

5-20-2011

The Carnavalesque and the Grotesque in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry

Renee Dombrowski
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Dombrowski, Renee, "The Carnavalesque and the Grotesque in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry" (2011).
University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations. 1304.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1304>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

The Carnavalesque and the Grotesque in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry

A Thesis

Master of Arts
in
English

by

Renee Dombrowski

University of New Orleans

May, 2011

Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Abstract..... | iii |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1..... | 3 |
| Chapter 2..... | 12 |
| Chapter 3..... | 20 |
| Conclusion..... | 39 |
| Works Cited..... | 41 |
| Appendix..... | 43 |
| Vita..... | 48 |

Abstract

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was a Pulitzer-prize winning American poet who did not produce much published work in her career. This was partly due to her low confidence, depression, alcoholism, and difficult personal life, but it was also due to her meticulousness as a poet. Colleagues and critics praised her strong description and mastery of technique, but criticized her early work as lacking depth. While appearing simple, her early works present complex themes of dualism and isolation. Using characteristics of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, her poetry explores these concepts and the need to cover them. This study's close analysis of four works ("From the Country to the City," "Cirque d'Hiver," "Pink Dog," and "The Man-Moth") reveals characteristics of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, adding a previously unnoticed depth to her early work.

INTRODUCTION

While their roots originate in ancient tradition, the carnivalesque and the grotesque are relatively recent terms to the literary lexicon. Although nuances exist in the terms' respective meanings, in general, the carnivalesque presents the jovial, fantastical images associated with carnival. It celebrates indulgence and pleasure, and it momentarily suspends social rules. While the carnivalesque subverts the negative, the grotesque highlights it and combines comedy with tragedy, with emphasis on tragedy. It exaggerates the inappropriate, degrades objects and the body, and focuses on characters oftentimes "physically or spiritually deformed" (Harmon and Holman 257). While these genres are considered distinct, many of their characteristics overlap: exaggeration, images of the abnormal, emphasis on the body, degradation, and the merging of reality and fantasy.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was a deeply conflicted poet whose life and works were shaped by her childhood experiences and relationships. She was a poet plagued by loss, low-self esteem, alcoholism, sickness, and depression. The carnivalesque and the grotesque permitted Bishop to explore the emotional ambiguity of these afflictions, including the reality and unreality of death and other personal tragedies. Some of her poems (notably "From the Country to the City," "Cirque d'Hiver," "Pink Dog," and "The Man-Moth") reflect several characteristics of these genres. They serve as appropriate vehicles for Bishop's themes, particularly the theme of the isolated and costumed self. Many studies of Bishop have explored her notion of the isolated self, but none has explored this theme as it relates to the carnivalesque and the grotesque.

Bishop has been labeled a poet of great observation, but some critics believe her powers of observation to be her only strength as a writer, and criticize her work for lacking complexity and emotion. Several of her poems describe an object without directly offering an explanation of

its significance or implications; however, when read closely, these poems contain layers of meaning. For example, one of her most anthologized poems, “The Fish,” describes the colors and other features of a newly caught fish. Critics understand that the poem is not merely about the fish, but about the speaker’s change in her understanding of the creature. While “The Fish” is highly celebrated, many of Bishop’s early poems are not. Most critics praise her selection of unique subjects, but believe Bishop insufficiently develops themes or emotions.

However, Bishop’s work does not lack emotion or complexity; the fact is that these attributes are generally sublimated within the density of her poetry. Bishop is not direct, but she is a master of subtlety. She allows the image of her observation to speak for itself. Although the language is simple and direct, her poems demonstrate considerable depth. Similarly, the images and characteristics of the carnivalesque and the grotesque are subtle, but revealing. The genres allow for ambiguity and multiple interpretations. Thus, analyzing Bishop’s work through the lens of these genres reveals a previously unnoticed depth to her early work.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINING THE CARNIVALESQUE AND THE GROTESQUE

The terms “carnival” and “carnavalesque” are distinct but interrelated. Carnival originated in ancient times, but what began as a ritual evolved into a complex system of images and emotions known as “carnavalesque.” Any explanation of the term must begin with an explanation of carnival. While its precise origins may never be known, Mikhail Bakhtin traces its origin in the western world to ancient Greek, Roman, and medieval societies. Perhaps the earliest and most important carnival was the Roman festival of Saturnalia. During one week in December, Roman citizens rested from everyday life and indulged in eating, drinking, partying, and gift-giving. This celebration honored Saturn, the god of the harvest. In addition to a festival-like atmosphere, the social hierarchy was inverted during Saturnalia. Slaves enjoyed feasts hosted by their masters, while masters served their slaves. Work became secondary as pleasure took priority.

These joyous celebrations of reversal could not exist without an opposite, “official” counterpart. Many religious festivals, political rites, and farming rituals were marked by a solemn, exclusive tradition. During these sacred festivals, certain citizens had the right to participate while others did not; therefore, there were participants and there were observers. Strict rules of conduct and procedure marked the celebration. From these official festivals emerged celebrations of a different, secular nature. A carnival-like atmosphere of laughter, games, and play in which everyone participated distinguished these ceremonies from their more reserved counterparts. In this way, these rituals “built a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 5-6).

Carnival eventually developed into an anti-culture, one of inclusion rather than exclusion. David Danow explains that “in its most general sense, carnival celebrates...the unofficial,

uncanonized relations among human beings that nonetheless exist...alongside the official, openly recognized forms of human intercourse” (3). In essence, carnival celebrates the unsanctioned and all its associations, but it is only made possible through the existence of its official counterpart. This was achieved through parodies and mockery of images from officialdom; bright costumes and masks mimicked the official attire, the clown acted as head of the event, and the atmosphere of spectacle facilitated the participation of various personalities (Danow 4).

The carnivalesque refers to a work of literature permeated by this spirit of play and reversal. It “provides a mirror of carnival” (Danow 4) that includes images like the clown, the mask, and the spectacle, but the term also includes the emotions and implications of carnival—the fantasy, the inclusion, the fun, and the bizarre. The most important aspect is its blurring of the gap between reality and fantasy. It presents a landscape of chaos and confusion, and it makes this landscape believable. According to Danow, the carnivalesque “supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable...and makes the extraordinary or ‘magical’ as viable a possibility as the ordinary or ‘real,’ so that no true distinction is perceived or acknowledged between the two” (3).

Mikhail Bakhtin, writing in the 1930s, provides the most extensive modern analysis of this literary term. He insists that the carnivalesque is not a phenomenon beginning at any specific point in history; it is a feeling ingrained in human nature and subconscious. In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Bakhtin explains its central characteristics. Firstly, it is inclusive and participatory. Observers are drawn into and become part of the spectacle. They do not stand apart from the clown and his antics, but they share in the experience. There is no clear line between performer and observer; rather the two are one and the same, composing the celebration itself. Bakhtin emphasizes that “carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and

everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (7). Similarly, the carnivalesque does not leave the reader unaffected, but the reader sees himself reflected in the images and themes of the work.

Secondly, the carnivalesque suspends standard rules and orders. Barriers that exist in real life disappear; the social hierarchy is reversed. What is impossible in life becomes possible in its dream-landscape. Typical worries vanish and are replaced by images of fantasy. This suspension implies eccentricity: masqueraders walk in bizarre costume; participants dress cross-gender, as gods, or as animals. Strange, bizarre clowns parade the midway. Similarly, the carnivalesque degrades and profanes the normal order. Those typically treated with respect are debased by crude mockery. Sex is carnal and not spiritual; religion is sacrilegious (Bakhtin *Culture and Theory* 250-252).

Finally, the carnivalesque is essentially a literature of ambiguity; its imagery and its language connote layers of meanings. Living in the gap between reality and fantasy, the images of the grotesque are constantly shifted and juxtaposed. For example, death is placed alongside birth. A living being shifts from life to death, and then is renewed again with life. If images are constantly changing, there are no absolutes. Language does not have an absolute meaning, and words are tools of play and ambiguity. Bakhtin emphasizes, “all the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truth and authorities” (*Rabelais* 11).

The term “grotesque” is more familiar than the carnivalesque. It has long been part of the literary lexicon, although it bears a striking resemblance to its partner. Like the carnivalesque, the grotesque blurs the distinctive lines between dream and reality. Comedy is a characteristic of both, but while a spirit of play marks the former, the grotesque is characterized by a spirit of

tragedy. The grotesque is not simply either comic or tragic, but its focus is on the tension between the two. Philip Thomson defines the term as essentially “the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response” and secondarily “the ambivalently abnormal” (27). Furthermore, its literature is marked by characters “either physically or spiritually deformed and [who] perform abnormal actions” (Harmon and Holman 257).

