"One Art" Analysis

In her poem, "One Art," Elizabeth Bishop constructs a poem that reveals a struggle with mastering the issue of loss. Through the use of a villanelle, Bishop utilizes the significance of structure and word choice to further the meaning of her work. Bishop crescendos each stanza to create a firm foundation for the dramatic conclusion, and incorporates expressive words throughout the poem to illuminate the last stanza's attitude shift from that of carelessness to seriousness.

The villanelle form is a type of love poem and Elizabeth Bishop's use of this is appropriate for her poem about lost love. The first five tercets (three lined stanzas) begin by speaking of small objects (keys) then grow to large items (continents). The final stanza is a quatrain (four lined stanza) that contains the occasion and attitude shift of the poem. The poem's first line "the art of losing isn't hard to master" resurfaces throughout the text to reiterate the speaker's opinion on the mastery of loss. And the repetition of the third line's final word "disaster" is a key to the meaning of the poem.

Bishop's word choice furthers the significance of loss and love throughout the poem. Since the first and third lines repeat within the text the middle lines of each stanza remain different from each other. The endings of each middle line have the same rhyme pattern and collectively they spell out an ultimate loss-" intent"/ "spent"/ "meant"/ and "went." The speaker, in the beginning, is impersonal and does not mention any valuable item which was lost. In the second stanza the speaker explains how to master the art of loss, and urges the readers to practice, making it a habit: "Lose something every day (line 4)." The "lost door keys, the hour badly spent (line 5)" become materialistic entities and lost time. The third stanza contains a dynamic list of uncontrollable loss. By choosing the phrase "losing farther, losing faster (line 7)," Bishop illustrates movement in time, ultimately symbolizing loss. The simple shift from the third stanza to the fourth allow for a more personal touch to the poem with the addition of the word "I." Bishop chooses the "mother's watch" to symbolize time and the link between generations. The lost watch makes tangible the feeling of inevitable loss. The speaker also sequences her losses- "my last"/ "next-to-last." Stanza five is the final tercet that includes materialistic items lost by the speaker. The loss of spacious and lavishing objects such as "cities"/ "realms," "rivers," and "continents" can not compare to the feelings the speaker acquires from the loss of love in stanza six.

The final stanza, the quatrın, contains an attitude shift from that of invincibility to somberness. By implementing "you," Bishop transformed the poem into a personal piece by breaking away from the pattern of inanimate objects and incorporating an actual being. Although the tone is of a more personal nature the details are still muffled. The parenthesis around "(the joking voice, a gesture/ I love)" creates a caesura for the reader, allowing a pause before confronting the uncertainty of the last lines. The first line refrain varies its form in line eighteen with the addition of the word "too" which seems to second-guess the original assertion that loss "isn't hard to master." And in the closing line the repetition of "likes" postpones the final word that the speaker is so hesitant to admit-"disaster." The parenthetical statement "(Write it)" is a self-prompt that conveys the energy needed to actually allow the word "disaster" to be recognized. By putting it in writing the speaker is accepting the fact that they have not yet mastered the art of loss.

Bishop's use of the villanelle form and strong word choice collectively work together to illustrate the speaker's private sorrows over a lost love without including a self-pitied tone. The poem reveals a struggle for mastery that will never be attained. One does attempt to master loss but the recognition of powerlessness may be a more efficient method to tame loss.