

Elizabeth Bishop—Creating Images

Title: Elizabeth Bishop—Words that Paint Pictures/Pictures that Inspire Words

Developed by: Rita Wilson

Suggested Grade Level(s): 5-9 *Can easily be adjusted for P-4

Suggested Length of Class Time: Flexible, depending on how many segments chosen and grade level.

1. Introduction – One hour
2. Picture to Poem – One hour
3. Poem to Picture – One hour

Subject Areas: Language Arts, Visual Arts, Social Studies

Rationale:

These lessons introduce students to Elizabeth Bishop, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet who has a special connection to Nova Scotia. 2011 marked the centenary of her birth. Much of that celebration takes part in Nova Scotia, where she spent an important part of her childhood with Gammie and Pa. By reading Bishop's words and learning about her Great Village world, Bishop and her works will come alive for the students.

The lessons also allow students to “see” how words can describe pictures and, in reverse, how pictures can be created anew through words.

Logistics:

Classroom setup:

Students will need a place to gather for a whole group discussion, as well as a place to work individually and in teams on writing and drawing. *It would be ideal if the technology is available to project the images on a large screen.*

Materials:

- Copy of image related to “Poem” for each student
- Paper for writing
- Paper for drawing or painting
- Pencils
- Drawing/painting materials (Coloured pencils or crayons would be good to portray details)
- Photocopies of paintings and writing

Suggested resources/images

- See attached Bibliography for books and websites
- Jpegs of “Poem”, “Uncle Neddy” and “Little Sister” pictures

Suggested Outcomes:

Visual Arts

- Discover art as a way of expressing ideas and sharing artwork
- Demonstrate an understanding of the lives of artists with cultural/historical/social contexts

Social Studies:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the interactions among people, places, and the environment

Language Arts

- Use writing to clarify thoughts and experiences
- Communicate information and ideas effectively and clearly, and to respond personally and critically
- Select, read and view with understanding literature, information, media, visual texts

Introduction:

When possible, start a week in advance by reading Sandra Barry's new biography, Elizabeth Bishop: A Home-made Poet, to give the class valuable background to begin these lessons. If that's not possible, choose excerpts from the book for the first lesson.

Lesson #1

This lesson starts with an introduction of Elizabeth Bishop.

1. Who was she?
2. Why does she matter particularly to all of us as Nova Scotians?
3. Do students know where Great Village is?
4. Imagine what Great Village looked like in 1916, when Elizabeth was a little girl living there?

Explain that Bishop wrote some of her most famous poems and stories about her childhood in Great Village. She wrote these 30 years later while she was living in Brazil. She said, in "Memories of Uncle Neddy"

"Although there are more, these are all the memories I want to keep on remembering — I couldn't forget them if I tried, probably — as if they had just happened or were still happening."

Take the class on a virtual tour of Gammie and Pa's Great Village home at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?V=SYM1iUzFfnU>

<http://www.elizabethbishopns.org> will connect you to more information about Bishop's life.

Next, discuss students' responses to two questions:

1. Do you think words can create a picture in your mind? How?
2. Do you think a picture can spark words? How?

(Have a passage and a picture selected in advance that you can use as an example after you ask the questions.)

Explain that they'll be using those ideas for the next lesson.

Lesson # 2 From Painting to Poem

1. Begin by reading an excerpt from Bishop's story, "In the Village", from Elizabeth Bishop, The Collected Prose, pp. 260-264 (*see appendix*), asking the students to imagine pictures in their minds as you read. Take a few minutes after reading to discuss these pictures asking the question "What images did Bishop paint with her words? What did you notice?"
2. Next, project the image of George Hutchinson's painting of Great Village on a whiteboard or screen. Give bio (*see Appendix*) of Hutchinson, Elizabeth's great uncle and his connection to Great Village. (*If you can't project the painting, either blow up an image that the whole class can look at and discuss or give students individual sheets of the painting at this point.*)
3. Elicit the things that students see in the picture.
4. Read Bishop's "Poem" aloud, explaining that she wrote it about this little painting, now for sale at an auction house in the United States. Explain that a group of people hopes to purchase it and bring it back to Nova Scotia and ask why they think this might be important.
5. Invite students to work in groups of 2 to 4, or individually, comparing the poem and the picture and making a list of things they see in the picture that are referenced in the poem. (*See Appendix for form*)
6. Discuss as group what they've noticed about the painting after reading the poem, comparing and combining their ideas.
7. Finally, re-read "Poem" and ask students to think about what the poem conveys beyond the physical painting? (This can be done as whole group, small group, or individual activity)
 - a. *What did you learn about the history of the painting?*
 - b. *What did you learn about the painting's connection to Elizabeth Bishop?*
 - c. *How do both the poem and painting portray memory?*
 - d. *Is there a difference between how each medium can do that?*
 - e. *Is one more effective than another?*
 - f. *Is that effectiveness different for different students?*

