First Death in Nova Scotia

SUMMARY

My mom laid out Arthur's body for viewing in the very cold sitting room. Above him were color pictures of English royalty: the current King and Queen and the former Prince and Princess of Wales. A table under the pictures held a taxidermied loon, a bird that my Uncle Arthur, Arthur's dad, had killed and stuffed for display.

The loon had been totally silent ever since Uncle Arthur shot him. He kept to himself on the marble tabletop, which looked like an ice-covered lake. The feathers on the front of his body were thick, white, chilly, and soft to the touch. His eyes had been replaced by red glass beads, which I coveted.

Mom called me over to say goodbye to my young cousin (that is, to pay my respects at his coffin). She boosted me and handed me a single white lily to give him. His coffin looked like a small glazed pastry, and the red eyes of the stuffed bird seemed to stare at it from the icy-looking tabletop.

My cousin Arthur was tiny and pale; he resembled a doll awaiting a coat of paint. I imagined that Jack Frost, the legendary spirit of winter, had begun painting him, just as he supposedly paints the red maple leaf (Canada's national symbol) year after year. I imagined Jack Frost had applied a little red paint to Arthur's hair, then stopped working, leaving Arthur permanently pale.

The elegant royalty in the pictures looked cozy in their furry red clothes. Their feet were snugly covered in the trailing fur cloth of the women's robes. I imagined that they were summoning Arthur to serve as the youngest attendant at their royal court. But how could he possibly travel to England, little flower in hand, considering that his eyes were firmly closed and the house was snowed in?

THEMES

CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE VS. AWARENESS OF DEATH

"First Death in Nova Scotia" describes its speaker's first encounter with death as a child. The speaker recounts a family wake held for her young cousin, Arthur, when the speaker herself was too young to understand death fully. The poem's descriptions stress the small size and fragility of Arthur's body, while capturing the innocent speaker's struggle to come to grips with his passing. Her childlike impressions make death seem jarringly cruel and disorienting to innocent young minds.

The poem repeatedly emphasizes the smallness and vulnerability of Arthur's body, making death seem powerful and brutal by comparison. The speaker's mother calls Arthur the speaker's "little cousin," for example, and he is *junior* to his father, also named Arthur. The speaker herself describes Arthur as "very small" and "doll"-like, with a "tiny lily" and a coffin like a "little frosted cake."

All of this language portrays the boy as diminutive and delicate, a fragile figure overpowered by death. This focus on his childlike body also hints that the speaker, for the first time, grasps how death can come for anyone—even someone as young as herself. And while the poem never mentions Arthur's cause of death, its description of a bird "shot and stuffed" by his father frames death as violent and pitiless—something that can abruptly destroy vulnerable creatures, including kids.

At the same time, the speaker struggles to understand what death actually *means* for Arthur. Arthur's pale corpse reminds her of "a doll / that hadn't been painted yet"; she imagines the folklore figure "Jack Frost" starting to paint him, then "dropp[ing] the brush." In other words, she tries to relate Arthur's pallor to what little she knows about the world. But to the mature reader, her naive impressions only convey the terrible, pitiable reality of a child's dead body.

Likewise, she naively associates Arthur's body, in its ceremonial setting, with the pictures of royalty in the parlor. She imagines he'll be joining their "court," then realizes this fantasy doesn't make sense: his eyes are "shut up [...] tight," as if he's sleeping forever. In this moment, it seems to dawn on her that Arthur may have nowhere to "go," no future of any kind. The blunt reality of his death starts to dispel her childhood fantasies about an exciting afterlife.

Thus, the poem depicts a double tragedy: the tragedy of Arthur's premature death and the tragedy of its impact on the speaker. The speaker begins to grasp the immense power of death, and the threat it poses even to children as small as herself. Even if this "First Death" didn't completely shatter her innocence, it profoundly jarred her, as she recalls it in minute detail many years later.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-50

THE STRANGENESS AND FINALITY OF DEATH

The speaker's cousin Arthur isn't the only deceased figure in "First Death in Nova Scotia": the poem also describes the "stuffed loon" in the family parlor. To the speaker, this dead

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bird seems both appealing and eerily remote. Meanwhile, the speaker imagines Arthur as an unpainted "doll" in an attractive, "cake"-like coffin, and a "page at [the] court" of the royalty in the parlor's framed pictures. Yet the speaker starts to realize that Arthur can't actually mingle with royalty—in fact, like a doll, can't "go" anywhere or do anything. Through a child's eyes, then, the poem captures the magnetic strangeness of death: the way the dead can look alive, even dignified, yet are permanently cut off from the living world.

Through its description of a taxidermied bird, the poem illustrates how the dead can tantalizingly resemble the living even as they remain disturbingly separate. During young Arthur's wake, he shares the parlor with a "loon / shot and stuffed by" his father. This juxtaposition invites comparisons between the two bodies, both of which belong to relatively small, vulnerable, male creatures. The loon even seems to "eye[]" Arthur's body, reinforcing the connection between the two. The bird's feathery breast strikes the speaker as both "cold and caressable"; that is, it's soft and pleasant to touch, like a living bird, yet has the unappealing "cold" of a corpse. Similarly, the bird's "red glass" eyes seem "much to be desired," like beautiful gems, but the bird overall looks remote and unapproachable on the "frozen lake" of his tabletop. He remains silent ("ke[eps] his own counsel"), heightening his remoteness and mystery.

