

## ELIZABETH BISHOP'S INFLUENCE ON JAMES MERRILL: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECT POEMS

Alexandra Lopez-Nadal & Gavin Sourgen

Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College

Poets Elizabeth Bishop and James Merrill had an intimate, respectful friendship evident from decades of exchanged letters. However, the influence Bishop had on Merrill is best understood in reading his poetry. Merrill enlightened readers of Bishop's effect on his work during a Key West Literary Seminar dedicated to her in 1993, fourteen years after her passing. The Key West Literary Seminar for Bishop was the first of its kind. Merrill was elated to have such an event dedicated solely to Bishop. An attendee and friend wrote Merrill as having said, "Of all the splendid and curious work belonging to my time, these are the poems (the earliest appeared when I was a year old) that I love best and tire of least. And there will be no others."

Merrill died only two years after the seminar, in February 1995, of complications from AIDS. He spent a large portion of his life admiring Bishop, but paying mind to not smother her about literary talent. Merrill was still considering Bishop's shy nature when he immortalized his fascination for her writing and work ethic in the elegy he wrote ten years after her death, "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia." In the poem Merrill asks, "What tribute could you bear / Without dismay?" In addition to reading the elegy during his part of the program, Merrill shared his poem, "The Kimono" which was inspired by Bishop's tender work, "The Shampoo" among other carefully curated pieces. The event is crucial to understanding Bishop's influence on Merrill's work. It is now a valuable resource that provides insight directly from the authoritative wordsmith. Close reading these poems Merrill curated for the program side-by-side, as well as select works by Merrill such as "Overdue Pilgrimage" that directly address Bishop, allows for further comprehension and appreciation of their friendship and work respectively. Moreover, Bishop's trademark indirect confessional mode, traditional forms, and literary devices can be found in Merrill's work.

Bishop first revealed her poem "The Shampoo" in a letter to close friend Marianne Moore, written from Brazil, in August 1952. She withheld the poem until 1955 when it appeared in *The New Republic* and soon after, in her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Poems: North & South - A Cold Spring*. Her use of metaphors and the topic of time directly influenced Merrill's poem, "The Kimono." Bishop may reveal her most tender state through the vulnerable tone in "The Shampoo." It is a surprisingly personal poem that utilizes metaphors in order to shroud an intimate moment between the speaker and her lover. Despite Bishop's apparent effort to conceal such details, "The Shampoo" is a love poem above all else. In the worried tone that underlies the poem, there is an acute awareness

of time—specifically, the speaker's aversion to aging further:

The still explosions on the rocks,  
the lichens, grow  
by spreading, gray, concentric shocks.  
They have arranged  
to meet the rings around the moon, although  
within our memories they have not changed.

And since the heavens will attend  
as long on us,  
you've been, dear friend,  
precipitate and pragmatial;  
and look what happens. For Time is  
nothing if not amenable.

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

True to her modest character and the common "dismay" Merrill regarded even in memoriam, Bishop never makes it clear that the affectionate poem addresses a woman. It is assumed to have been written for her Brazilian partner Lota de Macedo Soares, whom Bishop was living with at the time. When speaking about "The Shampoo," Merrill says that "Brazil must have represented for Elizabeth a kind of clarifying mirror." The speaker, however, only refers to a gender-neutral "dear friend." Biographically, it is written that Bishop named the poem "Gray Hairs" in earlier drafts, and also wrote playfully of de Macedo's sprouting gray hairs which made her appear "exactly like a chickadee."

The poem was turned down by *The New Yorker* and *Poetry*. Bishop acknowledged to friends, with a tinge of sarcasm and perhaps hurt, that the rejection may have been because there was “something indecent about it” and went as far as calling to attention its “tender passion.”

Above all, the vivid imagery of “The Shampoo” is the most clear indication of what is and isn’t revealed in the deeply emotional poem. For its publication in the rampant age of confessional poetry, “The Shampoo” is notoriously indirect. The oddly specific reference to lichens on rocks offers an image presented as if the speaker means to stall. This is evident in how the speaker diverges from third-person to a far more revealing first-person narrative with, “our memories” only at the end of the first stanza. The contradicting phrase of “still explosions” implies uncertainty, as if the speaker is unsure how to accurately depict the subject. From a creek to outer space, the reader is taken into a broader setting “to meet the rings around the moon” — an expansion of space that reflects how the speaker begins to open up to unveil her feelings. As if still warming up to her own sentiment, the personal mentioned “our” is an introduction to first-person pronouns throughout the poem that still, powerfully, exclude gender: a touching “us” and a fond “you.”