Lesson # 3 From Words to Paintings

1. Explain that students will learn more about Elizabeth Bishop while exploring the connection between words and visual images, but this time they'll move in the opposite direction. First they will hear her words, then draw their own pictures using the details in her words, and finally, they will look at pictures of the portraits she described.

2. Choose as much of the story, “Memories of Uncle Neddy” pp. 227-250, Elizabeth Bishop, The Collected Prose, as you wish to read to begin the lesson. The specific part of the story that describes the paintings is in the *Appendix*. Two paintings are described. You could read the description of both aloud with the class, then have students choose which portrait they would like to draw. Each student should have a copy of the description they choose to draw, to refer to as they draw--either Neddy or his “little sister”.
3. Decide what medium you would like the students to use to create their portraits or give them a choice from materials with which they are familiar.
4. As they work and you circulate, chat about additional details they might notice in the writing that they could include in their drawings.
5. Allow time, either when students finish that day or during the next class, to discuss the drawings, looking at differences and similarities and asking students to explain why they chose to include the particular features they did.

Extension of Ideas

1. Students can write, choosing poetry or prose, a description of their hometown.
2. Students can write about an incident in their childhood that is clear in their memory, including as many details as possible in order to make it vivid to others.
3. Students draw or paint a picture of their hometown, choosing a particular area.
4. Invite Sandra Barry (Elizabeth Bishop scholar, author and repository of fascinating information and anecdotes about Bishop) in to talk with the class about Bishop.
5. Choose another Bishop poem or piece of prose (*see Resource list*) and have students create pictures inspired by the words.
6. Choose another visual image, (or have students choose their own image). They can write about what they notice in the image or create a fictional story inspired by the poetry.

Suggestions for Assessment

- Evaluate students’ “Poem” and Painting—Seeing Words for depth of thought and originality
- Evaluate students’ answers to questions about what “Poem” conveys beyond physical details of painting
- Make note of how students work and focus, individually and in groups
- Note student’s ability to use information from a description to create a drawing
- Note student’s contributions and thought in brainstorming sessions

Appendix

Elizabeth Bishop—Creating Images/Resources

Elizabeth Bishop, The Collected Prose

The following stories are specifically about her Great Village childhood experiences: “Primer Class”, “Gwendolyn”, “In the Village”

Elizabeth Bishop, The Complete Poems, 1927-1979

The following poems come from Bishop’s childhood: “Sestina”, “First Death in Nova Scotia”, “Manners” and these are Nova Scotian content: “At the Fishhouses”, “Cape Breton”, “Filling Station”, “Large Bad Picture”, “Sandpiper”, “The Moose”

Elizabeth Bishop: A Home-Made Poet, Sandra Barry

Websites:

<http://www.elizabethbishopcentenary.blogspot.com/p/video-resources.html>

A channel at youtube maintained by EB 100 (Elizabeth Bishop 100) dedicated to making E B materials easily available.

<http://www.elizabethbishopns.org>

The Elizabeth Society of Nova Scotia’s website, with links to history, readings, events, tons of information

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?V=SYM1iUzFfnU>

(A visit to Gammie and Pa’s home in Great Village)

www.poemhunter.com/elizabeth-bishop/

(Bishop’s poems on-line)

<http://www.elizabethbishopns.org/mediat.html>

(Claire Miller reading “In the Village”)

Elizabeth Bishop—Creating Images— (pp. 260-264, Elizabeth Bishop, The Collected Prose)

You may want to choose a segment of this to read, or read the whole piece and then re-read certain parts that deal specifically with the visual background.

