

## **Refining Connection through Detachment: Deictic Shifts in Elizabeth Bishop's Poems**



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**ABSTRACT** : Elizabeth Bishop's poems are characterized by the observer's detachment in the description. In her poems, the observer usually concentrates on the details of objects and tries to rise above the immediate context, thus refining a new connection between self and the world. By analyzing the spatial and relational shifts in Bishop's poems, this study argues that the deictic shift not only presents the change of cognition in the observer's mind but also helps the observer shape the perception and enter into the imagined world.

**KEYWORDS**: Elizabeth Bishop; detachment; deictic shift; cognition.

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In Elizabeth Bishop's poems, few emotional expressions can be seen in the observer's description. The observer's involvement seems to lie in the deep concentration. The cognition in this kind of involvement has rarely been explored in literary studies. This paper therefore is intended to analyze the cognitive deixis shift in Bishop's poems and present how the deictic words contribute to the perception of the observer.

### **2. DETACHMENT AS AN ART OF INVOLVEMENT**

The treatment of detachment in Bishop's poems has impressed many readers and critics. Objective bits and pieces of life are common materials in her poems. Perhaps, the most typical one is found at the end of the first stanza in *The Map*:

Along the fine tan sandy shelf

Is the land tugging at the sea from under?

Bishop (2011: 5)

However, this description is not a literal presentation of the reality. The question mark in this quotation just indicates the interrogation in the observer's perception. Seamus Heaney (1995) admits the habitual detachment in Bishop's poems but adds that the observation demands much attention and precision that "the detachment almost evaporates" (Heaney 1995: 174). The observer usually involves itself into the intense scrutinization of the existence of objects and their relationship. In a letter written to Anne Stevenson, Bishop talks of her admiration of Darwin:

But reading Darwin one admires ..., sees the lonely man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.

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Smith (1977: 8)

The “self-forgetful” and “useless” concentration enables the observer to enter into a world free from the literal vision. That partly explicates the ending of *The Map*:

Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West  
More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors

Bishop (2011: 5)

Her despise of the definition imposed by historians implies her preference for self-definition. The self-definition is perceived and abstracted in the “unknown” world. Mary J. Elkins (1983) regards the formation of the other world as Bishop's art of seeing, during which the poet “moves from disinterestedness to involvement” through the relationship of simile and analogy (Elkins 1983: 51). In the analysis of *Crusoe in England*, Bonne Costello (2003: 358) maintains that Bishop conveys impersonal effects in “her remarkable handling of the persona” without encoding autobiographical details. In these interpretations, it can be seen that the treatment of detachment, as a strategy to achieve a different perception, does not totally prohibit the involvement of the observer. The observer stares at the world with deep concentration and rises above the immediate context. In the new world, the observer can perceive those unperceivable details in the literal vision. In this way, the closure of oneself into the details becomes a rebel against the literal definitions from outside, thus achieving the disclosure of a refining connection between the self and the world.

### 3. DEICTIC SHIFTS IN THE INVOLVEMENT

If the observers project their minds into the other world, there must be word choices tied to the immediate context and the other world in the poem. But how do word choices embody the transition from one context to another? This question entails the cognition of the readers. Stockwell (2002: 41) defines “deixis” as “the capacity that language has for anchoring meaning to a context”. Taking language as a medium, readers can experience the imagined world through the deictic devices. Green (1992: 121-122) regards “the encoding in an utterance of the spatio-temporal context” and “the subjective experience of encoders” as “deixis”. In this sense, the observer in the poem becomes the encoder whereas the readers become the decoders.

Readers can trace the way the observers project their minds by consulting the deixis shifts in the poem. Segal (2009), who develops the Deixis Shift Theory, associates the deixis shift with the act of imagination and maintains that the details of narrative texts can be interpreted by consulting deixis shift. This view contributes to the cognitive stylistics in the literary studies. Drawing on common stylistic features in the text, Stockwell (2002: 53-54) extends the deixis shift devices into six categories: perceptual, spatial, temporal, relational, textual and compositional shift. This outline paves the way for the cognitive poetic analysis in the literary works. This study will focus on the deixis shift in Bishop's poems and explore how the observers involve themselves into the other world through detachment.

