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**ELUSIVE FEMINISM: GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS
IN THE POETRY OF ELIZABETH BISHOP**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá způsob, jakým Elizabeth Bishopová pojímá témata a problémy, které jsou běžně považované za feministické, a to jak ve své poezii, tak ve svém osobním životě. Bishopová se sama označovala za feministku, přesto se však její pojetí feminismu značně vymykalo převládajícímu soudobému chápání této problematiky. Její feminismus se vyznačuje velkým důrazem kladeným na smysl pro rovnost, který se pak odráží jak v její poezii, tak ve způsobu, kterým si jako autorka přála být vnímaná. Bishopová se vyhýbá typické feministické strategii a rozhodně odmítá potenciální zaujatost ve prospěch ženské identity, pokud by to mělo být na úkor genderové neutrality jejího díla. Stejně tak pevně odmítá i separatistický tón feminismu, který za jejího života převládal, a dokonce jej označuje za zcela odporující myšlenku feminismu. Tato práce zkoumá koncepci feminismu Bishopové ze dvou hledisek: její obecné interakce s feministickými názory a myšlenkami a jak se tyto odrážejí přímo v jejích básních.

První kapitola této práce se zaměřuje na širší feministický rámec. Slouží jako teoretický úvod k příslušným feministickým a genderovým teoriím, i jako pozadí pro porozumění básním Bishopové s ohledem na feminismus a feministickou problematiku. To zahrnuje nejen obecný dobový kulturní kontext, ale také to, jak se tento kontext zrcadlí v literatuře a jak byly vnímány ženské autorky soudobou kritikou. Tato kapitola dále zkoumá vztah samotné Bishopové k feministické doktríně a její vlastní osobité pojetí feminismu. Nakonec porovnává Bishopovou s dalšími básnířkami té doby, a to jak s těmi, ke kterým bývá připodobňována, tak s těmi, které jsou obvykle považovány za její protiklady.

Druhá kapitola zkoumá, jak se koncepty diskutované v první kapitole odrážejí přímo v básních Bishopové. Rozbor vybraných básní slouží jako ukázka jejího neutrálního, objektivního postoje k otázkám, kterým se feministické autorky zpravidla věnují. Kapitola se zabývá tím, jakým způsobem Bishopová ve svých básních používá gender, tedy jak ztvárňuje mužské a ženské postavy a zároveň jak problematizuje binární kategorizaci genderu. V závěru práce zkoumá, jak Bishopová reaguje na vývoj v lyrické poezii, který odráží feministické přehodnocení maskulinní tradice, a analyzuje, jak Bishopová vytváří své lyrické subjekty.

Klíčová slova: Elizabeth Bishop, feminismus, ženská literatura, gender, americká poezie 20. století, genderová identita, lyrická poezie

Abstract

This thesis explores the way Elizabeth Bishop grasps the themes and issues usually understood as feminist, both in her poetry and in her life. Bishop identified herself as a strong feminist, yet her feminism defies the conventional understanding of the doctrine prevalent at her time. Her conception of feminism is characteristic for its strong sense of egalitarianism, which reflects both in her poetry and in the way in which she wished to be perceived. Bishop avoids a distinctly feminist strategy and decisively refuses the potential bias in favor of feminine identity, should it be at the expense of gender-neutral worth of her work. Similarly, she firmly rejects the separatist tone of the type of feminism which prevailed during her lifetime and even discards it as thoroughly unfeminist. The thesis examines Bishop's conception of feminism from two points of view: Bishop's general interactions with feminist thoughts and ideas and how they reflect specifically in her poetry.

The first chapter of the thesis focuses on the wider feminist framework. It serves as a necessary theoretical introduction to relevant feminist and gender theories, as well as a broader background for the understanding of Bishop's work with regard to feminism and feminist issues. This includes the general cultural context, but also its reflection in literature and the critical reception of female authors at that time. Accordingly, it also examines Bishop's own relation to feminist doctrine and her specific conception of feminism and compares her to other female poets of her time, both the ones she tends to be likened to and the ones who are usually presented as her counterparts.

The second chapter explores how the concepts discussed in the first chapter are reflected in Bishop's poetry. The close readings of selected Bishop's poems serve to manifest Bishop's neutral, objective attitude toward issues generally explored by feminist writers. It examines Bishop's employment of gender in her poetry, that is her portrayals of men and women as well as her challenging of the conventional binary gender categories. The thesis concludes with Bishop's response to the developments in lyric poetry, which reflect the feminist rethinking of the masculine tradition in lyric poetry, and with an analysis of the way Bishop constructs her poetic personae.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bishop, feminism, women's writing, gender, 20th-century American poetry, gender identity, lyric poetry

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1. Introduction

“To be, or not to be, ‘a woman’; to write or not ‘as a woman’; to espouse an egalitarianism which sees sexed manifestations as blocks on the road to full democracy; to love theories of difference which don’t anticipate their own dissolution.”¹ With these words, the poet Denise Riley encapsulates the dilemma that has been rehearsed endlessly throughout the history of feminist literature. Written nearly a decade after the death of Elizabeth Bishop, this statement articulates the most substantial anxieties that women writers, at least in the eyes of feminist critics, faced during Bishop’s lifetime. However, while most of Bishop’s female contemporaries who pronounced themselves feminist writers embraced the path of difference, taking arms against a sea of troubles – to follow in a corresponding Shakespearean fashion – and advocating a distinctly feminine way of writing, Bishop chose a path of an unusual egalitarianism.

While she strongly disapproved of the women’s movement and refused the idea of the reflection of feminist thought in poetry, Bishop did consider herself a feminist.² The key to her conception of feminism can be found in her refusal of the idea of separatism of the sexes, which for her included also any form of positive discrimination. Bishop opposed any form of discrimination on the basis of one’s gender, that is both positive and negative. Similarly, in her poetry, she defied the potential bias in favor of feminine identity, should it be at the expense of the gender-neutral worth of her work. Avoiding a distinctly feminist strategy adopted for example by Adrienne Rich, Bishop creates a poetic space in which an overt expression of gender struggle gives way to implications.

As Bishop explained in a letter to Anne Stevenson, she “thought of herself as being born into a certain era, situation, decorum, and for that reason she could never truly breathe freely – or sing gaily in full-throated ease.”³ Therefore, the first chapter of this thesis will focus on the wider framework of the time in which Bishop lived and wrote, and also more specifically on how Bishop herself understood the concept of feminism in general. The first part of the chapter will provide the cultural context of the time in which Bishop wrote, from the larger social

¹ Denise Riley, *‘Am I That Name?’: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988) 113.

² See Sheila Hale, “Women Writers in America,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 113.

³ Marilyn May Lombardi, “The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 38.2 (1992): 170, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/441616> 2 Sept. 2019.

climate, to its more specific reflection in literature, and the still more specific critical reception of female authors at that time. Inevitably, all of these contributed to the formation of Bishop's ideas and personality and thus represent a key factor for the understanding not only of her poetry, but also of the shaping of her literary career. The second part of the chapter will examine Bishop's own relation to feminist doctrine. Expounding on the background provided in the first part of the chapter, the second part of the chapter will first explore Bishop's peculiar conception of feminism and then proceed to a more particular comparison between Bishop and her female poet contemporaries.

The second chapter will then focus on how Bishop's conception of feminism reflected in her poetry. Again, the chapter is divided into two parts, each focusing on a different angle from which Bishop's poetry may be discussed with regard to feminism. The first part of the chapter will explore Bishop's employment of gender in her poetry. This includes not only an analysis of her portrayals of men and women respectively, but also a demonstration of how she subverts traditional gender conventions by challenging and transcending clear-cut binary categories of gender. Finally, the second part of the chapter will introduce a discussion on how Bishop answers both to the masculine tradition in lyric poetry and its feminist rethinking. After a necessary theoretical introduction to the development of that tradition, the chapter will conclude with an examination of Bishop's own approach to the lyric mode, with special attention paid to the way Bishop employs the lyric "I" and constructs her poetic personae.

2. The Feminist Framework: Elizabeth Bishop and Her Literary Milieu

When read from a feminist perspective, Elizabeth Bishop's poetry has a tendency to be interpreted in remarkably contrasting ways. To better comprehend the reasons behind such a diversity of readings, it is essential to understand also the larger context to Bishop's work, as an awareness of Bishop's views on gender-related issues outside of her poetry or even her prose helps to determine the position of Bishop's poetry in the feminist doctrine. This chapter will thus focus on the cultural context of Bishop's life and work, as well as her interactions with feminism in general. Apart from the necessary theoretical introduction to relevant feminist and gender theories, it will serve as a broader background for Bishop's grasp of feminism and feminist concerns both in her life and in her work. Both the wider feminist background and Bishop's own views will be examined not only through the lens of a particular generation, past or present, but also from the perspective of how it evolved and changed over the time. Subsequently, to understand more deeply Bishop's place among other female poets of her time, both from the critical point of view and her own perspective, the chapter will also consider Bishop's work, and by extension her more general viewpoint, as compared to other female poets of her time, both the ones she tends to be likened to and the ones who are usually presented as her counterparts.

2.1. Cultural Context

Elizabeth Bishop's work spans over a period of time which witnessed an unprecedented series of changes in the way gender stereotypes, feminism and by extension also female (though not necessarily feminist) writers were understood, generally accepted or inevitably also trivialized and ridiculed. In order to more profoundly comprehend Bishop's specific position in the various social and literary milieus, as well as her attitude towards individual aspects of the environment in which she lived and wrote and by which she was also, at least partially, naturally formed, this section will focus on the theoretical, social and literary background to Bishop's work. That includes first a brief introduction to the social climate during Bishop's life, especially the status of women in the society and its development over the course of the century and the related advance of feminism, then a more particular discussion of its reflection in

literature in connection to general transformations in the field and finally a critical reception of literary works written by women and their feminist reading.

2.1.1. Social Climate

Bishop was born in 1911, a year in which the first wave of feminism was approaching its last decade. Since the half of the 19th century, first-wave feminism strived to achieve a greater level of equality for women, focusing predominantly on legal rights. It reached its pinnacle in 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed and granted women the right to vote. Its focus on the fight for women's suffrage resulted in the support of a wider spectrum of people than the later, more radical waves of feminism, as it attracted even those whose views were more moderate (both women and men), although even first-wave feminism included more radical fractions aiming to achieve further legal reforms, such as those of higher education, property laws or matrimonial laws, and a more equal social role of women in general.¹

With the coming of World War II women started to acquire more diverse roles in the social structure. The war created the necessity for women to take on the jobs previously performed exclusively by men and as a result, women obtained also new work benefits and overall better work conditions.² However, in this regard, the post-war era brought a frustrating setback. While the work conditions of women did improve in comparison to those before World War II, this trend was not to continue in the post-war years, as men returning after the war resumed their old jobs for higher salaries and with better conditions than the women who were doing them during the war.³ Apart from the factual step back in equalizing women's rights, or at least a disruption in the progress, there was a strong propagation of idealized womanhood in mass media and popular culture, such as in magazines, advertisements or television.⁴

The ideal woman in the years following World War II was in direct opposition to the efforts pursued by feminists. She was not seeking her own independence but was happy enough to take care of the domestic bliss, pleasing her husband and raising children. Betty Friedan in

¹ Rory Cooke Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008) 40-43.

² Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L. Castledine, eds., *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985* (New York: Routledge, 2011) 3-5.

³ Ruth Milkman, *On Gender, Labor, and Inequality, Working Class in American History* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016) 83.

⁴ Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 10.

her 1963 landmark feminist book *The Feminine Mystique* describes this strongly endorsed model of exemplary womanhood:

[Women in the post-war era] were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. Some women, in their forties and fifties, still remembered painfully giving up those dreams, but most of the younger women no longer even thought about them. A thousand expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.⁵

Those who failed to imitate the ideal, or worse, those who did not even attempt to do so, were stigmatized, judged and ridiculed.

Nevertheless, this shift in perspective also inevitably provoked an opposing reaction in the more independently thinking women. The idealized domesticity started to be questioned by an increasing number of people, especially writers, and finally resulted in the second wave of feminism. Most notably, it was the publication of Friedan's book that sparked the ideological change and gave voice to women who found themselves unhappy in their home life.⁶ The lack of options that a woman under the strong social pressure had in her life became a major topic in the feminist debate of the time. Unlike the first wave of feminism, second-wave feminism did not settle for women's suffrage and widened its goal to a much broader sense of gender justice, including that outside of the legal system. Where first-wave feminists focused on the legal status of women, second-wave feminists demanded also a change of the general cultural and social perception of women and their role.

Second-wave feminism emerged when Bishop was in her fifties and lasted approximately until the early 1980s, spanning thus over the last two decades of Bishop's life. During this period, feminists managed to achieve a great deal, most importantly in the perception of the role of women in the society and integrating them into institutions that were previously inaccessible to women. However, arguably the most important change that had to be made was in the approach of women themselves, as a majority of women were comfortable in their role – at least according to the anti-feminist voices. Martha Weinman Lear reflected this concern in her well-known 1968 article "The Second Feminist Wave": "In the anti-feminist view, the status quo is plenty good enough. In the feminist view, it is a sellout: American women

⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) 16.

⁶ Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology, and Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 42.

have traded their rights for their comfort, and now are too comfortable to care.”⁷ Bishop was thus a member of the generation who grew up in the atmosphere of the success of women’s suffrage, but then witnessed the disintegration of the progression towards gender equality and general women’s fading interest in their rights, which the feminists felt needed to be reawakened.

2.1.2. Reflection in Literature

The development that occurred in the society necessarily reflected also in literature. The twentieth century saw a series of unprecedented changes in social order and artists naturally followed in the same direction. Modernism was the literary movement that held sway in the early part of the century, with Ezra Pound’s famous exhortation, “Make it new,” turning into an epitome of the modernist way of writing. For modernist writers, writing served as a means of expressing their reaction to the abrupt transformations in the society and of its vital concepts. Modernist literature in general answered not only to the technological progress and the rise of capitalism and by extension consumerism, but also to the newly arising notion of internationalism, nihilism and the related doubts about the sense of living, a revised understanding of social roles and the individual and finally an examination, more profound than ever before, of the concepts of gender and sexuality. Meanwhile, more specifically, modernist poetry moved from the iambic pentameter to free verse and on the whole aimed towards the abstract. However, most importantly, the primary focus shifted toward the representation of consciousness, subjectivity and the interior of the mind and its processes, rather than a realistic representation of one’s life.⁸

Arguably the most eminent modernist, T. S. Eliot, defined a poem as “a verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling”⁹ and this definition set an authoritative example for many future generations of poets. Despite all the diversity of the modernists, one critical method prevailed. New Criticism, with its approach that poetry should be studied as a definite genre, a poem should be understood as an autonomous aesthetic object and that the best way of

⁷ Martha Weinman Lear, “The Second Feminist Wave,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 10 March 1968: 250 <<https://nyti.ms/2XQQMrG>> 3 June 2019.

⁸ Peter Childs, *Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 3-5.

⁹ Quoted in Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets: Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Sylvia Plath* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005) xv.

analyzing poetry was close reading, dominated literary theory and it owed a great deal to Eliot.¹⁰ In what is perhaps his best-known essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot states that the mind and the personality of a poet is merely a medium for the poem, not its focal point: “Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.”¹¹ Or once more in Eliot’s words, “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”¹²

Bishop’s generation could hardly avoid the influence of a model of such significance. Yet, as Adam Kirsch notes, this heritage proved to be a rather double-edged sword:

To write in the wake of such giants was a mixed blessing. The Modernists had restored poetry to the position of a serious art, one that could – as [Robert] Lowell wrote – “take a man’s full weight and . . . bear his complete intelligence, passion and subtlety.” But at the same time, their huge success left the younger generation at a disadvantage. A young poet in the 1930s was faced with a body of poetry and criticism so authoritative that it took courage, and ingenuity, simply to avoid being crushed by it.¹³

For a young poet, beginning to write in the literary climate of the great modernists posed a considerable challenge. In any field of human creation, there is always the inevitable tendency towards some progression, meaning that the new generation of poets could hardly simply follow the stated modernist characteristics and goals. Nevertheless, the standard was set so high that it was immensely difficult both to follow or innovate the tradition and to break away from it completely.

In addition to these formal and critical advancements, modernism reacted to the changing position of women in the society, giving voice to the unconventional feminist thoughts and ideas. Before delving into a more detailed discussion of the influence of feminist ideas specifically on poetry, which will follow in the chapter on Bishop’s poetic strategy, let us now briefly introduce the general connection between the developments in literature and the feminist doctrine. Modernist writing is typically characterized not only by the already mentioned focus on subjectivity and the workings of consciousness, but also by its formal and linguistic innovations. Accordingly, when feminist aesthetics is claimed to be intrinsically

¹⁰ See Garrick Davis, ed., *Praising it New: The Best of the New Criticism* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press / Ohio University Press, 2008).

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 2014) 9.

¹² Eliot 10.

¹³ Kirsch xii.

modernist or avant-garde, especially in contrast to realist aesthetics, it alludes to both of these interpretations.¹⁴

As Jane Dowson argues, the 1930s poets were confronted with a new aesthetic freedom for women, which enabled them to rework conventional representations of women.¹⁵ Furthermore, Dowson observes, women like H.D., Amy Lowell, Mina Loy, Marianne Moore, Laura Riding and Gertrude Stein themselves gave impetus to modernist formal experimentations and despite the fact that “the poetry is rarely woman-centered, its subversions of traditional syntax and forms are feminist strategies for breaking and entering the traditions from which women had been excluded.”¹⁶ The combination of said innovations, in terms of both content and style, ensured the disparity between the poet and the poetic persona. This concept resulted in the possibility for a woman writer to adopt a different female or even a male persona, an option that then allowed them to explore a wider spectrum of tropes or to satirize gender stereotypes.

However, what should be understood is that such an unprecedented level of freedom in writing and publishing, as women suddenly had, at the same time led to an increased insecurity in men, now their masculine identity had been challenged. Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own*, a pivotal text for feminist literature, explains:

No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own; those innumerable books by men about women in the British Museum are a proof of it. The Suffragette campaign was no doubt to blame. It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon their own sex and its characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged.¹⁷

This can be related to the whole Anglo-American environment, though there were naturally some differences due to the general social diversity pertaining to the particular geographic location.

