Loss in One Art and A Temporary Matter

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Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art" and Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "A Temporary Matter" examine loss through very different forms, yet both resist the comforting idea that grief can be mastered once a person learns the correct lesson. Bishop's speaker turns losing into a repeated exercise, moving from misplaced objects toward places and finally a beloved person, while the strict villanelle gives emotional disturbance an appearance of formal control. Lahiri places bereavement inside a marriage after Shoba and Shukumar's stillborn child, showing grief through neglected routines, silence, work, food, and the physical spaces of their home. In both works, language creates temporary order without eliminating pain. Bishop's refrain becomes less convincing as the stakes rise, and Lahiri's confessional game briefly restores intimacy before revealing how far the marriage has changed. Read together, the texts suggest that acceptance is not emotional indifference. It is the difficult recognition that loss cannot be reversed, even when attachment, memory, and sorrow continue to shape the survivor's life (Bishop, 1976; Lahiri, 1999; Ramazani, 1994).

Form as an Attempt to Master Loss

Bishop's use of the villanelle is central to the argument because the form requires repetition at the exact moment when the speaker wants to prove that repetition can train the mind to endure loss. The poem begins with objects and missed opportunities that appear manageable: keys, time, names, and places can be lost without destroying the self. Each refrain therefore sounds initially like a practical maxim. As the poem proceeds, however, the examples grow more intimate and less interchangeable. Houses, cities, rivers, and a continent carry memory and identity, so their disappearance cannot be measured on the same scale as a misplaced key. The fixed pattern becomes both discipline and pressure. Each return to the claim that losing is easy forces the speaker to restate a position that the poem increasingly undermines. The final parenthetical command to "Write it!" exposes the labor required to name the beloved's loss as disaster. Artistic control remains real, but emotional mastery is partial; the poem succeeds because form contains grief without pretending to abolish it (Bishop, 1976; Ramazani, 1994).

When Practice Reaches the Beloved

The poem's movement from ordinary things toward the unnamed beloved also complicates the meaning of practice. Repeated minor losses may teach flexibility, but they do not make major bereavement equivalent to routine inconvenience. Bishop's speaker tries to create continuity by treating every disappearance as another instance of the same art, yet the final stanza breaks that logic through hesitation, punctuation, and attention to personal gesture and voice. The beloved is not merely one more item in an inventory; the person carries a history of intimacy that cannot be replaced by another object or place. The poem therefore stages a conflict between cognition and attachment. Intellectually, the speaker can classify loss, observe that survival continues, and even produce a technically controlled poem. Emotionally, the speaker cannot make the final loss harmless. This distinction matters because resilience is often misunderstood as freedom from grief. Bishop instead presents resilience as the ability to speak and continue while acknowledging the wound. The poem's discipline gives grief a shape, but the increasingly unstable refrain ensures that readers hear the cost of maintaining that shape (Bishop, 1976).

Grief Inside the Lahiri Household

Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" approaches the same problem through domestic realism rather than poetic repetition. Shoba and Shukumar remain in the same house after their baby's stillbirth, but their shared routines no longer create a shared life. Shukumar withdraws from academic work and everyday self-care, while Shoba spends more time away from home and abandons many of the domestic habits that once structured the marriage. The story does not assign one correct method of mourning. Their different responses become dangerous because neither can interpret the other's behavior as grief, and silence gradually replaces mutual recognition. The scheduled evening power outages interrupt this pattern by creating an artificial interval in which they eat together and exchange secrets. Darkness makes disclosure easier because it suspends ordinary expectations and gives conversation a rule. Like Bishop's villanelle, the game is a form imposed on emotional disorder. It helps them approach what they have avoided, but it cannot guarantee reconciliation because communication may reveal differences as clearly as it restores intimacy (Lahiri, 1999; Clewell, 2004).

Confession Without Guaranteed Repair

The confessions become more consequential each evening until Shoba announces that she has rented an apartment and intends to leave. Shukumar then reveals that he held their dead child and knows the baby's sex and appearance, information he had withheld because Shoba had said she did not want to know. The exchange is painful because truth functions simultaneously as intimacy, retaliation, and acknowledgement. Lahiri refuses the therapeutic assumption that disclosure always heals. Speaking can reconnect people, but it can also clarify that a relationship has changed beyond repair.

The final image of the couple crying together is therefore neither a simple reconciliation nor a clean separation. They share grief at the very moment they accept that their marriage may not survive it. This ending parallels Bishop's final admission of disaster: both works reach greater honesty by surrendering the claim that emotional order equals emotional freedom. The survivors gain language for what has happened, but language does not return the child, the beloved, or the earlier version of the relationship (Lahiri, 1999; Clewell, 2004).

Control, Acceptance, and Continuing Bonds

The comparison becomes most revealing when control is treated as a temporary strategy rather than a permanent solution. Bishop's speaker uses meter, rhyme, repetition, and classification; Shoba uses work, planning, and eventually the concrete decision to move; Shukumar uses withdrawal and delayed disclosure. Each strategy protects the person from being overwhelmed, but each also creates distance from what cannot be fully controlled. The works therefore challenge a linear model in which grief moves neatly from denial to acceptance and then disappears. Acceptance can coexist with anger, longing, attachment, or renewed pain, and people may continue bonds with what has been lost while reorganizing daily life (Clewell, 2004). The texts also show why literature is valuable for representing bereavement: it can preserve contradiction without forcing a clinical diagnosis or moral judgment. Bishop's controlled form makes emotional instability audible, while Lahiri's ordinary household details show grief entering routine behavior. Both writers suggest that survival depends less on becoming detached than on finding forms through which pain can be recognized without becoming the only possible future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "One Art" and "A Temporary Matter" present loss as an experience that people repeatedly try to organize but cannot completely master. Bishop's villanelle turns control into a formal experiment whose confidence weakens as the losses become more intimate, while Lahiri shows a marriage using routine, silence, darkness, and confession to approach a grief that has altered both partners. Neither work argues that acceptance creates a stress-free life or that detachment is the final proof of recovery. Instead, each distinguishes continuing life from emotional erasure. The speaker in "One Art" can write the word disaster and still remain wounded; Shoba and Shukumar can cry together and still move toward separation. Their language does not reverse what happened, but it makes the reality of loss shareable. The deeper connection between the works is therefore ethical as well as emotional: both respect grief by refusing easy consolation. They show that resilience may consist of acknowledging irreversible change, maintaining memory, and continuing to act even when attachment ensures that some losses remain painful (Bishop, 1976; Lahiri, 1999; Ramazani, 1994).

References

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