Despite the first two stanzas eventually giving away to personified moments, it isn’t until the third that the reader can comprehend to whom the poem is written. The final stanza begins with “shooting stars in your black hair,” a line that echoes the lichens and universal elements previously brought up by the speaker. Critic Bonnie Costello analyzes this curious comparison of the lover to nature and its relation to time:

The association of the lover’s hair with the lichens in the next stanza has a grotesque effect, but again there is no repulsion. The shocks in the visually accurate oxymoron “still explosions” turn out to be imperceptible and harmless, making the aging process more acceptable. But the sense of alarm remains.

Bishop manages to write of the graying hairs in a subtle but tender manner that, while not avoiding the anxiety of aging, manages to momentarily embrace it in the company of a loved one. After all, time is the only subject mentioned by name with a capital ‘T’. When the speaker asks, “so straight, so soon?” the only rhetorical question in the poem stands out in order to illustrate consistent worry. The repetition of the word “so” exaggerates a nostalgic tone through the speaker’s familiarity with the subject’s hair texture. This is where the speaker discloses the most and, because of how the imagery gives way to affection, reveals the poem’s true emotional intentions.

In addition to the fear of decline, the contrasting images of slow-growing lichens and quick shooting stars indicate a complex relationship. Harrison writes that the poem suggests an intimacy ranging “from the seeming immutability of lichens’ growth to the volatility of shooting stars.” However, before the poem can even become confessional, the em dash obscures any anxiety

with the simple yet meaningful action of washing the subject’s hair. Merrill has commented on the diction of Bishop’s poem, and specifically the line, “Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,” a gesture the speaker directs to the subject. “Otherwise,” Merrill writes, “the language is supremely plain, and the everyday gesture it clothes, supremely tender...It is as unexpected and convincing a love poem as I know.”

Merrill’s mention of “The Shampoo” appeared in 1983, during an interview with *The Washington Post*, where he also noted that “a young Bishop fan told me that his favorite [poem] was ‘The Shampoo.’ I wonder if it isn’t mine as well.” Four years earlier, Merrill had recited “The Shampoo” by memory at a memorial following Bishop’s death. Because of the technical accomplishments of her three stanzas, in addition to the strict, calculated treatment of the topic, it is clear to see how “The Shampoo” captured Merrill’s attention. Bishop’s use of oxymoronic imagery mirrors what Merrill called one of her “loveliest tricks” in an interview with *Jack Stewart for Review*: “to say something and then to say, ‘No, that’s not what I mean’—to take it back and to present it differently. She manages simply to interiorize the theory.” Effectively, the poem transforms into an introspective piece. For example, following an affectionate moment in the ninth line, the speaker calls the lover “precipitate and pragmatical” which is to say the subject suddenly appeared in their life hastily—and then Bishop immediately rejects that statement to say the subject has actually been considerate. Bishop’s characteristic skill acknowledges that her speaker is preoccupied with thought as well as emotion. The lines are therefore only a fraction of what she dares to admit to the addressed and to the reader. This characteristic of “The Shampoo”, reflective of Bishop’s private personality, inspired Merrill to write his poem “The Kimono” in 1992:

When I returned from lovers' lane  
 My hair was white as snow.  
 Joy, incomprehension, pain  
 I'd seen like seasons come and go.  
 How I got home again  
 Frozen half dead, perhaps you know.  
 You hide a smile and quote a text:  
 Desires ungratified  
 Persist from one life to the next.  
 Hearths we strip ourselves beside  
 Long, long ago were x'd  
 On blueprints of "consuming pride."  
 Time out of mind, the bubble-gleam  
 To our charred level drew  
 April back. A sudden beam . . .  
 Keep talking while I change into  
 The pattern of a stream  
 Bordered with rushes white on blue.

Merrill drew inspiration from Bishop's poem, "The Shampoo" for "The Kimono," immediately seen in its form with the same three six-line stanzas, and the title. Merrill stated that in thinking of "The Shampoo" he thought he "might try to write a love poem...in the same indirect manner with some of the equivalent abstract, difficult things to get through." "The Kimono" differs from Bishop's in its nursery rhyme pattern. This characteristic of "The Kimono" reflects how the poet aimed for "ease + lucidity" in his poems, which are two values he associated with Bishop's work.

Another nod to "The Shampoo" is seen in how Merrill writes about time. Similar to the way Bishop wrote of gray hairs almost four decades earlier, the poem begins with an image of the speaker's hair being "white as snow." A manuscript from Merrill's journal reveals early lines for "The Kimono" written as "When I came back from lover's lane / My hair was white as frost." The symbolism of frost would introduce a cold, bitter tone from the speaker at the very beginning. In the poem's final form, a similar emotional detachment is directed at the reader by the end of the first stanza with "perhaps you know" and the frost is reworked when the speaker is described "Frozen half dead" when arriving home.

