

The Demeter-  
Persephone Myth  
as Writing Ritual  
in the Lives  
of Literary Women



# The Demeter- Persephone Myth as Writing Ritual in the Lives of Literary Women

By

Jana Rivers Norton

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For Jack and the blessings of his life in mine.

### Prayer to Persephone

Be to her, Persephone  
All the things I might not be;  
Take her head upon your knee.  
She that was so proud and wild,  
Flippant, arrogant and free,  
She that had no need of me,  
Is a little lonely child  
Lost in Hell, ---Persephone,  
Take her head upon your knee;  
Say to her, 'My dear, my dear,  
It is not so dreadful here.'<sup>1</sup>

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

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<sup>1</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Prayer to Persephone," *The Selected Poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, edited by Nancy Milford (NY: Modern Library, 2002), 128.

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## PREFACE

What happens when biology betrays? When those supposed to love, and protect us can't or won't or leave too soon? What happens when we are taken by forces beyond our own personal control or reckoning? When we must fend for ourselves or live life accompanied by sorrow and confusion? The Demeter and Persephone myth voices the loneliness and fear of family betrayal, and the means necessary for working through loss, to discover dignity and recompense, in the expression and reception of human affliction.<sup>1</sup> Four literary women, Elizabeth Bishop, Virginia Woolf, Alice James, and Edith Wharton, metaphorically re-enacted the Demeter and Persephone myth as writing ritual to communicate moments of mourning and mental illness in language. The Demeter-Persephone myth, as a reflective lens, helped them gain the wherewithal to weave inspired tapestries of reconciliation and renewal. Bishop, Woolf, James, and Wharton, wrote about early experiences to find peace in the present. Writing quelled unnerving surges of grief, fear and worthlessness. By mythologizing painful memories, they made life, no matter how difficult, purposeful. This book retells each of their stories to suggest that writing yields vitality as it reinvents lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Angeles Arrien, *Nine Muses: A Mythological Path to Creativity* (NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher & Putnam, 2000), 95-104.



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\*

*When I was a child, my mother spent her days fighting or fleeing what she could not control. Her betrayal began when her grandfather, James Campbell, was sent to a mental institution for being “the family drunk.” Her parents were both alcoholics, and to this day, my mother drowns her own sorrows in a bottle. While growing up, she dealt with family secrets as best she could. As an adult, unable to heal the wounds of the past, she lashed out at her three small children. My father, lost to a solution, took his frustrations out on us. Consequently, he set a dangerous pattern in motion. Protect the wife. Betray the child. This pattern began, as far as I can remember, when I was three. Today, my parents still enact the pattern, but deny its existence. Yet, memories of childhood are alive in my flesh. They lie dormant in the recesses of my body only to awaken when a sound, word, or action, triggers a physiological response. Then, a sudden rush of blood races from my chest to my head. A wave of panic surges forth as time begins to slide backwards. A floating, falling sensation takes hold as my center of gravity gives way. Though I clamber for refuge, I am flooded with feelings that I do not belong--that I am unwanted--that I am unworthy of love or giving love in return<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> See Besel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (NY: Viking Adult, 2014). Traumatic memories are often triggered by sensations or sensory cues, moods, thoughts, lived events, or states of awareness associated with original traumas. See also, Diana Sullivan Everstine and Louis Everstine, *Trauma Response: Treatment for Emotional Injury* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1993).



# INTRODUCTION

## FIELDS OF MEMORY

Daughters of Memory, linger here, be welcome / Under my roof, take  
shelter from the rain clouds<sup>1</sup>

—Ovid, “Minerva Visits the Muses”

In ancient Greece, the Goddess Mnemosyne, as memory personified, was celebrated for her wisdom and poetic potential.<sup>2</sup> Her offspring, the nine muses, presided over the arts and sciences and possessed the power and wisdom to instruct bards. Ancient poets called on the muse Melpomene to inspire works of human tragedy.<sup>3</sup> Melpomene, the mythic embodiment of sorrow, symbolized a tragic life. Her presence allowed others to voice human remorse and regret. Greek tragedies inspired by Melpomene, were danced and sung to imitate life’s more unfortunate actions and reactions. Destructive action, then as today, led to misery, while constructive action, led to reconciliation.<sup>4</sup> Myths voiced embodied emotions, calmed conflictive thoughts, and gave communal societies opportunity to make sense of suffering.<sup>5</sup> Living orators recited stories of human events to ease discord and divert the mind from care. Early cultures relayed tales of human anguish to find meaning and purpose in life. The Demeter and Persephone myth as retold in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, called on the muses to reveal the cycle of death and rebirth, the primal relationship

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<sup>1</sup>Ovid, “Minerva Visits the Muses,” *Metamorphoses, Book V*, translated by Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1955), lines 280-286.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 465.

