

One Art



SUMMARY

It's not difficult to become an expert at losing things. So many things seem bound to be lost sooner or later that when they actually are lost, it's not a catastrophe.

To get better at losing, try losing something every day. Accept the frustration of losing your house keys, or realizing you've wasted an hour of time. It's not difficult to become an expert at losing things.

After this, practice losing more, and more quickly: forget places and names of people or things; lose track of where you'd intended to travel. None of these losses will cause a catastrophe.

I lost the watch that had belonged to my mother. And think about this! I lost the last, or second-to-last, of the three houses I have loved the most. It's not difficult to become an expert at losing things.

I lost two beautiful cities. And, even bigger than that, some vast domains that I owned, two rivers, and a continent. I miss them, but it wasn't a catastrophe.

Even if I lose you—and in losing you, lose your teasing voice, and a gesture of yours that I love—this won't have been a lie. It's clear that it's not too difficult to become an expert at losing things, though it may appear—*write this down!*—catastrophic.

about losing keys and hours, now she mentions losing abstract concepts—"places, and names, and where it was you meant to travel." Essentially, she seems to be talking about the loss of experiences, memories, and future hopes and plans. She also loses items of emotional value, such as her mother's watch and "three loved houses." The poem thus broadens the idea of loss, relating it to life changes that are inevitable with the passage of time.

Yet the speaker continues to describe these losses with the same casual tone, suggesting that even these major losses are manageable. It's as though those more mundane losses *prepared* the speaker for leaving bigger and bigger parts of life behind without spiraling into "disaster."

Indeed, throughout the poem, the speaker argues that it is possible to "master" loss itself—that with practice, loss can feel less catastrophic. Even when it comes to such huge losses as the loss of "cities," "realms," or an entire "continent," the speaker insists that "it wasn't a disaster." This is implicitly because the speaker has "mastered" the "art of losing"; she accepts that everything is transient, and this allows her to take these losses in stride.

Yet the poem *also* shows the ongoing effort involved in coping with loss. Despite the speaker's detached tone, as the losses grow in scale it becomes harder to take the speaker at her word when she insists that loss is no big deal. In fact, the poem's repetition actually suggests that loss *does* feel like a disaster to the speaker, since it requires constant work on the speaker's part to claim otherwise. The speaker refers to phrases about mastering loss and loss not being a "disaster" so often that they feel like mantras the speaker needs to obsessively repeat to stave off grief.

The speaker also revises these refrains as the poem progresses: the claim "their loss is no disaster" changes to "[n]one of these will bring disaster," and then, "I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster." The poem's opening line and primary refrain, "[t]he art of losing isn't hard to master," also changes in the last stanza to "the art of losing's not *too* hard to master." These revisions show the increasing effort on the speaker's part to hold the full grief of these losses at bay.

Finally, the speaker turns to the possible, future loss of a beloved "you." In doing so, the speaker interrupts the poem's form, first through the parenthetical "(the joking voice, a gesture / I love)," which describes this beloved; and then with the speaker directing herself to "(*Write it!*)," which reveals the effort involved in sustaining the poem's form and control in the face of this imagined, overwhelming loss. These interruptions show the cracks in the speaker's façade. The loss of the beloved "you," the poem implies, *will be* a disaster for the speaker,



THEMES



THE INEVITABILITY AND PAIN OF LOSS

"One Art" explores the idea that nothing lasts and thus that loss is an inevitable part of life. In fact, the speaker claims that with practice people can learn to accept and even "master" the "art" of losing. The speaker doesn't actually seem to be as adept at this art as she claims, however, ultimately lingering on the details of a beloved person she fears losing in a way that suggests she hasn't mastered anything at all. In the end, "One Art" suggests that everything in life is transient, while also showing the struggle involved in coping with the grief that loss entails.

At first, the speaker evokes everyday losses readers can relate to. For example, most people have lost their keys or wasted an hour of time. The speaker also remarks that "so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost," emphasizing that the loss of many things is a natural part of life.

As the poem progresses, however, the losses the speaker invokes grow in scale. Whereas before the speaker talked

whatever she might say to the contrary.

Ultimately, then, the sense of grief and overwhelming loss implied at the poem's ending sheds new light on the poem as a whole. Where before the repetition might have suggested that the speaker *has* mastered loss, it can now be read as representing the speaker's ongoing, daily work of *coping* with loss, suggesting that such work is never-ending.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

The art of ... hard to master;

The title of the poem lets the reader know that the poem's subject will be "one art"—implying that the "art" the poem will examine is one of many. Readers might expect this "art" to be a traditional kind of fine art such as painting or poetry. Yet, as the first line makes clear, what the poem will actually explore is "the art of losing."

