

Mastering the art of losing.

Introduction

This essay is mainly focused on Elizabeth Bishop's poem *One Art*, and the recurrent theme of "losing", depicted as an art, or as the poet might say: "the art of losing". This paper will also focus on the poem's form and the way in which the usage of certain conventions, such as tone, language, syntax (adjectives, adverbs and verbs) and form help to convey the poet's message, which suggests that loss can lead to the mastery of "the art of losing". The poem's title conveys the suggestion that its contents deal with the theme of art, which may be considered an irony; in the sense that as the reader goes through the lines he realizes that the poem is not about art, but about the "art of losing". This "art", as suggested in the poem, resembles an acquired and accomplished skill that results from the experience of losing insignificant things, which will lead, throughout the experience gained, to an art of losing rather important things in life.

The art of losing and the poem's form

Elizabeth Bishop's poem is structured in a way in which one may notice the poet's struggle in expressing herself. It seems as she is trying to state something different to what is being expressed. Chief among these conceptions there is a powerful sense of loss. She is able to achieve all this throughout the manipulation of language and form. Even the tone of the poem seems to avoid the real intended argument that the form of the poem tries to put forward (which will be discussed throughout this essay). As mentioned before in the

introduction, most of the poem is filled with irony. The first and most important indication of such irony is depicted in the refrain line: “the art of losing isn’t hard to master” (line 1). Throughout this ironic indication it becomes obvious that this poem is not about art, but about the “art of losing”, which becomes a skill that can only be acquired and accomplished through countless hours of practice. The irony held in the poem becomes evident by revealing that losing is an art. Without a doubt, it is ironic to see how a frustrating and difficult part of life can be considered an art.

The tone also changes in each of the stanzas. In the first stanza, Bishop speaks in tones of a rather experienced woman who has gone through situations which lead her to assert that “with the intent to be lost [...] their loss is no disaster” (lines 2-3). This, however, resembles the daily loss of keys, and time. Such parallelisms of lost things provide a temporary distraction that repels the reader away from the force built in the poem. Apparently the poet tries to hide her pain caused by the loss of a dear one, thinking that by embracing loss, she can master the art she is longing to obtain, “the art of losing”.

In the second stanza Bishop suggests the reader, throughout the usage of imperatives, to “lose something every day” and “accept the fluster” (line 4). Through the usage of imperatives and by sounding dominant, Bishop tells the reader that “the art of losing isn’t hard to master”. The only thing that is left is to “accept the fluster of lost door keys, the hour badly spent” (lines 4-5). Up to this point it seems as if the poet is trying to provide the reader with a guide devoted to the mastering of “art losing”. Suggesting that by following her simple advices, the reader can, too, achieve such art. It seems as if Bishop is trying to put

forward the philosophical reflection of the first stanza throughout imperatives and a second person speaker .

The third stanza intensifies the intention of the previous stanza in being developed as a command with a simple shift to “then”(line 7). Bishop puts forward an increasingly dynamic agenda devoted to loss, she commands the reader to “practice losing farther, losing faster” (line 7), but now she is not losing simple things. Bishop goes from losing simple things to losing “places, and names, and where it was you meant to travel” (line 8). It appears as if she is simply shifting the tone to a confessional one, since it has become evident, up to here, that Bishop is the one who speaks, which will become evident in the following stanza, she addresses the reader and shares her own experiences.

Throughout the poem, the changes in tone and speaker bestow the poet's efforts to cover up her true feelings. She goes from denying the importance of losing significant, but rather essential things , to the loss of personal belongings .

The usage of colloquial language intensifies the poems emotional power that has been hidden until now. The rhyme scheme Bishop employs and the usage of the “villanelle” appeal to put forward the intention and message of the poem, apart from lessening the seriousness of Bishop's true feelings. The poem in the fourth and fifth stanzas gains intensity, since the poet refers to the loss of properties, and places. She changes from second person to first person speaker. Her emotions are being revealed through the usage of adjectives to denote the importance those properties meant to her . Adjectives such as: Loved and lovely, reveal the poet's emotions which are gradually disclosed all the way

through the poem, although Bishop goes on denying the pain such loss represents by implying “*but* it wasn’t a disaster”(line 15).