Every morning I take the cow to the pasture we rent from Mr. Chisholm. She, Nelly could probably go by herself just as well but I like marching through the village with a big stick, directing her.

This morning is brilliant and cool. My grandmother and I are alone again in the kitchen. We are talking. She says it is cool enough to keep the oven going, to bake the bread, to roast a leg of lamb.

“Will you remember to go down to the brook? Take Nelly around by the brook and pick me a big bunch of mint. I thought I’d make some mint sauce.”

“For the leg of lamb?”

“You finish your porridge.”

“I think I’ve had enough now . . .”

“Hurry up and finish that porridge.”

There is talking on the stairs.

“No, now wait,” my grandmother says to me. “Wait a minute.”

My two aunts come into the kitchen. She is with them, wearing the white cotton dress with black polka dots and the flat black velvet bow at the neck. She comes and feeds me the rest of the porridge herself, smiling at me.

“Stand up now and let’s see how tall you are,” she tells me.

“Almost to your elbow,” they say. “See how much she’s grown.”

“Almost.”

“It’s her hair.”

Hands are on my head, pushing me down; I slide out from under them. Nelly is waiting for me in the yard, holding her nose just under in the watering trough. My stick waits against the door frame, clad in bark.

Nelly looks up at me, drooling glass strings. She starts off around the corner of the house without a flicker of expression.

Switch. Switch. How annoying she is!

But she is a Jersey and we think she is very pretty.

“From in front,” my aunts sometimes add.

She stops to snatch at the long, untrimmed grass around the gatepost.

“Nelly!”

Whack! I hit her hipbone.

On she goes without even looking around. Flop, flop, down over the dirt sidewalk into the road, across the village green in front of the Presbyterian church. The grass is gray with dew; the church is dazzling. It is high-shouldered and secretive; it leans backwards a little.

Ahead, the road is lined with dark, thin old elms; grass grows long and blue in the ditches. Behind the elms the meadows run along, peacefully, greenly.

We pass Mrs. Peppard's house. We pass Mrs. McNeil's house. We pass Mrs. Geddes's house. We pass Hill's store.

The store is high, and a faded gray-blue, with tall windows built on a long, high stoop of gray-blue cement with an iron hitching rail along it. Today, in one window there are big cardboard shaped like houses—complete houses and houses with the roofs lifted off to show glimpses of the rooms inside, all in different colors—with cans of paint in pyramids in the middle. But they are an old story. In the other window is something new: shoes, single shoes, summer shoes, each sitting on top of its own box with its mate beneath it, inside, in the dark. Surprisingly, some of them appear to be exactly the colors and texture of pink and blue blackboard chalks, but I can't stop to examine them now. In one door, great overalls hang high in the air on hangers. Miss Ruth Hill looks out the other door and waves. We pass Mrs. Captain Mahon's house.

Nelly tenses and starts walking faster, making over to the right. Every morning and Evening we go through this. We are approaching Miss Spencer's house. Miss Spencer is the Milliner the way Miss Gurley is the dressmaker. She has a very small white house with the Doorstep right on the sidewalk. One front window has lace curtains with a pale-yellow window Shade pulled all the way down, inside them; the other one has a shelf across it on which are Displayed four summer hats. Out of the corner of my eye I can see that there is a yellow chip Straw with little wads of flamingo-colored feathers around the crown, but again there is no time to examine anything.

On each side of Miss Spencer's door is a large old lilac bush. Every time we go by, Nelly Determines to brush off all her flies on these bushes—brush them off forever, in one fell swoop. Then Miss Spencer is apt to come to the door and stand there, shaking with anger, between the two bushes still shaking from Nelly's careening passage, and yell at me, sometimes waving a hat in my direction as well.

Nelly, leaning to the right, breaks into a cow trot. I run up with my stick.

Whack!

"Nelly!"

Whack!

Just this once she gives in and we rush safely by.

Then begins a long, pleasant stretch beneath the elms. The Presbyterian manse has a black iron fence with openwork four-sided pillars, like tall, thin bird cages, bird cages for storks. Dr. Gillespie, the minister, appears just as we come along, and ride slowly towards us on his bicycle.

"Good Day." He even tips his hat.

"Good Day."