<sup>3</sup> James A. Notopoulos, “Mnemosyne in Oral Literature,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 69 (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press, 1938): 465-493, <http://jstor.org/stable/283194>.

<sup>4</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics: Part I-IX*, translated by S. H. Butcher (Massachusetts Institution of Technology, Internet Classic Archive, 1996-2009), <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics/html>.

<sup>5</sup> Besel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 335.

between mother and daughter, and the rejuvenating properties of emotional and psychological renewal.

The Demeter-Persephone myth chronicled experiences of human loss and recovery, and foretold the mysteries of religious festival, held shortly after the first rains of autumn. Initiates who participated in a pilgrimage to Eleusis, in the heart of wheat and barley country, followed the mythic path of Demeter in search of her daughter. Once at Eleusis, participants entered a subterranean chamber and witnessed sacred rites of atonement, the veneration of plant life, and the symbolic resurrection of the human spirit. As such, the Demeter-Persephone myth, as ancient story, contains an essential motif, the endless “heuristic,” or “finding again,” of Persephone by Demeter to acknowledge seasonal rhythms of life.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the myth, is an emblem for what Mircea Eliade identifies as the myth of the eternal return—a cycle of knowing and becoming repeated in the pattern of perpetual decay and regeneration in nature.<sup>7</sup>

The restoration of mother daughter unity, as well as cultural revitalization, is achieved by ritual repetition. However, the tale also teaches about the consequences when that bond is broken—how it ushers in change and the finite nature of life.<sup>8</sup> Although the myth elicits pity and fear due to the brutal nature of Persephone’s abduction, Demeter’s longing, and the sacrifice of maternal love, Persephone’s ascent from death to life engenders restoration, and promotes her own, as well as her mother’s, growth from loss to the quietude of self-reflection.<sup>9</sup> As the *Hymn to Demeter* opens, Persephone, daughter of Zeus, wanders innocently where the moist ground yields a multitude of fragrant flowers; roses, iris, and hyacinth. Amid a lush meadow, a splendid narcissus entices the young maiden. Overjoyed, Persephone reaches out to grasp the flower

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<sup>6</sup> Erich Neumann, “The Woman’s Experience of Herself and the Eleusinian Mysteries,” in *Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for our Time*, edited by Christine Downing (Boston, Mass: Shambhala, 1994), 73-74.

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or Cosmos and History*, translated from the French by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> See Christine Downing, editor, *Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for our Time* (Boston, Mass: Shambhala, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See Tamara Agha-Jaffar, *Demeter and Persephone: Lessons from a Myth* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2002), for a discussion on how to repair mother-daughter unity through mythic means.



in both hands.<sup>10</sup> Suddenly, the ground beneath her falters. The earth gives way, and the unsuspecting Persephone is taken by Hades into the shadowy underworld. Meanwhile, Demeter discovers her daughter's disappearance, and is immediately seized by inconsolable grief. Persephone's fate is unknown to her, and she roams the earth for nine days seeking her lost child. When Demeter learns that her daughter is given to Hades by Zeus, she shows her dual nature, as an all loving, yet devouring mother. She shuns beauty as revenge. Demeter, goddess of bounty, creates a barren existence. She disallows earthly nourishment and appeasement to the gods. As the injustices prevail, Persephone's descent and resultant exile, signifies the harm of paternal neglect by a father figure, eager to uphold family secrets rather than protect his wife and daughter.

The story, however, also tells of Persephone's need to transcend passivity and to clarify a woman's understanding of herself. This essential lesson is contained within the myth since the story acknowledges that abandonment, as well as emotional loss and betrayal, leaves an existential as well as visceral mark. Unsettling experiences can restrict mental, emotional and bodily processes, yet therapeutic disclosure as adaptive action, liberates and extends thoughts and memories by processing painful experiences anew.<sup>11</sup> At its worse, Persephone's abduction and resultant mental debility, banishes awareness and diminishes her ability to remember, to think, and to speak.<sup>12</sup> These hidden energies, however, possess a dual nature as does her mother Demeter, who is nurturing one moment, the next, barren and cruel. Such emotional and mental difficulties need to be shared to allow the necessary steps toward healing for restoration of what is unique and genuine in each of us. In the story, when Persephone consumes the pomegranate seed, even though it binds her to Hades, hence to her own death in life—it opens her body to the realm of the dead as she ingests its essence.<sup>13</sup> She reconciles herself to her own fate and lessons in life. Persephone's acceptance of what befalls her, blazes a psychological path for mother and daughter once the anger and outrage subsides away from victimization toward creation, from suffering to the recognition of their own significance. Awareness of an internal void

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Crudden, translator, "Hymn to Demeter," *The Homeric Hymns* (NY: Oxford University Press, Nook edition, 2001), 30.