The term was first used at the end of the 15th century, when archaeologists uncovered Roman ornaments and paintings unlike any previously known. The ornaments were fanciful and transitional. Images blended into one another, “interwoven as if giving birth to each other.” (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 31-32). This style became known as the grotesque, and the term was soon used in the description of the arts. The definition has changed over the years, and disagreement, even contradiction, exists between scholars as to its exact usage. Wolfgang Kayser argues that it “has lost its status as a technical term and is currently used in a rather vague and noncommittal manner” (103). An extensive analysis is beyond the scope of this project; however, a brief summary of the term’s evolving definition and usage provides a firm foundation for Bishop’s use of it in her poetry.

Philip Thomson places the first literary reference to the term in the early 16th century, when the French writer Rabelais used it in connection with the body. From the 16th to the late 18th century, the term was generally related to caricature, burlesque, and parody—but the terrifying element was absent (13). Eighteenth century scholars who examined the grotesque, notably Justus Moser in 1761 and Carl Flogel in 1788, saw it as nothing more than humor. Many scholars, especially during the late 1700s, did not believe the genre capable of truly reflecting life; thus, it was not taken seriously (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 35-36). The grotesque was comic and absurd, but not capable of dealing with serious themes.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the term began to gain literary respect due in part to the esteemed authors who analyzed and used its techniques. In 1851, John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* identified two forms: the noble and ignoble. The ignoble form is a primarily playful, unsophisticated treatment of the body and other images; the noble form has implications beyond the obvious as it explores the tragic pathos of man. Particularly important in Ruskin's examination is his emphasis on the duality of the grotesque: its humor and tragedy. By focusing its attention on matters of tragic man instead of humorous man, the grotesque slowly built a reputation in the literary community. For example, Victor Hugo, in his preface to *Cromwell*, averred that the genre's blending of humor and tragedy constitutes the state of man; ugliness and bizarreness are not separate spheres, but rather integrated into man (Thomson 13-15). The noble form, with its emphasis on tragedy, dominated the Romantic understanding of the term. In the late 19th century emerged the "realistic" grotesque (so labeled by both Bakhtin and Kayser), marked by supernatural elements, and what Friedrich Theodor Vischer called the "malice of the inanimate object" (qtd. in Kayser 110). According to Kayser, in the realistic form, "the small, apparently familiar things in constant use, turn out to be strange, evil, and possessed by hostile demons who constantly swoop down on us" (Kayser 111). The dangerousness of the world is compounded as everything, both human and non-human, poses danger. The world is antagonistic; the people in it alienated, cut off from the objects and people of the world (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 47-48).

With such a fluctuating history, the term grotesque defies an unambiguous definition. Wolfgang Kayser, who arguably wrote the first extensive study of the term in 1957, never concisely defines it, preferring instead to offer several qualities and images to shape its definition. He argues that the word actually "applies to three different realms—the creative

process, the work of art itself, and its reception” (180). Nevertheless, several constant characteristics have persisted in its use. Firstly, according to Bakhtin, objects are treated with “exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness” (*Rabelais* 303). Furthermore, the object that is exaggerated is usually “a specific negative phenomenon...something that ‘should not exist’...the inappropriate” (306). This exaggeration is also a component of the carnivalesque, as it celebrates and exaggerates the abnormal. However, the exaggeration still reflects reality. The exaggerated object, while fantastical, contains elements of truth.

In particular, the grotesque exaggerates the body. If by definition the grotesque merges the comical and the tragic, what better object to ridicule than the body, the source of humor and shame? Yet even the genre’s treatment of the body has undergone change throughout the years. During the Renaissance, Bakhtin explains, “the [human] body was first of all a strictly completed, finished product. Furthermore, it was isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies. All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated” (*Rabelais* 29). Man was essentially remote, cut off from outside influences. The Romantic period marked a shift in the paradigm: the human not as a separate entity, but a being constantly interacting with its surroundings. If the body continually interacts, it can never be entirely detached from the world. According to Bakhtin, the body “is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (*Rabelais* 27). This is an essential characteristic of the grotesque: the shifting and blending of the body with its surroundings. The means through which we interact with these surroundings become a focus—the passages and openings that allow the body to interact: the mouth, the genitals, and the nose (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 26).

Secondly, degradation, most often of the body, often accompanies this exaggeration. Bakhtin explains that the grotesque “brings together heaven and earth. But the accent is placed not on the upward movement but on the descent” (*Rabelais* 371). Degrading aspects of the body—sex, defecation, and abnormality—become the focus of imagery, as are the openings to the body. Although the images reflect reality, the reader reacts to this degradation with simultaneous humor and disgust. Fittingly, another common image of this genre is the degrading combination of the human with the animal (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 316). Kayser states that often these animals are “the nocturnal and creeping animals which inhabit realms apart from and inaccessible to man” (182).

Finally, the grotesque juxtaposes images of life and death. During the Renaissance, it focused on the renewal, or birth, aspect of the cycle. The old and tired was replaced by something new, and the emphasis was placed on the innocuous hilarity of the transition. The term altered in the Romantic period, to focus not on the renewal, but on the loss. The innocuousness of the term was replaced by fear and “chaos that is both horrible and ridiculous” (Kayser 53). The Romantic grotesque conveys a tentative insecurity at the chaotic fantasy world it presents. As Danow emphasizes, “a certain fear of the world and its hazards becomes the new message of uncertainty and insecurity” (36). This theme is also seen in the realistic grotesque’s “fusion of organic and mechanic elements.” In this image, real humans are juxtaposed with inanimate objects, and sometimes two separate objects are blended so that the distinction between animate and inanimate is unclear. However, according to Kayser, this only serves to compound the alienation as “the mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it” (183).

As demonstrated in this brief history and delineation of characteristics, the carnivalesque and the grotesque share many characteristics. They have been used through the ages in various media, although according to Bakhtin, for one common purpose:

to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combinations of a variety of different elements and their approachment, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted (*Rabelais* 34)

Both the carnivalesque and the grotesque promote play. From this play come new perspectives, and from these new perspectives come diverse emotional reactions. And since they explore the gray areas where reality and dream blend, the emotional response is almost always ambivalent (Harpham 8). Even language lacks the ability to directly describe these contradictory feelings; however, the genres attempt to describe them through playful images and language. Harpham notes that the grotesque in particular address “the things left over when the categories of language are exhausted” (Harpham 3).

The reader’s reaction to this playfulness and ambiguity is one of ambivalence. One is drawn to these bizarre and changing images, but at the same time is repulsed by them. This repulsion stems from a subconscious fear of the aberrant. Edmund Leach, an anthropologist who studied social interactions, proposed a theory on deviants in society. He suggested that a child perceives the world as holistic. No disconnects or “deviants” exist to this social unity. As the child develops, he develops a “grid” to classify the world, but there are things within this grid that cannot be classified. These are the deviants, or “non-things.” These things become taboo, and naturally become a source of anxiety and repulsion (Harpham 4). The carnivalesque and the grotesque explore these “non-things,” and the reader’s reaction is one of conflicting emotions. Although the emotions are often contradictory, the overall sense is one of fear. To deal with the fear, deviants are often masked with normalcy or with costume, creating a fantastical world

where they are less harmful. These are the worlds created by the carnivalesque and the grotesque.

Finally, the genres allow a poem's speaker and reader to distance themselves from the objects and feelings presented in the work. This allows both to safely explore painful issues. According to Wolfgang Kayser, "in gaining distance from the events, the reader also wins freedom and self-assurance" (114). The fear subsides, because reality no longer appears like reality. Distance also allows the reader to form an opinion about the work in question, as the poem becomes a safe object rather than an accusation. Kayser is clear that the author should not suggest interpretation; rather it must remain the reader's responsibility to make sense of the chaotic and emotionally ambivalent world of the carnivalesque and the grotesque (186). But there *is* a meaning in the chaotic world if the reader is willing to explore deeply enough.

The carnivalesque and the grotesque are appropriate vehicles for American poet Elizabeth Bishop, given her style and her biography. Her work has often been criticized as simplistic; her early works in particular are regarded as interesting but containing little depth. Anne Coldwell describes "From the Country to the City" and "Cirque d'Hiver" as "perhaps the least successful of Bishop's attempts to explore the problem of human perception" (21). Thomas Travisano also agrees that these early poems "have a certain individuality and freshness of attack," but are poems in which "interesting ideas are not quite fully realized" (18). Contrary to these negative reviews, a close analysis of these early works reveals characteristics and images of the carnivalesque and the grotesque that permit Bishop to explore the gap between reality and fantasy, a place she often liked to write about. It allowed her to examine life's boundaries, and ultimately to discover that such boundaries are more transparent than we might think.