### 4. FLOWING VISIONS IN SPATIAL SHIFTS

Most of Bishop's poems suggest her expertise of mapping. In her detached description, the experience of the transition from one object to another seems like a flowing vision. In the poem *At the Fishhouses*, the preposed locative adverbials play a big role in shifting spatial deixis:

Up on the little slope behind the houses  
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass  
is an ancient wooden capstan...

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Bishop (2011: 62)

In this long sentence, the subject “capstan” stays behind, while its front adverbials connect the previous houses and stretch themselves to sketch the relative locations of other objects. The vision flows line by line until the subject “capstan” is targeted. After the appearance of “capstan”, it says in the poem:

...capstan,  
with two long bleached handles  
and some melancholy stains, like...

Bishop (2011: 62)

A smaller scope is presented by “with” to explore the details of the capstan, such as the “handles” and “stains”. From the motion and zoom lens, we can see that the speaker seems to look at the capstan with binoculars. Similarly, in the second stanza, the tree trunks become the target:

Down at the water's edge, at the place  
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp  
descending into the water, thin silver  
tree trunks are laid horizontally

Bishop (2011: 63)

The speaker tries to lead readers to the target by clarifying the connection between objects step by step. Then the focal length is zoomed:

...horizontally  
across the gray stones, down and down  
at intervals of four or five feet

Bishop (2011: 63)

In the formation of the binocular view, there is almost no trace of the speaker's emotion. The speaker's intense involvement lies in the observation instead of expressing emotions. In this observation, what matters is not the name of the central object but the details that the speaker observes in this object. The central object builds relation with others through adverbs and prepositions in the adverbials and the object itself gets dissected and measured by the speaker. The further dissection and measurement usually feature the use of simile and analogies from the everyday realities. The scattering of “benches” and “masts” among the “rocks” is like “the small old buildings with an emerald moss” (Bishop 2011: 62). The “stains” on the “capstan” is “like dried blood” (Bishop 2011: 62). In this way, the speaker carries the everyday realities and maps her own world above the immediate context.

*First Death in Nova Scotia* is more abundant in fusing everyday realities into the new world. Similarly, the spatial deictic words in the first two stanzas are important to shape the perception of the speaker. The speaker focuses on the surroundings seemingly irrelevant to her cousin's funeral, such as chromographs, loon, table and royal figures in the chromograph. The relative locations among them are accurately described in the first two stanzas, such as:

In the cold, cold parlor  
my mother laid out Arthur  
beneath the chromographs  
Below them (chromographs) on the table  
stood a stuffed loon

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He kept his own counsel  
on his white, frozen lake  
the marble-topped table  
Bishop (2011: 123)

The first sight of these objects is not suggestive of any emotion for the funeral but a sense of abnormality. Readers does not figure out the reason until the girl is "lifted up" to say goodbye to her cousin. This spatial motion indicates that the speaker is still a little girl, thus explaining the irrelevant thoughts in the beginning of the poem. But these locative prepositions in the first two stanzas, as the spatial deixis, help the girl to compose her own perception of the funeral scene. Only in this perception can she associate the loon with the coffin in the end of the third stanza:

Arthur's coffin was  
a little frosted cake  
and the red-eyed loon eyed it  
from his white, frozen lake  
Bishop (2011: 123).

The speaker uses a metaphor "cake" and "lake" respectively to describe the "coffin" and "table". In the girl's view, the "loon" is personified as a scared monster that may swallow the coffin because it looks like a "cake" in the girl's mind. This association is formed partly based on the spatial proximity and their relative locations. In the last stanza, the girl grasps the meaning of death by announcing her cousin's failure of spatial motion in her imagination. She would like her cousin to enter into her own fairy tale:

They (The gracious royal couple) invited Arthur to be  
the smallest page at court  
Bishop (2011: 124)

The girl associates the figures in chromographs with her cousin who lies beneath these chromographs. This imagination perhaps draws on her own memory of the plot in fairy tales. But in the end the girl realizes what the death means for her cousin, as he cannot come into the fairy tale together. His cousin cannot move and imagine the tale according to the spatial deixis like her, because the death means the loss of consciousness. The above analysis shows that the girl creates her own perception of the world by consulting the spatial deixis related to the various objects at the funeral.

