

The Dual Journey in Bishop's *Questions of Travel*

Elizabeth Bishop's poem, *Questions of Travel*, is renowned for its profound exploration of themes related to travel, identity, and existential questioning. On the surface, it appears to discuss the significance of travel. Yet, after a deeper reading, I can identify an intricate interplay between the concepts of movement versus stillness and inner worlds versus outer worlds. Through her unique observations and keen language, she describes travel as an exploration both physically and mentally. This duality runs throughout the entire poem, equipping it with profound philosophical and emotional significance.

The Reflections of Movement and Stillness

In the very beginning of this poem, Bishop uses a metaphor of water to reveal her contempt for this kind of restless travel. ¹She uses “*too many waterfalls,*” “*crowded,*” and “*hurry too rapidly*” to describe different forms of water. Further, she uses a technique of enjambment² in the first two lines, conveying a sense of urgency. Afterward, Bishop displays two general questions: “*Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?*”, “*Where should we be today?*” followed by a series of questions with more specific scenarios. Bishop entered a fragmented flashback of memories. Visiting all the memories, she could not identify the significance. Yet, compared to the very beginning, there seems to be more conflicts and hesitations in her mind: Stillness may not be the absolute answer. “*Must we dream our dream, and have them too?*” Stillness may not be enough, and movement may be necessary for us to self-identify. In the third stanza, she seems to be finding evidence to support the necessity. She uses several “*a pity not to have*” to demonstrate the pleasure and the wanting of her for travel. Bishop's initial contempt and lack of understanding towards movement gradually transforms into reflection, leading to partial support. This progression guides readers in contemplating

¹ Nelson, Nathaniel. *Flowing and Flown: Images of Water in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop*. Diss. University of the South, 2016.

² van't Jagt, Ruth Koops, et al. "Look before you leap: How enjambment affects the processing of poetry." *Scientific Study of Literature* 4.1 (2014): 3-24.

movement and stillness. However, in the end, Bishop does not provide a definitive answer, leaving it as an open-ended topic for readers to ponder.

Bishop's contemplation on the relationship between movement and stillness is closely linked to her own life experiences.³ Throughout her life, she moved between several countries, from the United States to Brazil⁴ and then to Europe, with her identity constantly shifting between different cultures and regions. This cross-cultural living experience gave her a more complex understanding of the concept of “home.”⁵ In *Questions of Travel*, “home” is not merely a geographical location or a familiar space but rather a state of mind, a sense of belonging that transcends specific places. The poem poses the question: “*Could Pascal have been not entirely right about just sitting quietly in one’s room?*” “*Should we have stayed at home, wherever that may be?*” These questionings and reflections on the idea of home mirror Bishop's conflicted attitude towards movement and stillness—she yearns to find new meaning through travel yet cannot fully escape the desire for stability and belonging.

The Interplay between Inside and Outer Worlds

Elizabeth Bishop's *Questions of Travel* intricately weaves the relations between the inner and outer worlds. She suggests that the act of traveling through outer worlds is crucial in shaping our inner selves. Despite her persistent doubts about travel, the poem reveals that the exploration of external landscapes greatly influences and shapes our internal experiences and reflections.

In the initial metaphor of the poem, Bishop's depiction of water serves as a reflection of the chaotic nature of travel. All these forms of water hurriedly travel and transform without changing themselves as water. Yet, this metaphor also stresses the importance

³ Al-Shammari, Hanan Ali Hussein. “Traveling In the Life of Elizabeth Bishop and Its Impact on Her Literary Output.” *ALUSTATH JOURNAL FOR HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES* 63.2 (2024): 54-67.

⁴ Bishop, Elizabeth. *Questions of travel*. Macmillan, 1965. In this book, the poem is under the chapter of *Brazil*. According to Bishop's highly autobiographical style of poetry, it likely reflects her experiences and observations during her time in Brazil.

⁵ Fan, Kit. “Imagined Places: Robinson Crusoe and Elizabeth Bishop.” *Biography* (2005): 43-53.

of encountering such chaos to spark internal inspection. In its rapid movement, the water mirrors the fluctuation of the mind when faced with new, unfamiliar environments. Through experiencing these outer worlds, we engage in a kind of mental travel, prompting us to question, rethink, and ultimately grow. Without witnessing the scenes described in the first stanza, such as the crowded waterfalls, the internal dialogue of questioning and reflection might never be initiated.

The fragmented flashbacks in the second stanza further illustrate how external experiences are integral to internal contemplation. Bishop's recollection of past travels, although seemingly disconnected, forms a fusion of memories that fuel her existential inquiries. Each memory, a piece of the outer world she has traveled across, becomes a motivation for pondering deeper questions about identity and existence. Without these travels and accumulated memories, the rich inner discourse and self-exploration would be less profound.

In the third stanza, Bishop catalogs the "*pity not to have*" moments, acknowledging the appeal and necessity of travel despite her initial doubts. Each item in this list represents an experience that has contributed to her inner world, shaping her understanding and appreciation of beauty and difference. The mere act of listing these experiences suggests that the outer journey is necessary for enriching the inner journey. The longing for these experiences reveals the subtle relationship between the two realms—traveling through the physical world enhances and deepens the exploration of the self.

In sum, Bishop's poem suggests that the journey through the outer world is inevitably linked to the evolution of the inner world. The act of travel, with all its uncertainties, becomes a vital process in constructing our internal landscapes. The interplay between these realms is not only essential but also enriching, as each outer journey fuels the introspective quest, leading to a more nuanced understanding of identity and existence. Through *Questions of Travel*, Bishop invites readers to reflect on this dual journey, recognizing that the outer and inner worlds are forever intertwined, each shaping and defining the other.

To conclude, in Elizabeth Bishop's poem *Questions of Travel*, the themes of movement

versus stillness and inner versus outer world are dually explored. Through vivid imagery and reflective questioning, Bishop delves into the dual nature of travel as both a physical and mental journey. Bishop's personal experiences of living across various cultures inform her complex understanding of "home" as a mental state rather than a physical location. The poem also suggests that travel's chaotic nature is essential for internal inspection and growth, as external experiences shape and enrich our inner worlds. Ultimately, Bishop leaves the topic open-ended, inviting readers to consider the outer and inner worlds at the same time, emphasizing that each journey informs and enhances the other.