CHAPTER TWO: ELIZABETH BISHOP—A BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Bishop was born on February 9, 1911, in Worcester, Massachusetts. She was born into privilege, the only child of William Bishop and Gertrude May Boomer Bishop. What began as a charmed life turned tragic when Bishop's father died when she was only eight months old, beginning a series of heartbreaking events that would shape her into the poet she became. Gertrude Bishop took William's death extremely hard, forcing her into a mental facility before Elizabeth turned one year old and a battle with insanity the rest of her life. Bishop seldom directly mentions this tragedy in her writing, although much of her poetry contains feelings of abandonment and loss that no doubt stems from these experiences (Millier 2-5 and Travisano 21-23). Gertrude's mental instability is also important as it foreshadows many of Bishop's future relationships—notably those with Lota Soares and Robert Lowell. As Millier observes in her biography, "Elizabeth was attracted to men and women of charismatic instability" (505).

In high school, Bishop began writing semi-autobiographical stories. Many of them feature a male protagonist named Lucius and his dealings with his mother, Easter. Like Bishop's real mother, Lucius's mother suffers from mental illness. These early writings display a characteristic element of Bishop's poetry that would dominate it as an adult, and which many critics condemn: her emotional distancing. In these early stories, Bishop distances her mother's illness by creating a character to express her feelings instead of directly addressing her distress. This coping mechanism carried into Bishop's career as a poet, as many of her works seem observational in nature. Thomas Travisano affirms that Bishop's "encounters with exterior things nearly always include a barrier, a physical or psychological distancing element" (58).

Bishop's early writings contain dream-elements, which further allowed the author to explore her emotions indirectly. The physically absent Easter often appears in Lucius's dreams, a

foreboding presence that dominates everything else. In one such dream, Lucius dreams of a moth, which becomes associated with his mother. Lucius wakes, “horrified with all the fluttering moths, and just as I woke, so that the feeling was neither a sleeping one nor a waking one, I became certain that the enemy was she” (qtd in Millier 7). Years later, Bishop wrote about an emotionally distanced figure struggling for wholeness in her poem “The Man-Moth.” Bishop last saw her mother Gertrude in the spring of 1916 when Gertrude was declared legally insane. In 1934, she died in a public asylum in Nova Scotia.

Gertrude’s parents took care of their granddaughter Elizabeth after Gertrude’s mental breakdown. Bishop spent her childhood in Great Village, Nova Scotia in the care of loving grandparents. These were the most carefree days in the poet’s life. The only blemish on this idyllic time was illness. Bishop was born with weak lungs and as a child suffered from bronchitis. Despite this respiratory weakness, she loved being outside and imagining fanciful worlds. Even these periods of asthmatic attacks were remembered with fondness compared to the more serious attacks she would have later in life. From 1916 to 1926, Bishop alternated between living in Nova Scotia with her grandparents and going to boarding school. Then in 1930, her grandfather died, followed shortly in 1931 by her grandmother (Millier 16-19).

Bishop’s care was then entrusted to her paternal grandparents. They brought her back to Worchester and into a mansion full of the comforts of life and wealth, but none of the caring and warm relationships she enjoyed in Nova Scotia. Whereas in Nova Scotia Bishop was allowed freedom to play outside, in Worchester she stayed in the mansion governed by her grandmother’s image of how a girl should act. With no friends or caring adults with whom to converse, Bishop retreated into her imagination and learned to contain her emotions. She lived there for only nine months, but the experience in the mansion led to further emotional distancing. Millier asserts,

“this was the beginning of her training in...stoicism, in distancing herself from real sadness, in avoiding complaints or expressions of pain or loss” (23). During her final month in Worcester, Bishop again succumbed to bronchitis, asthma, and allergies. She moved to Revere, Massachusetts, where she stayed with her mother’s sister, Maud Bulmer Shepherdson.

In 1934, Bishop arrived at Vassar College to major in English literature. Teachers and friends remember her as an interesting woman who kept mainly to herself, although she had a close circle of friends. Bishop developed a small reputation at Vassar through the school’s literary magazine and through having her work published in small, but notable magazines. At Vassar she read Hopkins, Crashaw, Herbert, and Renaissance prose; she continued to develop her own voice. She explored what mattered to her as a poet—particularly the poet’s need to create a sensual experience through meter. It was also during this period, when Bishop was age 20 or 21, that she developed her addiction to alcohol, although this early stage of the disease did not yet severely affect her life.

Two important events occurred during this time that influenced Bishop. After her sophomore year at Vassar, she and her friend Evelyn Huntington took a three week tour of Newfoundland. Bishop kept a journal of her observations during her travels, which no doubt became important for the travels and observations she would take later in life. Bishop continued to travel extensively from this point forward, a luxury allowed due to the family inheritance. In February of 1934, perhaps the most important event relating to her literary career occurred. Bishop discovered that Vassar’s librarian was a childhood friend of poet Marianne Moore. The librarian arranged a meeting between the two, and the moment changed Elizabeth Bishop forever. Until Moore’s death, the two would continue to exchange letters and discuss poems in a mentor-like relationship (Millier 42-55).

After her graduation in 1935, Bishop moved to New York, but did not remain there long, preferring instead to travel to France with a college friend. This movement from place to place carried into adulthood. Her life, nearly until the end, was marked by unemployment, sporadic writing, and travelling. However, her free time allowed her to develop other outside interests such as music, and to study art and literature. For example, in France she developed a love for the French surrealists, particularly their dream-like landscapes (Brown 68). The surrealists merged the conscious “real” world with the unconscious “dream world.” These artists no doubt helped Bishop develop a love for dualism, a characteristic that especially dominates her early work. For example, while she was in France “The Man-Moth” was published, a poem where reality and dream merge as the Man-Moth momentarily escapes his underground fantasy world in order to experience reality above the surface.

On November 21, 1936, Bishop’s college boyfriend, Bob Seaver, committed suicide. Seaver had asked Bishop to marry him, but she had refused. In a postcard sent to her shortly before his suicide, Seaver wrote, “Go to hell, Elizabeth.” (Millier 112). This was yet another of the many tragedies in Bishop’s life that she took personally and with difficulty. Bishop blamed herself for the suicide, escaped to Florida’s Key West, New York, and finally went on tour of England with friends Elizabeth Miller and Louise Crane. While touring the countryside of Cork, Ireland, the three girls suffered a terrible accident that threw all three from their car. Bishop and Louise suffered minor injury, but Margaret severed her hand and forearm. This was especially painful for Margaret who was an aspiring artist. Bishop tried to stay by her friend’s side through the recuperation and future years, even when years later Margaret was admitted into an insane asylum (Millier 113-125).

With so many personal tragedies it is no surprise that Bishop suffered from self-doubt her entire life, a characteristic that affected her personal relationships and her writing. Despite being the recipient of countless awards during her lifetime, including the National Book Award, two Guggenheim fellowships, the Neustadt International Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize, her journals consistently reveal a lack of self-confidence. Bishop herself was not sure of her style, or if her poems contained anything of real substance, and she was frequently exasperated to find that publishers would not accept her work. Marianne Moore wrote to Bishop noting that while her poems were fascinating, “I can’t help wishing you would sometime in some way, risk some unprotected profundity of experience” (qtd. in Millier 137). Moore sensed Bishop’s potential masked in restraint and urged Bishop to work through her self-doubt and emotional distancing in order to create something more real.

In early 1939, things continued to fall apart for Bishop. She moved back to New York, gained 25-30 pounds, and began seriously abusing alcohol and wrestling with depression. The recent loss of Seaver and Miller, the inability to find a publisher for her poetry, the constant bouts with asthma, and the feeling of homelessness no doubt accelerated her drinking and isolation. Beginning at about this time, around 1940, Bishop’s relationship with Moore changed. According to their routine, Bishop sent Moore a copy of her new poem “Roosters” for comment. It was returned drastically changed, including key elements of Bishop’s voice. Bishop humbly refused the corrections, and from this point onward, Bishop began to send fewer poems to Moore for review (Millier 147-160). With this once close relationship diminished, no doubt Bishop retreated even further into an isolated state where fantasy appeared more appealing than reality.

Bishop won the Annual Poetry Prize from Houghton Mifflin for her first compilation of poetry entitled *North & South* in 1949. The book was received with mixed reviews. One of these

reviews came from fellow poet Robert Lowell, who called several of her poems “trivial.” Then, in 1946, his book of poetry entitled *Lord Weary’s Castle* won over hers for the Pulitzer Prize. Bishop and Lowell met and quickly became friends, colleagues, and lovers. They undoubtedly influenced each other’s style through their relationship. In fact, one of Lowell’s most well known poems, “Skunk Hour,” was dedicated to Bishop. But her relationship with Lowell would be one of heartbreak. She would live to see his rise to fame followed by mental instability and public scandal (Millier 186-200).