### 4. MENTALITY IN RELATIONAL SHIFTS

Mentality, as an attitude or way of thinking of others, can be foregrounded in the mental predicates and the register of language. In *Man-Moth*, the speaker is a limited omniscient narrator who tells the adventure of a moth. This poem is distinctive of the mental predicates, such as "see" "observe" "feel" "think" "dare" and "regard". These verbs, as deictic words to present the mind style, serve the narrator's analysis of the mentality of the moth. With these mental analyses, the narrator tells the necessary information to present the unusual mind style of this moth selectively, so the readers need to involve themselves into the interpretation actively. It says in the poem:

He does not see the moon  
...  
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky  
proving the sky quite useless for protection

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Bishop (2011: 16).

These lines explain why the moth is persistent of climbing towards the moon. With these mental predicates, the narrator not only becomes the observer of the moth's illusion, but also engage herself into the poem just like the moth. The constant appearance of these mental predicates guarantees that the narrator's eyes will always follow the motion of the moth. As the poem continues, readers can find that this moth behaves much like humans sometimes:

... he flits,  
he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains

Bishop (2011: 16)

The failure of entering into the subway is quite common in the fast-paced life of city. It also says in the poem:

... He has to keep  
his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers

Bishop (2011: 17)

The highly anthropomorphic moth, like humans, has its own lifestyle. The behavior difference in the subway between the moth and humans is gradually blurred. In this way, the narrator, as the observer of the moth, can easily enter into another world based on the cognition of the moth.

The deep concentration in observation is not always consistent all through the poem. The tension exists between different registers of language in *Crusoe in England*. Before Friday comes to the island, the diction of Crusoe features geographic terms and names of flora and fauna, such as "hexagon" "watersprout" "chimney" and "irises". Crusoe is quite conscious of this feature, as he says:

One billy-goat would stand on the volcano  
I'd christened *Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*

Bishop (2011: 185)

The speaker then gives an addition in the parentheses "I'd time enough to play with names" (Bishop (2011: 185)). Then he mentions his nightmare where he lives on innumerable islands and has to register "their flora, their fauna, their geography" (Bishop (2011: 185)). But after the arrival of Friday, Crusoe's diction changes. He describes Friday in a general way: "Friday was nice, and we were friends" (Bishop (2011: 185)). He even calls Friday a "poor boy" and declares that he has "a pretty body" (Bishop (2011: 185-186)). These simple words indicate that the observer Crusoe's concentration has changed. Instead of caring about the bothering details in his surroundings, he enjoys the companion of Friday in a relaxed way. When he leaves the island, he reclaims his deep concentration and recalls his relics. The description of his knife is quite detailed:

I knew each nick and scratch by heart,  
the bluish blade, the broken tip,  
the lines of wood-grain on the handle...  
Now it won't look at me at all.

The living soul has dribbled away.

My eyes rest on it and pass on.

Bishop (2011: 186)

When Crusoe lives in that isolated island, he must rely on the only knife for survival. Therefore, he cherishes the knife by remembering every detail of it as if the knife is a member of his family. The words "bluish" "blade" and "broken" form the

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alliteration which highlights the subtle change on the knife. The bond between the human and object is broken once Crusoe lands on the other island where the commodities like the knife are not precious any more. Rather than say "I won't look at the knife at all", the poem says, "it won't look at me at all" (Bishop 2011: 186). In this way, the knife is endowed with the properties of a human. Crusoe wants to retrieve this bond but it is not up to him. In the final stanza, all those relics are left to the museum. Crusoe lists them in a detached tone by saying:

the flute, the knife, the shriveled shoes  
my shedding goatskin trousers  
Bishop (2011: 186)

Then he realizes that no one will care about them. The observer's impersonal involvement into these details enable him to enter into a situation of tragedy. Even if Crusoe realizes the loss of what he has cherished, he cannot retrieve them because he has lost his previous home.

### 5. CONCLUSION

The detachment in Bishop's poems can be revealed in the deep concentration of the observer who tries to grasp the details of objects in the view. By analyzing the spatial deictic words in *At the Fishhouses* and *First Death in Nova Scotia*, it can be seen that the spatial shifts promote the new perception of the observer. These shifts build the relationship among the objects in the observer's view, thus becoming the basis for the entrance into the new world. Then this study focuses on the mentality in Bishop's poems. The mental predicates in *Man-Moth* propel the observer's involvement into the imagined world of the moth. The register shifts in Crusoe in England not only indicate the change of the mental situation of the observer, but also enable him to enter into a tragical situation. The analyses above show that the detached description is not a literal presentation of the reality but involves the deep thinking of the observer. The detachment is a presentation as well as a catalyst for the imagination.

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