While this opening line sounds straightforward and direct—"The art of losing isn't hard to master," the speaker says—in fact this line, which will become the poem's [refrain](#), contains layers of meaning.

First, it is worth noting that the speaker describes the experience of losing—of going through loss, and living with loss—as an "art." This suggests that one can learn to deal with loss in the same way one might learn another craft or art such as painting, poetry, or music. While the poem makes it clear that its subject is the art of *losing*, the word "art" also implicitly connects the poem's subject to *other* kinds of art, including the art of poetry and the poem itself. From the beginning, then, the poem subtly connects the art it will examine with its own artfulness, implying that one way the speaker has "mastered" loss—or attempted to master loss—is through *writing the poem itself*.

The word "master" is also important. Traditionally, the word has been used in connection with the fine arts; the term "Old Masters," for example, refer to Classical painters and artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, who are considered "masters," or experts and virtuosos, in their craft. This word, then, sustains the idea that the "art of losing" that the poem will explore is connected to other kinds of art—and that the work involved in "mastering" loss, just like the work involved in mastering any fine art, involves practice, discipline, and skill.

The opening line is also an [aphorism](#), a remark that seems to convey a general truth about the world. On the surface, the

speaker appears simply to be recounting this truth, suggesting that it's not that hard to get used to or even become an expert at losing things. The speaker's [tone](#), which is confident and casual, reinforces the sense that this is an unquestionable fact.

At the same time, though, the reader might, even this early in the poem, start to ask questions. Is it really that easy to go through loss? Furthermore, if it isn't hard to get used to losing things, then why write an entire poem about it? The aphorism at the poem's beginning then, sets up a kind of double meaning in the poem: the speaker asserts that it's not too hard to "master" loss, yet something else seems to move beneath the poem's surface.

LINES 2-3

so many things ...

... is no disaster.

In lines 2-3, the speaker continues the confident, casual [tone](#) that opened the poem. "[S]o many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost," she says, "that their loss is no disaster." Many things will be lost sooner or later, the speaker seems to be saying, so when this loss inevitably *does* occur, it's not a catastrophe.

The way in which the speaker describes this inevitability is notable. "[S]o many things seem filled with the [intent](#) / to be lost," she says. "Intent" implies an element of agency; a person might intend to do something or go somewhere. Yet "things" are not usually thought of as having intentions. By using the word "intent," then, the speaker subtly [personifies](#) these "things"; she suggests not only that many things may inevitably *be* lost, but also that many things seem to have the *intention*, the *will* to be lost, and that this intention makes their loss truly beyond the speaker's control. The [consonant](#) /l/ sound, which connects the word "filled" to the various forms of "loss" in the stanza—"losing," "lost," and "loss"—emphasizes this sense of inevitability and intent, connecting that "intent to be lost" which "fills" these things, to the loss itself.

Meanwhile, the [polyptoton](#) of "losing," "lost," and "loss"—in which the word "loss" repeats in various forms—emphasizes the reality of loss in a variety of ways, as a fact of life ("loss"), as something one must undergo ("losing"), and as a quality of what *has* been lost. The word pervades the stanza, just as, the speaker implies, the experience of loss inevitably pervades a person's life.

All one can do in the face of such strong inevitability, the speaker argues, is accept it. And, in the last line of the stanza, the speaker suggests that *because* such loss is inevitable, when it does occur it's not overwhelming: "their loss is no disaster," the speaker says. These lines work like evidence to reinforce and build on the [aphorism](#) that began the poem. Since many things are bound to be lost sooner or later, the speaker implies, losing them isn't such a big deal.

Yet a closer look at these lines indicates that they are not as logical as they first appear. After all, just because things *will* be lost doesn't mean that the experience of loss isn't painful and difficult. Again, then, while the speaker seems simply to be recounting a general truth, there is also an element of dissonance in the lines, a sense that within the speaker's apparently logical, confident train of thought something isn't quite right.

Finally, it is worth noting the way in which the stanza balances [end-stopped lines](#) and [enjambment](#). The first line of the poem is end-stopped, with a semi-colon; this creates a pause for the reader at the end of the line and a sense of logical, measured syntax that matches the speaker's apparently logical tone. The last line of the stanza is also end-stopped, concluding with the ending of a sentence. The middle line of the stanza, however, when the speaker evokes the "intent" of many things to be lost, is enjambed, with the line ending dividing the "intent" of things from what their intent is ("to be lost").

This enjambment propels the reader over the line ending, both varying the poem's pacing and introducing a subtle level of tension, as the speaker shifts between the contained and measured feeling of the end-stopped lines and something that threatens, just slightly and momentarily, to destabilize the poem out of this measured stance.