Seeking a way out of her depression, Bishop nervously accepted a job at the Library of Congress as the poetry advisor. The job did not improve her constitution. She continued to struggle personally, and on May 14, 1949, was taken by a friend to Blythewood Psychiatric Hospital. She stayed there for two months before making her way to Yaddo, a community in New York that houses artists. Here she found out about Lowell’s intended marriage to another woman. She left Yaddo and moved into a boardinghouse in Washington to begin her work with the Library of Congress. From 1949-1950, Bishop visited with Ezra Pound, and her confidence as a poet continued to diminish. Her job performance diminished as well, because she was hampered by her alcoholism and chronic sickness. When her job was finished in Washington, Bishop returned to Yaddo unable to produce any poetry (Millier 201-233).

Feeling defeated, Bishop set sail for South America where she planned to stay with her friend Mary Morse. Shortly after arriving in Brazil in 1951, Bishop met Lota de Macedo Soares, a friend of Morse, and the two instantly connected. Bishop and Lota’s relationship would be perhaps the most important romantic relationship of Bishop’s life. Not only did this trip introduce her to Soares, but it also brought Bishop closer to carnival itself. The couple decided to buy a house in Petropolis, a city sixty miles from Rio de Janeiro. The early years in Petropolis

were good. The change of environment helped Bishop tremendously in controlling her health problems, and it provided Bishop with a much-needed relief from the hectic New York life (Travisano 133 and Millier 236-243). In 1956, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her combined book of poetry containing poems from *North & South* and new poems gathered under the name *A Cold Spring*. Most critics praised her new poems as more mature than her earlier work. Bishop continued to write poems inspired by her new surroundings in Brazil while recalling earlier experiences in Nova Scotia.

Beginning in 1961, Bishop's relationship with Lota began to deteriorate. Lota was hired by the Brazilian government to oversee the operation of a local park, and Elizabeth saw less and less of her lover. She occupied herself by writing letters to friends, writing reviews for various magazines, working on translations, and periodically working on poems for her next compilation, *Questions of Travel* (Millier 285-350). By 1965, Lota was exhausted and her relationship with Bishop strained. Politically, Brazil was in the midst of a revolution and Bishop needed to escape. She accepted a teaching position at the University of Seattle. Her teaching year was busy, and Bishop struggled. She found solace through an affair with a married university colleague named Suzanne Bowen. Upon her return to Brazil, the relationship with Lota completely fell apart. Lota was increasingly sick, badgering, and was suffering a nervous breakdown. On top of this, Lota discovered a love letter between Bishop and Bowen and became increasingly jealous and paranoid. Bishop had no choice but to leave Lota. Bishop moved out of their shared house, but she periodically visited Lota. She hoped for Lota's recovery and a return to a life like the previous one they had shared. Lota came to New York to visit Bishop in September of 1967. Overworked and alone, Lota overdosed on Nembutal the day she arrived, dying days later in a hospital bed. Bishop blamed herself for Lota's death, and her health

continued to suffer as she developed periodic hallucinations (Millier 351-431).

In 1970, Bishop accepted a teaching position at Harvard. Here, she met Alice Methessel who became her friend and lover until Bishop's death nine years later. Late in 1970, Bishop suffered from the worst asthma attack of her life. Friends and doctors did not think she would survive the attack, but she recovered by the end of the year. She returned to teaching, and she returned to writing and publishing poetry. During this time, "In the Waiting Room" and "The Moose" were both published and met with critical acclaim. Bishop also suffered personal loss in the death of Marianne Moore in 1972, and a falling out with Robert Lowell over his confessional style (Millier 432-479).

Four years later, Bishop's life once again turned tragic. Alice began to pull away from her, even considering marrying a man. Feeling alone, Bishop suffered several illnesses. She was depressed, and might have actually attempted suicide by overdosing on prescription pills. During this time, she wrote the villanelle "One Art," a chronicle of the losses she had experienced. She attempted to complete several other poems for a new book of poetry, *Geography III*, but only managed nine complete poems for the volume (Millier 480-526). On October 6, 1979, Elizabeth Bishop died in her home of a brain aneurysm. She was 68.

Bishop's life was one of abandonment and personal suffering. No doubt she felt as if living a double life, with two worlds constantly pulling on her: the persona of a confident teacher, poet and lover versus the unsure, isolated woman underneath. She searched for a home through extensive travel, but was always met with loneliness. She attempted sobriety while craving the comfort and oblivion of alcohol. She attempted to connect with others through unhealthy relationships. The dual world typical of the carnivalesque and the grotesque allowed Bishop to explore these tensions in her poetry.

CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS

Despite having a large amount of free time that allowed her to travel extensively, Elizabeth Bishop averaged two completed, published poems a year. Most took years to complete and were pieced together over a long period. Rarely did she write a complete first draft; most of her poems developed in fragments. She wrote a line or a stanza, then perhaps waited years before writing the perfect lines to complete the poem (Travisano 100). Most describe a simple object viewed from a fresh perspective. Millier succinctly describes Bishop's style as a reflection of her life:

Elizabeth Bishop had always looked on the world and its objects from an odd angle, and she knew it. The celebrated observer's accounts of her experience whether in letters, poems, stories, or memoirs—direct their gazes from an awareness of altered or unusual perspective. This is not a rhetorical device or mannerism but a way of seeing, the only way of seeing for the perpetual outsider. Alienated from the conventional view all her life by her homosexuality, by her alcoholism, by the trauma of her mother's illness and the 'false self' she had invented to cope with it, by the fact of being a poet at all—she was forced to take nothing for granted, to look at a map and feel the tug of the tide, to look at a painting and see the pain, to see beyond the palm-lined boulevard to the heap of 'skeletons' at the side. (388)

Some might find her small body of work surprising, considering that she often writes in straightforward, everyday language. But finding the most direct language was what proved difficult for her. In an interview with Alexandra Johnson, Bishop said:

The greatest challenge, for me, is to try to express difficult thoughts in plain language. I prize clarity and simplicity. I like to present complicated or mysterious ideas in the simplest possible way. This is a discipline which many poets don't see as important as I do (qtd in Travisano 63-64).

Bishop's critics applaud her "plain language," but fail to see the "difficult thoughts" she intended. Certainly, many poems have an indirect theme. A. Alvarez says of Bishop's style, "Reading her poems is like listening to highly imaginative bedtime stories and hearing everything but the plot; it is touching, disquieting, but queerly inconclusive" (325). In 1995,

Joseph Epstein claimed that Bishop wrote “good, nice, really quite swell poems—but they just cannot carry the weight of critical significance assigned to them” (52).

The carnivalesque and the grotesque allow Bishop to have it both ways. They allow her to observe and comment on objects with simplicity and clarity, while not needing to be direct in these objects’ implications. By nature, the carnivalesque and the grotesque are ideas not quite fully realized; they are ideas in transition that demand the reader to elicit meaning. Their images are divided yet connected, real yet artificial—essentially ambiguous. The reader can be left with many questions after reading Bishop’s poetry, most significantly the meanings of the poems. However, they are no less powerful or suggestive as a result of this ambiguity. Marilyn May Lombardi states that this elusiveness can be quite confusing and frustrating for readers. She describes Bishop as “reticent,” or restrained, and that this reticence poses problems for many critics (172). Although Bishop writes in straightforward language, it is “never straightforward in its effects [it is] open to two or more possibilities, always hiding something in the process of revealing everything” (163).

Four poems in particular contain characteristics of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, focus on a single image, and ambiguously suggest the duality and deceptiveness of life: “From the Country to the City,” “Cirque d’Hiver,” “Pink Dog,” and “The Man-Moth.” Three of these poems were written early in Bishop’s career and published in her first collection, *North and South*. “Pink Dog,” published in 1979, is one of Bishop’s final poems. The time difference between them is apparent: the *North and South* poems are reminiscent of surrealism in their ambiguity while the later “Pink Dog” is more direct in its meaning.

“From the Country to the City” explores the difference between the country and the city through a single image, a clown. The poem’s extended metaphor presents the country as a

clown—the legs symbolize the country while the head symbolizes the city. The clown’s legs span the nation, beginning at one end of the country and leading to the head. These legs are the roads on which we travel.