<sup>11</sup> See Wilma Bucci, "The Power of the Narrative: A Multiple Code Account," in *Emotion, Disclosure, & Health*, edited by James W. Pennebaker (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 93-122.

<sup>12</sup> See also, Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (NY: Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Crudden, "Hymn to Demeter," *The Homeric Hymns*, 42.

enables Persephone to see that her own life, though acutely altered, has meaning. Persephone's ascent from personal anguish represents the possibility of life beyond death and recovery from sorrow, a healing span between finite aspects of human existence, and the promise of psychic renewal.<sup>14</sup>

In a more contemporary context, the writers Elizabeth Bishop, Virginia Woolf, Alice James, and Edith Wharton, as female figures of descent, re-enact Demeter and Persephone's mythic journey into Hades and back—from abduction to grief, righteous rage to purposeful action, to discover artistic vitality and vision. In doing so, they reclaim autonomy by shifting sources of sorrow into significance to come to terms with suffering in their lives. Akin to the muse Melpomene, Bishop, Woolf, James, and Wharton, as daughters of memory, are inspired to express and chronicle what ails them.<sup>15</sup> Though they court humiliation and exile, they collectively voice what others refuse, or are unable, to remember or acknowledge. These literary women, often seen as deficient due to strict gender norms and expectations from families and society, continuously and creatively recast experiences of loss, neglect and mental illness into poetry and prose. As writers, they are often lonely and vulnerable. They are easily distracted by the somatic rush and pull of emotional and mental turmoil, physical ailments, mania, depression, or alcoholic defeat.

Yet, their lives, void of modern treatments or therapeutic release—are enlivened by creative means—by the efficacy of what Virginia Woolf calls her “word instinct.”<sup>16</sup> At times defeated, Bishop, Woolf, James, and Wharton mine private fields of memory to transform personal angst into art, to revitalize rather than to demean, human relationships. Negative experiences create a lack of understanding, yet they also promote self-knowledge and insight, because each writer discovers, as Persephone, that the human shadow, as core of the subconscious, houses repressed energies, secret desires, and the embodied residue of overwhelming experiences that disrupt thought and memory.<sup>17</sup> Though at times ambiguous or secretive,

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<sup>14</sup> See Jennifer M. Doran et al., “The Relationship between Trauma and Forgiveness in Post-conflict Sierra Leone,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 4, no. 6 (Nov, 2012): 614-623. Doran et al. Recovery from trauma involves finding meaning in the traumatic event and the ritualization of experience.

<sup>15</sup> Angeles Arrien, *Nine Muses*, 95.

<sup>16</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Moment's Liberty: The Shorter Diary of Virginia Woolf*, abridged and edited by Anne Olivier Bell (London: PIMLICO, 1990), 214.

<sup>17</sup> See Ibrahim Kira et al., “The Effects of Trauma Types, Cumulative Trauma, and PTSD on IQ in Two Highly Traumatized Adolescent Groups,” *Psychological*

they re-story painful experiences to ease personal turmoil by using writing as restorative action.<sup>18</sup> Each writer recounts stories about the past to help integrate and to stabilize related emotional, psychological, and physiological unrest. Rather than be subdued, they reconstruct early circumstances into literary art to gain coherence, identity, and authorial sustenance. Bishop, Woolf, James, and Wharton, are abducted by painful childhoods, by physical or mental illness, however, they courageously voice how their own parents are absent or destructive, unwilling or unable, to nurture a child.

