

On Binary Oppositions in *Filling Station**

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Abstract—The modern American poet Elizabeth Bishop's craftsmanship is fully shown in the keen, delicate observation, ingenious musicality, pure and accurate poetic diction, rich and vivid images in her poems. *Filling Station* is a poem depicting a decayed family-run station, unified by the pervasive presence of oil, and complete with filth and beauty, disorder and order, hope and decay, masculine and feminine, staying at home and going out for travelling, and many pairs of implicit or explicit binary oppositions. This paper is intended to explore the theme and the aesthetic characteristics from the perspective of binary oppositions, to display the profound beauty prevails dirt and filth; hope and happiness overwhelms decay and poverty; powerful, universal love keeps everything eternal in this little filling station.

Index Terms—*Filling Station*, binary oppositions, love

I. INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), an eminent American poet in the 20th century, got her reputation for many poetry collections, such as: *North & South*, *A Cold Spring*, *Questions of Travel*, *The Complete Poems*, *Geography III*, *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*. She was rewarded with many honors including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award, an Ingram Merrill Foundation grant and two Guggenheim Fellowships, and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1976. *Filling Station* (1965) was firstly published in Bishop's poetry collection *Questions of Travel* (1965), most of which was written during her staying in Brazil. According to biographer Brett Miller, *Filling Station* is often included when Elizabeth Bishop gives a reading of her poems (Miller, 1993, p. 35), maybe because the poem bears ear-pleasing beauty, or maybe this poem is one of Bishop's favorites. Technically free verse, *Filling Station* is never shapeless or undisciplined. This short but well-proportioned six-stanza poem reveals its disciplined accuracy of word diction, and lucid description through its exquisite form. Each stanza of this poem is composed of six-eight lines and each of its relatively short lines contains an average of six to seven syllables, which leaves readers the impression of a certain sound effects to their ears and visual tidiness to their eyes. Though Bishop travelled extensively, it was not the grand view that inspires her but the details of ordinary life. The subject of *Filling Station* is an oil-soaked, filthy, family-run gas station which seems odd and is not typical for a poem. Many of Elizabeth Bishop's poems seem more inclined to focus on the details of ordinary, even ugly things of the world, but usually achieve its sublimity or are finally rewarded in illumination, if seen beyond the surface of things. Critics home and abroad have done a lot of study work about Bishop and her poetry. But compared with other poems, not too many critics have studied this exquisite poem till now. There are pairs of implicit or explicit binary oppositions in it, which greatly enhance its artistic values. By analyzing this poem from the perspective of binary oppositions, this paper is intended to explore the theme and the aesthetic characteristics.

II. BINARY OPPOSITIONS

According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, binary opposition is the principle of contrast between two mutually exclusive terms, such as on and off, up and down, left and right. As an important concept of structuralism, binary opposition sees such distinctions as fundamental to all languages and thoughts (Baldick, 1990, p. 260). Literary works are abundant in artistic languages and deeper thought, so the theory of binary opposition has been greatly applied in the analysis of literary works. As a fundamental method in structuralism analysis, binary opposition firstly disintegrates a literary work into pairs of contradictory and related binary oppositions and then integrates them into an organic whole. Considering binary opposition as an important strategy in literary criticism, readers may spot fundamental binary oppositions in the literary works, integrate them to form a framework, and figure out the meaning. Jonathan Culler holds that certain oppositions are pertinent to larger thematic structures which encompass other antitheses presented in the text (Culler, 1975).

In the *Filling Station*, the poet tends to reveal its profound theme through its seemingly disgusting description of a decayed station: it present the readers with a microcosm of a family-run station, unified by the pervasive presence of oil, and complete with filth and beauty, disorder and order, hope and decay, masculine and feminine, staying at home and going out for travelling, and many other binary oppositions, yet the profound beauty prevails dirt and filth; hope and happiness overwhelms decay and poverty; powerful, universal love keeps everything eternal in this little filling station.

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A. *Seeking Beauty and Order among Filth and Disorder*

Filth and disorder in the *Filling Station* starts with an exclamation at the very beginning: “*Oh, but it is dirty!*” for this is a world described as black and greasy: “*oil-soaked, oil-permeated*” and the “*overall black translucency*” is “*disturbing*”. Also the sibilance sound fits the meaning well as the poet is writing about greasy dirt that covers everything: ‘s’ is used fourteen times in the second stanza, in addition to the ‘s’ sound of the ‘c’ in ‘saucy’. Because of its uncleanness as well as fragility, a caring, maternal voice sounds alarming in this disordered world at the end of this stanza: “*Be careful with that match!*” Then particular figures of this little station emerge in the second stanza: This is a family-run business and at the helm is “Father” in his “*oil-soaked monkey suit,*” which is obviously too small for him for “*it cuts him under the arms.*” Also his many unnamed sons are all described as “*thoroughly dirty,*” and all seem to be the same---“*quick and saucy and greasy.*” Seeing the main figures of ill-dressed father and same dirty sons in this filling station, the speaker begins to wonder: “*Do they live in this station?*” And the evidences with domestic features seem to offer positive answer: a porch with its wicker furniture and lazy dog suggests the possibility. “*Quite comfy*” not only especially describes the dog, but also the general atmosphere of the place, despite its pervasive dirtiness and that crushed sofa.