Arthur himself inspires a similar mix of reactions in the young speaker: he looks compelling and vibrant in some ways, alien and disturbingly lifeless in others. The speaker compares him to a "doll" and his coffin to "a little frosted cake": things that typically appeal to children. Yet he looks like an *unfinished* doll, one that "ha[s]n't been painted yet." Even more jarringly, he looks as though he'll remain unfinished and pale "forever." Because he's "laid out" under pictures of royalty (and presumably dolled up in fancy burial clothes), the speaker imagines that he'll join the English royal "court" as its "smallest page." In other words, she imagines death will be a special treat for him. But as she thinks about it further, this idea doesn't make sense: Arthur looks totally lifeless "with his eyes shut up so tight," and the "deep [...] snow" outside will keep him from making any kind of special journey.

In describing both bird and boy, then, the poem portrays death as equal parts fascinating and unnerving. This effect is especially acute for young observers (who don't fully grasp that the dead aren't coming back)—but the imagery reminds adult readers, too, of death's haunting strangeness and permanence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-50

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

In the cold, ...
... with Queen Mary.

Along with the title, lines 1-6 establish the poem's setting and basic situation. "First Death in Nova Scotia" indicates that the poem will be about a death—the "First" the speaker has ever encountered—in the Canadian Maritime province of Nova Scotia. These opening lines reveal that the deceased is named "Arthur," and that the speaker's "mother" has "laid out" Arthur's body for viewing at a wake.

In this context, the phrase "cold, cold parlor" (line 1) might seem to describe a commercial funeral parlor. However, the subsequent description of the room's lively decor—old-fashioned color prints ("chromographs") of royalty; a bird taxidermied by the speaker's uncle—suggests that this is instead a *home* parlor, a sitting room normally used for entertaining guests. So while it's not yet clear who "Arthur" is, the reader can gather that his wake is occurring in a family home, likely during a "cold, cold" Canadian winter.

The "chromographs," or color lithographs, depict two British royal couples: "Edward" and "Alexandra," formerly the Prince and Princess of Wales (later King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra), and "King George [V]" and "Queen Mary," who reigned during the poet's youth. Despite its formal independence, Canada remains part of the British Commonwealth, meaning that Kings and Queens of England technically rule over Canada as well—hence the presence of their pictures in this Canadian home. (Also, prior to the 1980s, Canada had slightly less autonomy from the UK than it does now.)

The poem was published in the 1960s, by which time all these royal figures were dead and their reigns long since over. In fact, Edward VII died the year before the poet was born. Thus, while it's not yet clear *when* the poem is set (or how old the speaker was at the time, how the speaker knew the deceased, etc.), these "chromographs" signal that the speaker is telling an anecdote from decades prior.

Here and throughout the poem, the lines follow a three-beat accentual meter. Each line contains three stressed syllables, but the position of those stresses, as well as the syllable count, varies. Listen to lines 1-2, for example:

In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur [...]

In line 1, the three stresses cluster in the middle of the line; in line 2, they alternate with unstressed syllables. Along with the irregular rhyme scheme, this loose meter gives the language a degree of flexibility (and even playfulness, despite the serious

subject matter). Accentual meter is also a common feature of children's verse, so it makes a good fit for this poem, whose speaker is an adult relating a childhood memory.

LINES 7-10

Below them on ...
... Arthur, Arthur's father.

Whereas lines 1-6 juxtapose the dead "Arthur" with pictures of British royalty, lines 7-10 juxtapose all of these motionless human figures with an equally motionless bird.

As the speaker recalls, "a stuffed loon" stood on the "table" just "Below" the "chromographs," either to one side of Arthur's coffin or between the coffin and the wall. A loon is a water bird found in the poem's rural Canadian setting, as well as elsewhere in North America, Europe, and Asia. This loon was "shot and stuffed" (killed and preserved for display) by the speaker's "Uncle Arthur," father of the Arthur who has died.

Although the "First Death" of the poem's title refers primarily to Arthur's death—that is, the first *human* loss that ever impacted the speaker—it could also, technically, refer to the loon's death. The bird is a once-living wild creature that now stands motionless in this family home. The next stanza suggests that the loon fascinates the speaker, in part because it embodies the chilling mystery of death. In general, the juxtaposition of bird and Arthur, along with the pictures of royal figures—one of whom died before the poet was born—creates a tableau of extreme, eerie stillness. The speaker is looking at five people and one bird, all inanimate in the morgue-like "cold" of the room.

The poem never reveals how Arthur died, so the killing and stuffing of the loon is the poem's only representation of death as a *process*. It makes death seem violent, sudden, and gratuitous—something that can come for beautiful and vulnerable creatures at any time.

Notably, the father of the dead Arthur (who turns out to be a very small boy) "shot and stuffed" the loon himself. There may be some implied irony in the fact that a man who killed a smaller, weaker creature—purely for sport—is now forced to grieve his own small child. The poem illustrates how family tragedy changes the speaker's view of death, but these lines hint that her uncle's relationship to death has just changed, too.

LINES 11-16

Since Uncle Arthur ...
... the marble-topped table.

Lines 11-16 elaborate on the disturbing image of the loon. The speaker notes a seemingly obvious fact: the loon "hasn't said a word" since Uncle Arthur's "bullet" killed him. Of course, the loon never said a word while he was alive, either (though he would have made other sounds). The speaker is anthropomorphizing the bird:

> He kept his own counsel
> on his white, frozen lake,
> the marble-topped table.

In other words, the speaker imagines the loon as a human-like presence who stays silent merely because he's keeping to himself ("[keeping] his own counsel"). This kind of flawed, yet creative thinking is typical of children's imaginations, which tend to anthropomorphize all sorts of things! (That's why so many children's stories feature talking animals, objects, and so on.)