LINES 4-6

*Lose something every ...
... hard to master.*

In the second stanza, the speaker begins to give directions to the reader, implicitly suggesting that if the reader follows these directions, they too can learn how to master loss. "Lose something every day," the speaker instructs the reader, suggesting that becoming an expert at loss is simply a matter of practice.

Interestingly, while this instruction can be read as the speaker addressing the reader, there is also a way in which it can be read as the speaker addressing *herself*, walking herself through the steps involved in mastering loss. Both readings are present in the poem at the same time.

"Accept the fluster," the speaker continues, "of lost door keys, the hour badly spent." Here, the speaker evokes things that the reader might be able to relate to losing. After all, most people have lost their house keys or realized they have wasted an hour of time, and have had to deal with the resulting agitation and confusion.

The [asyndeton](#) of "lost door keys, the hour badly spent," in which the speaker omits the conjunction "and" that might normally connect the two phrases, emphasizes the fact that these things are relatively inconsequential, since the speaker can list them quickly and casually. The reader can probably agree with the speaker here that such losses *aren't*

disastrous—and aren't, perhaps, that hard to master.

This stanza thus sustains the confident, casual [tone](#) that began the poem, and several sound effects work to emphasize the speaker's claims. The /l/ sounds in the various form of "loss" in these lines ("lose," "lost," "losing") are [consonantly](#) reflected in "fluster," connecting the inevitability of loss—which again pervades the stanza through [polyptoton](#)—to the fluster, or sense of confusion, one might experience in the face of this loss. Yet at the same time, the /r/ sound in "hour" bridges the word "fluster" and "master." This bridging sound implies that it is through practicing loss—such as practicing losing an hour of time—that one is able to move from the "fluster" or irritation one might initially experience in the face of loss, to obtaining "mastery" over it.

Meanwhile, the second stanza establishes the form of the poem, as the [refrain](#) that began the poem ("The art of losing isn't hard to master") repeats at the end of this stanza, and the word "spent," at the end of line 5 ("of lost door keys [...] spent") rhymes with the word "intent" that came at the end of line 2 ("so many things [...] intent"). The poem also introduces a rhyme word ("fluster") that appears to be paired with the word "master" at the end of line 1 ("The art of losing [...] master"). Notably, this is a [slant rhyme](#), not a full rhyme; the /er/ sound connects the word to its pair, yet the inexact rhyme introduces another element of tension in the poem, suggesting that despite the appearance of a controlled, even form, all is not exactly as it seems.

Like this first stanza, this stanza contains a combination of [end-stopped lines](#) and [enjambment](#). Here, though, the arrangement is different. Where the first stanza contained an instant of enjambment in the middle line, bracketed by two end-stopped lines, here the stanza *begins* with a moment of enjambment ("fluster / of lost door keys") before moving to two end-stopped lines. This shift subtly implies an effort, on the speaker's part, to reassert control within the poem, after the "fluster" that might have briefly disrupted that control.

LINES 7-9

*Then practice losing ...
... will bring disaster.*

The speaker continues her direct address to the reader in stanza 3. Here, the speaker suggests that the reader (and implicitly the speaker as well) can build on these experiences of smaller losses (the "lost door keys" and "hour badly spent"), to learn how to cope with larger losses: "[P]ractice losing farther, losing faster," the speaker says.

The repetition of "losing" and the [alliterative](#) /f/ sound in "farther" and "faster," as well as the [asyndeton](#) in this instruction—which elides the "and" between the two clauses—speeds the poem up, enacting what the speaker describes. This sense of the poem growing in intensity, speed, and scale, is further emphasized by the relationship between

the sentences and line endings in the stanza as a whole; the first sentence extends over three lines, including the [enjambment](#) of "meant / to travel," propelling the reader over the line endings to reach the end of the sentence. The reader, then, must adjust to the faster pacing of the poem, but also to what this pacing represents, as the losses the speaker invokes have grown both in scope ("farther") and speed ("faster").

The speaker directs the reader to "practice," or get used to, losing these larger, abstract things: "places, and names" and "where it was you meant / to travel." This list evokes the idea of forgetfulness as a kind of loss and inevitable part of life; places that might have been familiar become remote or hard to recall; likewise one might, over time, forget the names of people or things, and even where one had once intended to visit. At the same time, some items in this list could also be more literally lost. One might move away from a place that had been home, or lose the opportunity to travel somewhere. "None of these [losses]," the speaker insists, "will bring disaster."

And here, exactly midway through the poem, the reader could still, probably, agree with the speaker. One might not *want* to forget or lose names or places, but the reader probably does share the assumption that such loss, while difficult, is an inevitable part of life and not a catastrophe.