The need for men's self-assertion later came with an even greater intensity in the years following World War II. Once men got the chance to adapt to said confrontation of their identity with the newly awakened women's self-awareness, suddenly the war changed the tune again. The socio-economic reasons discussed earlier in the chapter re-established the patriarchal

¹⁴ Laura Marcus, “Feminist Aesthetics and the New Realism,” *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 2012) 12-13.

¹⁵ Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910-1939: Resisting Femininity* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 12.

¹⁶ Dowson 7.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005) 98.

arrangement and established an overly feminine and overly masculine ideal, causing another crisis of masculinity, only this time it was the huge impact of mass culture and the advertisement dictate, fostered by extensive political propaganda, that was to blame.¹⁸ The frustration from not being able to live up to the ideal put an enormous pressure on both women and men, which further deepened the gap between authors and the model promoted by the mainstream society, but also between women and men themselves. Therefore, the late 1960s and early 1970s explosion of women's poetry, as Suzanne Juhasz puts it, was also linked to the formation of new poetic forms. She explains that "much of what [the woman poet] knows does not link up to universals because the universals presently in existence are based upon masculine experience, masculine norms."¹⁹ In this sense, women were thus driven to create their own poetic forms to avoid the masculine experience rooted in the old forms, since those were formed by it. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

2.1.3. Critical Reception of Female Authors

The same stereotypes which prevailed in the society pervaded not only literature, as has been discussed earlier in the chapter, but even the literary criticism of works written by women. As a consequence, even authors that were generally considered to be literary innovators and critical of the traditional genres and tropes often had the conventional, conservative, and sometimes even patronizing, views when it came to female authors. Literary works by women were (and even nowadays far too often still are) considered to be inherently sentimental, just like women themselves.²⁰ The sentimental was frequently put into contrast with the intellectual – with men as representatives of intellect and women those of sentiment.

Suzanne Clark argues that "from the point of view of literary modernism, sentimentality was both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised." With respect to said connection between women and sentimentality, it can come as no surprise that this condemnation of the sentimental was gendered. Clark goes on to explain that from this point of view, "women writers were entangled into sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature,

¹⁸ See Davidson 1-27. For further information on the influence of political propaganda on the gender roles model, see K. A. Cuordileone, "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960," *The Journal of American History*, 87.2 (2000): 515-545, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/2568762> 29 Aug. 2019. For further information on CIA's secret program of cultural interventions in general, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 2000).

¹⁹ Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition* (New York: Octagon Books, 1976) 139.

²⁰ For various examples, see Dowson 15-21.

and so even the best might not altogether escape this romantic indulgence in emotion and sublimity, or so it might seem to a criticism anxious to make distinctions.”²¹ As Dowson clarifies, this association was also the reason why women writers have been largely obscured from modernist histories.²² Under these circumstances, progressive female authors had a hard time fighting against the prejudice that their work was inevitably unintellectual and proving that they deserve their place in the literary canon.

The issue of male-dominated criticism can be very clearly seen for instance in an analysis of such an eminent scholar as John Crowe Ransom. In his essay on the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, “The Woman as Poet,” Ransom denounces Millay as too emotional and intellectually unchallenging, a view from which her reputation suffered for many decades to follow.²³ Ransom’s essay with its acknowledgement of what was considered to be male qualities in poetry and belittling of the capacity of female poets to outgrow the category of sentimental, lesser “vein of poetry,”²⁴ has since then become an often-quoted example of anti-feminist criticism. This bigotry was so strongly rooted that it survived more or less for the full length of Bishop’s creative life.

A clear example of the impact that the encompassing atmosphere this mentality had on men was the poet Robert Lowell.²⁵ Kathleen Spivack, his friend and former student, remembers how in his classes, he would evaluate poets as “major or minor.” Women almost inevitably ended up categorized as minor.²⁶ The highest praise given to a woman poet by a male poet still was that “she writes like a man.” According to Spivack, both Muriel Rukeyser and Denise Levertov had, for Lowell, “disqualified themselves [...] by celebrating the vagina, thereby managing to offend both Boston propriety and male prerogative in a few quick scribbles.”²⁷ The prejudice against women writers was directed especially to women writers who strived to

²¹ Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and The Revolution of The Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 2.

²² Dowson 19.

²³ For a re-evaluation of Millay’s poetry, see for example John Timberman Newcomb, “The Woman as Political Poet: Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Mid-Century Canon,” *Criticism* 37.2 (1995): 261–279, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/23116550> 1 July 2019.

²⁴ See John Crowe Ransom, *The World’s Body* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1938) 76-110.

²⁵ Spivack explains that “the typical ‘Proper Bostonian’ was white, straight, quietly wealthy, land-rich, Protestant, and, if male, preferably a banker or lawyer. The ethnicities were ghettoized. In public, poets like Bishop as well as Lowell, so conscious of family, society, and schooling, went out of their way to assume protective coloration. The pressures on them to ‘conform’ were intense. As did many New England writers past and present, Lowell and Bishop forged an uneasy accommodation with Boston and the larger region, which did not entirely accept them. In their life and work they sought to understand, escape, be embraced by, and transcend this complex heritage.” In Kathleen Spivack, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz and Others* (Northeastern University Press, 2012) 71-72.

²⁶ See Spivack 88, 111, 122, 145, 158, 164.

²⁷ Spivack 63.

combine their feminine role with their vocation as poet, though Bishop (together with Marianne Moore) was spared this bias, as she had neither married, nor had children.²⁸

What afflicted the critical reception of works written by women was phallic criticism. According to Cheri Register's definition, the term marks the evaluation of female writers on the bases of their conformation to the established concept of femininity. The critics alleged of phallic criticism generally fulfil at least one of the three following premises: First, "they fail to discuss female writers as writers, without regard to their sex," second, "they ignore many female writers altogether" or third, "they have a myopic tendency to make universal statements on the basis of male experience."²⁹ When general academic objectivity is this deeply questioned, there naturally arises a call for distinctive feminist criticism. However, it was not until the 1970s that an organized feminist critical effort emerged.³⁰ What followed were collaborative endeavors of feminist academics generating women's studies courses and diverse feminist research, mostly published in the *Female Studies* series. This finally resulted in a notable growth of the participation of feminism in the higher-education curriculum.³¹

Rita Felski's definition of feminist literature states that it should "encompass all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed."³² Nevertheless, she also reveals her concern that it is impossible to clearly delineate the concept of feminist aesthetics, which would be based on the assumption of the existence of some distinctively female formal traits, or at least a "unifying consciousness" in women's writing.³³ She thus subverts earlier feminist critical efforts of a coherent, unifying definition of literature written by women and extends the theories such as that of Mary Jacobus, who argues that although the crucial characteristic of women's writing for a feminist critic is that it should be "speaking both for and as a woman (rather than 'like' a woman),"³⁴ the attempts to define some specific traits, exclusive for women's writing are utopian.³⁵

²⁸ Spivack 63.

²⁹ Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction," *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, ed. Josephine C. Donovan (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989) 8.

³⁰ The Modern Language Association's Commission on the Status of Women was established in 1970.

³¹ Register 2.

³² Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989) 14.

³³ Felski 23-30.

³⁴ Mary Jacobus, "The Difference of View," *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Routledge, 2014) 15.

³⁵ Mary Jacobus, "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and 'The Mill on the Floss,'" *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981): 207, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/1343160> 8 July 2019.

Bishop's work spans a period that witnessed many turbulent changes in the perception of the position of women in society. These changes then necessarily generated also a transformation of the perception of women writers and of the critical response to their work. This social climate gives Bishop's writing a very important background, both in the sense of the general social environment in which she lived and wrote – and which inevitably had an influence on her – and in the sense of the impact it had on the evolution of literary forms, which, naturally, was for Bishop a subject of significant relevance. Bishop's position in the milieu and the context it provides for her work thus represents a vital factor for the understanding of her writing and the shaping of her literary career.

2.2. Bishop's Poetics

At first glance, the relation of Elizabeth Bishop to feminist doctrine and its related issues may seem fairly uncomplicated. Bishop herself explicitly stated her opinions in a number of conversations, both with her friends and colleagues and in professional interviews. Yet her work continues to provoke a remarkable variety of critical interpretations. This section will expand on the background provided in the previous section and introduce Bishop's conception of feminism, exploring her views on the position of women in society and by extension also in literature and literary criticism. In addition, in order to characterize more clearly Bishop's poetic style, it will also draw a comparison between Bishop and her female contemporaries, not only in terms of technique, but also in terms of a more general approach to poetry as a means of expression. The analysis of Bishop in relation to other poets will be divided into two parts, the first covering the two poets who are most often listed as those bearing resemblance to Bishop – Marianne Moore and May Swenson, and the second part focusing on the poets who can be seen as her opposites – Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, although, as will be shown, even that distinction is not completely unequivocal.

2.2.1. Bishop's Feminism

Without any doubt, Bishop's most loudly resonating views on feminism are her disapproval of the women's movement and her refusal to be included in all-women anthologies. Her attitude towards the women's movement was strikingly radical. As Spivack writes, Bishop had no desire to be associated with feminists: "She couldn't understand it, she said [...]. She

thought it was strident, unruly, undisciplined.”³⁶ In a 1977 interview with George Starbuck, Bishop is bewildered when she hears that some of her poems, namely “Roosters” and “Filling Station,” were being used as feminist tracts.³⁷ Still, Bishop goes on to admit that “Roosters” *might* in fact sound like her most feminist poem. Since there is hardly any other Bishop’s poem discussed more often than “Roosters” when it comes to the examination of Bishop’s feminism, it will be revisited in the next chapter from other perspectives as well, in a more specific connection to Bishop’s manner of portraying men and women in her poetry. However, let us now introduce the poem from the perspective most often employed in examining “Roosters,” the feminist perspective. The most often discussed part of the poem goes as follows:

Cries galore
Come from the water-closet door,
From the dropping-plastered henhouse floor,

where in the blue blur
their rustling wives admire,
the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare

with stupid eyes
while from their beaks there rise
the uncontrolled, traditional cries.

Deep from protruding chests
in green-gold medals dressed,
planned to command and terrorize the rest,

the many wives
who lead hens’ lives
of being courted and despised;

deep from raw throats
a senseless order floats
all over town.³⁸

The prevailing interpretation translates “Roosters” as a war poem and respects Bishop’s claim that she was thinking “of those aerial views of dismal little towns in Finland and Norway, when the Germans took over.”³⁹ The ambience of war is reflected also in the structure of the poem, as the rhythm of the triplets give the impression of military staccato, and with an increasing

³⁶ Spivack 105.

³⁷ George Starbuck, “From the Archive: ‘The Work!’ – A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop,” *Ploughshares* Spring 1977: 30-54, *Ploughshares* <<https://www.pshares.org/issues/winter-2011-12/archive-work-conversation-elizabeth-bishop>> 27 Apr. 2019.

³⁸ Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011) 36-37.

³⁹ Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994) 96.

number of beats per line in each triplet creating an atmosphere of restlessness and escalating anxiety.

However, with the “many wives / who lead hens’ lives” and roosters from whose beaks “there rise / the uncontrolled, traditional cries,” it is quite obvious how, from the feminist perspective, the poem does indeed sound like a denunciation of the traditional patriarchal social arrangement. Betsy Erkkila understands the poem even as “a kind of veiled ‘coming out,’” in which Bishop “registers her personal protest against the ‘senseless order’ of marriage and heterosexuality that ‘floats / all over town’ and ‘gloats’ over the bed of lesbian love.”⁴⁰ The roosters in this sense embody the masculine domination in sexual power relations, while the women are tamed by the imposed discipline of chauvinism. Still, Bishop insists she never thought of “Roosters” that way, the connotation indeed being World War II rather than sexism in general.⁴¹ However, regardless of Bishop’s own declaration, the poem undeniably does encompass a reference to the dynamics between men and women, which then gives rise to theories that attempt to resolve this discrepancy, such as that of James Longenbach, who argues that it is precisely the poem’s “linkage of national and sexual aggression that marks it as a product of the Second World War.”⁴²

Bishop’s refusal to see “Roosters” as a feminist poem reflects her firm refusal to let any kind of agenda intervene with art in general. She had no interest in associating herself with any kind of feminist principles that would lead to the idea of separatism. This resonates most strongly in her aforementioned refusal to be a part of women’s anthologies. She explained her distaste for the idea numerous times, arguing that separating the sexes was silly (“I just thought that that was a lot of nonsense”⁴³), that it preferred agenda over good poetry (“As if there weren’t good men poets in the world!”⁴⁴), and finally that it was altogether absurd to privilege gender as a limitation (“Art is art and should have nothing to do with gender”⁴⁵). Yet, as she kept on reminding her interlocuters, that was a result of her being a feminist, not the opposite. In 1978, one year prior to her death, Bishop in an interview with Sheila Hale very firmly

⁴⁰ Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1992) 126.

⁴¹ Starbuck.

⁴² James Longenbach, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Social Conscience,” *ELH* 62.2 (1995): 473, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030084>> 30 Apr. 2019.

⁴³ Starbuck.

⁴⁴ Spivack 106.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Eileen Farley, “Pulitzer Prize-winning Poet Visits UW,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) 54.

confirmed her stance on the issue: “I was, and am, a feminist; and that is why I refuse absolutely to contribute to all-women volumes or all-women readings.”⁴⁶

As a consequence, it can be argued that Bishop’s main disagreement with the type of feminism which prevailed during her lifetime was the concept of separatism itself. The feminist response to social developments in this sense failed to satisfy Bishop’s feminist way of thinking, which was based on her exceptionally strong sense of equality, as the prevailing feminist doctrine was once again based on gender affiliation, hence replacing one kind of discrimination with another (even if a negative one for positive). For Bishop, separatism was thoroughly unfeminist; at the heart of her feminist thinking was a simple wish to be taken on equal terms with men. Interestingly, Bishop’s poetry was denounced more frequently by feminist critics, who believed that poetry should be engaged and convey a feminist message to the audience, than by men⁴⁷ – after all, she was awarded the 1956 Pulitzer prize by an all-male board.⁴⁸ Bishop’s formal perfection and precise yet vivid descriptions earned her the attention of many men who were otherwise scared off by the agenda that was often present in poetry written by women.

On the whole, Bishop did not see herself as a *woman* poet. On the contrary, according to Spivack, “she was insulted to be included in this category.”⁴⁹ Spivack goes on to explain that Bishop “was adamant in her stand to be recognized as a ‘writer,’ a category transcending that of gender.”⁵⁰ Apart from the feminist reasons for her dislike of such categorization, she was not particularly fond of women’s writing in general. Women’s experience was, in Bishop’s view, much more limited than that of men.⁵¹ The problem of classification on the basis of gender followed Bishop despite all her displeasure, which she never failed to declare: “All my life I’ve had wonderful reviews. And at the very end they’ll say, ‘The best poetry by a woman in this decade, or year, or month.’ Well, ha! What’s that worth?”⁵² This issue bothered her throughout

⁴⁶ Quoted in Sheila Hale, “Women Writers in America,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 113.

⁴⁷ James Longenbach, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Social Conscience,” *ELH* 62.2 (1995): 467, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030084>> 30 Apr. 2019.

⁴⁸ This was not an uncommon practice, as the first women in the Pulitzer Prize Board did not appear until 1981. Still, the only two women (apart from Bishop) awarded during 1940s and 1950s were Gwendolyn Brooks and Marianne Moore, neither of whom was a proponent of violently feminist poetry. For further information, see “Prize Winners by Year,” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, The Pulitzer Prizes, 2019 <<https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year>> 19 July 2019.

⁴⁹ Spivack 106.

⁵⁰ Spivack 106.

⁵¹ Though that was not necessarily a problem, as, in Bishop’s words, “there is Emily Dickinson, as one always says.” Quoted in Eileen McMahon, “Elizabeth Bishop Speaks about Her Poetry,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 108.

⁵² Starbuck.

her career and with the increasing number of reviews the number of references to her sex also increased. She complained of this also in her 1972 letter to Robert Lowell, in reaction to him praising her as one of four women poets who measured up to the major male poets of the era:⁵³ “I’d rather be called ‘the sixteenth poet’ with no reference to my sex, than one of four women – even if the other three are pretty good.”⁵⁴ And yet, as Spivack observes, in spite of these incidents Bishop was fortunate enough to be recognized more often as a “poet” than as a “woman poet.”⁵⁵

In addition, Erkkila argues that Bishop actually resisted not only the category of a woman poet, but also detached herself from the historical category of woman altogether. In reaction to Bishop’s claim that women with intelligence or a sense of humor develop “a tough, ironic attitude” as a means of coping with the general atmosphere of patriarchy,⁵⁶ Erkkila suggests that this attitude “placed Bishop in the self-divided and self-contradictory position of simultaneously denying the categories Woman and Woman Writer even as she struggled to affirm her historical experience as a writing woman.”⁵⁷ Although at this point, Erkkila may be going too far in her assumptions, claiming that Bishop was in this sense contradicting herself because her work evinces feminist tendencies, and she stresses Bishop’s concern about the historical experience of women, as expressed throughout her work.⁵⁸

To support her argument, Erkkila then somewhat skews Bishop’s answer in the 1978 interview with Elizabeth Spires. When Bishop expresses her concern about being misinterpreted in interviews, giving an example of how the interviewer of *The Chicago Tribune* twisted her answers to fit her into the pre-chosen image of an old-fashioned poet in contrast to feminist poets like Erica Jong or Adrienne Rich,⁵⁹ Erkkila selects an excerpt that indeed makes

⁵³ The full quotation goes as follows: “Few women write major poetry. Can I make this generalization? Only four stand with our best men: Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath.” Quoted in Ian Hamilton, “A Conversation with Robert Lowell,” *Robert Lowell, Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988) 170.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, eds. Thomas J. Travisano and Saskia Hamilton (London: Faber and Faber, 2008) 702.

⁵⁵ Spivack 106.

⁵⁶ “I’m thinking about this feminist thing. I think my friends, my generation, were at women’s colleges mostly (and we weren’t all writers). You get so used to being put down that very early, if you’re intelligent or have any sense of humor, you develop a tough, ironic attitude. You just try to get so you don’t even notice it.” In Starbuck.

⁵⁷ Erkkila 100.

⁵⁸ Erkkila 100-101.