The long, long legs
league-boots of land, that carry the city nowhere,
nowhere; the lines
that we drive on (satin-stripes on harlequin’s
trousers, tights);
his tough trunk dressed in tatters, scribbled over with
nonsensical signs;
his shadowy, tall dunce-cap; and, best of all his
shows and sights,
his brain appears, throned in “fantastic triumph,” (1-10)

The clown is initially described as comical and harmless. He is a “harlequin,” a term implying buffoonery and fanciful clothing. This characterization is further developed when he is described as wearing a “dunce-cap.” Beginning in line 6, the clown’s harmless nature becomes questionable. He is dressed in “tatters, scribbled over with / *nonsensical signs*” (emphasis mine). The message written on the pants cannot be deciphered; just as in the grotesque, language is oftentimes ambiguous and suggestive of multiple meanings.

As the speaker nears the head of the clown, the “shows and sights” of the city appear, “throned in ‘fantastic triumph.’” The allusion to Aphra Behn’s poem “Love in fantastic triumph sat” furthers the clown’s transition from a harmless character to a more sinister one. Behn’s poem bears similarity to Bishop’s. It begins with a personification similar to of Bishop’s opening lines:

Love in fantastic triumph sat
Whilst bleeding hearts around him flow’d,
For whom fresh pains he did create,
And strange tyrannic power he show’d (1-4)

The personified Love proceeds to take energy from those around him, taking fire, desire, and tears. He leaves those from whom he steals in fear and grief. Similarly, Bishop's clown becomes a tyrannical and fearful entity that interacts with its surroundings.

The city is an alluring spectacle, but hidden underneath are sinister intentions. The city is "jeweled," (12) "lamé with lights," (13) and "glittering" (16). However, it is also a "wickedest clown" (14).

As we approach, wickedest clown, your heart and head,
We can see that
glittering arrangement of your brain consists, now,
of mermaid-like,
seated, ravishing sirens, each waving her hand-mirror;
and we start at
series of slight disturbances up in the telephone wires
on the turnpike.

The clown's danger becomes fully apparent in the allusion to the mythological sirens. These beautiful women lured sailors to their deaths with their songs, just as the clown lures travelers into the city with his glittering lights. The clown takes action in the final lines of the poem:

Flocks of short, shining wires seem to be flying sideways.
Are they birds?
They flash again. No. They are vibrations of the tuning-fork
you hold and strike
against the mirror-frames, then draw for miles, your dreams,
out countrywards.
We bring a message from the long black length of the body:
"Subside," it begs and begs. (22-29)

Beneath the attractive exterior, the clown is dangerous. What he appears to be on the surface is not the whole truth. The image of the clown (a comic and harmless figure in the tradition of the carnivalesque) is reversed into a sinister figure (in the tradition of the grotesque). With this inversion, Bishop highlights the deceptive nature of appearances, while also implying the inevitability of such deception. Like the mythological sirens, the city puts on a costume to

hide its true, and dangerous, self. But in order for the city to lure others, this deception is necessary. No one knowing the truth would travel to the clown's brain if not for the glitter and "carnival" that it offers. But once in the brain, one has no escape.

The figure of the clown is the central image of the poem, and emphasis on the body is a common characteristic of the grotesque. The clown image allows Bishop to convey abstract ideas through this concrete figure. As Colwell has observed, "we can conceive of nothing beyond human terms of conception, can conceive of nothing without a body" (22). Thus, in "From the Country to the City," the body takes center stage as the poem's focal image. The clown's body is a crowned figure, wearing a dunce cap, "throned" (10) in triumph. According to Bakhtin, "the primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king" (*Cultural Theory* 252). It is important to note that the crown is merely a *mock* crown, as it holds no real, lasting power. Also according to Bakhtin, the crowning motif emphasizes the changeability of the natural order (252). One king is always succeeded by another in the natural process of death and renewal. This cycle is a common characteristic of the carnivalesque. Also in the tradition of the grotesque, the clown's body is undeniably exaggerated, as it spans an entire country. The exaggerated body of the clown emphasizes the fact that its sinister qualities are always around us, not just confined to the country or to the city.

The grotesque often presents the body interacting with the world. According to Bakhtin, the body "is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects" (*Rabelais* 27). The clown is not an enclosed entity, but blends into its surroundings, affecting the people in its vicinity and at a distance. The clown strikes his tuning-fork against the telephone wires to create a "series of slight disturbances" (20). In these

disturbances are the clown's dreams, which he feeds to those in the country (26-27). Those who receive the dreams beg for them to subside.

While those in the country beg for the ending of the disturbances, they are part of the entire clown. Bishop emphasizes the alluring clown's head, but the legs are part of the figure, and thus become part of its wickedness. In this way, the country is implicated in the falsity of the entire illusion. While the alluring head may be deceptively attractive, the legs and body provide access to the illusion. They are a means for leading travelers to the sirens that lie in wait. Secondly, the country receives messages from the head through the telephone wires. The dreams of the head infiltrate the idyll of the country. Separate "country" and "city" do not exist; the barriers disappear. This is another hallmark of the carnivalesque. If the clown is a metaphor for mankind, then this suggests that no one is innocent, but that everyone contains wickedness masked in illusion.

True to Bishop's style, many elements of the poem are unclear, including her pronoun use and overall theme. Is Bishop commenting on the dual nature of man, or is she implying the dangers of city-life? What are these dreams that the clown pushes out to the country? Answers to these questions are not entirely clear, and the poem ends on an ambiguous note: "We bring a message from the long black length of the body: / 'Subside,' it begs and begs." (28-29). This "we" could be country-dwellers, but if the body of the clown consists of both country and city dwellers, they are also part of the clown's elusiveness. Is the "it" in this line the message or the body asking for release? If it is the body, the entirety is implicated. Bishop provides no clear answers.

While the message of the poem might be ambiguous, the structure of the poem is exact. It consists of twenty-nine lines, with every other line set off with an indentation. On the page, these

broken lines appear like roads. The poem alternates from short, 3-6 syllable lines to long, 10-15 syllable lines. Lines 1-13 describe the clown objectively, then in line 14 the speaker addresses the clown himself: “As we approach, wickedest clown, *your* heart and head” (emphasis mine). This technique of objective description, then close comment was a popular one with both Bishop and her mentor Marianne Moore. This shift in point of view emphasizes the menacing influence of the clown. It is not just an object, but a being interacting with its surroundings. One cannot closely observe the object without being affected by it.

Several objects near the end of the poem also highlight the clown’s ability to influence his surroundings. Firstly, the sirens each hold a “hand-mirror.” This accessory is in accordance with the myth of the sirens; however, mirrors also act as methods of reflection. Mirrors attempt to show reality, but are not entirely accurate in their reflections. Secondly, these mirrors are struck with the clown’s “tuning-fork.” A tuning fork is used primarily to pitch musical instruments, but it also amplifies sound. The clown’s hitting of the mirrors with his tuning-fork produces vibrations that emanate to the country along the “telephone wires.” These three objects (the mirrors, tuning-fork, and telephone wires) allow the clown to amplify his message, or his “dreams” (26-27) to the country. What these “dreams” are remains unclear; however, it is clear that they are menacing and do not accurately reflect reality. The country begs for them to “subside.” Perhaps the ultimate dream of the clown is to be integrated, to not have a disconnect between country and city. Or perhaps the clown simply wishes to be free of the façade.

Like “From the Country to the City,” “Cirque d’Hiver” also focuses on a single object. The central image of the poem is a mechanical, circus toy. Bishop takes this traditional, jovial carnival object and inverts it to one of melancholy. The object is not just a “toy,” but symbolizes man’s dual nature. The poem begins:

Across the floor flits the mechanical toy,
fit for a king of several centuries back.
A little circus horse with real white hair.
His eyes are glossy black.
He bears a little dancer on his back.

She stands upon her toes and turns and turns.
A slanting spray of artificial roses
is stitched across her skirt and tinsel bodice.
Above her head she poses
another spray of artificial roses. (1-10)

Horse and dancer are connected via a pole that “pierces” through the dancer’s “body and her soul” before doing the same to the horse’s body. Under the horse’s belly is a windup key. When wound, the horse “canters three steps” (20) as the dancer rotates. As the toy moves, the “intelligent” horse comes face-to-face with the speaker while the dancer turns her back. The poem ends with horse and speaker staring at each other noting, “Well, we have come this far” (25).

In the same way that the clown is made up of both country and city, the toy is composed of two separate entities working together as a whole. According to Bakhtin, this is a popular characteristic of the grotesque, as it sometimes “cuts the double body in two and separates the objects” (*Rabelais* 53). Furthermore, the fusion of the animal with the human is typical of the grotesque (316). In “Cirque d’Hiver,” the pole literally pierces through the body and soul of both dancer and horse, fusing the two bodies together. The speaker describes the horse:

He has a formal, melancholy soul.
He feels her pink toes dangle toward his back
along the little pole
that pierces both her body and her soul

and goes through his, and reappears below,
under his belly, as a big tin key.

