

Emilie Zink-Wright

ENG-L202

Dr. Steven Petersheim

3 April 2018

Lies and Deception in “One Art” and “We Wear the Mask”

Lies and deceit, loss and heartbreak. These are common themes in every culture and every age of the world, so it is no wonder that these themes are represented in various works of art and literature. While they are central themes in Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art” and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask,” these poets explore their common themes using different poetic forms, different meter, and different rhyme schemes.

Dunbar uses a rondeau format, “a mainly octosyllabic poem consisting of between ten and fifteen lines and three stanzas...[with] only two rhymes, with the opening words used twice as an unrhyming refrain at the end of the second and third stanzas” (Poetry Foundation). The veiled simplicity of the this format is mirrored by the poem’s message. The reader does not have to explore the poem in depth to see that deception is a prominent theme discussed by Dunbar. In the first lines Dunbar writes “We wear the mask that grins and lies / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes” (Dunbar, 1-2). From these beginning lines one can see that Dunbar is talking about hiding one’s true feelings from the outside world, deceiving others by pretending to be or feel differently than one does in reality.

Bishop utilizes a different poetic form than Dunbar—a villanelle. This form seems like it, too, is simple, though it is actually one of the more complex poetic forms. The villanelle is a

“French verse form consisting of five three-line stanzas and a final quatrain, with the first and third lines of the first stanza repeating alternately in the following stanzas. These two refrain lines form the final couplet in the quatrain” (Poetry Foundation). In “One Art,” the refrain lines are “the art of losing isn’t hard to master” and “their loss is no disaster” (Bishop, 1 & 4). To make a complex poem format even more convoluted, Bishop does not adhere strictly to the rules of the villanelle. She manipulates the two refrains and the traditional iambic pentameter to fit the needs of her poem.

Just like the format, Bishop’s poem seems simple on the surface but is found to be much more complex when it is studied more closely. She begins with an assertion that “the art of losing isn’t hard to master” (Bishop, 1). In the subsequent lines, Bishop gives examples of things that can be lost, and how it is not a big deal to the narrator that she is losing those things. As Bishop continues to list lost items, we realize that the things being misplaced are becoming more significant and more difficult for the narrator to truly move past. It becomes clear that the narrator is trying to deceive herself in an attempt to avoid a broken heart. Her attempt at self-deception is evidenced by the way she changes the repeating lines from “the art of losing isn’t hard to master” to the refrain in her final stanza, “the art of losing’s not too hard to master,” (Bishop, 1 & 18). It is the final line that shows how complex her attempt at self-deceit is. By including and emphasizing the words, “*Write it!*”, Bishop calls to mind the act of repeatedly writing an idea in an attempt to drill it into one’s head (Bishop, 19).

In “We Wear the Mask,” Dunbar writes in iambic tetrameter, a simple and common meter comprised of four repetitions of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Typical for a rondeau, this eight-syllable meter provides a balanced and melodious pattern which makes the poet’s words easy to understand and remember and allows the reader to capture the

full effect of the poem without becoming too bored or confused. The refrain, “We Wear the Mask,” is not consistent with the meter of the rest of the poem (Dunbar, 9 & 15). By using this statement as the refrain and allowing it to stand out from the rest of the poem, Dunbar emphasizes the deception used to hide one’s true self.

While Dunbar uses one of the most common meters, Bishop’s “One Art” is written using one of the most well-known, having been Shakespeare’s meter of choice. Like iambic tetrameter, used by Dunbar, and any of the other iambic meters, iambic pentameter has an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, though this meter has five syllable pairs instead of four. There are therefore about ten syllables per line rather than eight, and while the slightly longer lines might make for a slightly more difficult poem, the general familiarity with iambic pentameter mitigates this potential. As discussed above, Bishop does not strictly adhere to the provisions of iambic pentameter. She treats the meter as a loose constraint, bending the rules when needed, which results in some eleven-syllable lines.

Bishop’s flexibility with iambic pentameter contributes to both the seeming simplicity and actual complexity of the poem. By not fully sticking to the meter, Bishop makes it difficult for those less familiar with poetry to identify the correct meter. Conversely, it also allows her to say exactly what she wants to get her point across precisely as intended. From a figurative standpoint, Bishop’s loose interpretation of the guidelines is indicative of the poem’s meaning. Just like the poem discusses deception, particularly self-deception, Bishop’s lines are not-quite-iambic pentameters masquerading as such.

Like the formats and meters, the rhyme schemes used in Dunbar’s and Bishop’s poems differ from one another and are integral in their respective poems. Dunbar uses two end-rhymes for each line. Other than the refrain, which stands alone, each line ends with a word rhyming

with either “lies” or “eyes” (Dunbar, 1-2). Once again, Dunbar uses a simple form that is standard for rondeaus and that makes it easy for the reader to stay focused on the words of the poem and the overall themes. The rhyme pattern fits nicely with the meter, creating a song-like cadence to the poem that keeps the reader interested and the words memorable.

Bishop’s poem, like Dunbar’s, is fairly straightforward. The villanelle’s prescribed rhyme scheme consists of two rhymes plus two refrains. In “One Art,” the last word of each line, except in the refrains, rhymes with either “fluster” or “intent” (Bishop, 2 & 7). Though refrains in villanelles are not required to follow the rhyme scheme, both of Bishop’s refrains happen to rhyme with “fluster” (Bishop, 2). Like Dunbar’s poem, the two-rhyme pattern makes it easy for the reader to stay interested and engaged.

The themes of lies and deception as presented in Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” and Bishop’s “One Art” are universal, and are themes that have been the focus of poets, playwrights, painters, and sculptors throughout history. Even such universal themes, which seem to have been written about ad nauseum, are never dealt with in the same ways. Dunbar and Bishop both discuss lies and deception, though they use different types of poems, different types of meters, and different rhyme patterns. There is much to be learned from each of these poems, as we have seen above, and there are likely many more similarities and differences between the two. As is the case with all artists, these poets used their preferred styles to write poems that allowed them to express their ideas the way they saw fit, and they each did so in a way that has impacted readers for generations.

Works Cited

Literature: The Human Experience. With 2016 MLA Update. 12th Edition. Bedford/St Martins,
2016.

Poetry Foundation. Poetry Magazine. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>. Accessed 3 April
2018.