For the poet Elizabeth Bishop, whose father dies from Bright's disease when she is an infant, and whose mother, five years later, is overwhelmed by grief until she is institutionalized in 1916, sources of parental care are dead to her. Bishop's literary sojourn in poetry and prose, speaks to the psychological abduction of loss, and her mother's horrifying descent into madness. Her life, as Demeter and Persephone's in Alfred Lord Tennyson's portrait of abduction, is marred by acute loneliness. Yet, her perpetual "voyages of discovery" closely mirror Persephone's dramatic descent and return from a chaotic inner world.<sup>19</sup> Bishop's poetry returns her again and again to the place of abduction--or the pain of maternal longing and its conflicting energies--to lift the emotive impact of loss by unlocking submerged content through creative means. Her poetry, as a lifting of spirit, allows her to perpetually resurface from moments of loneliness and loss. In turn, she rejects the superficial and sentimental aspects of existence to tap into the rich and real repository of the chthonic as she explores, what Maureen Moynagh identifies, as her own "mythic quest for selfhood."<sup>20</sup>

Bishop's sense of maternal longing is also keenly felt by the novelist Virginia Woolf. In 1895, when Virginia is thirteen, she endures the death of her mother Julia Stephen. Soon after, Woolf suffers the first of several mental break-downs. Later, she is ravaged by the undulations of a

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*Trauma, Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 4, no. 1 (2012): 128-139. Cognitive deficits were associated with repeated exposure to cumulative traumas.

<sup>18</sup> See Linda Belau and Peter Ramadanovic, editors, *Topologies of Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Memory* (NY: Other Press, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> See Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. See Elizabeth Bishop, "On Being Alone," Blue Pencil, June 1929. *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series: (f. 87.5), 18. Reprinted in Elizabeth Bishop, *PROSE*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz (NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011), 451-452.

<sup>20</sup> Maureen Moynagh, "Revisiting Demeter and Persephone," *Canadian Literature*, 214 (2012): 135.

misdiagnosed, yet likely bipolar disorder.<sup>21</sup> Her moods, often contrary and cyclic, match the mutability of the natural world. As the changing seasons shift in opposition with alternating qualities of darkness and light, coolness and warmth, solemnity and storm, Woolf vacillates between ecstatic states of creation and exhaustive spells of despondency. Yet, her dramatic shifts in mood, are fundamental to the rhythms of her life and death, and match her brilliance and loveliness as she travels her own journey of rebirth and decay.<sup>22</sup> Though plagued by emotional and mental illness, when touched by the flow of inspiration, Woolf dances creatively, as Persephone, in fields ablaze with golden light. She is forever drawn to the depths of the subconscious and uses mythic patterns to understand her place in the world, and to cultivate an abiding connection to nature. Her life and works, despite being witness to bitter ironies, as islands in the stream, spawn literary introspection and novelty.

Woolf's struggle to maintain a consistent sense of self is a torment repeated in the life of Alice James. However, unlike Woolf, who renders physical illness as useful, even instructive—James is captured by forces of the paternal, and uses mental break-downs as means for avoiding independent decisions. James organizes her life and purpose around physical illness, and effectively abstains from the duties and responsibilities of life. She as Persephone, experiences an ambiguous reality. James is perceptive and vital, yet her natural talents disrupt the status quo. James, alike many “nervous” women in her day, is largely unaware of repressed energies or underlying emotional currents. Accordingly, she transfers restrictive Victorian sex roles, as Showalter elicits, into a sick role to ward off forbidden thoughts and impulses.<sup>23</sup> James in turn, acquiesces to the powers of patriarchy—to a controlling father within a myopic context—and forms a split off personality as a protective measure. Moreover, she embraces death in life, her “mortuary

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<sup>21</sup> See Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911 to 1918*. See also *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919 to 1939* (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1964 and 1967); Thomas C. Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995); and Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill* (Ashfield, Mass: Paris Press, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Allan Combs and Stanley Krippner, “Structures of Consciousness and Creativity: Opening the Doors of Perception,” in *Everyday Creativity and New Views of Human Nature: Psychological, Social and Spiritual Perspectives*, edited by Ruth Richards (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 131-149.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (NY: Penguin Books, 1985).

moment,” and denies and disguises her own authentic self. Yet later, unwilling to be a victim, she ascends the depths of despair through writing her now famous diary, to acquire a destiny of her own making.