While Bishop used graying hair to illustrate passing time, seasons in "The Kimono" evoke the same effect of change. Furthermore, Merrill personifies feelings like Bishop did with the line, "For Time is / nothing if not amenable." The clichéd normalcy of seasons coming and going is meant to mirror how it is typical of love to change and leave: "Joy, incomprehension, pain / I'd seen like seasons come and go." There is no hint of romance until the second stanza of "The Kimono." Unlike "The Shampoo," Merrill's homage is not so much a positive love poem but, rather, one in which the speaker laments lost affection—a heavy topic to compose towards the end of the poet's life. Merrill's relationship with a younger and healthier man, Peter Hooten, late in life caused him grief as the companionship was often plagued with emotional problems. Yet Merrill preferred it to loneliness and states, "Life without Peter is grim" —without Hooten only company was the sickness which would end his life.

Similar to his 1995 poems, such as the elegy for Bishop "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia" and the unpublished poem "Elizabeth you should have," Merrill taps into self-pity with "The Kimono." As he writes in "Elizabeth you should have," Merrill knew that "soon, to his misfortune, / Whoever I may be / Will have run out of time." Materer also notes how Merrill was "facing the threat of illness and death" with the AIDS diagnosis he kept hushed, as a result, questions of life and art culminate "in the unusual bitterness" seen in these later poems.

The supposed lover in "The Kimono" is best described as Hammer puts it: a "half-smiling teacher." The subject is gender neutral like Bishop's "dear friend." Again, Merrill's poem takes on a more obvious tone of discontent. The subject cannot fully smile and even mentions ungratified desires, which foreshadow a failing relationship. "Hearths we strip ourselves beside" conjures a memory acknowledging that the times "Long, long ago were x'd," just as the failed plans they had made are likened to "blueprints." The negative emotions behind these anecdotes are made more powerful because the speaker quotes from a text; this exaggerates how, like Bishop before him, someone else experienced the trials of love. Time's cyclical nature is therefore a theme in "The Kimono" similar to how aging is a theme of Bishop's "The Shampoo." Hammer close-reads the lines in his biography for Merrill, and understands "our loves are like lives, incarnations, and we carry 'Desires ungratified' from one to the next, seeking illumination." The concept of illumination applies here to Merrill's life and art: "The Kimono" reveals how reading Bishop's poetry shed light for him even with a broad subject like romance.

Another device that bolsters the pessimist perspective of love in Merrill's poem is the use of quotations that seemingly refer to words from the mouth of the straying lover themselves such as the "consuming pride." The phrases then sting in their truth, and bring no relief to the speaker or the reader. However, the comfort is found in a kimono. It is put on much like the false smiles Merrill mentions. The kimono echoes the mention of seasons because in Japanese culture, various designs and fabrics are worn depending on the occasion and time of year. The comparison of nature and the kimono is most direct in the final lines: "Keep talking while I change into / The pattern of a stream / Bordered with rushes white on blue." Similar to how Bishop distressed about time in "The Shampoo" with metaphors of nature, Merrill repeatedly alludes to seasons to acknowledge a similar awareness: the inevitability of death. The kimono is worn and mentioned as a costume in order to signify the symbolism of changing oneself as the weather does. Unlike relationships with others and the speaker's mortality, the kimono will for the most part remain the same. Thirteen years after Bishop's death, "The Kimono" again professes how the style and literary devices of her work so ingrained Merrill's poetry—but especially as his own life was threatened.

After Bishop's death in 1979, Merrill continued writing of the poet and composed lines for her. A poem like the aforementioned "Elizabeth, you should have" reveals how their friendship and Bishop's influence allowed for philosophical contemplation and artistic renditions even in her absence. Merrill said Bishop's poems were "like the very light of day." They kept him company through the years she could not:

Elizabeth, you should have  
 Seen me today, alone,  
 In January sunlight,  
 Ignored by midday crowds  
 On the corner of Fifth and Fiftieth  
 --Where, in a happier life,  
 I might have sold balloons.

