

Commentary on Elizabeth Bishop's "Insomnia"

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Abstract:

Elizabeth Bishop's love poem "Insomnia", which is published as part of her second poetry collection *A Cold Spring*, exemplifies the poet's elliptical style and acute observational precision. This article focuses on its thematic concerns, imagery and literary devices. The lunar imagery, mirroring effects free-verse structure and repetitive techniques are discussed through textual analysis. The poem employs metaphorical interplay of the moon and mirrors to destabilize binary oppositions, unveiling the poet's profound yearning for freedom and love. Meanwhile, rhythmic patterns, anaphoric devices and fragmented structure epitomize Bishop's distinctive poetic style and affective expression.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bishop; "Insomnia"; mirror imagery; free verse; repetition

Insomnia

Elizabeth Bishop

The moon in the bureau mirror
looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, at herself,
but she never, never smiles)
far and away beyond sleep, or
perhaps she's a daytime sleeper.

By the Universe deserted,
she'd tell it to go to hell,
and she'd find a body of water,
or a mirror, on which to dwell.

So wrap up care in a cobweb
and drop it down the well

into that world inverted
where left is always right,
where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me. (Bishop, 2008, pp. 53-54)

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was born in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her personal life greatly influenced and promoted her creation of poetry, but she tended to describe many details implicitly and metaphorically. Most of her poems involve closely observing those ordinary and minute things in our daily life and exposing the real truth of them. She published this poem in 1951 as a part of her second collection of poems, *A Cold Spring*. The poem can be regarded as a love poem.

It starts with the image of the moon and the speaker personifies the moon. In western myth, the moon traditionally takes on the quality of femininity. In the night, the speaker feels sleepless and stares at the seemingly prideful and solemn moon. Incidentally, the moon is an insomniac as well and is now immersed in self-appreciation “in the bureau mirror”. In the second stanza, when the lonely moon realized that she is “deserted” by the universe, she just “tell(s) it to go to hell” and independently finds a suitable place to dwell. In the face of “care”, the moon chooses to hide it “in a cobweb” and throw it away in “the well”. Confronted with her unfortunate childhood experience, Bishop preferred to keep a reticent and impersonal attitude, and even never publicly confessed her sexual orientation all her life.

The third stanza essentially reveals the “mirror-image” relationship between human and nature. The moon leads the speaker to a newly inverted world where “left” becomes “right”, “shadows” become “body”, “heavens” become “deep”. Naturally, “you love me” should originally be “I love you”. In terms of Bishop’s lesbian identity, she blurs the binary opposition and uncovers a reflection of her hidden desire and spiritual pursuit. The poem is written in free verse with some perfect end rhymes such as “miles” and “smiles” in the first stanza, “hell”, “dwell” and “well” in the second stanza, “right” and “night”, “sea” and “me” in the final stanza. The enjambment is frequently used throughout the poem to express the poet’s melodic and smooth feeling. Notably, Bishop employs repetition of words, letters, sounds and sentences to enhance her emotions.

Alliteration of repeating the sound of “m” in “The **m**oon in the bureau **m**irror / looks out a **m**illion **m**iles”. The word “sleep” appears twice in the last two lines of the first stanza. A series of “where-clauses” are repeated in the final stanza to show the mirror relation between herself and the world around her. The feminine moon can reasonably be converted into the opposite sex one in the inverted world. The deep love Bishop expressed in the poem reflects her deepest desire for all the entities in the world, especially those people she subtly cares.

References

Bishop, E. (2008). *Poems, Prose and Letters*. (R. Giroux, & L. Schwartz, Eds.). The Library of America.