The novelist Edith Wharton, like James, is entrapped by what is expected of her, between the ideals of motherhood, and how her own mother fails to be nurturing. Like James, ambivalence between mother and daughter, and the ensuing conflict, is keenly felt as a desire for fatherly affection. This desire is often portrayed in Wharton’s short stories and novels as she endures numerous physical and psychological restrictions, as well as moments of despair. Efforts to self-actualize engender feelings of guilt, disdain, and enormous anxiety as she navigates the dangerous waters beyond what is considered proper or sound. Further, Wharton’s young life is shaped by existential calamity. She is overwhelmed with self-doubt and longs for self-definition in literature. However, Wharton deals with her own internal conflicts by celebrating the presence of words as they first spoke to her and inspired her to write.<sup>24</sup>

By reframing the Demeter-Persephone myth as symbolic remembering, these writers come to terms with loss and reclaim their own personal legacy, by assimilating childhood difficulties. As Persephone before them, they share their individual abductions and make sense of suffering. By integrating sorrow as a part of their own identities, they translate helplessness, isolation, and disharmony into literary discourse and discovery through perceptual and aesthetic exchange.<sup>25</sup> While excellence in writing transcends the personality and life experiences of any writer, early experiences dramatically influence a writer’s life and works. By writing about the traumatic as means for emotive and physiological release, Bishop, Woolf, James, and Wharton restructure painful experiences as catharsis. In so doing, writing gives way to awareness, and to the resolution of emotional and psychological tensions through human action as story. Writing reduces symptomology and emotional reactivity, and enables explorations of new ways of being through language as transformative. The regenerative act of re-storying personal sorrows, although tumultuous at times, revitalizes their lives as they weave inspired tapestries of psychological distress and its recovery. In turn, they craft a renewed vision of the world. The Demeter-Persephone myth retold anew helps them discover what Laurie Brands Gagne deems as the very essence

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<sup>24</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography* (NY: Touchstone, 1998), 70.

<sup>25</sup> Jana Rivers Norton, “Writing the Self into Existence: Neurasthenic Women and the Rendering of Literary Form during the Victorian Age,” *International Journal of the Humanities*, 4 (Australia: Common Ground Publishing, 2006).

of loss, and the impulse, to enact a life-affirming process that subdues, at least temporarily, our own suffering.<sup>26</sup>

Writing about the past helps these writers face unexpected upheavals, endure moments of unthinkable chaos, and envision the possibility for change. The modern day re-telling of the Demeter and Persephone myth as an allegory of life and death, provides a profound connection to universal patterns of existence and experience, as well as access to the realm of revitalization that exists at unknown depths where dreams and mythic potentials dwell. Writing as ritual engenders personal and societal insights and helps each writer overcome experiences of mourning and mortality to come to terms with what is missing in life. This book honors these resilient and restitute women, and depicts how adversity shapes their life stories, whose embodied experiences, previously unavailable or denied, surface as textual testimony to misfortune endured and overcome. While their autobiographical, epistolary and literary works encompass memories of disappointment and decline, Bishop, Woolf, James, and Wharton commemorate the joy of being alive within a continuity of creative expression and form.

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<sup>26</sup> Laurie Brands Gagne, *The Uses of Darkness: Women's Underworld Journeys, Ancient and Modern* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 34-36.

RETICENCE

*Fists beat on my father's chest.  
I run for the keys to your heart.  
You leave anyway, fleeing the scene—  
A crime of passion and of dread.  
My past breaks into pieces then.  
Though I try, I cannot mend,  
Or put these memories to rest.*

—*Jana Rivers Norton*

## CHAPTER ONE

### ELIZABETH BISHOP: VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY

O my child, / Led upward by the God of ghosts and dreams, / Who laid  
thee at Eleusis, dazed and dumb.<sup>1</sup>

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Demeter and Persephone”

In Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “Demeter and Persephone,” the mythic maiden Persephone is seized against her will to become a lost self until reunited with her mother. Persephone’s cruel abduction, and subsequent displacement in the realm of the dead, is an act of abandonment that leaves her an orphan of fate. The poet Elizabeth Bishop, whose mother, Gertrude Bulmer dies in a sanitarium in 1934—herself a Demeter like victim of unresolved grief—is abandoned as a child and left to live alternatively in Nova Scotia and New England with two sets of grandparents, and later with an aunt.<sup>2</sup> Though Bishop is not physically taken into darkness, she is left motherless, and is tormented by homelessness, as well as a longing for home. Bishop’s young life is severely shaped by loss. She is plunged into a chaotic inner world of decay and disintegration to linger at the edge of chaos and becomes an explorer of lost worlds by establishing sorrow as means for human contact.<sup>3</sup> Efforts to conceal the past, however, sire an urgency to come to terms with loss and the impact it has on her. Bishop, at

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Demeter and Persephone,” in *Demeter and Other Poems* (London: MacMillan, 1889), lines 4-6, <https://www.questia.com/read/228669572/demeter-and-other-poems>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Giroux, editor, “Introduction,” *Elizabeth Bishop: The Collected Prose* (NY: FSG, 1984), vii-xxii. See Elizabeth Bishop, “Autobiographical Sketch,” *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series IV: Prose (f. 53.6).