Bishop's diction implies that one entity, the horse, is animate with emotion and intelligence while the other entity, the rider, is inanimate with plastic and artificiality. Her clothing is decorated with a "spray of *artificial* roses" (emphasis mine) a phrase that appears twice in lines seven and ten of the second stanza. The dancer's body, not her mind, is crucial in her description. The speaker stresses the dancer's movements and her clothing. Her skirt is covered with decoration, and she wears a "tinsel bodice" (8). She even "poses" for the speaker, once again implying artificiality. By the end of the poem, the dancer appears unaware of her situation or her artificiality. The horse, however, "is the more intelligent by far" (22), capable of looking the speaker directly in the eye and communicating a mutual message (20). Furthermore, the horse has a "formal, melancholy soul" (12) while the rider's soul is not noted.

Two features of the horse stand out for the speaker: its hair and its eyes. Line three states that the horse has "real white hair." Later in line eleven, the speaker remarks that "His mane and tail are straight from Chirico." Chirico was a twentieth century surrealist painter whose work is characterized by a juxtaposition of classical objects and mechanized, contemporary objects. This dichotomy, combined with the indistinct landscapes Chirico painted, creates a melancholy and dream-like effect. The allusion seems apt for the horse, which has both artificial and real characteristics, and intelligence.

The other focus of the horse, its eyes, appears in the first and final stanzas of the poem. Line four, "His eyes are glossy black," describes both of the horse's eyes in a literal description, but by the final stanza the horse becomes symbolically abstract: "his eye is like a star—" (24). By the final lines, what began as a mechanical horse transforms into something intelligent and hopeful. This final simile also suggests that the horse and speaker share some secret knowledge, but Bishop provides no further elaboration, similar to the mysterious dreams of the clown. What

is this secret knowledge? Perhaps the knowledge will bring together both horse and rider, but the knowledge cannot be put into concrete words. Geoffrey Harpham remarks that this is one use for the grotesque; it “accommodates the things left over when the categories of language are exhausted” (3).

Lloyd Schwartz emphasizes the fact that “we must not forget that the horse and the dancer...are the opposite, alternate elements of a single entity which is incomplete without either part” (42). The pole which “pierces both...body and...soul” (15) connects the artificial dancer with the animate horse underneath. This concept is similar to the one found in “From the Country to the City.” Just as the entire country consists of natural (“country”) and unnatural (“city”), so the body consists of natural and unnatural. Similarly, the mechanical toy includes the separate artificial dancer and “real” horse. The two function together, and are linked body and soul via the pole that pierces them.

These final lines concerning the horse are part of an entire closing stanza that raises more questions than it can provide answers:

He is the more intelligent by far.
Facing each other rather desperately
his eye is like a star—
we stare and say, “Well, we have come this far.” (22-25)

Why is the horse more intelligent? Perhaps he is the more intelligent because he is aware of his situation. While the dancer never thinks, but merely “poses” and “turns and turns,” the horse appears aware of his situation. Their posing and mechanical movements are costumes hiding the artificiality of their lives. The poem suggests that everyone—horse, rider and reader—are stuck in this disingenuousness. With no clear pronoun, Bishop is implying that all are “facing each other rather desperately” (23), desperately needing to face the truth of this façade. The “we” of the final line, also ambiguous, is inclusive. As Bonnie Costello suggests, horse, rider, and reader

are all “collaborating intelligences” (50). This resembles the partnership between country and city, entities that also work together to deceptively cover the city’s danger.

Despite the poem’s ambiguous ending, “Cirque d’Hiver” appeals stylistically to readers. The structure of the poem is exact: five stanzas consisting of five lines per stanza. Each stanza follows an *abcbb* rhyme scheme. The fourth line of each stanza is iambic trimeter, while the remaining four lines generally are written in iambic pentameter. The mechanical structure and sound perhaps mirror the movements of the mechanical toy. The characteristic alliteration of Bishop’s style is also found in this poem, notably in the first line, “Across the floor flits the mechanical toy”. The poem’s formal techniques operate as a costume. The poem reads quite mechanically, but the almost nursery-like rhythm covers the horrible plight of the “body” of the toy. The “real” horse is left attached to an “unnatural” rider.

Bishop employs several instances of inversion, a characteristic of the carnivalesque, to demonstrate the motif of costuming. Most notable is the inverted intelligences of the horse and rider. The “human” (albeit toy) rider exhibits no human characteristics, while the nonhuman horse displays intelligence and self-awareness. Secondly, the tone and content of Bishop’s poem is an inversion of its title. “Cirque d’Hiver” is a real place located in Paris. It is a venue that hosts circuses, concerts, and other festive events. Such a title implies a poem with a “carnival-like” tone filled with laughter and human participants; however, the poem depicts a mechanical, silent toy. These inversions create a grotesque atmosphere in that Bishop takes traditionally festive and joyous objects and blends them with the tragic and melancholy.

“Cirque d’Hiver” is almost entirely a description of the mechanical toy. At no time does the speaker make a direct judgment on the horse or the rider, nor does she give a direct meaning; however, the diction implies intense desperation and isolation. The only direct communication is

in the final line when horse and speaker stare and say almost telepathically, “Well, we have come this far.” The tragedy of this line is understated. The intelligent horse realizes that any attempt to change his life or his attachment to the clueless and artificial rider is futile. His only option is to continue his canter. Similarly, the inevitability of the speaker’s mechanical and isolated self is also conveyed. The grotesque often includes a “physically or spiritually deformed” figure (Harmon and Holman 257), and the poem presents both a deformed object and speaker. The toy is a grotesque figure, as it is physically deformed by the pole that divides it, and spiritually deformed in its silent, mechanical role. Still, this mechanization is needed, because without it, what else would the horse do?

“Pink Dog,” one of Bishop’s final poems, also explores the concept of costuming in order to hide one’s true self. Unlike the two preceding ambiguous poems, “Pink Dog” (written late in Bishop’s career) is less subtle and more direct in its message. Appropriately, the setting is Rio de Janeiro, a city that is the epicenter for modern carnival where participants don elaborate costumes and parade through the streets in a playful atmosphere. In the poem, a freakish pink dog crosses the street, “naked” (3, 5), “bare” (4), “without a single hair,” (5) and in need of a costume to hide her ugliness (28). This nakedness is the dog’s greatest sin. Even the beach is covered: “Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue” (2).

“Startled, the passersby draw back and stare” (6). Fear dominates the crowd’s reaction; they are “mortally afraid of rabies” (7), or a “case of scabies” (8). According to Bakhtin, fear of the abnormal is a traditional characteristic of the grotesque where “the object of mockery is a specific negative phenomenon, something that ‘should not exist’” (*Rabelais* 306). The dog should not exist, let alone parade through the streets of carnival. The speaker admonishes, “Tonight you simply can’t afford to be a- / n eyesore...” (29-30). It is interesting to note that, up

until this point, Bishop has ended her lines cleanly. But these two lines are cut in two, separated in the middle of “an,” creating an eyesore to the otherwise structured line endings. This slight stylistic change symbolizes the travesty of the dog’s appearance.

As Travisano has pointed out, Bishop likes to write about these abnormal creatures; she has a “fascination with the scorned or the overlooked” (89). The pink dog is definitely not overlooked, but rather hated for her brazenness and her disruption of the jovial atmosphere of carnival. As the poem later makes clear, the dog is a vivid reminder of need and disease. Particularly repulsive to the spectators are the dog’s “hanging teats” (10). She is a mother, and as evidenced by her hanging teats, she has nursed many puppies. Bakhtin asserts that this is another common image of the grotesque. The “old and the new, the dying and the procreating are presented side-by-side. Birth and death are commonly juxtaposed” (*Rabelais* 24). In the midst of such a joyous carnival, the sickly dog, a reminder of death and disease, ruins the cheerful atmosphere. For this reason, the speaker urges the dog to cover herself.

Unlike the speakers of “From the Country to the City” and “Cirque d’Hiver,” the speaker of “Pink Dog” extends her observations beyond the central object to social and political matters. Bishop’s early work subtly suggests meaning, but in “Pink Dog” the speaker talks directly with the reader about Rio’s problems with the poor and aberrant:

Didn’t you know? It’s been in all the papers,
To solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?
They take and throw them in the tidal rivers (13-15)

The pink dog is symbolic of the local beggars searching and begging for food at night. These too are social deviants, as they are later ironically described as “idiots, paralytics, parasites” (16). Death by drowning is the fate of these men, and will be the fate of the defenseless dog as well:

“In your condition you would not be able / even to float, much less to dog-paddle” (25-26). Her only solution to her physical repulsiveness is to wear a “fantasia”—a carnival costume.