He wears the most interesting hat in the village: a man's regular stiff straw sailor, only it is black. Is there a possibility that he paints it at home, with something like stove polish? Because once I had seen one of my aunts painting a straw-colored hat navy blue.

Nelly, oblivious, makes cow flops. Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack.
It is fascinating. I cannot take my eyes off her. Then I step around them: fine dark-green and lacy and watery at the edges.

We pass the McLeans', whom I know very well. Mr. McLean is just coming Out of his new barn with the tin hip roof and with him is Jock, their old shepherd dog, long-haired, black and white and yellow. He runs up barking deep, cracked, soft barks in quiet morning. I hesitate.

Mr. McLean bellows, "Jock! You! Come back here! Are you trying to frighten her? To me he says, "He's twice as old as you are."

Finally I pat the big round warm head.

We talk a little. I ask the exact number of Jock's years but Mr. McLean has forgotten.

"He hasn't hardly a tooth in his head and he's got rheumatism. I hope we'll get him through next winter. He still wants to go to the woods with me and it's hard for him in the snow. We'll be lost without him."

Mr. McLean speaks to me behind one hand, not to hurt Jock's feelings: "*Deaf as a post.*"

Like anybody deaf, jock puts his head to one side.

"he used to be the best dog at finding cows for miles around. People used to come from away down the shore to borrow him to find their cows for them. And he'd always find them. The first year we had to leave him behind when we went up to the mountain to get the cows I thought it would kill him. Well, when his teeth started going he couldn't do much with the cows any more. Effie used to say, "I don't know how we'd run the farm without him."

Loaded down with too much black and yellow and white fur, Jock smiles, showing how few teeth he has. He has yellow caterpillars for eyebrows.

Nelly has gone on ahead. She is almost up the hill to Chisholm's when I catch up with her. We turn in to their steep, long drive, through a steep, bare yard crowded with unhappy apple trees. From the top, though, from the Chisholm's back yard, one always stops to look at the view.

There are the tops of all the elm trees in the village and there, beyond them, the long green marshes, so fresh, so salt. Then the Minas Basin, with the tide halfway in or out, the wet red mud glazed with sky blue until it meets the creeping lavender-red water. In the middle of the view, like one hand of a clock pointing straight up, is the steeple of the Presbyterian church. We are in the "Maritimes" but all that means is that we live by the sea.

From “Memories of Uncle Neddy”

pp. 229-230, Elizabeth Bishop, The Collected Prose Description of “Uncle Neddy”

“But here he is again now, young and clean, about twelve years old, with nothing between us but a glaze of old-fashioned varnishing. His widow, Aunt Hat, sent him to me, shipped him thousands of miles from Nova Scotia, along with one of his younger sisters, my mother, in one big crate. Why on earth did Aunt Hat send me the portrait of her late husband? My mother’s might have been expected, but Uncle Neddy’s came as a complete surprise; and now I can’t stop thinking about him. His married life was long-drawn-out and awful; that was common knowledge. Can his presence here be Aunt Hat’s revenge? Her last word in their fifty-odd-year battle? And an incredible last straw for him? Or is he here now because he was one of a pair and Aunt Hat was a fiend for order? Because she couldn’t bear to break up a set of anything? He looks perfectly calm, polite—quite a pleasant child, in fact—almost as if her were glad to be here, away from it all.

(The frames these ancestor-children arrived in were a foot wide, painted and repainted with glittery, gritty gilt paint. They were meant to hang against dark wallpaper in a haircloth-and-mahogany northern parlor and brighten it up. I have taken the liberty of changing them to narrow, carefully dulled, gold ones, “modern.” Now the portraits are reduced to the scale suitable for hanging in apartments.)