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1999).



times, is plagued by dissociative memories, numerous physical symptoms, and terrifying moments of disquietude. Though perpetually defeated she writes out her pain to embrace tragic memory as muse. As a poet Bishop uses the subjective language of loss as a frame of reference. She immerses herself in the psychic forces of the underworld to gain metaphoric ascendancy from personal tragedy. The art of writing encourages movement toward expansive self-awareness. Bishop responds to her own psychological abductions by reworking episodes of childhood neglect into poetry and prose to expose the very essence of experience.

Bishop's youthful exuberance, as Persephone, is veiled by the traumatic only to re-arise in the symbolic act of lifting her own life as well as her mother's "from gloom to bloom."<sup>4</sup> Her poetic works express themes of self-exile, human loss and bereavement to continually blossom poetic from moments of apparent doom. Bishop's ability to embrace the internal flow of embodied memory, at pivotal moments, gives rise to personal reflection and aesthetic ascendancy through poetic means. Bishop's personal and poetic descent into her subconscious to discover those places at once satisfying and life altering, a source of metamorphosis lurking at unknown depths.<sup>5</sup> By the time she reaches maturity she begins to write about her childhood displacement from Great Village, Nova Scotia, a home where her parents once dwelled to Worcester, New England. Bishop explains that her paternal grandparents are terrified by the way she is being raised, and take her by train to Worcester for the winter.<sup>6</sup> Still later, she describes how her father dies when she is eight months old, how her mother goes mad, and how she is left alone at the age of four. Yet, she fails to acknowledge her struggles with severe alcoholism, depression, and a life-long compulsion for unstable relationships. When Bishop attends boarding school at Walnut Hill, as well as Vassar College, she suffers tremendously when left alone during holidays. She consequently learns to fear family functions for most of her life.<sup>7</sup> Summer brings further isolation. Aloofness from her caregivers lingers as well, adding to Bishop's need for seclusion, and her reluctance to face a troubled past. Unlike Persephone, however, Bishop is never re-united or welcomed

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<sup>4</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Demeter and Persephone," line 98.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "At the Fishhouses," in *The Complete Poems of Elizabeth Bishop, 1927-1979* (NY: FSG, 1983), 65. Reprinted in Elizabeth Bishop, *POEMS*, edited by Saskia Hamilton (NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> See Alice Quinn, editor. *Elizabeth Bishop: Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments* (NY: FSG, 2006), 245n.

<sup>7</sup> Brett C. Miller, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993), 31-32.

back from the shadows and remains a motherless child. She is never told what happens to her mother by relatives who are reluctant to talk about it.<sup>8</sup> She also dislikes, in general, the sordid details found in confessional poetry.<sup>9</sup> However, she is inconsistent regarding the act of confession, and often uses literary displacement to emphasize personal pain as poetic inspiration.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, Bishop detaches herself from the emotional content of daily life as an aspect of her aesthetic practice, a tension that surfaces in her writing between an effort to maintain a balance between, what the critic Marilyn May Lombardi sees as, “confession and denial or forthrightness and repression,” to create a sense of reticence and immediacy in her art.<sup>11</sup> For Bishop, the poetics of immediacy allows the raw materials of personal experience to be woven into poetry and prose.<sup>12</sup> Yet, it is rarely possible to reconstruct memories of grief or loss successfully. Often, a mental, emotional, and aesthetic conflict emerges as episodes of the past seep through to blur the boundaries between life, art, and her memories of it. During periods of concentrated intensity, however, Bishop enters a state of sensory and symbolic innovation. Though hesitant to reveal the truth about her past, she writes about grief as a part of her aesthetic oeuvre. She learns early on that the dead continue to dwell in her imagination.<sup>13</sup> To encourage their departure, she ritualizes mourning to produce poetry that masters intense sorrow. The subconscious as a source for her creativity, emerges experientially to form a somatic connection between immediate experience and the mind of the poet.<sup>14</sup> Bishop believes that poetry is written while the mind is active, rather than in repose. A mind fully engaged in the moment of discovery fosters poetic insights.

Her story “In the Village,” a fictional work compressed from real-life,

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet*, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Octavio Paz, “Elizabeth Bishop, or the Power of Reticence,” in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 213.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Bidart, in *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography*, edited by Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 333.

