is difficult and it often is not enjoyable, especially if we cannot understand it. But the process should be enjoyable. Naylor and Wood quote Rosenblatt, who states that “the reader should be carried forward ... not by a desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself” (p. 17). We should be teaching how to read poetry and, by extension, how to explicate it. I enjoy reading good poems, the same poem, again and again, trying to decipher it, understand it, come to my own realizations and conclusions about it. It is a journey. As teachers, the key point is that we should not try to take ownership of a poem’s meaning. Instead, we should let our explications serve as guides for students to discover their own meaning. It is with this ideal in mind that the three explications are presented in this essay.

In addition, as teachers we should be teaching poetry in order to teach literary theory and the paths taken to unveil poems. Such paths are usually reserved for the élite. If we teach how accessible poetry can be, how each reading is unique and reserved to the reader, whoever you are, then perhaps we can change the

world by introducing how poetry is a new way to see the world.

An Explication

The three explications here are examples of how students can dissect a poem line by line, word by word. Each explication is accompanied by a short literature review explaining the poem's importance to student readers, along with teaching strategies of the poetic elements based on Naylor & Wood's 2012 text, *Teaching Poetry*, and a brief description of a possible assessment task. Regarding assessment, McTighe and Ferrera (2021) state that "students show evidence of their understanding when they can effectively do two things: (1) *apply* their learning, and (2) *explain* their thinking and support their responses to test items" (p. 12). There are three types of assessments in the classroom. Diagnostic, Formative, and Evaluative (p. 17).

The assessment task here can be modified to fit either one of the three types above. Finally, the explications given here are the sole analyses of the author, and they are not intended to act as a final, critical authority of each piece.

The End of the Line: Teaching Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses"

"At the Fishhouses" is an 83-line, Nova Scotian poem from Elizabeth Bishop (1983). The poem is written in free verse and has three stanzas. The first stanza is 40 lines, the concise middle stanza is six lines, and the third stanza is 37 lines, making the structure of the poem somewhat balanced and proportionate. It is also oddly symmetrical in scale to a sonnet. "The Petrarchan sonnet form has fourteen lines, and falls into two sections, the first of eight lines, the octave, and the second of six lines, the sestet" (Naylor & Wood, 2012, p. 24). Bishop's poem—specifically the two big stanzas and excluding the short middle stanza—is nearly five times the length of a sonnet. Regarding rhythm and meter, there is no apparent rhyming or beat pattern. For ease of analysis, I have broken the poem into 25 sentences. The images that Bishop produces though, as seen here in the first sentence, are crystalline:

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, 5
 and his shuttle worn and polished.

The poem has a complicated meter. To hear Bishop read the poem, the first line sounds like this: x / x x // x x. There are eight beats (tetrameter) with a variable rhythm. The second line is also tetrameter, but line six is six beats (trimeter). This change in rhythm puts emphasis on it. Line four is a line of alexandrine (12 beats) verse, which leads to the short five-beat line five. The sudden shift in meter puts emphasis on this line, “A dark purple-brown” (5). Regarding the poem’s lexis, the word “cold” (1) sets the scene and introduces thematic elements; I interpret it to be about death or the end of something. Words such as “down” (2), “old” (3), “gloaming” (4), meaning ‘twilight’ or ‘dusk’, “dark purple-brown” (5), and “worn” (6) echo such sentiments. However, the first word of the poem, “Although” (1), confuses. Is it used to explain why the man is sitting outside netting, or is there a deeper meaning? Could it mean that although there is life, it is in a constant state of dying until there is only death and dissolution. As mentioned previously, the poem is about the end of something. The end of a fish’s life, since it is the fishhouse that these fish end up at. It is also about the end of a fisherman’s life. The “old man” (3) and his netting are adornments for the rituals that Bishop depicts. It is also about the end of a culture.