After observing these apparently messy atmosphere and indecently-dressed figures, the speaker’s eyes travel next to a taboret and adjacent begonia which offers a different touch of stillness and neatness. This stanza seems to set a frame of watercolor painting with the items of still life within it: the comic book, the taboret, the begonia. All of their beauty forms a bizarre contrast with the previous messy background. The taboret is adorned with “*some comic books*” whose contents are unspecified. “*The only note of color*” of this comic books lie “*upon a big dim doily*” This large doily is dim from exposure to the same substance which permeates the family’s furniture and clothing. That houseplant, a begonia of an overgrowing image, seeming to overcome the decay of this little station, takes on its special vitality for it is extremely big and hairy.

Facing such “*extraneous*” plant and disharmonious decorations in this practical dirty workday business of filling station tanks, the speaker moves from observation to questioning: “*Why the extraneous plant? Why the taboret? Why, oh why, the doily?*” As if to probe the mystery, the speaker draws closer to the doily and finds it an odd combination of fresh and stale, both “*embroidered in daisy stitch with marguerites*” and “*heavy with gray crochet.*” The last stanza, however, leads mystery to a possible answer by “pumping” the “*somebody*” to the presence: “*Somebody embroidered the doily. Somebody waters the plant, or oils it, maybe.*” Not only does “*somebody*” bring beauty and care to this dirty and greasy place, this “*somebody*” even “*arranges the rows of cans*” and enables the order of them to make them chant or sing “*ESSO-SO-SO-SO*” with a certain rhythm. The internal rhyme as ‘SO’ sound occurs four times in this line. All the dominant rhythm is casual but fast, especially the last stanza, with ten repetitions of ‘so’, it is particularly fast to build up fast rhythm to the final decisive statement of its climax.

Then the only final answer to “why” practically reaches beyond logic to love in the end. “*Somebody loves us all.*” With such a simply and profound conclusion, this poem leads readers reach from a fussy, dirty and disordered surfaces to a consciousness of something deeper: love fills the station and keeps everything in order and beauty.

B. *Happiness and Hope Revealed among Poverty and Decay*

The “*Filling Station*” is described by the speaker with its prominent outward quality “filth” and is usually an odd subject for a poem, which may mostly focuses on those natural and human beauty. Bishop seems to reverse the most ordinary, seemingly ugly things of the world, to see them as worthy of attention and naming. The reading process of this “*Filling Station*” is likewise from the oily surface of things to the presence behind their “art” to achieve the final harmony.

The first stanza shows the snapshot of this small filling station by the speaker: “*this little filling station, oil-soaked, oil-permeated/ to a disturbing, over-all/ black translucency.*” Dirtiness is this little filling station and also extends toward the family that runs the station. “*Father wears a dirty,/ oil-soaked monkey suit/ that cuts him under the arms,*” and “*several quick and saucy/ and greasy sons assist him.*” Also “*a dirty dog*”, like the father and the son who work the station, is oblivious to the filth and disarray that surround him and still feels “*comfy.*”

In the following stanza, the speaker continues to survey the scene: “*a set of crushed and grease-impregnated wickerwork,*” combined with father’s apparently-shrunk overcoat and his son’s greasy appearance mentioned above, altogether implies their working-class status: they have to struggle to earn their living through sweat and hard work. Yet the only available reading material--- “*Some comic books*” “*provide/the only note of color---/of certain color.*” conveys kind of optimistic spiritual state of the people who “*live in the station*”, proving the “*comfy*” happy living condition of both human and animal felt. Life may sometimes like “*a big dim doily*”, a little bit “*heavy*” for the people in this little family-run filling station, yet they still hold the living state as “*a big hirsute begonia*”: untrimmed, vigorous and natural.