This description is the poem's first hint that it's a *childhood* anecdote: that its speaker didn't yet understand death, or perhaps even the differences between humans and animals, when she witnessed this "First Death in Nova Scotia." She understood that Uncle Arthur's "bullet" caused a profound change in the loon, but didn't grasp the exact nature of that change.

The speaker's metaphor also creatively links the "marble-topped table," on which the dead loon stands, with the kind of "frozen lake" the live loon might once have inhabited, at least during warmer months. It's a fitting comparison, since both tabletop and lake are "white," circular, cold, etc. (Loons migrate south in the winter, so the fact that this loon occupies a "frozen lake" is especially eerie; it underscores the fact that death itself is a frozen, inanimate state.) Again, the poem takes us inside the imagination of a bright, but very young child struggling to make sense of an unsettling scene.

LINES 17-20

His breast was ...
... to be desired.

Lines 17-20 complete the description of the stuffed loon. The speaker's language suggests that, as a young child, she found the loon strangely compelling. She found the thick white "feathers" on his breast "caressable"—soft and pleasant to touch—even though they were eerily "cold" in the chilly parlor. She was also fascinated by the "red glass" beads with which her uncle had replaced the bird's eyes. In fact, she "desired" them greatly, in the way small children often want to touch or play with shiny objects.

Like other details in the poem, this description conveys a naive fascination with death. The speaker, who is about toddler age, likes to pet the loon, without necessarily understanding that the loon can't feel her "caress[es]." In fact, the anthropomorphic language in the previous lines—"He kept his own counsel"—suggests that she imagines him as having some sort of agency or personality. Yet she also notes that the loon is cold; it doesn't respond in the way a warm, living bird would. Meanwhile, she "desire[s]" his glass eyes, perhaps as an ornament or toy to play with. To some extent, then, she views him as an inanimate object rather than an animate creature.

All in all, the details in this stanza illustrate the kind of mixed impressions kids often have about death and the dead. At the time of the poem's events, the speaker may have been on the verge of understanding death's permanence, but she hadn't quite grasped it yet. In fact, she may have even "desired" the loon's status in some confused way, imagining death as regal, dignified, etc. Her attitude toward the loon offers important context for her subsequent response to a dead *person* (cousin Arthur).

LINES 21-26

"Come," said my ...
... in Arthur's hand.

In lines 21-26, the speaker's mother beckons her to view the body in the coffin: "Come [...] / Come and say good-bye / to your little cousin Arthur." The repetition of "Come" might hint that the speaker is reluctant or afraid to come forward.

The speaker is then "lifted up" (presumably by her mom) and "given / one lily of the valley" (a white, bell-shaped, sweet-scented flower) to place in "Arthur's hand." These lines establish that Arthur died as a very "little" boy—and that the speaker herself must be very young, since she needs a boost from a grown-up in order to view the coffin. Thus, this poem about a "First Death" is, more specifically, about a little kid confronting the death of someone their own age.

The lily might be interpreted as a symbol of Arthur's innocence, vulnerability, beauty, and so on. Since the speaker holds it for a moment, it seems to symbolize *her* vulnerability and innocence as well. As a link between the living and the dead child, it highlights the fact that both of them (and all living creatures) are mortal. Lily of the valley is also poisonous if consumed, so the poem might be subtly playing on its associations with danger and death.

LINES 27-30

Arthur's coffin was ...
... white, frozen lake.

Lines 27-30 directly juxtapose the stuffed loon with the dead child:

> Arthur's coffin was
> a little frosted cake,
> and the red-eyed loon eyed it
> from his white, frozen lake.

The loon's glassy stare seems to link him visually with Arthur; his "red" eyes add a ghoulish quality to the description. (Bright red eyes are sometimes associated with demons or possessed creatures; this speaker isn't afraid of the loon, exactly, but she does seem to imagine him as alive and "eye[ing]" things.)

Meanwhile, the two metaphors draw a parallel between the situations of bird and boy. The speaker compares Arthur's small, decorated coffin to a "frosted cake" and the loon's tabletop to a "frozen lake." Not only do these two phrases rhyme, they both refer to something smooth and frosted over. The alliteration of "frosted" and "frozen" strengthens the link between the images, as does the fact that both the coffin and the tabletop serve as resting places for a dead body.

These links invite the reader to compare bird and boy in other ways, too. For example, both are small, vulnerable creatures who have died under cruel circumstances. (The loon has been hunted down, while Arthur has died far too young for an unknown reason.) Yet the young speaker associates both of them with appealing objects: the bird's gemlike eyes are "much to be desired," while Arthur's coffin reminds her of a delicious dessert. The speaker may be under the (mis)impression that death itself is a kind of treat—and that the loon and Arthur are somehow enjoying their special status.

LINES 31-36

Arthur was very ...
... Maple Leaf (Forever).

Lines 31-36 finally describe the subject of the elegy, young "Arthur" himself. The speaker has built up to this moment slowly, first describing Arthur's surroundings (pictures, loon, coffin, etc.) in detail. In this way, the poem's structure might reflect its speaker's childhood emotions: the long buildup might suggest her hesitancy and trepidation about viewing a dead body.

Now the moment has come, and she first describes Arthur simply as "very small." He doesn't seem much older than she is—roughly toddler-aged—and may even be younger. (Seeing a relative her own age in this condition must be jarring, but she never says so outright; the poem just registers her sharp impressions, which have clearly stuck with her all these years.) Next, the speaker notices that death has made Arthur extremely pale: "all white, like a doll / that hadn't been painted yet." She builds on this simile with a vivid flight of imagination:

> Jack Frost had started to paint him
> the way he always painted
> the Maple Leaf (Forever).