The next sentence shows the persona’s distance: “The air smells so strong of codfish/ it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water” (7–8). The persona does not use the first person or the second person pronoun, instead choosing a detached “one’s eyes” (8), telling us that this could be just one fishhouse of many.

Sentence three describes the storerooms with contrasting imagery, that of “gables” (11) typical of gothic architecture like you would find in a cathedral

especially when exposed to water and oxygen (“What metals rust?,” n.d.). The persona takes us away from the fishhouses to another location nearby, this one in a “sparse bright sprinkle of grass” (27). It is old to the persona; they describe it as “ancient” (28). But it’s a device, the “capstan” (28), made for moving or raising heavy weights. Being this close to the shore in Nova Scotia, and having it dated, she implies that it could only be used for whaling — with the “melancholy stains” that hint at “dried blood” (30), one can imagine easily what the device was once used for something more sinister, though the persona does not state this explicitly.

In sentence seven, the “old man” (32) returns. The persona tells us some history they have together: “He was a friend of my grandfather” (33). This qualifies the persona as being an expert on the goings on of their subjects here at the fishhouses. The old man becomes an archetype; he lives long in literature. He reminds me of a character out of *Moby-Dick*, or *The Old Man and the Sea*. Regarding a possible connection between Bishop and Hemingway or Melville, let us look at Naylor & Wood’s quote of Iser’s concept of ‘repertoire’, or

‘All the familiar territory within the text.’ These will be all the references within the text that are our shared cultural knowledge, and ‘may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged’. (Naylor & Wood, 2012, p. 18)

Bishop’s poem is an extension of fishing literature, and specifically to literature of the eastern Atlantic coast. Sentence eight provides an ecocritical lens through which to view Bishop’s poem: “We talk of the decline in the population / and of codfish and herring” (34–35). The next two sentences provide an image of the old man who has been long at work on this job, as “There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb” (37) and his “blade . . . is almost worn away” (40). The imagery shows that the old man is at the end of the line, as well as the fishing industry perhaps.

word shall fell him” (“A Mighty Fortress,” n.d.). What does the seal represent? This “element bearable to no moral, / to fish and to seals” (48–49), is it then bearable to fish and seals? Nature has assumed a higher plane in Bishop’s poem. The seal and fish and other residents of the ocean, the water, are purified by the “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear” (47) water. They are reborn.

Nature continues to create excitement in “At the Fishhouses” as “the dignified tall firs begin” (62). What are they beginning? Is it a dialogue, a communion of sorts with the nearby sea? They are “Bluish” (63) from reflecting the water and, like the fish, are at the end of the line, destined for living rooms every Christmas and street curbs soon after because of the walking ape. The water takes on an elevated nature: It is “suspended / above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones” (65–66). The sea, the icy wind and water vapor are described by the persona as “indifferently swinging above the stones” (66). Nature and all natural things have anthropomorphized. As such, they are subject to God’s judgment.

Are the stones part of the judgment? Is the sea part of the judgment, too? The persona tells us that

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. 75

It is the judgment, the end of the line for so many. The fishhouses are a poor imitation of the recorded judgment that we inflict on nature compared to the force and fury that nature inflicts upon us. It is cold, and icy, so cold that it feels like fire, and it has been transformed into fire. It is like Frost’s poem of the end of the world (Frost, 1920) except there is no choice between fire and ice because the world shall end in both.

The poem ends with an image of “knowledge” (78, 83) being the sea and the icy air swirling above it. It is “dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free” (79) and

“historical, flowing, and flown” (83). In Bishop’s poem the Tree of Knowledge turns into the Sea of Knowledge.

Importance of “At the Fishhouses”

Bishop was born in Massachusetts, but the loss of her father was then compounded by her mother’s suffering from mental illness, because of which she was forced to grow up in Nova Scotia with her paternal grandparents. As Travisano (1995) outlines, “Describing nature and experience with meticulous detail, Bishop often employed unusual metaphors and surreal images to portray an unsettling world” (p. 50). The “seal” (49) is an example. Bishop was one of the more important poets of her generation, and for this reason alone she must be taught. As Ramazani et al (2003) remark, “In contrast to the confessional poetry written by her contemporaries, which she found distasteful, her poems typically deflect or distill autobiographical content” (p. 16). Bishop was a renegade, “one of the central progenitors of contemporary poetry” (p. 15).