⁵⁹ The relevant part of the interview goes as follows:

Interviewer: In your letter to me, you sounded rather wary of interviewers. Do you feel you’ve been misinterpreted in interviews? For example, that your refusal to appear in all-women poetry anthologies has been misunderstood as a kind of disapproval of the feminist movement.

Bishop: I’ve always considered myself a strong feminist. Recently I was interviewed by a reporter from *The Chicago Tribune*. After I talked to the girl for a few minutes, I realized that she wanted to play me off as an ‘old-

Bishop sound more indignant about her poetry appearing as unfeminist, than about the problem of misinterpretation per se: “‘I’ve always considered myself a strong feminist,’ she said in the late seventies when a woman reporter for the Chicago Tribune sought to ‘play [her] off’ against Adrienne Rich and Erica Jong as ‘old-fashioned’ and unfeminist. ‘I finally asked her if she’d ever read any of my poems.’”⁶⁰

Erkkilä’s reasoning serves here as an instance of a vice that occasionally meets the analyses of Bishop’s poetry, when the reading is specifically tailored to suit a desired interpretation, rather than the interpretation being deduced from the reading.⁶¹ Similarly, Bishop’s sexuality – she was a lesbian – is sometimes given a stronger emphasis than is relevant for her poetry. However, as C. K. Doreski remarks, “[Bishop’s] sexuality, which fascinates critics who would like to appropriate it (rather than her) for purposes of literary politics, was probably less exciting than these sexual colonialists would wish.”⁶² Nevertheless, the approach of feminist critics would more often be rather reluctant,⁶³ in the words of Victoria Harrison, “less with [an] unconditional affection than with a challenge: she is a woman poet, now how?”⁶⁴

In fact, Bishop admitted that she found being a woman limiting for her as a poet: “Sometimes I think if I had been born a man I probably would have written more. Dared more, or spent more time at it.”⁶⁵ On the other hand, for Bishop, being a woman also involved a capacity for a greater attention to detail and empathy.⁶⁶ This, however, too often (at least according to Bishop) had the side effect of what she calls a “Happy Housewife tone.” Elsewhere

fashioned’ against Erica Jong, and Adrienne [Rich], whom I like, and other violently feminist people. Which isn’t true at all. I finally asked her if she’d ever read any of my poems. Well, it seemed she’d read *one* poem. I didn’t see how she could interview me if she didn’t know anything about me at all, and I told her so. She was nice enough to print a separate piece in *The Chicago Tribune* apart from the longer article on the others. I had said that I didn’t believe in propaganda in poetry. That it rarely worked. What she had me saying was, ‘Miss Bishop does not believe that poetry should convey the poet’s personal philosophy.’ Which made me sound like a complete dumbbell! Where she got that, I don’t know. This is why one gets nervous about interviews. In Elizabeth Spire, “The Art of Poetry, XXVII: Elizabeth Bishop,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) 130.

⁶⁰ Erkkilä 101.

⁶¹ This is not necessarily an issue concerning only feminist readings – Kim Fortuny in her *Elizabeth Bishop: The Art of Travel* notices how the reading of Bishop’s poetry can be adjusted to suit the objectives of a chosen political concept. Kim Fortuny, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Art of Travel* (University Press of Colorado, 2003) 14.

⁶² C. K. Doreski, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) xiii.

⁶³ For individual examples, see Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 214.

⁶⁴ Harrison 14.

⁶⁵ Starbuck.

⁶⁶ In her 1965 letter to Ilse Barker, Bishop writes: “I have a small theory of my own about this – that women have been confined, mostly – and in confinement details count. – They have to see the baby’s ear; sewing makes you look closely. – They had to do so much appeasing they do feel moods quickly, etc.” Quoted in Susan B. Rosenbaum, *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007) 194.

in the early 1970s unpublished notes for a poetry review Bishop writes: “I am sick of ‘domesticity’ – men don’t constantly write about shaving, having to go to work, whatever it is men do all day long – they go out and take walks, mostly, in their poems, and I wish women would, too.”⁶⁷ In a later draft, she elaborates this thought:

Women, unfortunately, seem to stay at home a lot, to write theirs. There is no reason why the home, house, apartment, or furnished room, can’t produce good poems, but almost all women poets seem to fall occasionally into the “Order is a lovely thing” Anna-Hemspotad (*sic*)-Branch category, and one wishes they wouldn’t. Sylvia Plath avoided this by when (*sic*) she wrote about babies, ovens, etc. – but sometimes one extreme is almost as bad as the other.⁶⁸

Bishop’s frustration with the domesticity of female poets is evident. She rejects both the poets who revel in their limited domestic environment and those who reveal the real struggle behind the domestic bliss too violently. As Harrison puts it, “Bishop asks to see the artist in the midst of his or her struggle, drawing the battles simply and without melodrama, as Klee drew them, so that she, the reader, can also be caught off guard and left pained with unanswerable questions.”⁶⁹

Bishop was very consistent in her views, the evidence being a comment she wrote about women writers nearly two decades earlier, in 1955:

It’s a fault one almost never finds in men’s writing, or if one does in a different form. It is that they are really boasting all the time. There’s a sort of intonation of the “She-has-such-a-lovely-home...” sort about it. They are secretly pointing out, for you to admire, their beautifully-polished old silver [...], their taste in clothes, their intellectual and, frequently, social standing, their husbands, etc. – and ultimately their sexual irresistibility... (men writers do this last of course, but not in such sly ways). It’s the “How nice to be nice!” atmosphere that gets me, and I think women writers must get quite away from it before they ever amount to a hill of beans. I see I’ve mentioned English ladies – well, there are plenty of American ones, too – Mary McCarthy does it, Jean Stafford less, maybe, but sometimes, Eudora Welty less but also sometimes – [...] I suppose it is at bottom a flaw in reality that irritates me so – not so much of being protected, – you can’t blame them for that – but of wanting to show that they are even if they aren’t.⁷⁰

Both of the quotations reveal that Bishop’s opinion on the projection of domesticity into poetry is not only very clear, but also unyielding and consistent. Yet, despite all her firmness on the

⁶⁷ Quoted in Rosenbaum 195.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Rosenbaum 195.

⁶⁹ Harrison 31-32.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Harrison 32.

above mentioned, Spivack insists that in real life, unlike in poetry, Bishop in fact enjoyed domestic life, that is both creating it and participating in it.⁷¹

When Bishop came to Harvard (thanks to Lowell's interference), she was, in Spivack's words, treated "shabbily."⁷² She was hired only part time, so that she wouldn't have to be paid benefits. To quote Spivack again, "she was a woman after all, not considered a great poet – no woman was – and Harvard could get away with this."⁷³ The chauvinist mentality was exceptionally strong at Harvard. It would be unthinkable to openly admit to lesbian identity in such environment.⁷⁴ Under these circumstances, Bishop would keep her sexual preference carefully in the closet – after all, much like the rest of her private life, her depressions and alcoholism. The degree of her sense of privacy was exposed to the full only after Bishop's death, when her letters and other unpublished materials became known and uncovered the great disparity between what she was willing to reveal in her private materials and in her poetry.

According to Spivack, Bishop in a way must have "internalized the misogyny of the time,"⁷⁵ and so at least partly also the point of view of women. Spivack continues: "How could she not? Being a woman, with implicit pre-conscious sexuality [...] was problematic. Many women with intelligence grew up with this dichotomy at this time. [...] She internalized many of the male attitudes of the day toward women, who were supposed to be attractive, appealing to men, and not ask for equal pay or a job with benefits."⁷⁶ Yet, as discussed above, Bishop did proclaim herself a feminist when she was confronted with the opposite, which may seem rather contradictory. However, that must not necessarily be the case. Bishop's feminism is based on a firm belief in the irrelevancy of gender differences. Or as Harrison puts it, "Bishop's form of feminism [...] believed in dissolving distinctions between men and women, rather than understanding or accepting gender difference."⁷⁷ In fact, Bishop seemed to be more annoyed with the women who kept on accentuating the distinctions and pushed them into everything

⁷¹ Spivack 105.

⁷² Spivack 71.

⁷³ Spivack recalls that "Harvard was particularly horrible to women [...] – they boasted they could get rid of women Ph.D. candidates by 'making them cry.'" On another occasion, the students who ran the literary magazine the *Harvard Advocate* invited the poet Muriel Rukeyser to read at Harvard. By that time, she was old and ill, yet the university showed no interest in taking care of her: "Not one member of the Harvard English Department attended that reading. The students were left alone with the full responsibility for Miss Rukeyser, who was extremely ill. So did Harvard treat its women poets. When male poets of Rukeyser's stature came to Harvard, the university took better care of them." In Spivack 120; 106-107.

⁷⁴ "The subject of lesbianism was unthinkable, except in code-language like Ancient Greek, which the academic fuddy-duddies seemed to find titillating. (According to them, only one lesbian seems to have existed ever in all of classical history: Sappho! long dead and no real threat to their professorial marriages.)" In Spivack 120.

⁷⁵ Spivack 119.

⁷⁶ Spivack 119.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) 95.

they touched, than with men. Accordingly, with regard to art, for Bishop there was a major difference between one as a person and one as a poet – the value of art should consist purely of its artistic merit, instead of its corruption with the poet’s personal agenda or propaganda.

2.2.2. Poetry of Restraint: Marianne Moore, May Swenson

Before moving on to the following chapter and focusing in greater detail on the reflection of the previous discussion in Bishop’s poetry, in order to better understand her style of writing, let us first at least briefly compare Bishop to her female contemporaries. Both Marianne Moore and May Swenson are poets whose style is close to that of Bishop. Kirstin Hotelling Zona explains that “all three of these poets wrote with a certain reserve – precisely the motive against which most feminist poets and critics of the last thirty years [as of 2002] have established themselves.”⁷⁸ She adds that although their writing differs significantly, it shares a common tension – “a thirst for accurate observation underscored by wariness of objective truth.”⁷⁹ With this being one of the major reasons why Bishop was criticized by the feminists, it may prove interesting to examine how this conflict with the approach of second-wave feminism affected Moore and Swenson.

An extensive body of critical literature has been dedicated to the relationship between Bishop and Moore, both personal and professional. It would be ineffective to try to cover here what others already have done with much more profundity than the scope of this thesis allows.⁸⁰ However, what definitely should not remain overlooked are the aspects of this literary friendship that could help refine the account of Bishop’s feminism. Bishop’s literary mother, as Moore is often called, captivated Bishop with her thoroughly original craft.⁸¹ Dowson enlists Moore among the most innovative poets of her time, together with Amy Lowell, Laura Riding, Gertrude Stein or Mina Loy. According to Dowson, they

disturbed or rejected conventional systems of signification. They were pioneers of defamiliarizing experiments, such as displacing traditional symbols or distorting conventional syntax. They avoided realist representations in favor of

⁷⁸ Kirstin Hotelling Zona, *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminist Poetics of Self-restraint* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005) 2.

⁷⁹ Zona *The Feminist Poetics of Self-restraint* 2.

⁸⁰ See for example David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop, with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989) or Joanne Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁸¹ Bishop after two decades of their acquaintance wrote to Moore: “[...] when I began to read your poetry at college I think it immediately opened up my eyes to the possibility of the subject-matter I could use and might never have thought of using if it hadn’t been for you. — (I might not have written any poems at all, I suppose.)” Quoted in Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* 3-4.

constructing the operations of consciousness. They endorsed the tenets of ‘high’ modernism intellectuality, objectivity and impersonality which avoided gender identification and it is significant that the ‘poetess’ label was rarely applied to them. They are difficult to pin down in terms of party or gender politics, but their avoidance of gendered affiliation is usually the place to look for a gendered awareness. They also challenged the idealisations of femininity maintained by literary tradition, myth and fairy-tale.⁸²

These qualities in Moore’s poetry resonated strongly both generally with what Bishop sought in poetry and more specifically with her understanding of the role of gender in poetry. Dowson sees Moore’s intellectuality as a way of consciously distancing herself from sentimentality (a feature commonly ascribed to female poets), as well as from male-associated conventions, which helped her to surpass traditional boundaries of genre.⁸³

The crucial difference between Moore’s and Bishop’s poetry is that unlike Moore, Bishop used her capacity for precise observation to expose bared human emotions. Moore, on the contrary, relied on allusions and was reluctant about such exposure.⁸⁴ “Can’t they *see* how different it is?”⁸⁵ Bishop writes to Moore. While the form of Moore’s poems is experimental, Bishop’s approach is, in terms of form, much more conventional – or “certainly more old-fashioned,”⁸⁶ as Bishop herself calls it. However, as Erkkila observes, if Bishop’s forms are traditional, “her vision is fundamentally postmodern.” That is, where Moore uses modernist aesthetic forms to express “a higher moral and spiritual order,” Bishop’s traditional forms communicate disturbingly modern meanings.⁸⁷ Similar differences between Moore’s and Bishop’s aesthetics can be identified also from the feminist viewpoint.

Margaret Homans in her feminist study on the clash between feminine identity and literary ambitions, *Bearing the Word*, defines two types of feminism, French and North American. Harrison summarizes their main traits thus:

North American feminism [...] trusts that “language itself is impartial,” even though cultural and ideological expectations have historically silenced women. Consequently, women can and do write their experience: they can be known in language. French feminism believes that language is a constructed order that itself limits expression, particularly the expression of the feminine, which is in Lacanian terms outside that order. The feminine is necessarily the “silent object,” the “fictive or absent referent.”⁸⁸

⁸² Dowson 144-145.

⁸³ Dowson 152.

⁸⁴ See Harrison 80.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* 4.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* 4.

⁸⁷ Erkkila 120.

⁸⁸ Harrison 222.

According to Harrison, Bishop, who “[trusts] in the power of her poetry to reveal people,” falls within this classification into the North American type, while Moore with her “animals and plants, which shield the poem from the dangerous and finally inarticulable force of human emotions” can be understood as an advocate of French feminism.⁸⁹

Similarly to Bishop, Moore’s feminist commitment has been repeatedly questioned. Bishop, perhaps surprisingly, since mostly she expressed dislike for feminism in poetry, defended Moore against such criticism. In “Efforts of Affection,” her memoir of Moore, Bishop counters: “One wonders how much of Marianne’s poetry the feminist critics have read. Have they really read ‘Marriage,’ a poem that says everything they are saying and everything Virginia Woolf has said? It is a poem which transforms a justified sense of injury into a work of art.”⁹⁰ Moore’s refusal to openly deal with subjects like gender or sexuality in the manner of the poets celebrated by feminist critics gained her at that time the reputation of a poet whose reserve signifies a subjection to the limitations imposed on women in patriarchal society. Yet, it may be argued that Moore’s self-restrictive strategy does not imply a submission to the external social demands but on the contrary, a free election of her aesthetic code.⁹¹ Similar approach, even though the execution may differ, can then be observed also in Bishop’s poetry. As Joanne Feit Diehl observes, “Bishop reserves her greatest praise for Moore when she remains faithful to her self-imposed rules, a condition Bishop defines as freedom of choice.”⁹² As a result, the patriarchal system against which the feminist doctrine strives to define itself is in this manner altogether disarmed.

The relationship between Bishop and Swenson strikingly echoes that of Bishop and Moore. Although the critical materials on their literary friendship by no means amount to those dedicated to Bishop and Moore, their extensive correspondence of over 260 letters offers a convincing evidence of this likeness – only in this case, Bishop embraced the role of a mentor (“a remarkably Moore-like mentor in diction and self-expression,”⁹³ as Zona does not fail to

⁸⁹ Harrison 222.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Bishop, “Efforts of Affection,” *Vanity Fair’s Writers on Writers*, ed. Graydon Carter (New York: Penguin Books, 2016) 50.

⁹¹ After all, in her younger days, Moore was quite an ardent first-wave feminist. She was involved in the American suffrage movement and both she and her mother were members of the Women’s Suffrage Party of Pennsylvania. Bishop recalls that Moore once told her that she “‘climbed a lamppost’ in a demonstration for votes for women. What she did up there, what speech she delivered, if any, I don’t know, but climb she did in long skirt and petticoats and a large hat.” In Bishop, “Efforts of Affection” 50.

⁹² Diehl, *The Psychodynamics of Creativity* 33.

⁹³ Kirstin Hotelling Zona, “May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop,” *Body My House: May Swenson’s Work and Life*, eds. Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt (University Press of Colorado, 2006): 58, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cgmvd.9> 4 July 2019.

notice), while Swenson took the part of a somewhat rebellious protégé. The tension between the two poets evinces a similar mixture of admiration and irritation. In Zona's words, "just as Bishop was both fascinated and frustrated by Moore's morality, so Swenson was intrigued and exasperated by Bishop's sexual reserve."⁹⁴ Still, despite their differences, both Bishop and Swenson were aware of the affinity of their approach, which much like Moore's represented a radical departure from the self-expressive poetry that seemed to dominate the scene at the time.⁹⁵

Swenson herself was quite reluctant about acknowledging Bishop's influence on her poetry. Although in her 1963 letter to Bishop, Swenson openly admits the influence – "not as to method, but as to attitude" – and even expresses the regret that her poetry is sometimes deviating from Bishop's tone too much to her own loss,⁹⁶ publicly she presented herself as thoroughly autonomous.⁹⁷ She pronounces this most eloquently in the 1979 interview:

Have I been influenced by [Elizabeth Bishop]? Not necessarily, although neither of us writes confessional poetry. Elizabeth Bishop has always stayed with the objective, the large view, the impersonal which contains the personal if you look deeply. I have this tendency, but not because of any influence of hers. I think we share some of the basic perceptive equipment.⁹⁸

However, most substantial about Swenson's answer is not her comment on Bishop's influence but the apparent easiness with which she grasps the same contradictions of Bishop's poetry that puzzled those who did not "look deeply" enough. In this manner, Zona argues, Swenson's clever readings of Bishop's poetry notably enrich the pool of generally known interpretations: "While Bishop clearly struggled against the confines of heterosexist culture, her restraint is not merely the product of repression or self-protection. [...] Swenson helps us see that Bishop's silences were often strategic, in the service of unearthing assumptions instead of giving answers."⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Zona, "May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop" 56.

⁹⁵ Zona, "May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop" 59.

⁹⁶ The full quotation goes as follows: "[...] the fact is I *have* been influenced by you a lot – not as to method, but as to attitude. I'd like to be more so. But when I write I find I can't do just as I intend to – it goes its own way. I would like to find the casual and absolutely natural tone that you have in your poems – they are never over-colored or forced the least little bit – they are very honest, and never call attention to their effects. Their brilliance is inside, and not on the surface. And they are subtle, not obvious. I think my greatest fault is being obvious – and I never know it until the poem's been printed – quite long after that, and it's too late." Quoted in Zona, "May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop" 59-60.