Her comparison alludes to the folktale character Jack Frost, the mischievous spirit of winter. In some legends, Jack Frost not only brings the frost of winter but also paints the leaves of fall. In the speaker's imagination, he "started to paint" Arthur in just the same way (but didn't finish the job). The speaker then associates this legend with Canada's national symbol, the red "Maple Leaf," which also makes her think of the Canadian patriotic song, "The Maple Leaf Forever."

Basically, as the speaker struggles to make sense of what she's seeing, she relates it to what little she's learned about the world, including the folktales and anthems of her Canadian

childhood. These aren't the reference points that would come to most adult observers' mind, but they're all the speaker's got.

On the one hand, they emphasize how little she knew about death at this stage (she doesn't seem especially sad or frightened, for example). On the other hand, the strangeness of the comparison captures some of the inherent, jarring strangeness of death itself. After all, many adults turn to legends and imaginative visions (of an afterlife, etc.) in an effort to come to grips with death. The fantasy about "Jack Frost" illustrates a similar process taking shape in the mind of a young child.

LINES 37-40

He had just ...
... him white, forever.

These lines complete the speaker's brief tale about "Jack Frost," which is both an indirect description of her dead cousin and an imaginative attempt to make sense of his death.

Cousin Arthur is pale, the speaker tells herself, because Jack Frost never finished painting him. Jack only got as far as painting Arthur's hair with "a few red strokes" before he "dropped the brush / and left [Arthur] white, forever." It seems that cousin Arthur was a redhead during his short life. Many redheads have very fair skin, and death has made Arthur even paler, so that the red in his hair seems to be his only natural color.

"Red" is also another subtle link between Arthur and the loon. It's the color of the loon's eyes (which the speaker repeatedly points out) as well as Arthur's hair. This small link points to deeper connections between the bird and the boy: they are now joined in death, and they compel the speaker's attention. (Red is an attention-grabbing color.)

The repetition of "forever" (which ends lines 36 and 40) suggests that the speaker is aware of death's permanence:

> [...] and then
> Jack Frost had dropped the brush
> and left him white, forever.

The next stanza will suggest that her understanding of death remains incomplete; she (or her younger self) is still puzzling out how it all *works*. But she grasps that Arthur has undergone an irreversible change, even if she understands that change in fanciful terms. She senses that, in "say[ing] good-bye" to her cousin (line 22), she's saying goodbye forever.

LINES 41-46

The gracious royal ...
... page at court.

In lines 41-46, the speaker's attention returns to the portraits of royal couples (the "chromographs" described in lines 3-6). This shift is unexpected, given that it follows the poignant description of little Arthur in his coffin. But these abrupt transitions mimic the restlessness of a small child, whose attention never settles on anything for very long. This particular transition might suggest that the speaker, after viewing Arthur for a moment, felt uncomfortable and turned her focus elsewhere.

After imagining that "Jack Frost" had something to do with Arthur's pallor, she imagines that the royalty in the portraits have something to do with his future. Specifically, she imagines that they've "invited Arthur to be / the smallest page at court." She notes that they look "warm" in their robes of "red" cloth and "ermine" (a soft, mink-like fur), and that the furry "trains" (trailing parts) of the women's gowns even cover up their "feet." Since the speaker is in a "cold, cold parlor" (line 1), the royals' comfort may remind her of her own discomfort—and perhaps inspires the idea that Arthur will be joining their comfortable world. (Going to a *better place*, so to speak.) Arthur's burial clothes—which are probably fancier than what he'd normally wear—might add to her impression that he's off to join these fancy, "gracious" people. (Of course, he's not dressed as regally as *they* are; the speaker thinks he'll be working for them as a "page," or messenger.)

The juxtaposition of Arthur's body with pictures of royalty suggests other connections, too. First, "Arthur" was a legendary British king, so young Arthur's name may seem to earn him a place among the company of kings and queens. Second, one of the royals in the pictures ("Edward") died before the poet was born, and all were dead by the time she wrote the poem. Accordingly, the reader (if not the younger version of the speaker) can't help seeing these "gracious royal couples" as people from the past, not the present. The fantasy that Arthur is joining them is a reminder that he's joined the company of the dead.

Finally, Arthur's "red" hair subtly matches the royals' "red" robes, much as it corresponded with the "red" eyes of the loon. Arthur's "white" skin also matches the loon's "white" tabletop and the royals' "ermine" fur (which is typically white). These colors draw the dead child, the dead bird, and the dead royals into a kind of harmony; together, they make a well-matched, perfectly still tableau.

LINES 47-50

But how could ...
... deep in snow?

After several stanzas of description, the poem ends with a question. To the reader, it might seem like a rhetorical question, but for the speaker, it expresses honest confusion about the nature of death:

> But how could Arthur go,
> clutching his tiny lily,

with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?

Arthur can't go *anywhere*—much less to the royal "court" of England, which is thousands of miles across the ocean. He has died in Nova Scotia and will soon be buried there. All of this is obvious to reader and poet, but not to the speaker (or the speaker's younger self), who doesn't understand what death is any more than she understands where England is. However, her question signals a sad realization: the adventure she's imagining for Arthur is impossible. There's no way Arthur can travel right now, because his eyes are "tight[ly]" closed, and the "roads" around the house are "deep in snow."

This realization, in turn, hints at more serious doubts. The speaker already understands that Arthur will be pale "forever" (line 40); now it seems to dawn on her that death might be forever, too. In other words, death might be a state of permanent repose: Arthur might never again open his eyes or have anywhere to "go." The ceremony of wake, coffin, "lily," etc. might not be the start of a special adventure; it might be the end of something.