At its core, “Pink Dog” is about the impulse to cover the body, especially one that is atypical. The dog is told to dress up and hide her imperfections—her scabies and hanging teats. This is similar to the country that must be dressed as a clown and that puts on a show to mask its true self. It is also similar to the clueless dancer of the mechanical toy who prefers to cover up her naturalness with artificial sprays of roses. While the previous two poems offer no physical consequence to this masquerade, “Pink Dog” clearly and brutally states the consequence of exposing one’s true self: banishment and death.

It is no coincidence that the dog is female. From a feminist perspective, the poem suggests the need of every woman to cover herself. The final lines implore the dog to “dress up!”, recalling a favorite childhood game of little girls. Lines 30-31 read, “But no one will ever see a / dog in *máscara* this time of year” (emphasis Bishop). The term “*máscara*” refers to a masquerade, but it also suggests the cosmetic used by women to falsely lengthen their eyelashes in order to make their eyes more attractive. It is interesting to note that this reference to mascara comes directly after the line “you simply can’t afford to be a- / n eyesore,” relating the dog to every woman who wears make-up to appear more attractive.

The structure of the poem itself suggests spectacle. It is composed of thirteen three-line stanzas. Each tercet follows an *aaa* rhyme scheme. The rhyme and meter is heavy-handed, consisting of iambic pentameter throughout. The shift in tone throughout the poem is also quite noticeable. The beginning is almost comical: a beautiful beach scene with sun blazing is interrupted when a bare, pink dog trots across the street. The mood quickly becomes harassing as the audience stares at the dog and wonders if it is rabid, then sad as the speaker questions where

her babies are and in what slum the “poor bitch” (11) begs. The poem turns political as the speaker likens the dog to the city’s sick and aberrant, and then becomes frantic as the speaker urges the dog to hide itself in carnival costume:

Carnival is always wonderful!
A depilated dog would not look well.
Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival! (37-39)

Like the dancer whose back is to the speaker in “Cirque d’Hiver,” the speaker of “Pink Dog” seems to be in denial. The line, “Ash Wednesday’ll come but Carnival is here” (32) suggests this. The present calls for carnival and disguise, but the future Ash Wednesday and confrontation should not be considered. While some allege Carnival is “degenerating,” the speaker reduces the allegation to mere talk. The ending of the poem evokes the delusion of the speaker as she urges the aberrant dog to put on the costume to cover her natural self. The speaker prefers to focus on the pleasurable carnival atmosphere, and denies reality.

The need to cover oneself is a natural instinct. For the dog, it is a defense mechanism against those who would ridicule or kill it. But even if the pink dog were to put on the costume and dance, it would still be the sickly dog underneath. As Catherine Cucinella points out, the poem “makes clear that the attempt at hiding, disguising, or disavowing the body ultimately ends in failure” (73). She further observes, “masquerade cannot and does not eliminate the chaotic or the disorderly; rather, it veils the threat in acceptability” (79). This is one message of “Pink Dog.” The costume may be necessary to soothe oneself and to make the spectators of our lives feel better, but ultimately, reality will always peek through it.

The speaker of “Pink Dog” yearns for an inclusive world. The beggars and sickly of the city are feared because of their separateness and otherness; the same is true of the hairless pink dog. By definition, carnival is a festival of inclusion in which divisions do not exist and

eccentricity is expected. Ironically, the pink dog is excluded during carnival season. The speaker wants the dog to cover for the sake of her inclusion into the rest of society, because without the costume, she is received with fear and negativity. Given these facts, one can only conclude that Bishop's message in "Pink Dog" is similar to that of the previous poems: one must costume oneself in order to survive. The city lures tourists with its false lights, the dancer is blissfully unaware of her plight, and finally the dog's very survival is dependent on a costume. To wear a costume is "the practical, the sensible" (27) thing to do.

If the pink dog is a spectacle for the crowd of passersby, "The Man-Moth" is also a spectacle that performs center stage. Instead of an audience, however, he performs only for himself. Like the clown, the toy, and the dog, he has a costume, but he hides behind his quest to reach the moon. Travisano comments that the Man-Moth "is a heroic quester, an artist, a coward, and a clown... [he has] a clown's movements, a clown's sadness." (31). He performs his act high above ground. From the height of the city, "The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat. / It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on" (2-3). Like a circus performer in center ring, the Man-Moth stands in the shadow of man and carries out his ultimate dream, to reach the moon. He is "an inverted pin" who is "magnetized to the moon" (4).

The moth is both animal and human, a blending frequently used by the grotesque (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 316). Bishop uses this combination to distance herself from the isolated character of the Man-Moth. This figure is reminiscent of other lonely figures like it. It is not only the archetypal questor, but also Bishop (who was always searching for the right relationship and the perfect poem) the pink dog (in need of hiding her deformities), the mechanical toy (in search of the next step), or the clown (in need of sending its message). Or perhaps the poem is an ode to her mother. One recalls Bishop's high school writings that called her mother a moth, and no

doubt Bishop's mother was in search of her sanity. Like Bishop, the moth in the poem is a great observer, both in sight and touch. The moth "does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties" (6) and feels the moon's "light on his hands, neither warm nor cold" (7). This is the world of the carnivalesque where the standard rules are temporarily suspended.

The world of the Man-Moth is dream-like and fantastical, with the Man-Moth at center stage. The moon for the Man-Moth is not real, but merely a "small hole at the top of the sky" (14). The walls he climbs to reach the moon are "facades" (17); they too are illusions. His shadow as he climbs is "like a photographer's cloth" (18). As a photographer only mimics real life through his photographs, the Man-Moth is trying to capture something through his act. He is a dreamer. He fears what he does, but at the same time feels compelled to act. As he climbs, the Man-Moth nervously trembles (13, 16). The sky offers no protection (15); he is exposed to his fears and the indifferent moon (11). His quest, his act, is foolish. The dreamer knows his quest will fail; others will not even attempt to reach the dream: "Man, standing below him, has no such illusions" (22). But when he falls, the Man-Moth is unhurt (24).

Then, in a typical grotesque fashion, the drama turns from celestial to subterranean. Left physically unhurt, the Man-Moth returns to his dreary life beneath the city. After almost attaining the moon, he returns to the subway. The grotesque often focuses on this underground, subverted landscape. As Bakhtin has observed, "The grotesque swing...brings together heaven and earth. But the accent is placed not on the upward movement but on the descent" (*Rabelais* 371). Once on the subway, his posture is inverted: "The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way" (29). As the train begins to move, he is travelling forward and backward at the same time, as if on a carnival ride.

While traveling on the rails of the subway, the Man-Moth thinks of what runs underneath his life: “artificial tunnels” and “recurrent dreams” (34). His world is not based on reality, but on fiction. Next to these tunnels and dreams runs a “third rail, the unbroken draught of poison” (37). This grotesque, underground world is frightening. Bakhtin reminds us that this world is often “to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly become meaningless, dubious, and hostile” (*Rabelais* 38-39). Perhaps this thing that the Man-Moth fears, this “third rail,” this “unbroken draught of poison” is reality. Preferring the unattainable dream, the Man-Moth finds reality meaningless, dubious, and hostile. He does not want reality; “He regards it as a disease / he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep / his hands in his pockets” (38-40). Perhaps this dream world is not too terrible, especially compared with the poisonous reality alongside it.

Up until the final stanza, the Man-Moth has been emotionless. He has felt fear, but otherwise has remained unaffected by his journey. Bishop turns her attention to the reader in the final stanza and advises what to do should he ever catch the Man-Moth:

If you catch him,
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.
Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention
he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,
cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

Grotesque literature often focuses on the openings of the body: eyes, nose, and mouth. These openings provide access between the inner self and the outside world. In this final stanza attention turns to the Man-Moth's eyes and mouth. From his dark pupil drops the Man-Moth's only possession: a tear (45). He swallows it, thereby internalizing what could be his only link

between himself and the outside world. The poem ends on a cheerless and solitary note. The Man-Moth is left alone, but satisfied.