⁹⁷ Zona describes Swenson as "fiercely independent [and] uncomfortable with the idea of influences in general." In Zona, *The Feminist Poetics of Self-restraint* 8.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Zona, "May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop" 60.

⁹⁹ Zona, *The Feminist Poetics of Self-restraint* 9.

Erkkilä suggests that women poets have throughout the course of history often turned to each other in an effort to validate themselves.¹⁰⁰ Should this claim be applied to Bishop's relationship with Moore and Swenson, it in fact proves to be quite accurate, even though all of them would most likely protest against such a gender-based categorization. In any case, this validation should not be interpreted only in terms of positive confirmation, but also as the possibility of a contrastive affirmation of oneself against the other poet. In this sense, the literary friendships of Bishop with Moore and Swenson then arguably did function on this principle and although it may indeed seem too restrictive to limit it by gender affiliation (after all, Bishop's friendship with Lowell was at least comparably inspirational as the one with Moore), in this case it may be understood as a validation of the possibilities in dealing with the poet's feminine identity without submitting to patriarchal traditions or feminist dictate. As Zona clarifies, "Moore, Bishop and Swenson expressed their commitment to feminism by exposing its most treasured assumptions: not only do they challenge the ideal autonomy, but they contest the integrity of a sensual or sexual authenticity by which that ideal is measured."¹⁰¹ As a result, poets such as Bishop, Moore or Swenson provoke the rethinking of what can be understood as feminist literature and what role, if any at all, self-expression needs to play in its definition.

2.2.3. Confessional Poetry: Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath

With the revelation of Bishop's biographical information, which came to light mostly after her death, re-readings of her poetry began to flood in. Suddenly, the personal, which until then had been only hinted at, began to take much clearer shape. Her lesbianism, harsh depressions, serious alcoholism and almost exemplarily unhappy childhood are never explicitly referred to in her poems. After reading Bishop's biography and her letters, her poetry opened up to a previously largely omitted manner of interpretation.¹⁰² Whether the emergence of autobiographical readings of Bishop's poetry should take all the credit for her rising reputation is questionable, nevertheless "the Elizabeth Bishop phenomenon," as Thomas Travisano calls

¹⁰⁰ Erkkilä 5.

¹⁰¹ Zona, *The Feminist Poetics of Self-restraint* 2.

¹⁰² There even appeared an accusation that Bishop owed her growing popularity to the newly emerged biographical material. Joseph Epstein suggests that were it not for the outbreak of personal revelations, Bishop's poetry would never acquire such level of accessibility, hence popularity. "One suddenly realizes that many of Elizabeth Bishop's poems are made simultaneously more penetrable and a little less impressive with the addition of biographical information," Epstein complains and marks her off as a careerist who, "despite the claims made on her behalf, [...] was a long way from great." In Joseph Epstein, "Elizabeth Bishop: Never a Bridesmaid," *The Hudson Review* 48.1 (1995): 41; 52, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/3852049> 26 July 2019.

it, generated also a growing number of critical interpretations.¹⁰³ With the autobiographical readings of Bishop's poetry, she started to appear also in the feminist literary canon, since feminists, who encouraged the poetics of self-expression,¹⁰⁴ now recognized the outsiderhood of her lesbian identity.

One of the first to offer thus revised interpretation of Bishop's poetry was Adrienne Rich in her 1983 review of Bishop's *Complete Poems*. Rich admits that she "had felt drawn, but also repelled, by Bishop's early work. [...] I had not then connected the themes of outsiderhood and marginality in her work, as well as its encodings and obscurities, with a lesbian identity."¹⁰⁵ She regrets the fact that previously, "attention was paid to her triumphs, her perfections, not to her struggles for self-definition and her sense of difference," which then "made her less, rather than more, available to me."¹⁰⁶ While before the revelation of Bishop's life history, her work seemed to Rich "impenetrable" and "intellectualized to the point of obliquity," now, "especially given the times and customs of the 1940s and 1950s," she was able to appreciate it as "remarkably honest and courageous."¹⁰⁷

Rich's reading set the tone for a great number of interpretations which were to ensue. Susan McCabe also follows the autobiographical re-evaluation of Bishop's poems and in her thorough feminist study of Bishop's work, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, she refuses the idea that Bishop's lesbian identity could have only little or no effect on her work and understanding of gender. Furthermore, McCabe argues that Bishop's self-definition is formed primarily by her personal losses, which further increases the need for autobiographical understanding of her work. "While Bishop is by no means a confessional poet in the manner of Sexton, Plath, or even Rich, she questions and tests the boundaries that would separate life from her art and makes loss a theme around which her self-interrogation constellates,"¹⁰⁸ McCabe contends, and professes the view that Bishop "rejects impersonality and anti-confessionalism."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Travisano offers quite a complex account of various critical readings of Bishop's poetry as of 1995. See Thomas J. Travisano, "The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon," *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, Eds. Margaret Dickie and Thomas J. Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 217-246.

¹⁰⁴ Linda A. Kinnahan, *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004) 43.

¹⁰⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (London: Virago Press, 1986) 124-125.

¹⁰⁶ Rich 125.

¹⁰⁷ Rich 125.

¹⁰⁸ Susan McCabe, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) xvi.

¹⁰⁹ McCabe xviii.

“I *hate* confessional poetry, and so many people are writing it these days,”¹¹⁰ Bishop groans in reaction to a commentary of one of her students, Wesley Wehr, at the University of Washington in 1966. She was not attracted to what she calls “the oh-the-agony-of-it school,”¹¹¹ which gluts poetry with the poet’s constant complaints. In her 1967 commentary on confessional poetry quoted in *Time*, Bishop half-jokingly told the interviewer that in confessional poetry, “the tendency is to overdo the morbidity. You just wish they’d keep some of these things to themselves.”¹¹² Peter Nickowitz suggests that “Bishop’s explicit intolerance for confessional poetry highlights her general aversion to revealing aspects of her personal life; she nonetheless does this, albeit through veiled expressions.”¹¹³ However, it is still important to bear in mind what had been already noted by Erkkila, that is that even though Bishop does indeed let her personal history enter her poems, “she would never move in the direction of what she called the ‘School of Anguish’ poets.”¹¹⁴

Nevertheless, when it came to the most outstanding confessional poets of her time, Bishop was somewhat less critical. In the midst of scolding Lowell for using his former wife’s letters without her permission in *The Dolphin* – and for changing them, which, for Bishop, was “infinite mischief” – Bishop recognizes that at some point, turning to confessional poetry may have been inescapable: “In general, I deplore the ‘confessional’ – however, when you wrote *Life Studies* perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate.”¹¹⁵ Even though she calls the poets whom “Cal [as Lowell was called by his friends] seems innocently to have inspired, [...] the self-pitiers who write sometimes quite good imitations of Cal,”¹¹⁶ Bishop’s commentary on the poetry of Rich, Sexton and Plath is ambiguous.

All of these women – Bishop, Rich, Sexton and Plath – were at some point in some form of contact or at least knew each other indirectly via Lowell. While Bishop’s views of what poetry should convey were radically different from theirs, this did not necessarily mean that

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Wesley Wehr, “Elizabeth Bishop: Conversations and Class Notes,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) 45.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Leslie Hanscom, “A Poet Who Doesn’t Wear Her Woes,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) 71.

¹¹² Bishop then confessed that she hadn’t meant to sound this caustic, especially since it was used in a cover story on Lowell, of which she claimed to have had no idea. In Megan Marshall, *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017) 205-207.

¹¹³ Peter Nickowitz, *Rhetoric and Sexuality: The Poetry of Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 66.

¹¹⁴ Erkkila 149.

¹¹⁵ Bishop, *One Art* 562.

¹¹⁶ Bishop, *One Art* 432.

she was not able to appreciate their work. Even though Bishop considered Adrienne Rich to be “violently feminist,” she still counted her among the poets “whom I like.”¹¹⁷ They were never close friends, yet they held each other in high regard. Rich was the leading feminist poet of her time and although her poems “weren’t so much confessional as they were polemical,”¹¹⁸ as Megan Marshall puts it, she strongly promoted the feminist idea that poetry should challenge patriarchal values and create a distinctly feminist vision.¹¹⁹ This, of course, strongly contradicted to Bishop’s conviction that art should remain free from any kind of agenda. However, not only that Bishop and Rich actively debated the feminist issue when Bishop refused to be included in yet another anthology devoted to female poets,¹²⁰ but surprisingly, Bishop even allegedly expressed to Rich a wish to “write something more ‘frank’ about the situation of women,”¹²¹ Marshall reveals.

While Rich gained her respect, Bishop was not so sure about Anne Sexton’s poetry. Spivack remarks that Sexton was “something of a renegade. She broadcast her messy personal life, rather than hiding it beneath a veneer of polite and tightened fury.”¹²² Inevitably, this did not resonate well with Bishop’s reserve. Furthermore, Bishop simply did not consider Sexton’s poems good enough to justify her excessive self-exposure. In a letter to Lowell, Bishop writes that some of Sexton’s poems reminded her “quite a bit” of Lowell and were “quite good, at least some of them,” but that “there is all the difference in the world, I’m afraid, between her kind of simplicity and that of *Life Studies*, her kind of egocentricity that is simply that, and yours that has been – that would be the reverse of *sublimated* I wonder – anyway, made intensely *interesting*, and painfully applicable to every reader.”¹²³ Yet, as Spivack recalls, both

¹¹⁷ Spires 130.

¹¹⁸ Megan Marshall, “Elizabeth and Alice,” *The New Yorker*, Condé Nast, 27 Oct. 2016 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/elizabeth-bishop-and-alice-methfessel-one-art>> 06 July 2019.

¹¹⁹ For further information on Rich’s feminism, see for example Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz, *Translating Poetic Discourse: Questions of Feminist Strategies in Adrienne Rich* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985).

¹²⁰ Bishop recollects the argument with Rich in the interview with Starbuck:

“EB: [...] I’ve tried to argue this with Adrienne once or twice. I *still* think I’m right. It’s one of the few things I think I’m right about.

GS: With Ann Stanford’s thing, it was a question of whether you’d let yourself be included?

EB: Yes. I said I couldn’t possibly, I never had. And it would be very unfair to others whom I’d already turned down. I told her that hers sounded much better, but even so.

GS: I can imagine a strong feminist argument which says don’t be an idealist, be practical.

EB: Adrienne was here and we’d never really argued about it before and there were several other people—old, old friends of mine—and she kept saying ‘don’t you want to be *read*?’ and yes I want to be read, but not to that extent.”

In Starbuck.

¹²¹ Marshall, *A Miracle for Breakfast* 292.

¹²² Spivack 63.

¹²³ Bishop, *Words in Air* 327.

Bishop and Sexton were keen to meet each other. Both were also equally nervous about the meeting, although their reasons differed:

Anne was afraid to meet Elizabeth Bishop because Lowell had touted her as the best woman poet in America, and because Anne admired Bishop's work so much. But Elizabeth was afraid to meet Anne because she feared that Anne would be "confessional," and she was repelled and appalled by what she considered Anne's raw and sexual outpourings, and because of Anne's openness in writing about her breakdowns, a topic Elizabeth feared and about which she could never bring herself to write directly.¹²⁴

For Bishop, Sexton was too forcedly confessional and melodramatic, both in poetry and in person. Moreover, Bishop typecasts Sexton (along with for example Virginia Woolf) as a representative of what she calls "'our beautiful old silver' school of female writing," which, she explains, "is really boasting about how 'nice' we were. They have to make quite sure that the reader is not going to mis-place them socially, first – and that nervousness interferes constantly with what they think they'd like to say."¹²⁵

Sylvia Plath was much more self-assured about her poetry skills than most of her contemporaries, and as such she did not share the respect Rich and Sexton had for Bishop. "No reason why I shouldn't surpass at least the facile Isabella Gardner & even the lesbian & fanciful & jeweled Elizabeth Bishop in America,"¹²⁶ Plath writes in her journal and although she became more appreciative in a later entry – "Am reading Elizabeth Bishop with great admiration. Her fine originality, always surprising, never rigid, flowing, juicier than Marianne Moore, who is her godmother"¹²⁷ – it never quite got in conflict with Plath's confidence about her own qualities.¹²⁸ Bishop's reactions to Plath's poetry are comparably ambiguous: "Sylvia P. seems like a tragic loss to me – although I can scarcely bear to read her poems through, they are so agonized. A bit formless for my taste, too – but really a talent."¹²⁹ Jonathan Ellis then argues that the differences between their personas were too great for them to give each other credit, "Bishop, because of her long-standing reluctance to reveal too much of her own life in

¹²⁴ Spivack 108.

¹²⁵ Bishop then goes on to explain that she has been wary about this manner of writing ever since she came to realize the concept: "I wrote a story at Vassar that was too much admired by Miss Rose Peebles, my teacher, who was very proud of being an old-school Southern lady – and suddenly this fact about women's writing dawned on me, and has haunted me ever since." In Bishop, *Words in Air* 333.

¹²⁶ Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) 316.

¹²⁷ Plath 516.

¹²⁸ Plath in fact hoped to follow in Bishop's steps and earn similar mentorship from Moore as Bishop earlier had. However, this hope was shattered when in response to some poems sent to Moore, Plath received "a queerly ambiguous spiteful letter" full of Moore's strict criticism. See Ellen Levy, *Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle Between the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 226.

¹²⁹ Bishop, *Words in Air* 583.

poetry, Plath because of her lifelong compulsion to do so.” In other words, Bishop had “the famous eye,” while Plath “the famous I.”¹³⁰

While Bishop was never particularly enthusiastic about confessional poetry, this did not prevent her from praising the most original voices within the style, especially Lowell. It can be argued that she might not be nearly as frustrated with it as she was, if it had not become so popular, especially among the younger generation of poets – some of whom took her classes and thus significantly contributed to her irritation.¹³¹ “They seldom have anything interesting to ‘confess’ anyway. Mostly they write about a lot of things which I should think were best left unsaid.”¹³² That is, as if the very concept of too much openness, with which Bishop was intrinsically uncomfortable, was not enough, she rarely found the poems to be good poetry per se.

Bishop’s moving life could have provided her with a wide source for confessional poetry. However, as Kirsch observes, “what separated Bishop from her peers was not the inner experience of ‘destruction,’ but the aesthetic and ethical strategies with which she simultaneously revealed and concealed it.”¹³³ In Bishop’s poetry, the personal is not explicitly revealed but it nevertheless saturates the verse. She was very careful about keeping her aesthetic distance, yet she managed to maintain moments of intimacy, all the more powerful for their scarcity. When Bishop’s later poetry became somewhat more personal and suggested more of her struggles and other autobiographical details, it was on the one hand favorably accepted by the feminists, on the other hand it failed to please those who relished her earlier, more descriptive poems.¹³⁴ The poet John Ashbery “felt slightly disappointed” with *A Cold Spring*, as “some of the new poems were not, for me, up to the perhaps impossible high standard set by the first book [...] and in several the poet’s life threatened to intrude on the poetry in a way that didn’t suit it.”¹³⁵ Feminist critics, on the contrary, favored the more personal bent, although, as Zona notices, this was largely at the expense of her older poetry: “The new feminist Bishop is

¹³⁰ Jonathan Ellis, “Introduction: ‘For what is a letter?’” *Letter Writing Among Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015) 6.

¹³¹ As Bishop herself remarks, in general she was never very fond of what was currently fashionable: “I’m just naturally perverse – if you want me one way, I go the other way.” In Starbuck.

¹³² Wehr 45.

¹³³ Kirsch 65.

¹³⁴ Erkkilä 138.

¹³⁵ John Ashbery, “The Complete Poems,” *The New York Times* 1 June 1969: BR8, *The New York Times* <<http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/books/bishop-complete69.pdf>> 27 May 2019.

achieved in exchange for the old, more ambivalent one, while her self-restraint remains a mark of misfortune, a silent plea for sympathy.”¹³⁶

However, while Bishop have indeed occasionally used autobiographical details as a subject for her poetry, it is rather questionable how substantial the autobiographical aspect is for the aesthetic value of the poems. By the same token, praising Bishop’s poetry on the basis of her lesbian identity undermines her belief in the autonomy of art. The autobiographical reading of Bishop’s work is, much like focusing merely on her Moore-like qualities, inevitably reductive. According to Lorrie Goldensohn, for Bishop, “to be personal meant to be misread, to be trapped within the conventional feminine.”¹³⁷ Bishop famously believed in “closets, closets, and more closets”¹³⁸ and never published poems which threatened to reveal to the public more of her private life than she intended to. As a result, through carefully unveiling intimate details by the means of the impersonal, Bishop thus subverts the patriarchal structure in accordance with her own conception of feminism much more efficiently than if she used the technique of, in her view, excessive self-expression and dramatization of the chauvinist oppression.

Despite the fact that Bishop herself expressed her conception of feminism a number of times, demonstrating that it is based first and foremost on her firm refusal of any form of discrimination, her poetry has always provoked a remarkable variety of critical responses. Bishop inevitably must have been influenced by the attitudes then prevailing in society. Although in her poetry she tried to maintain a firmly neutral stance toward any form of agenda, the polarization of opinions on gender issues coming with second-wave feminism led to mixed reactions to her attempted neutrality. The critical reception of Bishop’s poetry became even more complicated after her death. While during her lifetime, she was quite unequivocally grouped with poets of restraint, such as Marianne Moore and May Swenson, with the posthumous release of the details of Bishop’s personal life, a number of critical responses shifted their focus to an autobiographical reading of her poetry, which then resulted in her occasional, if reluctant, categorization alongside confessional or feminist poets, such as Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

Since both of these classifications tend to be somewhat reductive, let us now examine how Bishop’s poetry subtly transcends gender conventions, but without explicitly professing

¹³⁶ Zona, *The Feminist Poetics of Self-restraint* 6-7.

¹³⁷ Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 62.

¹³⁸ Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) 327.

any kind of agenda. This chapter introduced the cultural context of Bishop's life and work and provided a wider background for a critical study of her poems. The following chapter will explore how Bishop responded to gender-related stereotypes, both in the sense of general gender stereotypes and in the sense of those concerning women writers specifically.