In the final stanza, the tone of the poem has shifted radically; it has become a sad one which exposes the truth behind the poem. The poet is unable to put forward her intentions, it seems as if she is trying to surrender upon her denial of pain caused by the loss. She addresses a “you” and even uses the verb “love”, used to demonstrate the feeling that a certain gesture casts upon her. The loss of something so powerful as love has not yet been mastered. The real importance of this stanza relies in the usage of adverbs: “even losing you”, and “not too hard to master”(lines 16-18). The emphasis of such adverbs is carefully constructed in order to put forward the drama that reigns through the last stanza. Syntax in the poem increases the growing tension.

The loss of things suggested in the poem is used to support the idea that “the art of losing isn’t hard to master”. The poem opens up with the loss of insignificant things, these losses increase in importance and significance as the poem progresses, Bishop is trying to make the reader become familiar with “the art of losing”. By embracing loss, the poet takes control over the situation by deciding how she will master “the art of losing”, “a continent”, “two cities”(line 13) even a loved one, which is what she considers to be the biggest loss. The usage of the imperative “*write* it”(line 19), shows the poet’s struggle in finishing the last line or even the struggle she goes through in trying to say what she wants.

This poem is written in the form of a villanelle, Bishop ingeniously incorporates her writing into this form of poetic control to make evident the irony

of mastering the “art of losing” throughout the poem. Bishop’s usage of repetitions confirms her refusal and denial of pain caused by the loss of something or someone. The intensity of this poem relies in the usage of language.

Conclusion

As mentioned before, Elizabeth Bishop is able to project a message throughout her poem by means of language and poetical control; that is the successful usage of the villanelle used as a complement to her words and tone, although I attempt to say that the form of the poem is not in the structure itself but in the language.

The poem is written following the structure of a villanelle, “a French form of writing composed of five triplet stanzas, with the last one being a quatrain, and the first and third lines of the first stanza strategically placed throughout the remainder of the poem”¹. Through the usage of this verse form, Bishop is able to portray the irony of mastering “the art of losing”. The first and third lines are repeated throughout the poem; such repetition seems to be consistent in terms of rhythm and meaning. The usage of certain conventions such as: tone, rhyme scheme and language (especially the variations of formal and colloquial language and adjectives) appeal to reveal the poet’s feelings throughout the slight variations of line repetition and language. In addition, the poem raises an ironic question about the loss of things in life taken as an art.

At the beginning of the poem not much is disclosed regarding intention and meaning, but as the reader goes through the poem, the major

¹ Drabble, Margaret. *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*. P.590

circumstances of meaning and intention become obvious. By means of the shifts in speakers, Bishop is able to intensify the meaning and intention of the poem; she starts the first three stanzas by using a second person speaker which addresses a reader by suggesting certain actions throughout imperatives. She begins the fourth stanza by shifting from a second person narrator into a first person speaker to intensify the poem's meaning; by means of this the poet becomes involved in the poem making it personalized. As a general principle, the poem's major irony is that even the best and most enviable circumstances of life, referring to the loss of something or someone, contain inherent imperfections, such as pain and an unarticulated frustration that can be begotten by the loss of someone. Therefore, we can conclude by saying that mastering the "art of losing" is hard to master. The feeling caused by the loss of things can resemble ease in accepting the loss, whereas, in the last stanzas of the poem the loss refers to bigger rather significant things which go from personal things to people. The contrast relies in the loss itself, we as normal people are not ready or even prepared to lose the presence of people, therefore, the failure in the art of losing as mastery becomes evident.

Bibliography

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- Drabble, Margaret. *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*. London, Oxford University Press, 1968.