"Elizabeth, you should have" is significant enough to analyze because it is a three-page draft, unfinished without a title. It is uncharacteristic of Merrill's poems as it strays from his usual elitist diction and refined, high-art passages with its raw details; because of this, Merrill most likely had no interest in publishing it and instead wrote the stanzas cathartically. Although it is not his elegy for Bishop, the poem is as powerful as one not least because it was composed close to the end of Merrill's life when he was consciously reflective and nostalgic. He was living with AIDS and understood his days were numbered. As he posits in the tenth stanza, "...to his misfortune / Whoever I may be / Will have run out of time." The

matter did not sit well with Merrill, who already felt plagued with separate woes of life. For example, as in "The Kimono," Merrill continues to refer to troubled love with specific pronouns. The line, "He called me co-dependent" most likely refers to beau Peter Hooten. The imagery of drowning that follows is a clichéd depiction of sorrow, that could almost be regarded as juvenile for Merrill. The poem further utilizes characteristics of confessional poetry with the use of "I" and commonplace settings. The speaker shifts through New York City, from a therapist's office to the sidewalk for street food. The lines directed to Bishop are tragic and devastating:

I didn't dare go home,  
 Didn't know where to ask  
 (That falafel was salty)  
 For just a drink of water.  
 Didn't know anything--  
 Where I lived, who I was (As you in your poem,  
 Elizabeth, For better or worse did).

In "Elizabeth, you should have" Merrill writes that Bishop's poem "was somehow the story / Of my life, too" and how his "childhood / Seemed often to slip past, / Waiting for life to begin," a sentiment immediately contrasted with the speaker's present day of old age and sickness: "Waiting, awake and lonely / For my nurse to come and wake me." The Bishop poem Merrill refers to is her late poem "In the Waiting Room," which the speaker mentions by name in discussion with his therapist in an earlier stanza. The speaker's resigned tone and disclosures are incredibly moving because they are used in conversation with Bishop beyond the grave. Moreover, Merrill includes similar imagery found "In the Waiting Room" for Bishop's elegy, "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia," in the following lines:

In living as in poetry, your art  
 Refused to tip the scale of being human  
 By adding unearned weight. "New, tender, quick"—  
 Nice watchwords; yet how often they invited  
 The anguish coming only now to light  
 In letters like photographs from Space, revealing  
 Your planet tremulously bright through veils  
 As swept, in fact, by inconceivable  
 Heat and turbulence—but there, I've done it,  
 Added the weight.

The heat and turbulence that sweeps Bishop's planet, a spatial metaphor for her life and her work, echoes the description of a waiting room in her poem, "In the Waiting Room." Bishop describes the dental office as "bright" and "too hot." Notably, Merrill's imagery in "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia" further reflects the photograph young Bishop saw in the National Geographic: "the inside of a volcano, / black, and full of ashes; / then it was spilling over in rivulets of fire." Bishop's volcano may represent the emotional eruptions to her life that she would later experience through depression and alcoholism. In her elegy, Merrill calls her troubles "inconceivable" because of his initial belief that nothing seemed to affect her poetry which refused "to tip the scale of being human." Merrill reiterates the profound yet compound and modest nature of Bishop's work in 1991 when he said she created an "oeuvre on a human scale. Simple enough for a child, subtle enough for a philosopher, sad, amusing, never dull."

In his elegy for Bishop, Merrill "adds the weight" to Bishop's legacy as an act of accolading the poet further than she preferred. Despite having praised her the same with poems like "The Kimono" and "The Victor Dog," this poem stands out because "Merrill's devotion to Bishop is the theme of 'Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia.'" At the Key West Literary Seminar in 1992, Merrill reiterated how the poem "is an account of visiting Great Village in Nova Scotia in 1988 or '89...addressed to Elizabeth." Ten years after Bishop passed, the poem first appeared in the *New Yorker*. The poem was also notably published the year of Merrill's own death in his 1995 collection, *A Scattering of Salts*. By the time Merrill passed he had been "awarded virtually every major honor given to poets" including the National Book Award twice and the Pulitzer and Bollingen Prizes. Despite of, or perhaps because of his success, Merrill kept both Bishop's work and friendship on his mind throughout the years.

As the author of *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* argues, Merrill was drawn "to what one might call Bishop's human, impressionable, and marvelously non-monumental use of traditional poetic forms." The influence of Bishop's characteristic skill is seen in "Overdue Pilgrimage." Merrill maintains a conversational tone throughout and utilizes exclamation points to do so with phrases like, "Look, those were elms!" and "Excuse our dust!" The speaker mocks their own voice, calling them "phrases for tomorrow's cards" while also again referring to correspondence kept with Bishop over the years. However, while keeping a varied, irregular rhyme scheme, Merrill evokes Bishop's craft by writing the sonnets in subtle iambic pentameter. Bishop symbolically and immediately appears in "Overdue Pilgrimage" in the first stanza: "a whole wall hung / With women's black straw hats, some rather smart / —All circa 1915, like the manners / Of the fair, soft-spoken girl who shows us through." Bishop loved straw hats and wore them in her Key West portraits. Moreover, she certainly contrasted Merrill's outspoken nature for most of her life.