3. Subverting the Conventions: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetic Strategy

This chapter will focus on how Bishop's conception of feminism reflected in her poetry. As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, Bishop was very much opposed to the idea of projecting any kind of agenda into her poetry. Most obviously, this concerned the feminist agenda, though Bishop resisted the concept of engaged poetry in general. She strongly believed in the autonomy of art and as a consequence it would prove fruitless to look for any sort of expressly feminist thoughts in her individual poems. Yet it is still possible to examine Bishop's poetry with regard to her views, exploring how she portrays the genders and conceivably also the related stereotypes. The poems discussed in this chapter are thus selected to illustrate Bishop's attitude toward themes generally explored by feminist writers. This includes first an analysis of how her strongly egalitarian views on gender issues reflect in the way she portrays men, women and gender in general. At the same time, in order to achieve a fuller grasp of Bishop's stance on feminism in connection to her poetry, it is vital to focus also on how she answers both to the masculine tradition in lyric poetry and its feminist rethinking, and by extension also to analyze her approach not only to the lyric mode itself, but even to the features generally attributed to it.

3.1. Gender in Bishop's Poetry

Even though Bishop is most frequently recognized as a poet famous for her precise descriptions and personal reticence, who tends to prefer natural scenery over representation of human beings, that does not necessarily imply a lack of foundation for an analysis of her approach to gender in her poetry. On the contrary, even her avoidance of poetry abounding in portrayals of men and women invites profound research. Bishop in her poetry generally evades the subject of women and men alike and when she does refer to people, she evinces a strong sense of egalitarianism. Her approach to the two sexes will be examined according to the way she presents them both in the sense of physical representation and psychological portrayal, as well as according to their symbolic value. However, after analyzing each gender individually, it is vital to consider also the way Bishop challenges clear-cut categories and transcends conventional binary gender distinctions. Therefore, the last part of this section will explore

Bishop's employment of motives that are ambiguous and encompass both masculine and feminine aspects.

3.1.1. Portrayals of Men

In the infrequent cases in which Bishop in her poetry refers to individual people, they tend to act as representatives of personal roles rather than of the individuals themselves.¹ Bishop typically resorts to a surprisingly small number of recurring types. The significance of this approach should not be overlooked, and the representations of people in Bishop's poetry should thus be understood not merely as a specific psychological portrait or a personality of an individual but rather as an illustration of the selected types, or sometimes even stereotypes, of people. This allows for a better study of Bishop's general understanding of gender roles and identities and by extension of her strong sense of equality. The majority of her depictions of male personae in the cases in which a man has a role of more significance may be sorted into two main categories – the grandfather (or old man) type and the misfit. The grandfather type will be examined predominantly in "At the Fishhouses," further supported by the briefer examples of "Manners" and "For Grandfather." Similarly, the type of the misfit will be examined in greater detail in "Going to the Bakery," "The Burglar of Babylon" and "The Prodigal," with "The Riverman," "Manuelzinho" and "A Drunkard" used as supportive examples. Finally, this section will revisit "Roosters," this time from the perspective of Christian symbolism in connection to human, here specifically male, vices.

Bishop generally avoids mawkish sentimentality. Even the motif of the grandfather figure remains fairly unaffectionate, despite her loving relationship to her maternal grandfather, William Bulmer,² with whom this type is usually associated. Still, this represents one of Bishop's most personal themes. The old man, often knowledgeable and benign, is mostly connected to memory and the notion of the passing of time. Inevitably, this is also followed by a strong sense of loss, which is so often present in Bishop's poems, and results in what Thomas Travisano calls "an ongoing connection to a lost world."³ Bishop's poetics of loss is known for its meditative tone, accompanying another recurring motif of the confrontation of nature and

¹ Naturally, this excludes poems dedicated to Bishop's acquaintances, such as "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" or "North Haven."

² For further information on Bishop's relationship with William Bulmer, see for example Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of it* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 14.

³ Thomas Travisano, "Bishop and Biography," *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, eds. Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 31.

people, where the nature is mostly encompassing or even overwhelming. All these features may be recognized in Bishop's poem "At the Fishhouses."

In "At the Fishhouses," Bishop opens the poem with the following lines:

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.⁴

As Bonnie Costello observes, the series of dependent clauses reflect a difficulty of seeing, making the old man himself "almost invisible" among the phrases.⁵ The old man thus nearly blends with the environment surrounding him, creating an image in which the man and the setting are in harmony but with the environment being a much more dominant element. The poem moves on to a more detailed description of the surroundings, focusing especially on the image of the sea. The importance of the sea gradually culminates and eventually it extends far beyond the significance of a natural phenomenon. "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: / dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,"⁶ and the old man is the one who knows it, who is able to coexist with it and even profit from it, despite the fact that "If you should dip your hand in, / your wrist would ache immediately."⁷

The whole poem carries a background image of passing within a subtle stillness, a stillness that is confronted by the speaker through the old man:

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.⁸

By offering him a cigarette, the speaker makes a gesture connecting the two distinctive worlds on whose edge stands the old man. The impression of a shift is accentuated by a sudden alteration of the punctuation, when a passage of long descriptive sentences clashes with two significantly shorter ones. The latter intensifies the image of passing by remarking that "[the old man] was" – was, not is – "a friend of [the speaker's] grandfather," thus may be analogous to a lost childhood in relation to the grandfather. David Kalstone explains that "originally, [the

⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 62.

⁵ Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 110.

⁶ Bishop, *Poems* 64.

⁷ Bishop, *Poems* 63.

⁸ Bishop, *Poems* 62.

poem] began with more details about Bishop's grandfather, but her revisions suggest the degree to which she chose not to overstress the poem's human and personal center."⁹

Not overstressing the intimate aspects is a key trait of Bishop's poetry. That does not necessarily imply a lack of emotions. On the contrary, in one of her letters to Bishop, May Swenson writes that she found "At the Fishhouses" "the most *moving*," most emotional of all the poems in *A Cold Spring*.¹⁰ However, the emotions are suppressed and distanced, just as the poem is distanced temporally, since it refers to the past. This temporal distance is shared with other poems involving the grandfather, that is "Manners" and the unpublished manuscript poem "For Grandfather." Both poems rely heavily on the memory of Bishop's childhood. Yet, as Richard Flynn observes, "because of Bishop's insistence on presenting the child's-eye view without a heavy layer of adult evaluation," "Manners" with its playful rhyme scheme and structure resembling that of a nursery rhyme resists sentimentality.¹¹ "For Grandfather" is a rarely personal and affectionate poem. Its intimacy is emphasized by the title, which, after a number of combinations, Bishop chose to take the form of a direct address. However, even with its unusually nostalgic tone, the poem still relies on Bishop's characteristically detailed descriptions, once again projecting the sense of personal loss on the landscape, where the coldness of nature gradually merges with the coldness of the grandfather's death. In general, the motif of the old man may thus be argued to defy any excessive sentimentality, while maintaining its emotional charge carefully concealed behind the precise descriptions of the material world.

While the connotations of the old man figure are quite homogeneous, the category of misfits is fairly diverse. Bishop's male misfits vary from those whose outsiderhood consists in their racial or social segregation to those, who are secluded by their slight feeble-mindedness or excessive love of alcohol. In "Going to the Bakery," the speaker faces a series of manifestations of social disparity, which culminates in encountering a beggar, "A black man [who] sits in a black shade."¹² The contrast is thus increased by their racial otherness and the speaker's inept "Good night"¹³ emphasizes their social difference even further. The poem is interwoven with such grotesque details, another instance being the beggar emphasizing his most

⁹ Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* 121-122.

¹⁰ Quoted in Harrison 29.

¹¹ Richard Flynn, "Words in Air: Bishop, Lowell, and the Aesthetics of Autobiographical Poetry," *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century: Reading the New Editions*, eds. Angus Cleghorn, et al. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012) 207.

¹² Bishop, *Poems* 174.

¹³ Bishop, *Poems* 174.

likely fake wound, “Lifting his shirt to show a bandage,”¹⁴ which ironize the situation while sustaining its seriousness and suggesting the speaker’s awareness of the awkwardness of her position. “Going to the Bakery” is one of Bishop’s poems reflecting the double standard of Brazilian social structure, and another instance may be for example “Under the Window: Ouro Prêto,” with “Going to the Bakery” being in this sense a “more sordid”¹⁵ version of “Under the Window,” as James Longenbach puts it.

“The Burglar of Babylon,” another of Bishop’s Brazilian poems, describes the story of Micuçu, an escaped murderer killed on the run, a true story she personally witnessed while living in Brazil.¹⁶ This poem shares with the previous two the social aspect and intensifies the ironic tone and grotesque qualities. Its protagonist is rather dense, after all, “He wasn’t much of a burglar, / He got caught six times – or more.”¹⁷ This explicit articulation of his abilities as a burglar is implicitly suggested throughout the whole poem by the means of a strong internal focalization reflected in the overall simplicity of language and the deliberate triviality of rhymes. Likewise, the sing-song predictability indicates the predestination of the burglar’s fate:

It was early, eight or eight-thirty.
He saw a soldier climb,
Looking right at him. He fired,
And missed for the last time.¹⁸

The line break after “He fired” represents the most significant point of suspense, creating a moment of tension between the burglar’s anticipated fate and its seeming turn, a turn that is irreversibly disproved in the next line.

Still, before Micuçu came to such a situation, he managed to lead the life of a relatively successful criminal, despite his rather insufficient abilities:

They don’t know how many he murdered
(Though they say he never raped),
And he wounded two policemen
This last time he escaped.¹⁹

However, the cause of Micuçu’s former success as a criminal is to be found not so much in his skills as in their lack in the case of the policemen, which is reaffirmed by their further actions: “And one of them, in a panic, / shot the officer in command.”²⁰ The foolishness of the male figures in the poem is emphasized by Micuçu’s dependence on female characters. Although

¹⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 174.

¹⁵ Longenbach 478.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) 718.

¹⁷ Bishop, *Poems* 115.

¹⁸ Bishop, *Poems* 114.

¹⁹ Bishop, *Poems* 112.

²⁰ Bishop, *Poems* 112.

emphasizing that “they say he never raped” might seem superfluous, especially since Bishop puts it into parentheses, it in fact completes the image of Micuçu’s reliance on women throughout the poem. From the perspective of social inequality, Micuçu may be seen as an embodiment of disparity. But he is by no means a rebellious folk hero. Micuçu is a symptom of the defunct society, he is an unsuccessful criminal who serves as a spectacle for the “Rich people in apartments / [who] Watched through binoculars.”²¹ Bishop herself confessed that she felt a part of the social gap: “I am one of the ‘rich with binoculars!’”²² According to Adrienne Rich, there are “no heroes to this ballad, only victims. Burglars are caught and killed; the essential state of things remains the same.”²³

Questions of Travel contains two other narrative poems of a similar type, “The Riverman” and “Manuelzinho.” “The Riverman” shares with “The Burglar of Babylon” the somewhat simple-minded protagonist, as is reflected in the simple language and naïve course of thought, the allusion to the problem of poverty and also the reliance on a woman when it comes to practical life (“I look yellow, my wife says, / and she brews me stinking teas”²⁴). Interestingly, for Robert Lowell, the protagonist of “The Riverman” represents rather Bishop herself, as he sees the poem as a translation of Bishop’s old nightmare into a vision of strength.²⁵ Moving onto the second poem, “Manuelzinho” it soon becomes clear that its protagonist is not nearly such a social outcast as Micuçu. Instead the poem reflects class differences. Remarkably, the protagonist again strongly depends on women. However, Costello suggests that here the position of the misfit is much more challenging to the dominant culture. Generally, Costello sees Bishop’s misfits as symbolizing “the failure of our domestic orders, the inevitable intrusion of uncontrollable elements into our lives, toward which we may react openly and creatively, or defensively.” In “Manuelzinho,” Costello argues, with the shifting relationship between master and servant, the stability of the hierarchy is shaken even more than in other poems.²⁶

When it comes to poems whose misfits are alcoholics, that is “The Prodigal” and another of Bishop’s unpublished manuscript poems, “A Drunkard,” the social aspect evaporates. Yet, the tone of these poems is much more serious, arguably due to Bishop’s own drinking problem.²⁷ George Monteiro classifies both “The Prodigal” and “A Drunkard,” together with

²¹ Bishop, *Poems* 113

²² Goldensohn 6.

²³ Rich 133.

²⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 104.

²⁵ See Lombardi, “The Closet of Breath” 170.

²⁶ Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 80-81.

²⁷ See Cheryl Walker, *God and Elizabeth Bishop: Meditations on Religion and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 49.

“In the Bakery,” as “a quest parody,” arguing that in all of these poems, the goal of the quest is in fact the liquor.²⁸ The interpretation of “The Prodigal” as Bishop’s explicit exposure of her struggle with alcoholism²⁹ is already widely accepted. Bishop herself admitted that it was based on her personal experience “when one of [her] aunt’s stepsons offered [her] a drink of rum, in the pigsties, at about nine in the morning, when [she] was visiting her in Nova Scotia.”³⁰ It can then come as no surprise that the poem plays on a more personal note.

However, what also should not remain overlooked is the poem’s biblical symbolism. The model for “The Prodigal” was the well-known biblical parable about a prodigal son obtaining forgiveness;³¹ however, according to Frank J. Kearful, “Bishop suspends the theological agency of the parable and focuses on a limited portion of the biblical story, which she freely elaborates upon.”³² In the poem, which takes the form of a double sonnet, Bishop’s attention is drawn not so much to the denouement itself, as to the period of doubts during which the prodigal is deciding whether to stay in “The brown enormous odor he lived by,” with the description itself evoking what he has transformed into, or to “go home.”³³ The agonizing process is emphasized by the irregular rhyme scheme:

But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts
(he hid the pints behind a two-by-four),
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red;
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.
And then he thought he almost might endure
his exile yet another year or more.³⁴

The progressive irregularity interwoven with occasional repetitions reflects the inner disorder of the prodigal. In the moments of ephemeral natural beauty, he “almost might endure” his self-imposed isolation, nevertheless the “almost” implies the inevitability of eventual facing his inability to look at his life from a distance. And yet “it took him a long time / finally to make his mind up to go home.”³⁵ The prodigal’s reluctance, which is a result of his acceptance of the circumstances, indicates that his condition is essentially intentional and thus difficult to change, which reinforces the derivation from the original parable.

²⁸ George Monteiro, *Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil and After: A Poetic Career Transformed* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012) 73.

²⁹ Brett C. Millier, “The Prodigal: Elizabeth Bishop and Alcohol,” *Contemporary Literature* 39.1 (1998): 63, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208921>> 29 Dec 2014.

³⁰ Bishop, *One Art* 478-79.

³¹ Luke 15:11-32.

³² Frank J. Kearful, “Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘The Prodigal’ as a Sympathetic Parody,” *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Connotations Society, 12.1 (2002 / 2003): 16 <<https://www.connotations.de/article/frank-j-kearful-elizabeth-bishops-the-prodigal-as-a-sympathetic-parody/>> 12 Apr. 2019.

³³ Bishop, *Poems* 69.

³⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 69.

³⁵ Bishop, *Poems* 69.

Apart from the religious impulse, Bishop in “The Prodigal” elaborates on human weakness – an attitude perceptible in a satirizing form in other Bishop’s poems as well. While the prodigal’s alcoholism, his lack of self-control and general fecklessness are not exclusively male weaknesses (although they sometimes tend to be stereotyped in this way), “Roosters” involves vices that may be seen as distinctly masculine. However, similarly to those in “The Prodigal,” in “Roosters” the vices are again notably connected to Christian symbolism. Although the poem involves what Adam Kirsch calls “a wonderful satire on masculine egotism and violence,”³⁶ in the second part of the poem, the symbolism of the roosters radically changes. While initially the roosters stand for the patriarchal militarists, according to the prevalent interpretation, in the end they come to symbolize Christian forgiveness. As Erkkila remarks, “the poem has usually been read as a meditation on the two sides of humanity emblemized by the dual symbolism of the roosters as figures of denial and affirmation, despair and hope.”³⁷ This way, the symbolic meaning of the roosters shifts into the realm of biblical forgiveness, which is vital also in the story of the prodigal son, and thus addresses a much more universal theme than masculine deficiencies. Bishop’s misfits in general defy unambiguous interpretations. While her skepticism helped her to distance herself from “the masculine heroic demands of the age,”³⁸ as John Palettella defines it, this should by no means be understood merely as a refusal of the masculine heroics, but rather as a general refusal of what Palettella calls “a politics committed to a cocksure, dogmatic ideology that squelches speculation.”³⁹

3.1.2. Portrayals of Women

Bishop’s poetry challenged not only the then-prevailing masculine heroics, but also the notion of idealized femininity. This will be examined primarily in the poems “Sestina,” “House Guest,” “Faustina, or Rock Roses” and “In the Waiting Room,” with the poems “The Prodigal,” “Under the Window: Ouro Prêto,” “Songs for a Colored Singer,” “Cootchie” and “The Shampoo” serving as supportive examples. Also, “Roosters” will be briefly revisited once more, here from the perspective of sexuality and the related perception of the body. As Cheri Register explains, “the idealized or ‘positive’ female stereotype can, of course, be as

³⁶ Kirsch 69.

³⁷ Erkkila 127.

³⁸ John Palettella, “‘That Sense of Constant Re-Adjustment’: The Great Depression and the Provisional Politics of Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘North & South,’” *Contemporary Literature* 34.1 (1993): 30, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/1208500> 3 Sept. 2019.

³⁹ Palettella 20.

antifeminist as the [...] negative stereotypes” because it “obscures the actual social condition of women and induces them to seek consolation in myths rather than work for social change.”⁴⁰ The women in Bishop’s poetry are indeed far from ideal. Typically, they are largely imperfect, which, however, is not necessarily seen as negative. On the contrary, in Bishop’s poetry, imperfection is a vital human trait and even a submission to a demand for the ideal, be it patriarchal or feminist, is represented in negative terms. This may be seen in “Roosters” and its “many wives / who lead hen’s lives / of being courted and despised,”⁴¹ who fail to resist masculine domination and submit to the patriarchal model.