SYMBOLS

LILY OF THE VALLEY

The lily of the valley is a white, bell-shaped flower sometimes used in weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies. Because it's pale, fragile, and "tiny," like young Arthur, it symbolically mirrors his beauty and vulnerability, as well as the brevity of his life (which has "flowered" and decayed in a short time). All of these factors make the lily a fitting symbol for him to carry into the grave. White is also sometimes used to symbolize purity and innocence, so here it might represent Arthur's innocence as a small child.

Finally, lily of the valley is poisonous; if ingested, it can cause acute sickness and even, in extreme cases, death. Like other elements of this funeral scene (the stuffed bird, freezing winter, etc.), it serves as a reminder of death and danger.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 24-26:** "I was lifted up and given / one lily of the valley / to put in Arthur's hand."
- **Line 48:** "clutching his tiny lily,"

RED AND WHITE

Red is the color of blood, so it's symbolically associated with life and vitality—at least, in some contexts. In other contexts, it can be associated with danger or violence (spilled blood). White carries all sorts of traditional symbolism, but in this poem, it's mainly associated with the pallor and icy "frozen[ness]" of death.

Both red and white feature in the descriptions of cousin "Arthur," the "loon," and the "chromographs":

- Cousin Arthur, lying dead in his coffin, is described as "all white" except for the "red" in his hair. He's also given a "lily of the valley," a white flower. The coffin itself is compared to a "little frosted cake," so it, too, may be white.
- The loon has eyes of "red glass," and it sits on a white marble tabletop (which the speaker compares to a "white, frozen lake").
- The "royal couples" in the chromographs wear "red" robes with "ermine" trimming. Ermine fur is typically white with black streaks. (The ermine itself—a small, weasel-like animal—has a white winter coat and black tail.)

Finally, the entire house is surrounded by white "snow" (line 50).

Symbolically, the mixture of red and white may reflect the way the young speaker confuses life and death. She sees that all these figures are as motionless and "frozen" as marble, but she still ascribes some agency or vitality to them. (Arthur seems to be "clutching" his flower; the loon seems to "k[eep] his own counsel"; the royal couples seem "warm," etc.) She's only just beginning to understand that death means the *end* of agency and vitality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "on his white, frozen lake,"
- **Line 17:** "His breast was deep and white,"
- **Line 19:** "his eyes were red glass,"
- **Line 25:** "one lily of the valley"
- **Lines 27-30:** "Arthur's coffin was / a little frosted cake, / and the red-eyed loon eyed it / from his white, frozen lake."
- **Lines 32-40:** "He was all white, like a doll / that hadn't been painted yet. / Jack Frost had started to paint him / the way he always painted / the Maple Leaf (Forever). / He had just begun on his hair, / a few red strokes, and then / Jack Frost had dropped the brush / and left him white, forever."
- **Line 42:** "were warm in red and ermine;"
- **Line 48:** "clutching his tiny lily,"
- **Line 50:** "and the roads deep in snow?"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors illustrate how the speaker saw and experienced the world as a child. They demonstrate both her vivid, active imagination and her incomplete understanding of subjects like death.

For example, the speaker twice compares a marble tabletop—where a "stuffed loon" sits—to a "white, frozen lake." This is a fitting and thought-provoking metaphor on several levels. Loons are water birds, so they do nest on lakes and ponds. And the poem is set during a cold winter in Nova Scotia, so the surrounding lakes would certainly be frozen. It's apt and creative, then, for the speaker to compare the loon's tabletop to an icy lake; after all, both surfaces are cold, round, and white.

At the same time, loons don't live on *frozen* lakes; they migrate south in the winter. So there's something unsettling about the idea of a motionless loon on a frozen lake, just as there's something unsettling about a loon standing on a parlor table. The loon is there in the house because it's been "shot," "stuffed," and turned into a decoration. But to the young observer, who doesn't yet understand death, it still seems quasi-alive, as if the table might somehow be a version of its natural habitat.

The speaker also compares "Arthur's coffin" to "a little frosted cake" (lines 27-28). In other words, it's smallish (not elongated like an adult coffin), decorated (with flowers and/or carvings in the wood), and perhaps white, like cake icing. To her, the coffin looks appealing—a sign of her confusion about what death really represents.

The simile and extended metaphor involving "Jack Frost" (lines 32-40) further illustrate her struggle to wrap her mind around death. She doesn't fully grasp why Arthur looks "all white" except for the red of his hair—that is, she doesn't understand *pallor mortis*, or the paleness of corpses. So she invents her own explanation for Arthur's pallor: she compares him to a "doll," then imagines that "Jack Frost," who paints the leaves of autumn, tried painting Arthur red but quickly gave up.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "on his white, frozen lake, / the marble-topped table."
- **Lines 27-28:** "Arthur's coffin was / a little frosted cake,"
- **Line 30:** "from his white, frozen lake."
- **Lines 32-40:** "He was all white, like a doll / that hadn't been painted yet. / Jack Frost had started to paint him / the way he always painted / the Maple Leaf (Forever). / He had just begun on his hair, / a few red strokes, and then / Jack Frost had dropped the brush / and left him white, forever."

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The poem anthropomorphizes both the "stuffed loon" in the parlor and the season of winter (embodied as the legendary character "Jack Frost"). These details help convey the vivid imaginative world of a very young child.

First, the speaker describes the stuffed loon as though it (or "he") were not only alive but also capable of human speech:

> Since Uncle Arthur fired
> a bullet into him,
> he hadn't said a word.
> He kept his own counsel [...]