<sup>11</sup> Marilyn May Lombardi, *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 201.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Giroux, editor, “Introduction,” *One Art: Elizabeth Bishop Letters* (NY: FGS, 1994), xviii.

<sup>13</sup> Susan McCabe, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Brett C. Miller, *Elizabeth Bishop*, 43.

reads as a memory trace of unresolved grief.<sup>15</sup> Bishop writes that a scream,

hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies, skies that travelers compare to those of Switzerland, too dark, too blue, so that they seem to keep on darkening a little more around the horizon--or is it 'around the rims of the eyes? . . . The scream hangs . . . unheard in memory—in the past, in the present, and those years in between. . . .<sup>16</sup>

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*I look through the window. The sky is blue. The wind is fierce. The scene reconnects me to the past--to a little girl afraid of the wind. The wind represents the truth--the slaps, the scolds, the hush-hush, sweet Charlottes. Like Bishop before me, I am a good girl, and good girls don't tell. Like Bishop, I want to scream at the secrets--to tell the truth even if it kills. . . .*

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Bishop's literary art shifts psychic pain into words on the page as she identifies and integrates early memories. In the poem "Sestina," a teacup full of tears depicts a somber mood as grandmother and child rely on daily activities signified by serving tea despite the failing light. The poem is a ritualized act of repetition where the grandmother trusts the farmer's almanac to foretell when to plant, when it will rain, and when to put aside sorrow.<sup>17</sup> It also allows Bishop, as Susan McNabe contends, "to recuperate and modify, to cast out and bring back" her early episodes of childhood grief.<sup>18</sup> The act of weeping is present as well. The image of shedding tears provides an emotive release, as does the poem "The Reprimand," where the residue of pain, as a bitter enemy, leaves a salty trace on the skin.<sup>19</sup>

In Bishop's notebooks from 1934 to 1936 entitled "Sea Notes," she contemplates real and artificial crying and indicates a desire to research the "Anatomy of Tear Ducts," as well as the "psychology of weeping." She also outlines a story about a doctor or magician that captures a victim to test the authenticity of emotion. To produce a tear as the victim is

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<sup>15</sup> *One Art: Elizabeth Bishop Letters*, 12; 298; 477.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Village," in *The Collected Prose of Elizabeth Bishop*, edited by Robert Giroux (NY: FSG, 1984), 251. Reprinted in Elizabeth Bishop, *PROSE*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz, 62.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "Sestina," in *The Complete Poems*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Susan McNabe, *Elizabeth Bishop*, 208.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "The Reprimand," in *The Complete Poems*, 228.

subjected to a starving artist, the sole survivor of a horror, and a war veteran, who tells tales until the victim begins to cry.<sup>20</sup> Contrastingly, Bishop captures her own sadness in an undated notebook titled “Hospital Notes,” where nasty sobs accumulate as missing objects spill into present day to be purged and cleansed.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Bishop reveals latent memories that begin to surface during the spring of 1935 as dream imagery. Despite her distress, Bishop reshapes memory into the image of a tear reflected in a rain drenched window. Whether Bishop recognizes the face in the window as her own, none can say, yet the sad and marginalized presence captures relational loss. Similarly, in her poem “Florida Revisited,” a need to release disjointed aspects of memory, as well as paternal alienation, leads to the discovery of her own voice. The poet calls upon the full moon that rises as an object of illumination to restore emotional fortitude and balance. Though the moon cannot stop crying, it guides her through the chaos of perpetual mourning. Here, Bishop uses elements of nature to ponder her own predicament.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, a waxing moon as psychic potential is present in “Recorded Observations” to mirror a divided self. The poem possesses fantastical dreamscapes and takes place where a pale boy on a yellow sled slides down an icy embankment that looks like clouds. The boy is suddenly transformed as the moon until it falls from the sky in front of her grandmother’s house in Great Village.<sup>23</sup> The moon’s waxing and waning as decline and death, as well as cyclic renewal, is used to restructure the immutability of traumatic memory into metaphor. The poetic fragments “Swan-Boat Ride,” composed later in life, continues Bishop’s poetic quest to embrace a cycle of psychic loss as poetic gain.<sup>24</sup> In the poem, she recollects a ride on a swan boat at the age of three. Bishop tells us that her

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “Sea Notes,” *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series XI: Notes and Notebooks (f. 72.2), 32.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “Hospital Notes,” *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series XI: Notes and Notebooks (f. 74.2).

