

One Art

In Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art", the poet's struggle with the persistency and consistency of her message that loss can yield to mastery echoes throughout the poem. This is evident as the poet attempts to demonstrate to the reader that she, herself, has done so, by means of her writing through an indecisive tone, specific things of loss, and disguised poetic control.

Throughout the poem, one may notice the poet's struggle in expressing herself—it is

almost as if she is trying to say two things at once, even implying the opposite with

precise manipulation of vernacular. The tone of the poem evades the truth of the

argument that the form of the poem (which will be discussed later on in the essay)

establishes. Each stanza is bathed in irony—"The art of losing isn't hard to master",

the refrain line of this poem is a very important one in depicting its first ironic

indication. This poem is not about art, but about the "art of losing", an acquired

and accomplished skill that results from countless hours of practice. The line's irony

holds its ground by revealing that losing is an art. Indeed, it is ironic to see how a

frustrating and annoying part of life can be considered an art. The tone also changes

within each of the stanzas. In the first stanza, Bishop speaks in tones of the survivor,

someone who has gone through an event and has lived to tell the reader that she has

seen these things "with the intent to be lost" and can conclude from them "that their

loss is no disaster". The second stanza encompasses a more instructional quality.

The survivor-poet now advises the reader to "lose something every day." By

sounding instructional, the poet assures the reader that "the art of losing isn't hard

to master" if he/she would simply "accept the fluster of lost door keys, the hour

badly spent". Follow these simple guidelines, and the reader can, too, master the art

of losing. Instantly, the third stanza intensifies the lesson with a simple shift to

“then”. A progressively forceful agenda of loss is planned when the poet instructs to “practice losing farther, losing faster”, but this time losing “places, and names, and where it was you meant/to travel...” By using “I”, the tone changes once more—it is now the poet who speaks from her own experiences and shares them with the reader—and her writing is now personalized and humanized. Through personalization, the reader can catch a glimpse into the poet’s thoughts and emotions—but only a glimpse at first, due to Bishop’s efforts to disguise her true feelings throughout the poem. Denying the difficulty of losing is quite evident throughout the poem. The use of colloquial speech seems to silence the emotional intensity the poem tries to keep undercover. The ABA rhyme scheme appeals to the ear and sounds jovial, consequently lessening the seriousness on the topic of her true feelings. Denial begins in the fourth stanza as the Bishop refers to her lost properties as “beloved”—displaying a fondness she had for those things in her life that she lost, slowly revealing her emotions. Her use of adjectives gradually discloses more emotion as the poem progresses with two “lovely” cities. “I miss them” is the next emotional step the poet reveals about herself, yet she is quick to pull out her defence mechanism of denial, “*but* it wasn’t a disaster”, just so no one sees her soft side. In the final stanza, the tone has completely changed again, this time it is a tone of breaking down. The “—” pause before the final stanza suggests that the poet needs to take a moment to recompose herself before finishing. After going through so much in the first five stanzas, she needs to take a breath before coming to her final conclusion. Decides to surrender her denial by using “love”—a powerful word, used to demonstrate a love she has for a certain gesture. In the last three lines, “I shan’t

have lied” reveals that she has indeed been denying this whole time that “the art of losing’s not too hard to master/though it may...” The words “too”, “though”, and “may” are excuses the poet uses to make up for her denial.

The examples of potential things to be lost presented in the poem are used to support the poet’s belief that “the art of losing isn’t hard to master”. The poem starts off with small losses and continually builds them up as the poem goes on. By supplying the reader with concrete, genuine examples of “lost door keys” and “the hour badly spent”, he/she can relate to the poem with some familiarity—people misplace their keys all the time, let alone waste an hour of their day watching television—and understand that losing those things “is no disaster”. Bishop’s examples are exact and avoid exaggeration in order to relate the true feelings of loss. From “places, and names, and where it was you meant/ to travel”, to a more personal loss such as a family heirloom and houses—the poet seeks to expand both the number of losses and the content of those losses to reassure the reader (and quite possibly herself) that control is possible. By embracing loss, Bishop makes it seem like she has authority over the series of losses she plans on mastering. She even goes as far as losing cities, rivers, and a continent—the final stage of her gradual build-up to the climax—to express the fact that, in the final stanza, the ultimate loss is the loss of a beloved person. The sixth stanza is now directed to “you”—probably not the reader, but to someone Bishop knew quite well and cherished. This final, and most personal example of loss is one that the poet is still struggling with as evident

throughout the entire poem with her denial. This is the loss she talks about as being the greatest loss of all.

This poem is written in the form 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. Bishop ingeniously incorporates her writing into this strict and cohesive form of poetic control to portray the irony of mastering the art of loss throughout the poem. The poet's denial is once again confirmed as the first and third lines are repeated throughout the poem in slight variations—"but it wasn't a disaster" and "the art of losing's not too hard to master"—as the reader gradually arrives at the end of the poem. The brilliance of this poem lies in the full picture of this magnificent piece of writing. Bishop uses the villanelle form to control the uncontrollable—her tremendous grief and sadness from the loss of a person. After careful consideration of this poem, one can safely deduce that the poet's mastery sought over loss is indeed closely related to poetic control. The use of the parenthetical injunction enables the reader to see how far the poet has come since the beginning of the poem. The poet has finally broken down at the last stanza, and tries her best to deny that losing will bring disaster. "Though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster"—the poet does a considerable amount of struggling to finish writing this line. The repetition of "like" delays the arrival of the word the poet has been trying to push away this whole time—yet she knows she cannot lie to herself (or the reader) anymore and she must "Write it!" even though it goes against her

lesson plan. The poet goes through the act of recognition by writing it down and forces herself to admit it and face the facts.

Art's connection to loss is portrayed as one of irony in this piece of writing. An art is an acquired and accomplished skill derived from countless hours of practice and trial and error. Loss is an inevitable aspect of life that can result in disheartening emotions. Bishop successfully combines the two in an ironic playfulness that works in concurrence with extreme seriousness. It seems as though her message tells the reader to practice losing things, because once he/she loses enough things, the biggest most important losses will not be so difficult to overcome, mainly because he/she has practiced and is used to losing things.

Bishop's internal conflict is evident through her display of denial throughout the poem. Although she puts in a great deal of effort to disguise her true feelings about the mastery of loss through a number of precise, poetic devices, careful analysis of this poem reveals what she intended to hide. The magnificence in this poem comes from the poet's ability to use a strict, controlled poetic form, like the villanelle, to express such powerfully, uncontrollable emotions through writing.