Such a bizarre collective effect is so overwhelming for the speaker that she starts to demand: “*Why the extraneous plant? Why the taboret? Why, oh why, the doily?*” She demands who add touches of beauty and upturning strength to such a clearly dismal world. Yet, as the speaker’s attention focuses on the doily, she seems to find some clues to her demanding, for this piece of doily is carefully “*embroidered in daisy stitch/ with marguerites, I think,/ and heavy with gray crochet.*” “*Somebody embroidered the doily,*” she recognizes. Even in this place of filth and disarray, a person took the time to make something beautiful. “*Somebody waters the plant,*” she says; and in a humorous tone she adds, “*or oils*

it, maybe.” to bring vigor and hope to this seemingly disgusting place. Ultimately she also notices the musical and melodic echo from those meticulously-arranged “rows of cans” softly saying: “So-So-So” to “high-strung automobiles”: the passing vehicles who are filled with new energy in this “filling station.” All of these convey the information of being optimistic, happy and hopeful.

These small revelations culminate in the final line of the poem: “Somebody loves us all.” At the end of this poem, beauty and strength found its source in love. Also the poem suddenly opens out to “us all.” In doing so, it suggests that no human being, no matter how “thoroughly dirty” their living conditions are and how “crushed” and “heavy” their life is, is beyond the beautifying power of love.

C. *Feminine Love from the Masculinity*

Even though Bishop had once admitted that she was not “a flaming militant”, she was acting as a feminist when she refused, as she did throughout her career beginning in the 1930s, to allow her work to appear in anthologies devoted to women’s poetry. (Monteiro, 1996, p. x) Ostensibly *Filling Station* is totally about a masculine world: a messy and dirty living station, a father-and-son run automobile industry, “man’s best friend”---a dirty dog. However, seeing through the surface of the poem, one senses the elevated place of female. The feminine consciousness is pervasive in the whole poem as if the oil permeates the little filling station.

In the first stanza, the fussy tone of a woman for whom cleanliness is a priority: “Oh, but it is dirty! —this little filling station.” “Be careful with that match!” has the maternal sound of one who is naturally concerned for the safety and health of her household. Oil has soaked and covered everything with such a black slick that the speaker thinks the place may even explode if someone throws away a lit match.

Then in the second stanza, this filling station is described as a family station with the staff consisted of a father with an improper overcoat and his “greasy” sons. They are all filthy due to being coated in oil. Also the speaker notices evidence that a family live on the premises: the porch with a wickerwork set, the crushed wickerwork sofa and a family dog. Even the dog is oily.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker notices some comic books lying on a big dim doily that covers a taboret which belongs to a set. Then she sees a neglected and hairy pink flower: “hirsute begonia” which seems not fit in: “the extraneous plant”. Because of the general greasy appearance of the filling station, she questions “why” the presence of a domestic aesthetic amidst this male-dominated place after describing the design and stitching on the doily in detail. The whole thing is rather odd: “Why, oh why, the doily?” She is both amused and puzzled with the clash of it all. Would a man in a mini shrunken monkey suit have fancy embroidered doily or a prosperous pink flower?

In the final stanza, the speaker thinks there is a caring person that secretly stitches doily, waters plants and tidies oilcans, arranges the orderly way of the ESSO cans to lure business to the filling station. (ESSO is the name of company that owns the station.) She suggests that ‘somebody’ provides these domestic touches. She throws in a humorous touch about oiling the begonia. Is it the oily father? Seemingly not. In the last line, a clue is offered about the “somebody”: “Somebody loves us all”. Indirectly the poem indicates there may be a loving and protective mother figure in the background. The caring figure is invisible in the poem but she has left her marks. She is connected to the oil soaked males who run the filling station, possibly a mother figure. The images of present father and absent mother actually follow the classic example of a binary opposition: presence-absence dichotomy. Distinguishing between presence and absence, the polar opposites, is a fundamental element of thought in many cultures and literary works.

Filling Station and other poems in *Elsewhere*, which is one of the two parts of poetry collection *Questions of Travel* (1965), are mainly about Bishop’s own strangely textured childhood. Bishop lived a “restless, disoriented, and distraught life” (Stanford, 1994, p. 161). When she was only eight-month-old, her father died of kidney disorder, and her mother drifted in and out of mental hospitals because she was distraught over her husband death. At the age of five, Bishop never saw her mother again because she was permanently institutionalized. Based on her personal life, *Filling Station* may be about Bishop herself. She missed and longed for a mother figure in her own life subconsciously. The women figure’s physical absence is somewhat like the specter of her own lost mother. Though Bishop’s mother disappeared from her life, she may have believed or wished that her mother still cared for her in a spiritual way. She may have felt that her absent mother shaped her life in the same way that a caring ‘somebody’ left her mark on the filling station. The poem shows that Bishop may have tried to imagine that there is a caring mother behind other people’s lives; a maternal love is always there behind the scene.

Even though the inhabitants and surfaces of this place are distinctly masculine, there is a feminine consciousness to match it, revealed in the poem’s voice and in the traces of a feminine aesthetics in the station. It is just this maternal love that endows this little filling station with order, beauty, vigor, and eternal charm.