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “Florida Revisited” *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collection Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series V: Poetry (f. 64.24).

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “Recorded Observations,” *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series XI: Notes and Notebooks (f. 72.3).

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “Swan Boat Ride,” *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series: XI: Notes and Notebooks (f. 74.3).

mother is injured when a white swan bites her finger.<sup>25</sup> Then later, in notebooks from 1934-1936, as well as the 1940s, Bishop relates the white swan as a symbol of destruction and repulsion, respectively. Certain images and words also relate to madness and mortality, to a sense of suspended descent while floating upon dead water as a bird nips her mother's finger and draws blood from a hole in the glove. Victoria Harrison asserts that the poem reveals Bishop's realization that her mother's madness and disintegration, as well as her subsequent death, is connected to Bishop's early terrors.<sup>26</sup>

In another poem "A mother made of dress goods . . .," a shivering figure crouches in a wash-basin as blackness fills the room. The poem ends with a chilling implication that the crust of snow outside as a protective cocoon is not strong enough to hold her mother and she falls through into darkness. While some intrusive memories of childhood are symbolically recast, others threaten to overwhelm. Further, in the poem "Family Portraits," incongruent events suddenly surface to suggest that her family memories are still present in the flesh.<sup>27</sup> In the 1960 memoir "Primer Class," the visceral power of the traumatic creates a painful shudder as it moves like a wave of panic to make her chest contract and freeze. Sensation, as memory for Bishop, is not something constructed, it is forever present.<sup>28</sup> Later, she shares that once her father dies and her mother is institutionalized, she is fearful that her grandmother might die too and begs her not to. . . .<sup>29</sup>

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*When I was a child, you asked me to go with you and leave the rest of the family behind. I was afraid when you left and did not come back. By the age of five I learned to fear the one I loved most. But these are distant memories. I feel fear every day. I fear that I am damaged in some inexplicable way, and that only through continuous reassurance, can I be made whole. . . .*

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "What the Young Man Said to the Psalmist," in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 282.

<sup>26</sup> Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 135.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "Family Portrait," in *The Complete Poems*, 261.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "Primer Class," in *The Collected Prose*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Bishop is tormented by doubt as well as self-desecration, and feels flawed and inadequate, a fraud or impostor frequently haunted by maternal deprivation. She feels guilty about her mother's madness, institutionalization, and death. She is taken care of as a child by loving relatives. Yet, she admits that her mother's insanity is a nightmare that produces an impulse to save others. Unable to save her mother, she seeks mother substitutes to save instead—a compulsion that neither leads to mastery or satiation. Her Brazilian lover Lota de Macedo Soares commits suicide in 1967. Suzanne Bowen is hospitalized at Belo Horizonte in Brazil in 1970.<sup>30</sup> Bishop takes responsibility for the wellbeing of others to satisfy the void at the center of her own life. Although, she knows that her early miseries are no one's fault, she is troubled by estrangement and confusion. She routinely scrutinizes what it means to be alive. In the poem "In the Waiting Room," a six-year-old girl is perpetually falling until she falls into the vastness of space.<sup>31</sup> At the age of six, Bishop is sent to Worcester to live with her grandparents. Yet, she fails to properly grieve the loss of her parents, and needs encouragement to talk about loss, to accept and acknowledge its reality. She is unable to relinquish the dead or absent. Instead, she clings to the one who is no longer present.

Homesickness tortures her as well. In a 1935 notebook, Bishop describes an acute attack while on a freighter traveling to Europe. She is pursued by death and mental illness until she can no longer think or breathe. She is haunted by maternal loss and experiences a loss of being. At times, Bishop cannot deal with her mother's deterioration, as well as her own displacement, and avoids unsettling emotions. She is afraid of inheriting her mother's mental illness. Still, at other times, she is determined to demonstrate that she is sane even though she thrives on suffering.<sup>32</sup> Yet, when Bishop communicates a sense of homesickness in several drafts of a poem and short story about her mother, her efforts to rework a lost maternal is apparent. In the poem "Homesickness," an image of a grief-stricken mother appears as a weeping woman in a tear drenched

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<sup>30</sup> See Elizabeth Bishop, "Aubade & Elegy," *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series V: Poetry (f. 64.19). See Bishop to Bowie, dated June, 15, 1970, *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, Series I: Correspondence, (f. 27.5).

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room," in *The Complete Poems*, 160.

<sup>32</sup> Bishop to Bowie, dated June 14 & 16, 1970, Series I: Correspondence, *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries, (f. 27.5).