This is the poem's first indication that the speaker, at the time of the poem's events, didn't yet understand the reality of death. As a toddler-aged observer, she seems to have imagined that the loon *could* speak, but was choosing to remain silent ("[keep] his own counsel"). These kinds of fantasies and misconceptions, of course, are common in early childhood.

Later, the speaker imagines that "Jack Frost" is responsible for the pallor of her cousin's corpse. According to some legends, Jack Frost—the mythical, sprite-like embodiment of winter—paints maple leaves red as the cold sets in. In the speaker's imagination, Jack Frost started to paint Arthur's body, too, but only got as far as coloring his hair before abandoning the task. This creative misconception is another sign that the speaker doesn't understand death (the *real* reason Arthur looks so pale).

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-14:** "Since Uncle Arthur fired / a bullet into him, / he hadn't said a word. / He kept his own counsel"
- **Lines 34-40:** "Jack Frost had started to paint him / the way he always painted / the Maple Leaf (Forever). / He had just begun on his hair, / a few red strokes, and then / Jack Frost had dropped the brush / and left him white, forever."

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem places several striking or unusual objects in juxtaposition. Arthur's ornate coffin, which resembles "a little frosted cake," is laid out in the "parlor" of a home, where it shares space with old color prints ("chromographs") of English royalty and a "loon / shot and stuffed" by the speaker's uncle.

These juxtapositions tend to highlight similarities and continuities among the figures in the scene (Arthur, loon, royals). For example, Arthur and the loon are both still and lifeless, while the royals are motionless in their still pictures. One of the royals ("Edward, Prince of Wales") died before Bishop's childhood years, when the poem is set; all were dead by the time the poem was published in the 1960s. Thus, the

boy, the bird, and the royal couples are all images or reminders of death. (One could even say that Arthur and the loon are *history* now, like the couples in the old-fashioned "chromographs.")

All of these figures are also associated with the colors red and white. (The "ermine" on the royals' robes refers to a type of white fur.) Red is traditionally associated with blood, life, or vitality, while white, in this poem, is associated with the pallor of death. Symbolically, then, the repeated juxtaposition of these colors hints at the speaker's confusion about life and death. All the figures in the scene are lifeless or motionless, yet the young speaker imagines them as having feelings and agency. (For more, see the Symbols section of this guide.)

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-10:** "In the cold, cold parlor / my mother laid out Arthur / beneath the chromographs: / Edward, Prince of Wales, / with Princess Alexandra, / and King George with Queen Mary. / Below them on the table / stood a stuffed loon / shot and stuffed by Uncle / Arthur, Arthur's father."
- **Lines 27-30:** "Arthur's coffin was / a little frosted cake, / and the red-eyed loon eyed it / from his white, frozen lake."
- **Lines 41-50:** "The gracious royal couples / were warm in red and ermine; / their feet were well wrapped up / in the ladies' ermine trains. / They invited Arthur to be / the smallest page at court. / But how could Arthur go, / clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?"

REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of key words and phrases. Some of these repetitions emphasize the poem's themes or reflect the speaker's emotions; others highlight similarities among the figures and objects the poem describes.

The very first line, for example, repeats the word "cold" twice in a row. This epizeuxis rings out like chattering teeth, helping to establish that the poem is set in the dead of winter. "Cold" also returns in line 18, in the speaker's description of the stuffed loon. Here, it emphasizes not only the wintry chill of the room but also the fact that the loon is dead (has lost its body heat). In fact, it subtly links winter and death, adding to the deathly atmosphere of the scene in general. The phrase "white, frozen lake" (repeated in lines 15 and 30) has a similar effect: as a metaphor for the marble tabletop in the parlor, it makes the room seem all the more deathly cold.

The words "white" (lines 15, 30, 32, and 40) and "red"/"red-eyed" (lines 19, 29, 38, and 42) repeat throughout the poem. They help tie together the descriptions of loon, Arthur, and the royal couples in the parlor "chromographs." They also carry some symbolism, evoking cold/pallor/death on the one hand and warmth/life/vitality on the other. (See the Symbols section of this guide for more.)

Other repetitions hint at the speaker's feelings and attitudes. For example, her mother repeats "Come" (lines 21-22) when beckoning her to view Arthur's coffin. The fact that she says it twice might suggest that the speaker is scared to step forward. (She may not understand death, in other words, but she's nervous in its presence.) The repetition of "Forever"/"forever" (lines 36 and 40) might reflect her dawning awareness of the permanence of death.

Finally, the many repetitions of "Uncle Arthur" and "Arthur" highlight the bond between the father and the son named after him. The poem doesn't describe Uncle Arthur's emotions, but it's fair to assume the death of his young namesake has come as a cruel blow.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cold, cold"
- **Line 8:** "stuffed"
- **Line 9:** "stuffed"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Uncle / Arthur, Arthur's"
- **Line 11:** "Uncle Arthur"
- **Line 15:** "white, frozen lake,"
- **Line 18:** "cold"
- **Line 19:** "his eyes," "red"
- **Line 21:** "Come"
- **Line 22:** "Come"
- **Line 23:** "little," "Arthur"
- **Line 25:** "lily"
- **Line 26:** "Arthur's"
- **Line 27:** "Arthur's"
- **Line 28:** "little"
- **Line 29:** "red-eyed"
- **Line 30:** "white, frozen lake."
- **Line 31:** "Arthur"
- **Line 32:** "white"
- **Line 36:** "Forever"
- **Line 38:** "red"
- **Line 40:** "white," "forever"
- **Line 42:** "red," "ermine"
- **Line 44:** "ermine"
- **Line 45:** "Arthur"
- **Line 47:** "Arthur"
- **Line 48:** "lily"
- **Line 49:** "his eyes"

VOCABULARY

Parlor (Line 1) - Here referring to the sitting room of a house, a room typically dedicated to hosting and entertaining guests. (Though a wake is being held there, this "parlor" is not a funeral

parlor.)