Similarly, as Erkkilä observes, Bishop “would never be led to romanticize the home, relations between mothers and daughters, or relations among women as a blissfully loving, nurturant, and mutual haven against the oppressive designs of patriarchy.”⁴² After all, even the sow in “The Prodigal” “always ate her young.”⁴³ It thus may be argued that in Bishop’s work, the home is marked by a sense of loss and it is a site where disorder and instability dominate over happiness and maternal love. The home in “Sestina” too is far from consoling. The “old grandmother” is “laughing and talking to hide her tears,” while “the child” draws “inscrutable” houses,⁴⁴ creating a distressful image of a home in which the absence of the child’s parents is uncomfortably conspicuous. Interestingly, the child in “Sestina” is always titled only a “child,” never explicitly gendered. For as Jacqueline Vaught Brogan remarks, in “Sestina” Bishop does not merely indict patriarchy by showing the plight of women, which could be assumed from the grandmother’s tears, but she shows “that people of all genders suffer from the same social imprisonments that constrict and conscript human lives.”⁴⁵ In this sense, “Sestina” may be understood as a critique of the patriarchal system, which, however, can be just as harmful for men as it is for women. According to Brogan, “the ‘rigid house’ – like the rigid form of the sestina itself – is emblematic of the rigid gender roles that the weeping grandmother, the ‘man with buttons like tears,’ and the child presumably endure due to social conventions that ultimately make of a home a virtual prison instead.”⁴⁶

Bishop in general renounces unambiguous portrayals. She strictly avoids both the model of flawless heroines and that of happy housewives. The women in her poetry are strikingly

⁴⁰ Register 6.

⁴¹ Bishop, *Poems* 36.

⁴² Erkkilä 145.

⁴³ Bishop, *Poems* 69.

⁴⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 121-122.

⁴⁵ Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, “An Almost Illegible Scrawl,” *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century: Reading the New Editions*, eds. Angus Cleghorn, et al. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012) 251.

⁴⁶ Brogan 249.

realistic and often they provoke questions about the values commonly associated with women, that is both from the point of view of the patriarchy and from the feminist perspective. Their characterization has a strong tendency to be thoroughly unsentimental, even critical and seemingly unfavorable both in the physical and the psychological sense. One of the very few exceptions is “Under the Window: Ouro Prêto,” which introduces a rarely affectionate and cheerful environment. This not only challenges the very nature of the concept Bishop’s women currently represent and its standard perception, but most importantly, it captures them in all their humanity, good and bad.

In the rarely discussed poem “House Guest,” the “sad seamstress” is “decidedly mediocre.” She is not exactly a “poor orphan” but she is “small and thin and bitter.”⁴⁷ Susan McCabe interprets the poem as a concealed expression of Bishop’s lesbian identity. She argues that since many of her artist figures are male, Bishop in this manner demonstrates her “immasculation” and reveals her struggle to convey her lesbian identity in her writing. As a result, McCabe explains, Bishop’s female figures are often “confined,” “deprived” and “powerless.” She then understands the seamstress as invoking “affiliation through pain and identification” and her inability to sew straight as an inability to “provide a ‘straight’ and potent mythology for women’s creativity.”⁴⁸ However, it would be a simplification to focus merely on the weaknesses of the seamstress. The poem satirizes not only its protagonist, but even more importantly the people surrounding her. These are in fact those who are truly powerless and at a loss. Their helplessness is reinforced by the reference to Clotho, the one of the Three Fates who spins the thread of human life:

Can it be that we nourish
one of the Fates in our bosoms?
Clotho, sewing our lives
with a bony little foot
on a borrowed sewing machine,
and our fates will be like hers,
and our hems crooked forever?⁴⁹

The association of the seamstress with Clotho and her power over human fate emphasizes the reversed power relations between the seamstress and the speaker’s household. Yet, while the speaker is wondering whether any sort of resistance to fate (or the seamstress) is even possible, the seamstress herself, in a way much like Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, remains

⁴⁷ Bishop, *Poems* 170-171.

⁴⁸ McCabe 82-83.

⁴⁹ Bishop, *Poems* 171.

passive (“wasn’t / her month up last week, anyway?”⁵⁰) and instead of assuming power, she deprives others of it by her inactivity.

Despite her curious position of power, the seamstress in “House Guest” remains passive and does not take advantage of the situation. Erkkila observes that while “Bishop was personally and erotically drawn to other women, [...] she never translated her sexual preference into any saving narrative of feminine or feminist transformation.” Therefore, even in the cases in which women stand at the center of Bishop’s poems, they are “complicit in the systems that oppress them, and their relationships are sites of struggle as well as affection across race, class, and gender lines.”⁵¹ The theme of social struggle is not reserved for female protagonists only, as is clear from the previous discussion of Bishop’s male misfits. Still, in the case of women, Bishop’s focus is much more personal, especially when social struggle is connected to the issue of race, such as in “Songs for a Colored Singer,” “Cootchie” and “Faustina, or Rock Roses,” which all revolve around a figure of a black woman.

The characters of Cootchie and Faustina explore especially the master-servant dynamic, as both are a servant to a white woman. Significantly, the poems introduce a master-servant relationship between two women, so that the class and racial charge is not overshadowed by the subject of gender. Both “Cootchie” and “Faustina, or Rock Roses” question the mistress’s understanding of the importance of the servant to her, and both leave the questioning unresolved. However, while Cootchie remains in a powerless position until her death, Faustina experiences a reversal of roles. In the words of Brett C. Millier, “[a] powerful white woman [is] made helpless by age, [a] powerless black woman [is] given absolute sovereignty.”⁵² “Faustina, or Rock Roses” is a poem full of contradictions and extremes. It uses the contrast of a number of white visual elements with a single intervention of a black one. The “white woman,” her “fine white hair” and “white disordered sheets,” “Rags or ragged garments / [...] each contributing its / shade of white” and “the white bowl of farina” all contrast only with “[Faustina’s] sinister kind face / [that] presents a cruel black / coincident conundrum.”⁵³ This notable contrast is mirrored also in the two possibilities of their relationship from the white woman’s perspective:

Oh, is it

freedom at last, a lifelong
dream of time and silence,

⁵⁰ Bishop, *Poems* 171.

⁵¹ Erkkila 121.

⁵² Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 189.

⁵³ Bishop, *Poems* 70-71.

dream of protection and rest?
Or is it the very worst,
the unimaginable nightmare
that never before dared last
more than a second?⁵⁴

Yet, in spite of its potentially emotive motif, the poem remains exceptionally unsentimental, as Rich appraisingly remarks: “I cannot think of another poem by a white woman, until some feminist poetry of the last few years [as of 1983], in which the servant-mistress dynamic between Black and white women has received unsentimental attention.”⁵⁵

Bishop’s relation to the physical body is equally unsentimental. While in “Faustina, or Rock Roses,” the perception of the white woman’s aging body is rather disconcerting, it is far from unusual that Bishop’s bodies are depicted in unpleasantly realistic ways. As Costello remarks, “among the published poems of this period only ‘The Shampoo’ [...] offers a real counterpoint to the terrified vision of the mortal body presented in ‘Faustina, or Rock Roses.’”⁵⁶ The body often even lacks a direct description, yet this does not prevent it from assuming a position of significance⁵⁷ and a possibility of the speaker’s (at least partial) identification with it.⁵⁸ Despite its occasional disagreeableness, the body in Bishop’s poetry is not in denial. Even in “Roosters,” the sins of the flesh are clearly identified as less grave than those of the spirit, “St. Peter’s sin / was worse than that of Magdalen / whose sin was of the flesh alone.”⁵⁹ The body and its sexual potential is thus not understood as negative per se. However, it still may be a cause of confusion or even a trauma, when it is related to gender identification.

When it comes to the problem of sexuality in Bishop’s poetry, there is hardly any other poem discussed more often than “In the Waiting Room,” one of the most authoritative readings being that of Bonnie Costello. Costello characterizes the speaker’s sensation caused by looking at the images of naked African women in *National Geographic* in combination with the ambiguous “oh!” of pain as a trauma of identity. She explains that “the sudden revelation of the body, through the very alien images of the naked African women, paradoxically brings her to a disturbing personal/impersonal intimacy with herself and everyone around her.” Although *National Geographic* traditionally served as a medium which enabled its readers to “break the

⁵⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 71-72.

⁵⁵ Rich 132.

⁵⁶ Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 74.

⁵⁷ See Catherine Cucinella, *Poetics of the Body: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elizabeth Bishop, Marilyn Chin, and Marilyn Hacker* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 55.

⁵⁸ See Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller, “Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Rewards of Indirection,” *The New England Quarterly* 57.4 (1984): 542, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/365061> 1 Dec. 2019.

⁵⁹ Bishop, *Collected Poems* 38.

taboo of the body,” while preserving one’s distance and cultural superiority, here, Costello explains, the balance is disrupted and “the recognition of the body cannot remain contained in the imperial hold of the National Geographic but infects the room; the images on the page indeed become the room, no longer contained as mere pictures of faraway places.”⁶⁰

Until the child encounters the “horrifying” breast of the naked women, the poem offers a seemingly unequivocal cultural stability. However, the bodies presented by the magazine are clearly repressed:

Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.⁶¹

As Costello has already noted, the wires around the necks of the women may be understood as a symbol of the “strangling force of culture.”⁶² The speaker is apparently repulsed, yet she is still drawn to the magazine: “Their breasts were horrifying. / I read it right straight through. / I was too shy to stop.”⁶³ The crucial “*oh!*” then comes “from inside,” that is not only from the inside of the dentist’s office, but also from the inside of the speaker’s mouth and even structurally from the inside of the line:

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain
– Aunt Consuelo’s voice –
not very loud or long.
I wasn’t at all surprised;
[...]
What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.⁶⁴

The interruptive punctuation reflects the girl’s hesitation and confusion. Her anxiety increases together with the confusion and when she suddenly becomes aware of her identification with her aunt, she experiences “the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space.”⁶⁵ This culminates in the realization that “you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*.”⁶⁶ The sensation of falling may then be understood as her falling out of the stage of

⁶⁰ Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 121-124.

⁶¹ Bishop, *Poems* 179.

⁶² Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 123.

⁶³ Bishop, *Poems* 179.

⁶⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 180.

⁶⁵ Bishop, *Poems* 180.

⁶⁶ Bishop, *Poems* 180.

childhood, into “cold, blue-black space” of adult life, and while her realization of the “I” stops the rapidly growing anxiety, her perception is already changed.

The interpretations of the reaction of the young girl vary significantly. While Betsy Erkkila identifies the child’s terror with her realization of a “fall into the oppression and constraints of gender,”⁶⁷ C. K. Doreski focuses primarily on the absence of suitable female role models and the process of the formation of the child’s identity as such, which she sees as formed “less by the accidents of birth (parentage, sex, family name) than by the individual’s confrontation with and discovery of such ‘accidents.’”⁶⁸ Lee Edelman then finds the poem to be a study in homoeroticism, describing “eroticism that undermines the institution of heterosexuality”⁶⁹ however, this view is criticized by Elizabeth Dodd, who argues that while “there is a quiet, even suppressed presence of homoeroticism in some of Bishop’s work,” especially in some of her uncollected poems, for “In the Waiting Room,” the poem which Edelman examines in greatest detail, this approach is far too reductive.⁷⁰

Still, the argument that seems to be in greatest agreement with Bishop’s egalitarian thinking is the one shared by Megan Marshall and Elizabeth Dodd. In Marshall’s view, the poem was “written by a woman about a girl’s perceptions, but the “subject matter” – growing up, experiencing self-consciousness – was universal.”⁷¹ Dodd shares this conviction, arguing that “certainly the poem shows gender awareness,” yet it is “tied up with the larger awareness of humanity in general; the young Elizabeth is not really discovering her sexuality so much as she is discovering her own participation in the human race – including her gender identity.”⁷² Both of these views thus confirm Bishop’s incorporation of all forms of human connection independently on any gender agenda. As a result, even Bishop’s most frequently discussed poem concerning gender identification may be understood as addressing universal themes rather than female sexuality alone.

⁶⁷ Erkkila 150.

⁶⁸ Doreski 76.

⁶⁹ Lee Edelman and Elizabeth Bishop, “The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘In the Waiting Room,’” *Contemporary Literature* 26.2 (1985): 194. JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/1207932> 21 Oct. 2019.

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Dodd, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992) 108.

⁷¹ Marshall, “Elizabeth and Alice.”

⁷² Dodd 109.

3.1.3. Challenging Gender Conventions

A number of Bishop's poems transcend gender stereotypes on yet another level. In these poems, Bishop avoids clear binarism and as Costello remarks, "nothing disarms us like the violation of categories we assume are secure," such as life/death, right/wrong or male/female.⁷³ Bishop's poetry often resists the strictness of these divisions. Costello adds that "women as well as men in her poems express fear of life, the longing for cultural mastery or aesthetic and conceptual transcendence. Male as well as female beholders confront an elusive, contradictory, mutable, and recalcitrant reality. Bishop's misfits are of both sexes."⁷⁴ In addition, in some of Bishop's poems the sexuality of the characters is transferred or otherwise subverted. These then may manifest the features of the other sex, so that the masculine aspects become feminine and the other way around. This will be examined first briefly in "Arrival at Santos" and then in greater detail in "Exchanging Hats." Sometimes, the gender may become almost completely fluid, in which case the character surpasses the boundaries of gender, which will be examined predominantly in "The Gentleman of Shalott" and in short also in "The Fish" and "The Man-Moth." Finally, even the poetic space, which itself is often understood as gendered, may be challenged by a pervasion of the other sex. This will be shown on the example of "Filling Station," accompanied with the examples of "The Weed" and "The Moose."

In some of Bishop's poems, this gender ambiguity is only slight. Miss Breen in "Arrival at Santos" is "a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,"⁷⁵ whose unusual profession and stature are profoundly unfeminine. Michael Davidson sees her as a prototype of the "masculine woman," much like Bishop herself. Being a traveler, or rather a wanderer, Miss Breen too is, according to Davidson, "displaced from conventional domestic spaces and roles."⁷⁶ With her mannish characteristic, Miss Breen thus deviates from the model of a typical woman, but her queerness is still quite mild. Bishop's "Exchanging Hats," on the other hand, offers a much stronger image of gender ambiguity. In Costello's words, in this poem "Bishop describes a world of sexual anxiety, where men become effeminate and women become the captains:"⁷⁷ The gender ambiguity thus results in the social identities becoming confused:

Unfunny uncles who insist
in trying on a lady's hat,
– oh, even if the joke falls flat,
we share your slight transvestite twist

⁷³ Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 46.

⁷⁴ Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 250.

⁷⁵ Bishop, *Poems* 87.

⁷⁶ Davidson 172.

⁷⁷ Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 83.

in spite of our embarrassment.
Costume and custom are complex.
The headgear of the other sex
inspires us to experiment.⁷⁸

The poem employs carnival playfulness emphasized by the plentiful alliterations and regular rhyme scheme. Yet, in spite of its friskiness, “Exchanging Hats” has a somber undertone. The uncles are “unfunny,” with a “slight transvestite twist” that causes “embarrassment,” which is all the more prominent for its arrival after a significant pause created by the stanza break. Until that point, the poem might still evolve in an unambiguously playful spirit, however, with the speaker’s embarrassment comes also the poem’s fast-paced descent into the “madness of the hatter”⁷⁹ aggravated by the perversities.

Costello explains that “Exchanging Hats” discloses an anxiety about social roles, which are here exchanged rather than made flexible: “Instead of expressing the freedom from fixed order and identity, the grotesque here expresses the radical instability and inauthenticity of all cultural roles.”⁸⁰ For a more fluid rendering of gender identity and by extension also sexuality, one needs to look at one of Bishop’s earlier poems, “The Gentleman of Shalott.” The poem gives an ironic twist to Tennyson’s well-known poem “The Lady of Shalott,” from which it derives its title as well. While Tennyson’s lady is condemned to choose between the world only as a reflection in her mirror or death, or, as Anne Stevenson interprets it, between “a half-life of shadows or a real life that kills imagination,” Bishop’s gentleman is offered both, but as Stevenson remarks, only as long as he “keeps the two sides of himself [that is himself and his imagination] perfectly aligned.”⁸¹

However, in Bishop’s poem the gentleman struggles with confusion about his perception of his own reflection in a mirror. Puzzled about “which side’s in or out / of the mirror,”⁸² he is unable to differentiate the mirror image from himself and fears that “if half his head’s reflected, / thought, he thinks, might be affected.”⁸³ While the poem seems to be written in a light tone, Bishop’s irony is embedded in a serious predicament:

Which eye’s his eye?
Which limb lies

⁷⁸ Bishop, *Poems* 230.

⁷⁹ Bishop, *Poems* 230.

⁸⁰ Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 85.

⁸¹ Anne Stevenson, “The Lady and Gentleman of Shalott: The Early Poems of Elizabeth Bishop,” *Critical Survey* 11.3 (1999): 88, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/41557310> 16 Nov. 2019.

⁸² Bishop, *Poems* 11.

⁸³ Bishop, *Poems* 11.

next the mirror?
[...]
To his mind
it's the indication
of a mirrored reflection
somewhere along the line
of what we call the spine.⁸⁴

The gentleman's uncertainty about himself, strengthened by the image of self-division, is mirrored in the disjointed rhyme scheme. That together with the short, uneven lines project the gentleman's ambiguous personality even into the poem's structure. The question "Which eye's his eye," with the "eye" being a homophone for "I," inevitably refers also to the gentleman's identity and poses, as Kirstin Hotelling Zona observes, "a question that, typically, is posed only to expose the impossibility of an answer."⁸⁵

From the feminist point of view, "The Gentleman of Shalott" may of course be understood as a criticism of romantic heroism and by extension also of male arrogance and egotism. The gentleman is in control of his actions and capable of making choices, yet he is still dependent on the reflection, trapped within his narcissistic world.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the gentleman's immersion within his narcissism challenges also conventional masculine sexuality. As Victoria Harrison argues, here "love is clearly not love of difference; there is no Lady Lancelot beyond the mirror. But Bishop does give the gentleman of Shalott the option of sexuality constructed as doubling."⁸⁷ His refusal to accept the sameness may even become a problem, since then he is confronted with his own incompleteness: "If the glass slips / he's in a fix - / only one leg, etc."⁸⁸ Harrison then concludes that "he is an isolate, though doubled, subject; duplication, not opposition, gives him pleasure, whatever psychological or cultural norms might dictate."⁸⁹ Bishop's gentleman of Shalott thus subverts the conventional masculine sexuality not by embracing femininity or homosexuality, but by ignoring sexual opposition in a wider sense, that is both male and female.