Despite the Man-Moth's content in his dream-world, he is not whole. He does not feel the temperature on his hands, the walls on which he climbs are merely façades, he "flits" and he "flutters" (26-27) as if not substantive. On the subway he "always seats himself facing the wrong way" (29) and he "travels backwards" (32), implying he is not heading in the right direction with his life. He dreams, but his dreams are of reality, the only thing that will make him complete. This is another example of inversion, a characteristic of the carnivalesque. While the Man-Moth appears whole, his dream-world is his costume. He is not complete because he refuses to face reality.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated, “The Man-Moth,” “Pink Dog,” “Cirque d’Hiver,” and “From the Country to the City” use elements of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. The images of the carnivalesque, notably the clown and the spectacle, take center stage in Bishop’s observation. These images are described through characteristics of the grotesque, including exaggeration of the body and the inappropriate. Finally, Bishop uses inversion and focus on the gap between reality and fantasy to explore man’s predilection for hiding his true self behind costuming.

Each figure in Bishop’s poems costumes itself in some way. The clown of “From the Country to the City” hides its dangerous intentions with the glittering lights of the city. The toy of “Cirque d’Hiver” masks its tragedy behind silent mechanization and artificial clothing. The “Pink Dog” does not want to cover herself, but must if she wants to survive. And finally, the “Man-Moth” costumes his days with his quest to reach the moon. Without these costumes, these figures would be left even more isolated than they already are.

The motif of deceptive costuming fits the biography of the author. Elizabeth Bishop experienced much tragedy in her life, and no doubt felt herself pulled in two directions. She experienced many splits: sobriety and alcoholism, health and illness, traveling and staying home, sanity and insanity. While wrestling with these destructive issues, she undoubtedly felt the necessity of masking their problematic influence. Bishop’s style also somewhat serves as a costume for the depth of her poetry. She uses alliteration, rhyme, and meter to give order to the issues she confronts in her poems, especially loneliness. While her language appears simple on the surface, it often hides deep and vast implications.

Perhaps what attracted Bishop to the carnivalesque was its inclusionary aspect. Carnival is a time of pleasure, indulgence, and ambiguity for *everyone*. Such an atmosphere is welcoming

for a travelling, alcoholic, bi-sexual poet with a love for observation and language. But even behind the jovial exterior, hidden at the back of the laughing clown, is the ever-present loneliness. The carnivalesque is merely a mask for the grotesque, and the isolated figure behind it. In all four poems, “carnival” images are shown to be dark and isolated. Bishop cannot stay in the indulgent, inclusive atmosphere. Just as carnival arrives once a year, the carnivalesque is temporary.

Joseph Epstein’s comment that Bishop wrote “good, nice, really quite swell poems” that do not “carry the weight of critical significance assigned to them” (52) is evidence of lazy reading. A close analysis of these lesser-studied early poems reveals a command of subtle language woven with characteristics of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. The images she selects for these poems reflect a grim, isolated world, which on the surface appears inviting. However, as Bishop’s life proved to her with each new tragedy, carnival is only temporary. All that one can do is move forward through it, donning costumes when necessary to cover up the isolation. After all, that intelligent horse tells us in “Cirque d’Hiver,” “We have come this far.”

Works Cited

- Alvarez, A. "Review: Imagism and Poetess." *The Kenyon Review* 19 (1957): 321-329. *JSTOR*.
Web. 11 March 2011.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington:
Indiana UP, 1984. Print.
- . "Carnival and the Carnavalesque." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*.
Ed. John Storey. 2nd Edition. 250-259. *Google Books*. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.
- Brown, Ashley. "Elizabeth Bishop." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Ed. Donald
Greiner. Vol. 5. Gale Research Company, 1980. 66-77. Print.
- Colwell, Anne. *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth
Bishop*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1997. Print.
- Costello, Bonnie. *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*. Cambridge: Harvard UP,
1991. Print.
- Cucinella, Catherine. "'Dress up! Dress up and Dance at Carnival!': The Body in
Elizabeth Bishop's 'Pink Dog.'" *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 56
(2002): 73-83. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Jan. 2011.
- Danow, David. K. *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*. Lexington: UP of
Kentucky, 1995. Print.
- Epstein, Joseph. "Elizabeth Bishop: Never a Bride." *The Hudson Review* 48 (1995): 34-52.
JSTOR. Web. 11 March 2011.
- Harmon, William and Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. 11th ed. New Jersey: Prentice
Hall, 2009. Print.

Harpham, Geoffrey. *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*.

Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.

Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1957. Print.

Lombardi, Marilyn May. "The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art."

Twentieth Century Literature 38 (1992): 152-175. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 March 2011.

Millier, Brett Candlish. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. Berkeley: U of

California P, 1993. *NetLibrary*. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.

Schwartz, Lloyd. "The Mechanical Horse and the Indian Princess: Two Poems from

North & South." *World Literature Today* 51 (1977): 41-44. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Jan.

2011.

Thomson, Philip. *The Term and Concept 'Grotesque': A Historical Summary*. London:

Methuen, 1972. Print.

Travisano, Thomas J. *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development*. Charlottesville: UP of

Virginia, 1988. Print.

Appendix: Full Text of Poems

From the Country to the City

The long, long legs,
league-boots of land, that carry the city nowhere,
nowhere; the lines
that we drive on (stain-stripes on harlequin's
trousers, tights);
his tough trunk dressed in tatters, scribbled over with
nonsensical signs;
his shadowy, tall dunce-cap; and, best of all his
shows and sights,
his brain appears, throned in "fantastic triumph,"
and shines through his hat
with jeweled works at work at intermeshing crowns,
lame with lights.
As we approach, wickedest clown, your heart and head,
we can see that
glittering arrangement of your brain consists, now,
of mermaid-like,
seated, ravishing sirens, each waving her hand-mirror;
and we start at
series of slight disturbances up in the telephone wires
on the turnpike.
Flocks of short, shining wires seem to be flying sidewise.
Are they birds?
They flash again. No. They are vibrations of the tuning-fork
you hold and strike
against the mirror-frames, then draw for miles, your dreams,
out countrywards.
We bring a message from the long black length of body:
"Subside," it begs and begs.

Cirque d'Hiver

Across the floor flits the mechanical toy,
fit for a king of several centuries back.
A little circus horse with real white hair.
His eyes are glossy black.
He bears a little dancer on his back.

She stands upon her toes and turns and turns.
A slanting spray of artificial roses
is stitched across her skirt and tinsel bodice.
Above her head she poses
another spray of artificial roses.

His mane and tail are straight from Chirico.
He has a formal, melancholy soul.
He feels her pink toes dangle toward his back
along the little pole
that pierces both her body and her soul

and goes through his, and reappears below,
under his belly, as a big tin key.
He canters three steps, then he makes a bow,
canters again, bows on one knee,
canters, then clicks and stops, and looks at me.

The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.
He is the more intelligent by far.
Facing each other rather desperately—
his eye is like a star—
we stare and say, "Well, we have come this far."

Pink Dog

The sun is blazing and the sky is blue.
Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue.
Naked, you trot across the avenue.

Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!
Naked and pink, without a single hair...
Startled, the passersby draw back and stare.

Of course they're mortally afraid of rabies.
You are not mad; you have a case of scabies
but look intelligent. Where are your babies?

(A nursing mother, by those hanging teats.)
In what slum have you hidden them, poor bitch,
while you go begging, living by your wits?

Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers,
to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?
They take and throw them in the tidal rivers.

Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites
go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights
out in the suburbs, where there are no lights.

If they do this to anyone who begs,
drugged, drunk, or sober, with or without legs,
what would they do to sick, four-legged dogs?

In the cafés and on the sidewalk corners
the joke is going round that all the beggars
who can afford them now wear life preservers.

In your condition you would not be able
even to float, much less to dog-paddle.
Now look, the practical, the sensible

solution is to wear a *fantasia*.
Tonight you simply can't afford to be a-
n eyesore. But no one will ever see a

dog in *máscara* this time of year.
Ash Wednesday'll come but Carnival is here.
What sambas can you dance? What will you wear?

They say that Carnival's degenerating
--radios, Americans, or something,
have ruined it completely. They're just talking.

Carnival is always wonderful!
A depilated dog would not look well.
Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!

The Man-Moth

Here, above,
cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight.
The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.

But when the Man-Moth
pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,
the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges
from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
proving the sky quite useless for protection.
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

Up the façades,
his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
to push his small head through that round clean opening
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.
(Man, standing below him, has no such illusions.)
But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although
he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.

Then he returns
to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,
he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains
fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.
The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way
and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,
without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort.
He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards.

Each night he must
be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams.
Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie
his rushing brain. He does not dare look out the window,
for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,
runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease
he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep
his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers.

If you catch him,
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.
Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention
he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,
cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

Vita

The author was born in Bonduel, Wisconsin. She received her bachelor's degree in Secondary Education and English from Concordia University Wisconsin in 2004. She began her graduate work at the University of New Orleans in the fall of 2007, first pursuing a degree in the MAET program before switching to the MA program in English.