Moreover, Merrill acknowledges Bishop's personal life when he presents her as a child in the second stanza. He imagines "The child whose mother had been put away / Might wake, climb to a window, feel the bay" which touches on the poet's early life when her mother was institutionalized for poor mental health. Scholars such as Luke Carson write how Merrill "sees that he has failed to offer homage to Bishop" as exhibited through the social anxiety present in the poem. When Merrill talks about the "soft-spoken" tour guide, his similarities with Bishop, and specifically where they came from, are acknowledged while maintaining casual nostalgia: "She knows these things you would have known by heart / And we, by knowing you by heart, foreknew." Carson further notes "the poem allows us to suspect that Merrill did not, as he claims, know Bishop 'by heart.'" This can be argued due to the bond the speaker illustrates between Bishop and him throughout the elegy.

For example, in "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia" Merrill alludes to Bishop's 1965 poem, "Filling Station" in order to exaggerate what he remembers about her. It is an attempt by Merrill to "narrow the distinction between author and poetic persona." Diction and imagery from "Filling Station" are visible in the elegy such as the word *dirty* in the "dirty look" Merrill describes. Costello acknowledges that the Bishop poem has "an attitude of class revisionism" seen in its first lines:

Oh, but it is dirty!

—this little filling station,

oil-soaked, oil-permeated

to a disturbing, over-all

black translucency.

Be careful with that match!

Merrill first refers to “Filling Station” directly, with the speaker recalling the poem when he stops at an ESSO gas station: “We filled up at the shrine.” However, as Bishop’s speaker feels in “Filling Station,” Merrill’s speaker seems emotionally detached from the station and the town it is located in. After all, “Overdue Pilgrimage” is primarily spent leaving Bishop’s hometown as opposed to reflecting within it. The speaker’s detachment and use of the negatively connoted word “dirty” establishes a state of unease in the scene. Moreover, a car wash is needed before departing the town, in which “the pent-up fury of the storm hits: streaming, / Foaming ‘emotions’—impersonal, cathartic.” Merrill writes the speaker’s sentimental reflection during the removal of the dirtiness to mimic the way “Filling Station” ends, that is, with an unlikely, overwhelming sense of emotion: “Somebody loves us all.” Merrill is overcome with similar affection, but it is for Bishop as a person, albeit realized with self-contempt. Carson also analyzed the speaker’s ending: “while he maintains his cosmopolitan aloofness, he is embarrassed by the failure of his manners...[and] sees that he has failed to offer homage to Bishop.” This is undoubtedly the anxious aftermath of Bishop’s influence. Merrill worries he did not do her art justice—especially if she’d have considered it “unearned” or again, refuse the tribute in “dismay.”

Nevertheless, Merrill publicly and literarily supported Bishop. Two months after her passing, Merrill spoke about the lack of critical acclaim for Bishop during her lifetime. He claimed a next generation of open-minded readers would better understand:

[Her poetry’s] ease, this natural perfection, along with the technical mastery it implied, were not always prized in the workshops. Young people saw by other lights...Her fellow poets read her, as E.M. Forster said of Jane Austen, “with the mouth open and the mind closed.”

Spencer Reece, a mentee and friend, wrote that Merrill was “one of the earliest champions of Bishop, and he wanted to pass on to me what he knew of her, not to show off that he knew her, but to help me.” Now it is his repertoire of twelve collections that provides a modern reader, not only with an understanding of his literary genius, but an indication of Bishop’s talent as well. His mastery of traditional forms in the modernity of 20th century poetry is inseparable from North & South. By analyzing the poems inspired by and written for Bishop, their relationship can be interpreted as one that impacted Merrill’s work beyond the bounds of inspiration. She provided Merrill guidance and insight on the craft of writing both on paper and through everyday life. Bishop’s influence brought Merrill anxiety to the point where his elegy for her illustrates caution—he did not want to offend her even a decade after he’s been left with only her poems in the world. He loved “both the poet and the person.”

Mark Strand, a mutual friend of the two, wrote of Merrill alluding to Bishop as “our greatest national treasure” in 1977, two years before her sudden death.

Examining Merrill’s relationship with Bishop as a distinct interrelation through their balance of friendship and professional admiration bolsters a reader’s analysis of his work. Close reading any Merrill poem provides insight to what he treasured all the same.

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