AT THE

FISHHOUSES

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GENERAL IDEA

• Narrative flow
  – Fishhouse description
  – Old Man
  – Description
  – Seal and subject
  – Knowledge
• Follow an ABABA… pattern
  – A = third person
  – B = first person
• Fourth shift → second person
• Subject
GUIDING QUESTIONS

• Why did Bishop choose the Fishhouses as a representation of the destruction of knowledge?

• How does Bishop use shifting tones to express the change in her perspectives between each stanza?
In her poem, *At the Fishhouses*, Elizabeth Bishop reveals that humans inhibit their ability to be creative/imaginative for money and power. She demonstrates this idea through her use of enjambment, repetition and pastoral elements.
WHY DID BISHOP CHOOSE THE FISHHOUSES AS A REPRESENTATION OF THE DESTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE?
Definition: a poem involving rustic people or a rural setting; in a contemporary sense, a means of expressing complex ideas in a simple way

Typically presents an idealized rather than realistic view of life

Fish house: rustic in a coastal sense
  - Fishermen are the laborers and shepherds of the coast

Distancing effect: allows the poet to step back from and critique society
PASTORAL EXAMPLES

Simple Idea

“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” (Lines 12-18)

Complex Idea

Silver is valuable as a human construct. Humanity is inescapable. It is easier to kill an animal than to catch it. Likewise, the same can be said for ideas. Translucent items permit light through, but also diffuse it. This makes it difficult for opposite sides to see each other. (frosted glass)
PASTORAL EXAMPLES

Simple Idea:
"He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty, from unnumbered fish with that black old knife, the blade of which is almost worn away.” (Lines 38-40)

Complex Idea:
- Scales are torn away from the fish, it cannot thrive.
- A black old knife kills beauty and knowledge. Alludes to mindless killing and not reflecting on progress. There needs to be a re-examination of value.
CONCLUSIONS

• Nature is knowledge
• Animals are ideas
• Humans kill each other’s ideas and knowledge the same way they kill nature.
• Humans create translucent constructs and items, making it difficult for opposing sides to see each other and reconcile.
• The resolution is available in the re-examination of our actions and ideals/needs.
• Fish houses was chosen because it is a great scene to convey all of these ideas.
How does Bishop use shifting tones to express the change in her perspectives between each stanza?
ENJAMBMENT AND SHIFTS
(A HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP)

“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” (Lines 13-20)

Analysis:
• Fluid and calming
• Exposes beauty in the otherwise chilling scene
• Romanticizes the struggle
• Focus on impact of knowledge despite opposing forces
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”
(Lines 32-37)

Analysis:
• Slightly jarring and is interrupts the fluidity
• Emphasis on the importance of the lines
• Acknowledgement of the necessity of destruction for further development in other areas
“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” (Lines 41-46)

**Analysis**
- One long sentence as the whole stanza (amongst long stanzas) puts emphasis on the brief, yet meaningful contemplation
- Reconciliation between needs and ideals
- Final threshold between destruction and construction
ENJAMBMENT AND SHIFTS

(A HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP CONTINUED)

“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

ever, flowing and drawn, and since

our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown”

(Lines 78-83)

Analysis

• Rhythm similar to the lapping of an ocean
• Explicit and implicit acknowledgement of freedom
• Appreciation of the present and potential
• Reminiscing about the opportunity present within nature (and ideas)
REPETITION (WORDS)

- Repeated words
  - Iridescent (24-25)
  - Herring (35-36)
  - Down (45)
  - Seal (49)
  - Christmas (64-65)
  - Over (67)
  - Same (67)
  - Flowing (82-83)

- Repeated ideas
  - Nature
  - Tranquility
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.

**Analysis:**

- Christmas trees: like a bullet, this subtly breaks the pattern.
- Like the fish, the trees are nature, yet are destroyed for consumption by humans.
- Tone
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us, the dignified tall firs begin . . . . . . . . . . . .

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.

Analysis

• Long stanza is divided by repetition.

• Knowledge is objective and endless, we chose to color it.

• Seal (total immersion)
  – The sealing of your fate. (she was really punny here...)
  – Total immersion (we don’t really try to jump out of our situation. Maybe we can’t)
  – We structure everything as much as possible in the name of money and progress yet hinder creativity
  – Creativity versus communication (production of knowledge is therefore hindered)
All is **silver**: the heavy **surface** of the **sea**, swelling slowly as if considering spilling over, is opaque, but the **silver** of the benches,

**Analysis**

- **Hiss of the surf of the ocean**
- **Silver and blue**
- **Visual imagery repetition**
  - Emphasis
- **Resignation to the destruction without thought**
  - The fisherman’s livelihood in destruction of fish -> come to an end
  - Success is not carried by creativity
- **Recollection of memories**
  - Clear yet grey and muddled
QUESTIONS FOR YOU!

• What other significance does “At the Fishhouses” have regarding life and/or the human condition?
  – Memories?
  – Thought?
  – Go Vegan!
• What role does memory play in “At the Fishhouses?”
• What is the role of the old man? What does he represent?
QUESTIONS FOR US!