“At the Fishhouses” is perhaps Bishop’s finest poem. For some critics, Bishop’s use of “time conveys the exciting separateness of her world” (Eavan Boland quoted in Travisano, p. 56). Bishop creates a history, a chronology, in “At the Fishhouses.” She describes a simple scene of an “old man ... netting” (Bishop, 1983, line 3) that turns into water being a “transmutation of fire” (74) and then “forever, flowing” (82). She states that “our knowledge is historical (83), that the old man is important, that the water is not just water but a symbol of something greater, nature, a more spiritual component of our lives, and that a simple fishhouse that is at the end of the line for so many is something greater, like a new beginning, or a transition to another world.

Bishop’s poem connects strongly with nature. Boschman (1992) states that “the poem sees the community as gaining a more authentic sense of unity by acknowledging its own mutability and by realizing its origins – and thus its history – in nature itself” (p. 248). Such reflections on how the community ties together with nature is important. This is again exemplified in the “seal” (49) that

Bishop sings to. “In anthropomorphizing the seal, Bishop suggests that people are only a different mammalian species; she uses of the seal exactly the sort of words she could use of an acquaintance” (Vendler, 1987, p. 830).

Teaching “At the Fishhouses” to Japanese University EFL Students

One of the more remarkable aspects of this poem for me was its shape. I would like to get students to look at the shape of the poem and try to find meaning in it. But because of its size, it would need to be cut up into digestible bits that resemble a ‘poem’. This could be done by giving the three stanzas to three groups. Naylor and Wood (2012) describe how “when presented with a piece of prose in the shape of a poem, students’ discussions ‘demonstrated their awareness that the poetic genre required that they creatively add meaning to the text’” (p. 30). Although Bishop’s poem is not prose, it appears as such. Having the students read the stanzas as stand-alone pieces would encourage them to compare and contrast what is unique about each stanza, especially since the second stanza is so short. Students could also rewrite a prose version of the poem and divide it into stanzas themselves before seeing the actual poem. “This means that they have to demonstrate their understanding of the form; the poem exhibits a naturalness of speech without necessarily using rhyme and requires that the students actively engage with the words” (p. 30). The students could also engage with the content of the poem by rewriting it into a short story (discussed later as an assessment task). This might be especially useful if students are familiar with Hemingway’s novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Naylor and Wood highlight Brenda Pinder’s suggestion of rewriting Shakespeare into a novel as a form of “text transformation” in order to gain even more student interaction with the text (p. 33).

One of the more important things to do with students is to introduce some background information for “At the Fishhouses.” This is especially useful for students who have not grown up near the sea. In Japan, the fishing culture is a big part of everyone’s life, but recently young people have no idea what goes

on or the history of it. Tying in the Nova Scotian fishing culture with Japan's, comparing various aspects of each, would be beneficial and create interest. Such an activity would "have the effect of turning a poem into a historical artefact or curious mystery that needs to be unravelled, rather than as a piece of writing that can speak directly to the reader" (p. 35).

Assessment Task

Being a creative writer, I would like students to rewrite the poem into a narrative, as described previously. To do this, they would need to identify the major characters, the old man and the persona. They could add additional characters if they wanted. Naylor and Wood note that such an activity of "text transformation [will] provide some very rich interaction with the text and the choices that have been made in the writing of the verse" (p. 33). The students would add dialogue, action, and thought to improve how the persona of the poem (the narrator of the story) and the old man would be characterized. The students could then participate in a writer's workshop, listening to the stories that their classmates have made and provide comments for discussion. Students would be assessed based on their story contribution and their feedback to others in the writer's workshop.

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