By ignoring the gender oppositions altogether, "The Gentleman of Shalott" offers another form of subversion of the conventions of gendered sexuality. A similar type of undermining of the established social code may be achieved by a reversed concept, that is by

⁸⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 11.

⁸⁵ Zona, *The Feminist Poetics of Self-restraint* 75.

⁸⁶ See Jeredith Merrin, *An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Uses of Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990) 102.

⁸⁷ Harrison 48.

⁸⁸ Bishop, *Poems* 11-12.

⁸⁹ Harrison 48.

containing both opposites in a single figure. This figure is then not necessarily human, but it accommodates an ambiguous sexual quality. As one instance of this concept may be seen Bishop's once most anthologized poem, "The Fish," whose hermaphroditism challenges the binary paradigm of corporeal normativity.⁹⁰ According to Catherine Cucinella,

the body in Bishop's poetry always refuses containment by rejecting a site of stasis in an either-or paradigm. Because Bishop positions them on thresholds and in-between spaces, her poetic bodies disrupt the culture-nature binary, a binary that relies upon a myriad of other binarisms: mind-body, reason-passion, sense-sensibility, reality-appearance, transcendence-immanence, and form-matter.⁹¹

Similar representation across the boundaries of gender as in "The Fish" may be seen also in "The Man-Moth." Bishop's man-moth too embodies both the masculine and feminine aspect. Davidson classifies Bishop as a poet who in "The Man-Moth" "[interrogates] masculine aspirations from within a speaker who embodies many of those aspirations."⁹² In addition, his "feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold, / of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers" and "a disease / he has inherited the susceptibility to"⁹³ may be attributed to his remarkable sensitivity and fragility, which are so often typecast as a feminine qualities.

It is not only the gender conventions of individual figures, in which the binary oppositions are challenged. Even the poetic space itself, when seen as gendered, may reflect the dynamic blending of male and female distinctions. Bishop disliked the traditional perception of home as a space pertaining to women and the outside as one pertaining to men, especially when it comes to poetry. Jonathan Ellis discloses that Bishop "[encouraged] women poets to take more journeys outside of the house and garden, rebelling against an imagined gendering of poetic space."⁹⁴ Bishop herself problematized the distinction and let her poetic spaces, both physical and mental, merge the two genders or invade the customarily gendered space by the other sex, such as in "The Weed," "Filling Station" and "The Moose." Costello explains that in "The Weed," the "stiff and idle"⁹⁵ final thoughts pertain to the "male space of mental finality," which collides with the "female space of 'the heart.'"⁹⁶ This way, the psychological space becomes subject to flux and denies the rigid gendered differentiation.

⁹⁰ For further discussion of the ambiguous sexuality of "The Fish," see Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 64.

⁹¹ Cucinella 7.

⁹² Davidson 170.

⁹³ Bishop, *Poems* 16-17.

⁹⁴ Ellis, *Art and Memory* 95.

⁹⁵ Bishop, *Poems* 22.

⁹⁶ Costello, *Questions of Mastery* 57.

“Filling Station” introduces a male-dominated space pervaded by a presence of feminine consciousness. The masculinity is represented by a series of images typically suggesting male domain of influence. It is a “little filling station,” a marker of automobile industry traditionally controlled by men, penetrated with dirt, sweat and grease. The male dominance is accentuated by the bodily presence of the father and his sons:

Father wears a dirty,
oil-soaked monkey suit
that cuts him under the arms,
and several quick and saucy
and greasy sons assist him
(it’s a family filling station),
all quite thoroughly dirty.⁹⁷

The distinctly masculine inhabitants are introduced by a voice of feminine consciousness. The feminine perspective is clearly reflected in the language via which the poem is articulated, even from the very first line: “Oh, but it is dirty! / – this little filling station.”⁹⁸ The masculine environment is infiltrated by distinctly feminine aesthetics: “a big dim doily,” which is “Embroidered in daisy stitch / with marguerites” or “a big hirsute begonia.”⁹⁹ This feminine touch to the masculine, industrial site creates a strong sense of domesticity, which is already suggested by the speaker’s maternal cleanliness and wariness (“Be careful with that match!”¹⁰⁰). The gender markers in the poem are profoundly clichéd, but the stereotypes affect both male and female features equally. However, significantly, the agent of the domestic care remains unknown and, importantly, ungendered throughout the poem: “Somebody embroidered the doily. / Somebody waters the plant / or oils it, maybe.”¹⁰¹ As a consequence, the gender neutral “somebody” blurs the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine and the actual femininity of the feminine elements becomes dubious. The physical absence of the woman is then a positive fact in its transcendence of gender because after all, “Somebody loves us all.”¹⁰²

While Bishop’s poetry clearly inclines to some level of impersonality, it does not particularly evade either of the sexes. In both cases Bishop refrains from any form of excessive sentimentalism or, on the other hand, bitterness, which tends to be ascribed to feminist (especially then lesbian) writers in order to undermine their work.¹⁰³ Bishop’s male characters

⁹⁷ Bishop, *Poems* 125.

⁹⁸ Bishop, *Poems* 125.

⁹⁹ Bishop, *Poems* 125-126.

¹⁰⁰ Bishop, *Poems* 125.

¹⁰¹ Bishop, *Poems* 126.

¹⁰² Bishop, *Poems* 126.

¹⁰³ For further information on discarding women writers as sentimental, see Dowson 15-21. For further information on feminists (and lesbians in particular) being accused of man-hatred, see Rich 56.

are, apart from the grandfather type, mostly misfits, but their symbolic meaning varies, and they are by no means mere objects of mockery. On the contrary, Bishop's misfits often touch upon themes that for her are deeply personal and intimate. Bishop's female characters then can be characterized predominantly by their defiance of all forms of idealized femininity, that is both its patriarchal and feminist variants. Her women may thus often be unappealing in many ways, but they are profoundly realistic and by extension also thought-provoking – not merely in the sense of gender, but also in terms of race or class. Nevertheless, most importantly Bishop subverts the conventional paradigm of binary gender oppositions, be it by problematizing the characteristics of a particular sex (both in terms of the characters and the poetic space) and flirting with those pertaining to the other sex, or by making the gender altogether fluid and ambiguous. Following the discussion of the employment of gender in Bishop's poetry, the next section will examine also how she responds to gender stereotypes in relation to poetic form.

3.2. Bishop's Lyric Voice

Feminist criticism often argues that literature has been formed by patriarchal tradition, and feminist literature (both poetry and prose) then strives to challenge this tradition by developing a distinctive feminine voice. This section will thus explore how Bishop responds both to the masculine tradition in poetry, especially lyric poetry, and also to the idea of its feminist rethinking. Starting with a necessary theoretical introduction, the discussion will then proceed to Bishop's own approach to the lyric mode. As will be explored, during the course of its evolution, the lyric mode has been dominated by a male voice, marginalizing female poets contributing to the genre. This resulted in a rather problematic relationship of female poets to the lyric "I," though not strictly only due to their gender identity, but also because of the development of the conception of the self in general, regardless of gender. Therefore, the last part of this section will focus on how Bishop faces this double anxiety and constructs her poetic personae.

3.2.1. The Evolution of the Lyric

Until recently, the history of Anglophone lyric poetry was dominated by male poets. From Shakespeare to Yeats, women played their part in lyric poetry chiefly (though not exclusively) as lyric subjects used by male poets. Accordingly, the tradition of the male lyric

voice may be characterized by a significant level of authority and confidence, which has been acquired during the centuries of formation and consolidation of the form and by extension also of the male lyric voice.¹⁰⁴ Especially during Romanticism, the lyric mode experienced a significant strengthening of its position in respect to other forms of poetry. The lyric became widely acknowledged as the highest form of poetic expression, as Claude Rawson explains, and acquired a dignity which exceeded that of the epic. As a consequence, the importance of feeling and emotional charge triumphed over that of a story or a plot and came to be regarded as a norm of serious poetic expression.¹⁰⁵

It is essential to put this into parallel with the dominance of male poets over the genre. With the rise of the lyric poem's prominence, the dominance of male poets over the lyric grew, and thus further reinforced the already strong connection between male voice and lyric mode. As a result, the expression of the poet's self, or more precisely, the poet's expression of the emotions and psyche voiced by the speaker of the poem, was necessarily explored primarily from the masculine point of view, which led to its evolution on the basis of this single-sex angle only. Ironically, the emotionality and sensibility, so much celebrated by male poets in the past, later turned out to be quite an unfortunate complication for female poets. The connection between the emphasis on personal feelings or emotions, inherent to the lyric mode, and the clichéd connection of these traits to women eventually, and rather counterproductively, led to the conception of the lyric itself as feminine, or even effeminate.¹⁰⁶ As a consequence, from the feminist point of view, women poets are confronted on the one hand with the authority of male voice, which directly influenced the eventual style of lyric poetry, and with the risk of being disparaged as effeminate (even if it followed the tradition) on the other.

Mutlu Konuk Blasing summarizes it thus: "Poetry is a special, sacramental language, a privileged hieratic discourse – historically, a jealously guarded male domain; especially since the Romantics, however, it may focus on personal experience – historically, a female province."¹⁰⁷ The cultural gendering of poetry then, Blasing explains, is a result of the "increasing separation of subjective and material realms, together with the gendering of these opposites." The "feminine" realm of imagination, emotions and personal experience is put in

¹⁰⁴ See Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 15-58.

¹⁰⁵ Claude Rawson, *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 13-14.

¹⁰⁶ Kinnahan 16.

¹⁰⁷ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, "From Gender to Genre and Back: Elizabeth Bishop and 'The Moose,'" *American Literary History* 6.2 (1994): 268. JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/489870> 1 Oct. 2019.

contrast with the “masculine” qualities of reason, empirical truth and public experience.¹⁰⁸ Women poets are thus argued to be forced to either artificially restrict the emotional charge of their poems to avoid being accused of excessive emotionality in relation to their gender, or risk marginalization in the male-dominated literary milieu. However, according to Blasing, the authority of the cultural position of male poets itself had since the Romantics come into question, leading to the tendency of the modernists’ poetic anxieties to “make it new” getting cast in gender terms, that is how to write “like a man,” which then affected male poets as much as female poets.¹⁰⁹

In any case, this discourse serves as evidence of the increasing awareness of gender differentiation in poetry. The call for a distinctly feminine way of writing appeared as soon as at the beginning of the twentieth century, and was, perhaps surprisingly, voiced not by women only. The poet Harold Monro, editor of the 1912 special edition on “Women-Poets” of *Poetry Review*, declared that “the great poet is neither man nor woman, but partially each.” However, at the same time, he observes that “Woman” failed to represent herself in poetry “through the belief that, in order to do so, she must become as Man.”¹¹⁰ Similarly, Edith Sitwell in her 1925 article “Some Observations on Women’s Poetry” asserts that women should free themselves from the poetic forms developed by men:

Women poets will do best if they realise that male technique is not suitable to them. No woman writing in the English language has ever written a great sonnet, no woman has ever written great blank verse. Then again, speaking generally, as we cannot dispense with our rules, so we find free verse difficult.¹¹¹

As Jane Dowson argues, “one of the difficulties in avoiding gendered associations was that traditional poetic form was identified with the best of male and the weakest of female writing.”¹¹² However, the rare cases of women poets celebrated for their formal prowess were

¹⁰⁸ Blasing 268.

¹⁰⁹ Blasing 268.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Dowson 21.

¹¹¹ Edith Sitwell, “Some Observations on Women’s Poetry,” *Vogue* (1925), *Edith Sitwell: Fire of the Mind*, eds. Elizabeth Salter and Allannah Harper (London: Michael Joseph, 1976), 189.

¹¹² Dowson supports this argument with the example of William Archer, who “apparently in praise of Alice Meynell, denounced women generically for failing with form: “Few poetesses of the past have shown a very high developed faculty for strict poetical form. I am not sure that the works of any woman in any modern language are reckoned among the consummate models of metrical style ... ladies as a rule seem to have aimed at a certain careless grace rather than a strenuous complexity or accuracy of metrical structure ... Mrs Meynell is one of the rare exceptions to this rule. Within a carefully limited range, her form is unimpeachable.” In Dowson 21.

often criticized as traditionalists by feminist critics,¹¹³ which, after all, was precisely what oftentimes occurred to Bishop.

The demand for the establishment of an alternative female tradition as a response to the male-dominated field of poetry became even louder in the 1960s.¹¹⁴ The feminist vision of this period particularly strongly encouraged poetics of self-expression.¹¹⁵ The question of “I” in lyric poetry thus deserves a closer attention by itself. The “I” is undoubtedly a pivotal element of the lyric mode and plays a fundamental role in the articulation of the poet’s voice, be it male or female. There is a reciprocal influence between the general conception of the lyric “I” and the poets striving to push its boundaries. While the poets are constantly trying to avoid the conformation to the accepted convention, the convention is at the same time necessarily being reformed by these efforts, similarly to the reformations of a literary canon on a larger scale. However, the canon has at the same time, again, been developed primarily of quite a narrow spectrum of poets, that is particularly white male Anglophone poets. The patriarchal structure in this sense then penetrates all levels of both the process and the subsequent reception of the work.

Despite their best efforts, women poets who attempt to get away from the patriarchal structure of the lyric and the conception of the “I” are still bound within the language, which (as has been mentioned already in the first section of the previous chapter in the context of the developments of the critical reception of female authors) may also be understood as a mechanism of oppression. Adrienne Rich, in her well-known 1980s essay “Blood, Bread, and Poetry,” explores such forms of oppression and recognizes a gap between herself as a woman and herself as a poet. It is only when she manages to “write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman’s body and experience, to take women’s experience seriously as theme and source for art” that she is able to close this gap.¹¹⁶ From this perspective, a female poet writing lyric poetry thus has to face on the one hand the anxiety about the lyric “I” – and by extension also about the self, not necessarily bound to her gender – and on the other hand the anxiety about her position as a woman poet within the man-dominated multilevel literary structure.

¹¹³ See the earlier discussion on Bishop and Moore, or for a more general rendition, see Allen J. Frantzen “When Women Aren’t Enough.” *Speculum* 68.2 (1993): 445-446. JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/2864560> 12 Nov. 2019.

¹¹⁴ See Zona, *The Feminist Poetics of Self-restraint* 2.

¹¹⁵ See Kinnahan 43.

¹¹⁶ Rich 182.

3.2.2. Bishop's Response to the Tradition

The preceding discussion made clear Bishop was repeatedly subjected to criticism about her precision and formal perfection, which supposedly signified her compliance with the male-developed and male-dominated tradition in poetry. As a consequence, during her lifetime, Bishop's poetry was praised predominantly by those who were closer to the literary canon than to its radical (especially feminist) rethinking. Doreski notices that even after her death, "many critics have seen Bishop as peculiarly reticent, personally repressed, or unhealthily self-effacing. They write of Bishop the solitary, the lesbian, the cipher, the helpless victim of the phallocracy trapped in the prisonhouse of gender."¹¹⁷ The call for new poetic forms founded on distinctly female experience was indeed largely ignored by Bishop. While Rich, as mentioned earlier, eventually interpreted Bishop's poetry as innovative in its reflection of the outsiderhood of her lesbian identity, this view has been later contended for example by Helen Vendler, who argues that "the spiritual singularity of artists sets them socially apart [...] whether they are sexual 'outsiders' or not."¹¹⁸

And yet, despite the much-debated nature of Bishop's inclining to traditional forms is based more in her trust in the impartiality of language and by extension of poetry as well (pertaining to the aforementioned North American deviation of feminism) than in her lack of innovativeness as such. On the contrary, Bishop took advantage of the aesthetic freedom (brought by modernist developments discussed in the first section of the previous chapter), which helped to create new ways of representing consciousness, the self and also women. While Bishop did not follow in the vein of Marianne Moore's formal experimentations, in her case the modernist legacy is reflected in the modern, or even postmodern, vision of Bishop's poems. This has ensured Bishop the attention of a great number of critics and theorists in the following decades. Furthermore, Gillian White argues that even Bishop's adherence to traditional techniques cannot be understood in quite the same terms as it would be before modernism, and her rhyme or narrative strategies thus need to be read in a different way than nineteenth-century poems.¹¹⁹

Blasing offers a similar perspective, seeing conservative forms as in fact offering more rhetorical freedom than ostensible freedom and appreciating Bishop as a poet who takes full

¹¹⁷ Doreski 8-9.

¹¹⁸ Helen Vendler, "The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop," *Critical Inquiry* 13.4 (1987): 827, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343530>> 28 Aug. 2019.

¹¹⁹ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014) 50.

advantage of the seemingly “narrow” freedom conventional form offers and whose work “increasingly registers the complexity of a woman poet’s historical position, not only post eighteenth century but post modernism.”¹²⁰ Bishop’s intricate technique is notable not for any sort of radical determination, but for the way she abandons the prescribed models of representations, the result of which has been disclosed in the previous section of this chapter. In this way, Bishop problematizes gender conventions by challenging the characteristics pertaining to each of the two sexes or by the blending of gendered spaces.

Apart from “Filling Station” discussed earlier in the chapter, the strategy of problematizing gendered spaces in poetry can be seen also in “The Moose.” According to Blasing, this narrative poem exemplifies Bishop’s “strategic position in literary history.” Blasing argues that while a number of readers see a specifically female sensibility in the poem,

far from showing a female sensibility, the poem situates itself firmly within the subgenre of Romantic and modern narratives of personal encounters with nature, observing its gendering of nature as feminine vis-a-vis the masculine-gendered experiencing subject-poet. At the same time, the poem also questions the gender framework of this subgenre, both because the subject is female and because the poem appeals to older narrative forms.¹²¹

The identification of the moose as “a she” (“Look! It’s a she!”¹²²) corresponds to the traditional gendering of nature as female. The femininity of the moose is reinforced by the conspicuously domestic connotations of her description, she is “homely as a house / (or, safe as houses).” Furthermore, symptomatically it is a man’s voice that assures others of her being “Perfectly harmless....”¹²³ However, Blasing concludes that “by entering the narrative syntax, Bishop also enters a historical syntax and, thereby, a traditional gender framework,”¹²⁴ suggesting Bishop’s self-awareness in the employment of the genre, reflected in the manner in which the traditional structure is followed.