Uncle Neddy stands on an imaginary dark red carpet, against a dun-colored wall. His right arm rests on the back of a small chair. This chair is a holy wonder; it must have been the painter’s “property” chair—at least, I never saw anything like it in my grandmother’s house. It consists of two hard-looking maroon-colored pads, both hung with thick, foot-long, maroon fringes; the lower one makes the seat, the upper one, floating in the airless air, and on which Uncle Neddy’s arm rests, the back. Uncle Neddy wears a black suit, velveteen, I think; the jacket has pockets and is gathered to a yoke. He has a narrow white collar and white cuffs and a double black bow of what appears to be grosgrain ribbon is tied under the jacket collar. Perhaps his face is more oblivious than calm. Its not actually belonging to the suit or the chair gives it an extraneous look. It could almost have drifted in from another place, or another year, and settled into the painting. Plump (he was never in the slightest plump, that I can remember), his hair parted neatly on the left, his cheeks as pink as a girl’s, or a doll’s. He looks rather more like his sisters than like Uncle Neddy—the later versions of him, certainly. His tight trousers come to just below the knee and I can make out three ornamental buttons on each side. His weight rests on the left leg; his right leg is crossed in front of it and the toe of his right boot barely touches the other boot and the red carpet. The boots are very small, buttoned. In spite of his peaceful expression, they probably hurt him. I remember his telling me about the copper-toed boots he wore as a child, but these have no Copper toes and must be his “good” boots. His body looks neatly stuffed. His eyes are a bright hazel and in the left one—right, to me—the painter has carefully placed a highlight dry white paint, like a crumb. He never looked so clean and glossy, so peaceful and godly, so presentable again—or certainly not as I remember him.

Description of Uncle Neddy's little sister p. 233, Elizabeth Bishop, The Collected Prose

And although she has been dead for over forty years, his little sister is her now, too beside him. Her imaginary carpet is laid out geometrically in dark red, green, and blue, or is it supposed to be tiles? and her wall is darker than his. She leans on a fairly normal round table, draped in a long red tablecloth, and her left leg is crossed over her right one. She must be about nine. She wears a small bustle and a gold brooch, but her black hair is cut short all over, with a fringe over her eyes, and she looks almost more like a boy than he does.

The paintings are unsigned and undated, probably the work of an itinerant portrait painter. Perhaps he worked from tin-types, because in the family album the little girl's dress appears again. Or did she have only the one dress, for dress-up? In the painting it is dark blue, white-sprigged, with the bustle and other additions purple, and two white frills making a sort of "bertha." (In the tintype the French wax doll appears, too, seated on her lap, big and stiff, her feet sticking out in small white boots beneath her petticoats, showing fat legs in striped stockings. She stares composedly at the camera under a raffish blond wig, in need of combing. The tintype man has tinted the cheeks of both the doll and my mother a clear pink.

George Hutchinson Biographical Information

(Edited from Elizabethbishopcentury.blogspot.com, Friday, May 21, 2010 by Sandra Barry)

George Wylie Hutchinson (1852-1942), was Elizabeth Bishop's great-uncle. He was the brother of Gammie, Elizabeth's maternal grandmother. He was a painter, illustrator and photographer, and had a remarkably interesting life.

Elizabeth Bishop was well aware of Great-Uncle George, who was still alive during her childhood years in Great Village. George lived to nearly 90 and was in communication with his sister (Gammie) right until she died in 1931.

Elizabeth grew up looking at Hutchinson paintings, his portraits and seascapes hung on the walls in the Bulmer family home. Indeed, Hutchinson was sending little water-colours to his sister and nieces right into the 1930's. We are fortunate to have a few Hutchinson paintings at Acadia University. His work is also found in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Bishop has two important poems based on his paintings. The first, "Large Bad Picture," was published in her first book *North and South* in 1946; the second, "Poem," was published in her last book *Geography III* in 1976.

Poem

(pp. 176-7 *Elizabeth Bishop, The Complete Poems 1927-1979*)

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,
American or Canadian,
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays
--this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)
has never earned any money in its life.
Useless and free, it has spent seventy years
as a minor family relic
handed along collaterally to owners
who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to.

It must be Nova Scotia' only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple
--that gray-blue wisp—or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.
The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist's specialty.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind—I can almost remember the farmer's name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.
Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?
Those particular gees and cows
are naturally before my time.

A sketch done in an hours, "in one breath,"
once taken from a trunk and handed over.
*Would you like this? I'll probably never
have room to hang these things again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A.*

I never knew him. We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,

our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).
our visions coincided—"visions" is
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life" and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail
--the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-top-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Worksheet – Poem

Name _____

Date _____

“Poem” and Painting—Seeing Words

Choose 10 word(s)/lines from “Poem” that you see in Hutchinson’s painting.

For example: “two miniscule white geese in the blue water, back to back”

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.