

Questions of Travel By Elizabeth Bishop

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Voices and Visions

*“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
To imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
About just sitting quietly in one’s room?”*

The above-mentioned stanza from “Questions of Travel” by Elizabeth Bishop caught my attention the most. The importance of travelling is highlighted and favoured over staying at home. Elizabeth asks herself if travelling around different places indicates a lack of imagination. She referred to Blaise Pascal here, who was the French philosopher, physicist, and mathematician of the 17th century. He once said that the main reason behind a person’s unhappiness is that he isn’t aware of how to remain quiet in his room. Elizabeth does not appear to agree with Pascal’s stance by asking if Pascal could have been “not entirely right” in what he stated. I think that it isn’t the lack of imagination that urges us to travel to places. Rather, travelling around and observing things enhances and shapes our imagination more creatively.

A person who travels around the world will have a different imagination than a person who stays at home living in his imaginative world. A person can be imaginative living in his bubble, but travelling will verify and refine that imagination. Mary McCarthy, a writer, says, “I would like to have been Elizabeth, I think, to have had those wonderful and very amusing images inhabiting my mind” (learner.org). This shows how Elizabeth Bishop used her imagination and incorporated her imaginative world into her works. I think even the way she questions herself, that is, the imagination that leads us to journey to different places, is one of the many pieces of evidence of her imaginative nature. Thus, this stanza plays the role of a thesis and a central idea of the whole poem.

“I knew that nothing stranger

Had it ever happened, that nothing

Stranger could ever happen.”

“In the Waiting Room” by Elizabeth Bishop is an interesting poem in which Elizabeth reads a magazine while sitting in a waiting room, waiting for her aunt, who has gone for a checkup at the dentist. The date written in the magazine caught her attention, and she realized that exactly after three days, she would turn seven years old. This realization made her astonished and worried that one day, she would also be an adult and would become like her aunt. In this stanza, she admits that the feelings and emotions she was going through after this realization were the strangest of all the feelings. I think that not every kid of this age might have ever thought or got worried about becoming one of the adults. It’s very rare to listen to a going-to-be seven-year-old questioning why she should be an adult like her aunt. “The moment of a child first experiencing her own or his identity, and that moment of terror and panic and alienation, and how that was a fundamental experience in the life of the child” (learner.org). This poem attracted me in a way that shows how such a young child realizes the reality and truth of life that one day, she will also be one of the adults and suffer from the same problems and issues that the adults undergo. And I think this realization and panic of being an adult is very rare at this age, particularly being expressive about it and also expressing it this way through a poem. I believe this poem shows Elizabeth’s sensibility and sensitivity towards the reality of life and the world.

*“The shooting stars in your black hair
in bright formation
are flocking where
so straight, so soon?
Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin
battered and shiny like the moon.”*

This stanza is from the poem “The Shampoo” by Elizabeth Bishop, and this poem is considered to be the most romantic piece of Elizabeth. It’s about the feelings of love and romanticism between Elizabeth and her friend Lota, with whom she spent many years in Brazil. I think this poem reflects Elizabeth’s sensitive, emotional, and romantic nature. She tells her friend how her black, straight hair seems like a stream of shiny stars when washed in the moonlight. The whole poem takes the readers inside Elizabeth’s mind and imagination and describes how it would feel to touch and wash Lota’s black, shiny hair in the moonlight. What a distinctive and romantic sight it would be. “I think this poem, The Shampoo, talks about this very daily matter and a practical matter to clean your hair, and

who becomes a kind of cosmic meeting of not only two persons, but I should say, of two planets or two stars, and that is also an insinuation of this metaphor of the skies, and the shampoo is a metaphor for love. She never talks about love in this poem. But it's a love poem" (learner.org). Even this poem of Elizabeth depicts how creative her mind was in the matter of art and poetry. A person with typical thinking can't connect ordinary objects like shampoo to matters of love or any other deep subject. I think the connection she made between the shampoo and her love for her friend is simply marvellous and stuns the readers regarding her deep personality, feelings, and thoughts.

Works Cited

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