Chromographs (Line 3) - Pictures (specifically, lithographs) made using an early color printing process.

Edward, Prince of Wales; Princess Alexandra; King George; Queen Mary (Lines 4-6) - Members of the British royal family during the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

- "Edward, Prince of Wales" (later King Edward VII, 1841-1910)
- "Princess Alexandra" (later Queen Alexandra, 1844-1925)
- "King George" (George V, 1865-1936)
- "Queen Mary" (Mary of Teck, 1867-1953)

Edward and Alexandra were married, as were George and Mary. Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911, by which time Edward VII had already died; the other three royals were still alive during her early childhood, and George V was the reigning King of England.

Stuffed loon (Lines 7-8) - A loon is a water bird found in North America, Europe, and northern Asia. This loon has been taxidermically "stuffed," meaning that its dead body has been preserved and prepared for display.

Kept his own counsel (Line 14) - An idiom meaning "stayed silent" or "kept to himself."

Caressable (Lines 17-18) - Pleasant to caress; soft to the touch.

Lily of the valley (Lines 24-25, Line 48) - A type of white flower. The blossoms of the lily of the valley plant have a pleasant scent, but the blossoms and berries are toxic if ingested.

Jack Frost (Line 34, Line 39) - A folktale character associated with winter (and sometimes autumn as well). According to various legends, Jack Frost is said to bring cold weather, leave frost on plants and windows, and add color to autumn leaves, as depicted here.

The Maple Leaf (Forever) (Lines 35-36) - The red maple leaf is Canada's national symbol, found on its flag. This line also alludes to "The Maple Leaf Forever" (1867), a Canadian patriotic song.

Gracious (Line 41) - Elegant; full of grace.

Ermine (Lines 41-44) - The ermine is a small mammal, similar to the mink and the weasel, that has long been prized for its fur. In the UK and elsewhere in Europe, ermine fur has historically been used in royal robes and other aristocratic clothing.

Trains (Line 44) - The trailing material at the back of robes or gowns.

Page (Lines 45-46) - An attendant or messenger at a royal court, or (in medieval times) a young knight-in-training.

Court (Lines 45-46) - The formal residence or official assembly of a monarch, including family, advisors, etc.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem contains five stanzas of 10 lines each. It follows a rough three-beat accentual meter (meaning that each line contains three strong stresses, even if they don't always fall in the same places). The poem doesn't follow a consistent rhyme scheme, although the last line of each stanza makes a full, imperfect, or identical rhyme with a previous line in the stanza. (Thus, "father" rhymes with "Arthur" in the first stanza, "desired" with "fired" in the second, "lake" with "cake" in the third, "forever" with "Forever" in the fourth, and "snow" with "go" in the fifth).

Overall, then, the poem is formally consistent, even a bit strict, in keeping with the formal occasion it describes. The slight looseness in the meter and rhyming, however, reflects the fact that this is a *child's* wake, narrated through a child's eyes. (Or, rather, through the eyes of an adult narrator recalling their childhood self.) Accentual verse, in particular, often appears in nursery rhymes and other children's poetry. Thus, the form of "First Death in Nova Scotia" mirrors its subtle mingling of adult and childhood perspectives.

METER

The poem follows a three-beat accentual meter. This means that each line contains three strongly stressed syllables, even as the syllable count and the placement of stresses vary from line to line. Look at lines 1-4, for example:

> In the cold, cold parlor
> my mother laid out Arthur
> beneath the chromographs:
> Edward, Prince of Wales,

In line 1, the first stress occurs on the third syllable; in line 4, it occurs on the first. But the lines consistently contain three strong beats, as you'll notice if you say them aloud and tap a hand or foot as you go.

Accentual meter is often found in nursery rhymes and other children's and folk verse, so it's a fitting choice for this poem about children.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem contains rhymes, but its rhyme scheme varies from stanza to stanza. Its one consistent feature is that the last line of each stanza rhymes with a word elsewhere in that stanza. Namely, "father" (line 10) rhymes with "Arthur" (line 2); "desired" (line 20) rhymes with "fired" (line 11); "lake" (line 30) rhymes with "cake" (line 28); "forever" (line 40) echoes "Forever" (line 36); and "snow" (line 50) rhymes with "go"(line 47). Three of these are full rhymes; the others are imperfect

("Arthur"/"father") or identical ("Forever"/"forever").

Other near-rhymes in the poem include "parlor"/"Arthur" (lines 1 and 2), "table"/"caressable" (lines 16 and 18), and "small"/"doll" (lines 31 and 32).

This loose structure makes a good match for the poem's rough accentual meter. The playful flexibility of the language makes it sound a bit like children's verse; in that way, it fits the poem's childhood world, even as it makes an unsettling vehicle for the poem's solemn subject. The rhyming final lines also give each stanza a strong sense of closure, which feels appropriate in a poem about the finality of death.

SPEAKER

The speaker is an adult recalling a vivid scene from childhood. Although their name, gender, etc. are never specified, the details of the poem closely match Bishop's own experience (she lived in Nova Scotia during her early childhood, had an "Uncle Arthur" there, etc.). As a result, this guide refers to the speaker as "she" and assumes that the speaker is a version of the poet.