Filling Station describes a filthy, untidy gas station in a remote place. The speaker mocks the black and messy appearance of the filling station. Surprisingly she finds signs of beauty and order within its filth and disorder, harmony and happiness among decay and poverty. Thus she cannot help wondering who provides the orderly or domestic touches for this gas station, and who fills care and love to this “filling station” to maintain its vigor: maternal love prevails over everything.

D. *As a Place of Commerce and Home*

Filling station, a family-run business of oil station, is meanwhile a home for a family of a father, sons, a dog, and an

absent mother. The goal of running business is to make money, which might be considered as emotionless, loveless and heartless. It is also regarded as man's realm in the 1960s when this poem was created. The poet turns the filling station into cozy, beautiful, happy home full of love, especially maternal love. Ostensibly a father and his sons run the station, but a doily draped on a taboret and a begonia can be noticed, which offers evidences of a woman's existence and caring. Actually the musicality of this poem also enhanced the meaning of home and family. The 'f' alliteration sound links the family to the filling station: "*family filling station*". And the long 'i' sound is emphasized through the continuous question 'why': "*Why the extraneous plant? Why the taboret? Why, oh why, the doily?*" They can meet the standard of writing poetry, advocated by the 18th century poet Alexander Pope (2004), that the sound must seem an echo to the sense. So once more the distinction between home and a place of commerce is blurred and the dichotomy is broken down.

Bishop's life was mostly rootless since she was transferred from this place to that place as a parentless kid in her childhood. Later she spent most of her adult life traveling. For this reason she may have her own opinion of the truly grounding sense of home. Filling station is a stop for travelers stopping to buy gas here. It is also a home image for the weary travelers to stop and rest, to fill the gas and get energetic, to feel at home temporarily. So filling station is not only a commercial place, but a homelike place for travelers who are in the long journey. It is a micro world where the travelers come in and might be embraced by the nurturing love, which is suggested by the embroidered marguerites on the dingy doily and the tinkling cans which line up to say "ESSO—SO—SO—SO" to the drivers of the automobiles. All of these touch the heart of a wandering traveler stopping for gas. The simple and profound last line, "*Somebody loves us all*" extend the love from family love to universal love, because it is not "Somebody loves family", but "us all". The poet breaks down the dichotomy between "us" and "them", actually the family members in the normal family and the people who travel outside of home and around the world. This filling station can fill not only gas to the automobiles but nurturing love to the heart, it is also the sense of home for travelers.

III. CONCLUSION

There are contrasts, conflicts or tension everywhere in this world and it is also the case in the literary world. The structural principle of binary opposition can be employed in various research fields: philosophy, linguistics, literature and so on. Binary opposition, used as a literary theory, can be used to analyze and interpret literary works so as to shed light on the theme, characters, structure and to assist the understanding, to contribute to the insight.

Bishop lived an "undisciplined" life but her poetry is always "disciplined" (Stanford, 1994, p. 161). She is well-known for the meticulousness and painstaking revising efforts. She displaces her master's consummate craftsmanship in creating this poem. The genius and craftsmanship are fully shown in the keen, delicate observation; ingenious musicality; pure, accurate poetic diction; rich, vivid images etc in her poetry. Thus her life and her poetry could also be regarded as a pair of binary opposition.

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry has transcended time and space and is becoming more and more popular all over the world. Understanding the profound themes is a gateway to appreciating her poetry. It seems that the majority of *Filling Station* is about the unfamiliar or unavailable place, but the assertion "*Somebody loves us all*" in the last line highlights the care taken to make this nasty old place home or homelike. It is the love and care of the people that make this station filling with beauty and happiness.

APPENDIX

Filling Station
By Elizabeth Bishop

Oh, but it is dirty!
—this little filling station,
oil-soaked, oil-permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
black translucency.
Be careful with that match!

Father wears a dirty,
oil-soaked monkey suit
that cuts him under the arms,
and several quick and saucy
and greasy sons assist him
(it's a family filling station),
all quite thoroughly dirty.

Do they live in the station?

It has a cement porch
 behind the pumps, and on it
 a set of crushed and grease-
 impregnated wickerwork;
 on the wicker sofa
 a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
 the only note of color—
 of certain color. They lie
 upon a big dim doily
 draping a taboret
 (part of the set), beside
 a big hirsute begonia.

Why the extraneous plant?
 Why the taboret?
 Why, oh why, the doily?
 (Embroidered in daisy stitch
 with marguerites, I think,
 and heavy with gray crochet.)

Somebody embroidered the doily.
 Somebody waters the plant,
 or oils it, maybe. Somebody
 arranges the rows of cans
 so that they softly say:
 ESSO—SO—SO—SO
 to high-strung automobiles.
 Somebody loves us all.

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