Bishop thus may be argued to see the restrictions not so much in the traditional forms, denounced by progressive feminists, as in the women’s own perception of themselves. She noticed these limitations even in her own case, when she admitted that she would probably write more, if she was a man.¹²⁵ The reasons behind the women’s insecure self-perception were of course grounded in the external pressure generated by the patriarchal culture. However, if women writers are to break free from the restraints of the patriarchal tradition, it is in this sense

¹²⁰ Blasing 267-269.

¹²¹ Blasing 269-270.

¹²² Bishop, *Poems* 193.

¹²³ Bishop, *Poems* 193.

¹²⁴ Blasing 273.

¹²⁵ Starbuck.

much more meaningful to refuse to participate in it altogether than to delimit themselves against it, which further widens the gap between the two sexes. In her poetry, Bishop herself assumed a strictly disengaged posture with regard to gender, even though occasionally she questioned her own approach. She never saw her poems as intentionally addressing the situation of women, yet in her reaction to Rich's 1972 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Bishop admitted that she was aware of the issue, but her solution lied in its ignoring.

Rich invited women writers to unite in "refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society and referred to Bishop as a poet who keeps "human sexual relationships at a measured and chiselled distance in her poems."¹²⁶ She continued with a praise of the anger present in much contemporary poetry by women, seeing the effort to achieve "objectivity" or "detachment" as pointless and stating that it was time for women to "stop being haunted" by "internalized fears of being and saying themselves."¹²⁷ Bishop assured Rich that she had no objections to Rich's commentary and admitted that concerning the anger, "I'm sure you're absolutely right. [...] I must have felt the same way many years ago—but my only method of dealing with it was to refuse to admit it."¹²⁸ Still, she never actually transferred this reconsideration to her poems even in the following years and remained firm in her refusal of engaged poetry.¹²⁹

3.2.3. Bishop's Poetic Personae

Bishop's lyric voice itself challenges the lyric convention from within of the traditional form. In the twentieth century, the general stance on the "I" in lyric poetry came to be rather that of an anxiety, than that of an authority; and that both in the case when the "I" is dismissed and when it is endorsed.¹³⁰ Bishop too inevitably faces the anxiety about the representation of the lyric "I," undoubtedly intensified by her aversion to the revelation of the details of her private life. It can then come as no surprise that the "I" in her poetry is often concealed, neutral and elliptical. Kathleen Spivack emphasizes the peculiar reticence of Bishop's employment of the "I:" "She did not, like Walt Whitman, like Ginsberg, or even like Lowell, thump the

¹²⁶ The passage referring directly to Bishop goes as follows: "Much of woman's poetry has been in the nature of the blues song: a cry of pain, of victimization, or a lyric of seduction. (Or, like Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, she kept human sexual relationships at a measured and chiselled distance in her poems.)" Quoted in Marshall, "Elizabeth and Alice."

¹²⁷ Quoted in Marshall, "Elizabeth and Alice."

¹²⁸ Quoted in Marshall, "Elizabeth and Alice."

¹²⁹ See for example the 1977 interview with George Starbuck.

¹³⁰ See for example Norman Finkelstein, "The Problem of Self in Recent American Poetry," *Poetics Journal: Digital Archive*, eds. Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007) 505-513.

incessant drum of 'myself.' The 'I,' when it comes in her poems, is a little surprise, and usually comes in as a comment on humanity and the human condition."¹³¹ It is thus the vision of the self in the world, rather than the self per se, which gains prominence in Bishop's poetry.

As a result, most often her rhetoric is asexual,¹³² the "I" in her poetry is genderless, rather the eye of a traveler than the "I" of an individual self. This may be seen for example in the poems "Love Lies Sleeping," "View of the Capitol from The Library of Congress," "Paris, 7 A.M." or "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" and more. The "I" of the speaker serves as "eyes" for the reader, who in this sense observes landscapes and cityscapes through the eyes of the speaker. Bishop's vivid and precise descriptions thus prevail but at the same time, the speaker of the poem subtly challenges the reader's judgement with his ambiguous observations. The poet Eavan Boland observes that Bishop never suggests that the object of her perception "will vanish without her intervention. Her earth is not represented as a dramatized fragment of her consciousness."¹³³ The consciousness, so powerful in Romanticism, is not the focal point here. That allows Bishop to evade gender classification and as a consequence also to free herself from the connotations of gender-determined roles.

Occasionally, the explicit "I" in Bishop's poetry is completely excluded and substituted with a general and indeterminate "we" ("From the Country to the City," "House Guest," "Questions of Travel" and others) or omitted in favor of the addressee "you" ("The Shampoo," "Argument"). Both the unspecified or suppressed "I" and its omissions then provoke a number of intricate questions: What gender is the "I"? Who is the "we" and is it inclusive or exclusive? Who, and of what gender, is the addressee? Accordingly, in the infrequent cases in which the "I" plays a more prominent role, the poetic persona is subjected to careful scrutiny by literary critics and theorists, especially those inclined to autobiographical interpretation. This is the case with poems such as "In the Waiting Room," "Crusoe in England" or "One Art."

"One Art" is one of Bishop's best-known lyrical poems. Many times, it has been interpreted as her reaction to the dissolution of her relationship with Alice Methfessel, and even before that with Lota de Macedo Soares. In a more general sense, it has also been put into parallel with all the plentiful losses Bishop encountered since her early childhood.¹³⁴ The speaker of the poem introduces a series of losses, and while the stakes increase, the instruction

¹³¹ Spivack 85.

¹³² Harold Bloom, ed. *Elizabeth Bishop* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2002) 66.

¹³³ Quoted in Harrison 2.

¹³⁴ See for example Marshall, "Elizabeth and Alice," McCabe 33-36, Doreski 13, or Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Elizabeth Bishop's Art of Losing," *The New Yorker*, Condé Nast, 26 Feb. 2017 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/elizabeth-bishops-art-of-losing>> 21 Aug. 2019.

is to “practice losing farther, losing faster.”¹³⁵ With the word “disaster” being placed in a terminal position in the villanelle, Bishop does not let it slip from the reader’s attention even for a moment. Therefore, even though the pervasive “disaster” is being repeatedly discharged, the effects of losing eventually and inevitably escalate into the impression that it after all is a disaster, even further emphasized by the hesitation reflected in the repetition of the “like:” “It’s evident / the art of losing’s not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.”¹³⁶ The emotional charge of the poem is exceptionally strong (especially for Bishop’s poetry), yet the poem still preserves some of the speaker’s distance, as the emotions are concealed behind pretended bravery and significantly, the identities (and even gender) of both the speaker and the addressee remain unrevealed.¹³⁷

Interestingly, the two other poems named above, “Crusoe in England” and “In the Waiting Room,” are both voiced by distinctly different personae, namely that of a man and that of a child. “Crusoe in England” is not the only instance of Bishop’s employment of a male persona (other examples include “Jerónimo’s House,” “The Riverman” and “From Trollope’s Journal”), but “Crusoe in England” is the one gaining most critical attention. The autobiographic quality of the homoerotic nature of the relationship between Crusoe and Friday has been already discussed from many angles, from McCabe’s vision of the poem as a reflection of Bishop’s silenced lesbian relationships and their eventual loss,¹³⁸ to Nickowitz’s understanding of Friday as a “fantasy of fulfillment and erotic desire,”¹³⁹ or to Diehl’s perception of the poem as a sort of therapy enabling Bishop “to deal with subjects that would otherwise remain unspoken because they were overtly threatening or simply too overt.”¹⁴⁰ And yet, according to Frank Bidart, Bishop was horrified by the suggestion that it might be understood as a metaphor for Brazil and Lota.¹⁴¹ However, not necessarily seen in autobiographical terms, the suggestion of a homoerotic tension between Crusoe and Friday is undeniable (“Friday was nice, and we were friends. / If only he had been a woman! / I wanted

¹³⁵ Bishop, *Poems* 198.

¹³⁶ Bishop, *Poems* 198.

¹³⁷ Marshall clarifies that one of the earlier drafts of “One Art” included an allusion to Alice Methfessel’s “blue eyes,” which, however, Bishop left out of the final version and thus made the loss much more universal. In Marshall, “Elizabeth and Alice.”

¹³⁸ McCabe 197.

¹³⁹ Nickowitz 132.

¹⁴⁰ Joanne Feit Diehl, “Bishop’s Sexual Poetics,” *Women Poets and the American Sublime*, ed. Joanne Feit Diehl (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 94.

¹⁴¹ In Bonnie Costello, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Impersonal Personal,” *American Literary History* 15.2 (2003): 345. JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/3567920> 8 Nov. 2019.

to propagate my kind, / and so did he, I think, poor boy.”¹⁴²) and may be understood also as a strategy to look beyond gender in a wider sense.

The critical discussion of women poets tends to focus on the way they handle their womanhood as reflected in their poetic personae.¹⁴³ Bishop’s approach to womanhood is by far most often examined in “In the Waiting Room.” As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, the poem’s focal point is the speaker’s realization of her sexuality. Significantly, this much-debated poem in terms of a construction of gender identity, adopts a persona of a child, not of an adult, mature woman. The “I” is in the center of attention throughout the whole poem, both as an explicit verbal expression and as a frequently repeated sound, often further accentuated by alliteration. However, it is only the speaker’s self-assertion, “you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*,”¹⁴⁴ that verbally declares her gender identity. Again, from the autobiographical perspective, it may be (and has been) argued that the child persona with her instable “I” reflects Bishop’s own insecurity concerning her own sexuality and gender identity.¹⁴⁵ Generally, Bishop’s poems with child personae share strong autobiographical connotations. Other examples – apart from “In the Waiting Room” – include “First Death in Nova Scotia” or “Manners.” Nevertheless, what is more significant than the ties to Bishop’s own memories, is the fact that the “I” voiced by a naïve, often confused child persona is always connected to some form of realization, to some clash with reality.

As mentioned earlier, the feminist rethinking of lyric poetry strongly encouraged the poetics of self-expression. As a consequence, it brought also an increase of readings relying on details of the poet’s life.¹⁴⁶ When the facts of Bishop’s life became known, it caused an explosion of autobiographical interpretations of her poetry. These readings are inevitably reductive. As Costello observes, “Bishop aimed to write poetry that would participate in something larger than the self.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, Doreski explains that Bishop’s poems are “highly personal, but they do not constitute a conventional autobiography. Instead, they recount the story of her attempts to invent a language adequate to her perception and require a critical approach that acknowledges the primacy of that concern.”¹⁴⁸ Doreski then introduces a paradox “that as autobiography abandons Bishop’s poems, they begin to live. In American poetry only

¹⁴² Bishop, *Poems* 185.

¹⁴³ See for example Rich 182-184 or Dowson 34.

¹⁴⁴ Bishop, *Poems* 180.

¹⁴⁵ See for example Erkkilä 150 or Nickowitz 35.

¹⁴⁶ Although this was a wider trend, as may be clear from rising popularity of confessional poetry. Still, feminist criticism often employed autobiographical readings even in the cases of non-confessional authors.

¹⁴⁷ Costello, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Impersonal Personal” 343.

¹⁴⁸ Doreski 14.

[Emily] Dickinson has been as successful in frustrating critics who need to use the life as a means of explaining.”¹⁴⁹

While Bishop’s poems clearly do include details from her life, their autobiographical value is not necessarily what constitutes the poem’s primary concern. In Costello’s words, “rather than read Bishop as an individual standing against a monolithic and oppressive tradition, it might be more useful to consider a lyric subjectivity taking shape in relation to the contradictory and unarticulated aspirations of the culture.”¹⁵⁰ Bishop may be argued to comply with T. S. Eliot’s theory introduced earlier, that is that the mind and the personality of a poet is merely a medium for the poem, not its focal point, and that the significance of the poet’s particular impressions and experiences may differ greatly in the poet’s life and in the poetry.¹⁵¹ Bishop herself articulated her conception of the disparity between the piece of art as an autonomous aesthetic object and the selfhood of the artist in her letter to Anne Stevenson: “What one wants in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.”¹⁵² In this sense, Bishop thus manages to transcend the feminist strategy of self-expression as a means of delimitation against the male-developed tradition in lyric poetry.

Bishop strongly disapproved of any form of agenda in poetry, which in her case predominantly involved the feminist agenda. Yet, it should be understood that her determined evasion of radical feminism does not make Bishop an anti-feminist. On the contrary, by her refusal to conform to any form of biased judgement posed on the basis of one’s gender, Bishop in her poetry promotes true gender equality. Her portrayals of both men and women are largely unsentimental, yet unbiased. Her male misfits and realistic women defy both the patriarchal and the feminist model. Furthermore, Bishop challenges the paradigm of binary gender oppositions by confounding the attributes pertaining to the particular sex (personal as well as spatial) and pushing them towards fluidity and ambiguity. The increasing demand for the establishment of an alternative female tradition in response to the male-dominated field of poetry, especially lyric poetry, also increased the demand for the poetics of self-expression, which would confront the confidence of male lyric voice and express a distinctly female experience. Bishop in her poetry rejected the feminist strategy and stayed with traditional forms. Yet, she still managed to express a fundamentally modern vision, refusing the explicitly confessional self-

¹⁴⁹ Doreski 84.

¹⁵⁰ Costello, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Impersonal Personal” 340.

¹⁵¹ Eliot 9-10.

¹⁵² Quoted in Costello, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Impersonal Personal” 340.

expressionism in favor of the concept of the “I” serving as an eye for the reader, and thus challenged conventions from within traditional form.

4. Conclusion

The label “writer’s writer” always carries a sense of undervaluation of the author by the general readership, as if only those of the same craft were able to appreciate his or her work. Bishop was not only repeatedly described as a “poet’s poet,” but in John Ashbery’s review of her *Collected Poems*, she was classified even as a “writer’s writer’s writer.” As Ashbery himself later admitted, to call her that was “an ambiguous compliment.” He explained that it was

to compound the audacity of the compliment, to imply that her writing has sophistication – that somehow unfortunate state of felicity in whose toils most of us wallow from time to time even as we struggle to cast them off. Yet this is the first thing that strikes me about Miss Bishop’s unique position among American poets, one might even say among American writers. That is, the extraordinarily intense loyalty her work inspires in writers of every sort [...]. It shouldn’t be a criticism leveled at Miss Bishop that her mind is capable of inspiring and delighting minds of so many different formations. We must see it as her strength, a strength whose singularity almost prevents us from seeing it.¹

Bishop’s sophistication was not recognized only by her fellow poets. She garnered extensive critical acclaim, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the National Book Award for Poetry and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, to name just a few. As of 1977, “practically the only honor she hasn’t won is popular recognition,”² as Leslie Hanscom put it.

Although Bishop later managed to attract the attention of a wider readership as well, this was largely due to the boom in autobiographic interpretations of her work. While nowadays, autobiographic readings of Bishop are mostly outmoded, her poetry still inspires a remarkably wide range of divergent interpretations. According to Helen Vendler, Bishop’s poetry “resists easy classification.” With her categorical denial of her inclusion in women-only anthologies and of the label “woman poet,” her dislike for confessional poetry, and even her (perhaps unconscious) resistance to classification as an “American poet,” Bishop escapes most of the common categories. And yet, “she is a creature of her own century,” Vendler concludes, “and her poetry represents one of the attempts made in our era to write a poetry no longer dependent on religious or nationalist feeling – a poetry purely human, refusing even Keats’ mythological sources.”³

¹ John Ashbery, “Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop,” *World Literature Today* 51.1 (1977): 8, JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/40090378> 1 Dec. 2019.

² Leslie Hanscom, “A Poet Who Doesn’t Wear Her Woes,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) 69.

³ Vendler 834.

Bishop in general quite grumbled about the ways her poems were being interpreted: “Critics find the most extraordinary philosophies that never could have occurred to you when you wrote the poem.” To understand a poem, she advised her students to “use a dictionary. It’s better than the critics.”⁴ In her letter to Robert Lowell, she was even more expressly uncompromising: “Oh dear I do loathe explanations, explanations, etc. [...] To hell with explainers.”⁵ She found Lowell’s review of her *North & South* uniquely insightful: “It is the only review that goes at things in what I think is the right way.”⁶ While Bishop was outraged mostly by autobiographical readings of her poems, she disapproved also of any form of feminist interpretations of her poems.

Bishop disliked any explicitly feminist (or other) agenda in poetry and was appalled by attempts to find any in her own poems. Even in the last decades, feminist critics mostly focus on locating at least some feminist traits directly in Bishop’s poetry – to find some common feminist theme, formal or stylistic trait, or at least to uncover a reflection of her lesbian identity and female outsiderhood. However, while Bishop did consider herself a feminist, her understanding of feminism consisted precisely in the insistence that there should not be any such common trait, that women poets should have a scope of themes just as broad as male poets and that they should not let their gender be the defining characteristic of their work. For Bishop, there is no need for any distinctly female characteristic in poems or positive discrimination in publishing and reading events to promote poetry written by women. All that matters is if it is good poetry. When a poem is good per se, regardless of the poet’s gender, and is perceived as such, it is an accomplishment in Bishop’s perspective of feminism.

As a result, it would be ineffective to try to locate any overtly and radically feminist concepts in Bishop’s poetry. Her representations of men and women are equally impersonal. Nevertheless, she still eludes to conventions, both with respect to the feminist doctrine and with respect to the patriarchal tradition. She challenges the paradigm of binary gender oppositions and experiments with the various characteristics and traits appertaining to the opposite sex, and that in terms of both people and poetic space. To accomplish this, there was no need for Bishop to sever ties with traditional poetic forms, as she was able to express her modern vision even from within the traditional form. Furthermore, Bishop establishes her poetic self mostly as the self in the world, rather than the self of a personal expression. Bishop thus surpasses the

⁴ George Monteiro, “Introduction,” *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) x.

⁵ Bishop, *Words in Air* 465.

⁶ Quoted in David Kalstone, “Prodigal Years: Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell 1947-49,” *Grand Street* 4.4 (1985): 191-192, JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/25006778> 13 May 2019.

boundaries of gender by disregarding it and establishing a lyric voice that serves as eyes for the reader and which is neither overtly feminine, nor masculine. Even in the rather rare cases in which the gender of the lyric “I” is defined, Bishop does not resort merely to the persona of an adult woman, but also to those of a man and that of a child. Bishop’s poetry achieves true gender equality not by depending on the feminist agenda but by conveying meaning independent of her gender as a poet.

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