It's not clear exactly how old the speaker is during the events of the poem, but she must be fairly young, because her mother has to "lift[]" her up to view Arthur's body and "give[]" her a flower to put in the coffin (lines 24-26). In other words, she's too young to view the coffin on tiptoe, place the flower without help, etc., so she is probably no more than a toddler. (In real life, Bishop's mother was institutionalized when Bishop was five, and Bishop never saw her again.)

Though the speaker uses a sophisticated vocabulary (e.g., "chromographs"), her perceptions and points of reference are realistically childlike. For example, Arthur's pale body reminds her of "Jack Frost," a mythical character often used to explain fall and winter to kids (lines 34-40). She imagines, creatively but absurdly, that Arthur is going to join the English royalty whose portraits he's laid out beneath—then, like a bright child, starts to question her belief (lines 45-50). Thus, while using words that little kids wouldn't know, the speaker sensitively captures how she saw and imagined the world at a very young age.

SETTING

The poem's title establishes its setting: "Nova Scotia," one of the Maritime provinces of eastern Canada. Bishop lived for a time in Great Village, Nova Scotia—a very small village, despite the name—during her early childhood. Her "Uncle Arthur" (Arthur Bulmer) and his family lived there, too.

More specifically, the poem takes place in a home "parlor" during a "cold, cold" winter. Note that this is not a *funeral* parlor; young Arthur's wake is being held in the sitting room of a house, as the domestic decorations ("chromographs," "stuffed loon," etc.) make clear. The surrounding "roads [are] deep in snow," as often happens during winters in rural Canada.

The poem refers to other aspects of Canadian identity as well. Though legally an independent country, Canada remains part of the British Commonwealth, meaning that the King or Queen of England formally reigns over Canada as well. The pictures of royalty in this Canadian home ("Edward, Prince of Wales," "Princess Alexandra," and "King George with Queen Mary") reflect the country's ongoing affiliation with the British monarchy. In fact, the young speaker imagines that little Arthur, having died, will now go to England to serve the royal court—though it dawns on her that this is probably impossible.

The young speaker also relates a legend that "Jack Frost," the spirit of winter, paints the red "Maple Leaf (Forever)." The red maple leaf is Canada's national symbol and appears on its flag.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop was a celebrated American poet, as well as a short story writer, painter, and translator. "First Death in Nova Scotia" appears in her collection *Questions of Travel* (1965), which also contains such well-known poems as "The Armadillo," "Filling Station," and "Visits to St. Elizabeths." It's a mid-career poem, written after her previous volume, *North & South / A Cold Spring* (1955), won the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. It's also rooted in autobiography; her "little cousin Arthur" Bulmer, son of her "Uncle Arthur" and Aunt Mabel, died when Bishop herself was a small child in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia.

Bishop created visual art throughout her life and kept multimedia journals. Her work is sometimes described as imagistic; she tends to observe the physical world closely and encode her conclusions in minute descriptive details, often while exploring themes of loss, belonging, and yearning.

The time frame of Bishop's career places her within the generation of Confessional poets. These poets—who included Bishop's peers Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, as well as her longtime friend Robert Lowell—emphasized the autobiographical in their poetry, often highlighting intense emotional and psychological experiences. Bishop, however, was critical of this mode of writing and resisted including such detailed or direct personal accounts in her poems. Though her poems, including "First Death in Nova Scotia," draw on her life, they often do so with a degree of distance and convey their feeling in indirect or ironic ways.

Bishop was a gay woman writer in the male-dominated 20th-century literary world, and even her implied portrayals of same-sex love led to rejections from publications like *Poetry* and the *New Yorker*. It's fair, then, to see her restrained, indirect

approach as both an artistic decision and a professional prerequisite. She asserted that she didn't want to be judged on the basis of her sexual orientation or gender, but on the quality of her work as a poet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After growing up in Nova Scotia, Canada and the northeastern United States, Bishop traveled extensively throughout southern Europe and northern Africa, recording many of her observations in verse. Intending to take a short trip, Bishop traveled to Brazil in 1951 and ended up living there for 15 years. Bishop's extensive travels fed her interest in international literature, and she published translations of poetry originally written in French, Spanish, and (most famously) Portuguese. At the same time, her writing occasionally glances back to Canada, as in "The Moose" and "First Death in Nova Scotia." This poem even alludes to the red "Maple Leaf," the Canadian national symbol.

The mid-20th century was a tumultuous time in world history, as political instability and social tensions bubbled over around the globe. The 1960s, when this poem appeared, were particularly conflict-ridden. However, Bishop's poems rarely address conflicts and world events directly. Instead, they tend to confront universal human struggles, such as grief and the drive to be understood.

"First Death in Nova Scotia" does refer to several historical figures, all members of the British royal family: "Edward, Prince of Wales" (later King Edward VII, 1841-1910), "Princess Alexandra" (later Queen Alexandra, 1844-1925), "King George" (George V, 1865-1936), and "Queen Mary" (Mary of Teck, 1867-1953). All of these figures were deceased by the time Bishop published the poem, though several were still alive during her early childhood, when the poem takes place. Their pictures in the family parlor are "chromographs" (a.k.a. chromolithographs), made using an old-fashioned color printing process.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life — Read a biography of Elizabeth Bishop at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "First Death in Nova Scotia." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNoFxZ1gCu0)
- Bishop in Nova Scotia — Check out the biography, photos, and other resources offered by the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia. (https://elizabethbishopns.org/)
- A Bishop Documentary — Watch a short film about Bishop's life and art. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XB6sJ-PeLo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BISHOP POEMS

- One Art
- The Fish
- The Mountain

HOW TO CITE

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