Interestingly, though, while the speaker began the stanza with asyndeton (the omission of "and" in the opening instruction speeding the poem up), here the speaker links the list of things the reader should get used to losing with [polysyndeton](#), now *repeating* the word "and" in the list "places, **and** names, **and** where it was you meant / to travel." This polysyndeton subtly implies that the loss, for both the speaker and reader, is building and accumulating. The word "and" emphasizes that sense of accrual. While the speaker's claims still seem logical and relatable, then, there is also a sense that the losses within the poem are growing in scale and weight.

Finally, the poem's repetition of "disaster," with a slight change to the phrase that prefaces it, reinforces this sense that something else is working in tension with the speaker's casual tone and the poem's controlled form. Before, the speaker insisted that since "so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost [...] their loss is no disaster." Here, this phrase is changed to "None of these will bring disaster." While these two remarks seem close in meaning—in both cases, the speaker is insisting that these losses are not disastrous—the slight revision also signals an element of development and change within the poem, which the speaker and reader must constantly work to accommodate.

LINES 10-12

*I lost my ...
... hard to master.*

In stanza 4, the speaker drops her instructions to the reader, instead speaking directly out of her own experience. "I lost my

mother's watch," she says. Then, she briefly directs the reader to "look!" at what else she has lost: "my last, or / next-to last, of three loved houses went." Notably, at this point the poem also changes in the kind of losses that it evokes. Where before the speaker mentioned the loss of relatively small things—"door keys," or abstract concepts like places, and names"—here the speaker describes losing things of emotional value.

Interestingly, this stanza also contains the poem's first moment of self-correction or self-interruption. First, the speaker says that she lost the "last" of the three houses that she loved; but then she revises this slightly to: "or / next-to-last." This could be read as meaning that the speaker hasn't yet lost the "last" of these houses, but only the "next-to-last," the second of them, and still has one remaining, if precariously.

The speaker's [tone](#) is still casual, almost off-the-cuff, here, yet it is important to note that people's houses are, first and foremost, their homes. What the speaker is really saying here, then, is that she lost her mother's watch, and also three homes, perhaps over the course of her life, that she has loved. Additionally, the instance of self-correction and uncertainty implied by the "or" implies that the loss the speaker has experienced is both potential and ongoing, since the poem suggests that she *could* or even likely *will*, lose the last of these three houses and homes.

In these lines, the [alliteration](#) of /l/ sounds connects "lost," "look," "last," "next-to-last," and "loved." This /l/ sound, coming as it does after so many iterations of the word "loss" in the poem (in different forms), implicitly connects the speaker's houses—and indeed, whatever it is that she loves—to the idea of loss itself. This /l/ sound also emphasizes the speaker's use of the word "loved," here, as this word is introduced for the first time in the poem. While the speaker is still, at this point, describing losing inanimate things—the watch and the houses—something seems to have tipped the scale of the poem into a greater threat, a greater kind of urgency, as it becomes clear that what the speaker is truly losing is what she has most loved and cared for in her life.

The stanza concludes with a direct [repetition](#) of the poem's [refrain](#), "The art of losing isn't hard to master." In keeping with the form of the [villanelle](#), this refrain has repeated in alternating stanzas, the other stanzas containing the word "disaster." At this point, the speaker again repeats the refrain exactly. But can readers hear it the same way they did at the poem's opening? While the speaker still sounds confident, even dismissive, readers might begin increasingly to question, here, whether the losses the speaker has undergone are really as easy to manage as she claims.

Interestingly, after the third stanza, in which a single sentence extended over three lines—speeding up the poem's pace and suggesting an increase in intensity—here the speaker seems to rein the poem in again. The stanza is marked by a predominance of [caesurae](#), as the first line contains two

instances of terminal punctuation (“I lost my mother’s watch. And look!”), and the self-correction of modifiers, from “last,” to “or / next to last,” requires the reader to slow down to parse the speaker’s meaning.

This shift in pacing comes at a moment when, at another level, the undertow of loss and grief in the poem has become increasingly strong, as the losses the speaker evokes have grown in scale. The caesurae could be read as suggesting, then, an increasing effort on the speaker’s part to hold the full weight of these losses at bay.

LINES 13-15

*I lost two ...
... wasn't a disaster.*

The poem’s penultimate stanza, like the preceding stanza, begins with the words “I lost.” Like the preceding stanza, then, this lets the reader know that the speaker is again recounting losses from her own experience. The [anaphora](#) of this phrase, though, also introduces a quiet sense of heartbreak in the poem: the words are not particularly stressed or emphasized, but the phrase “I lost” pervades the lines that follow.

And here, the things the speaker says she has lost have become increasingly huge, almost to the point of sounding [hyperbolic](#): “I lost two cities, lovely ones,” she says, and then, “And, vaster, / some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.” It is worth noting that this list employs the same kind of [asyndeton](#) that occurred earlier, with the “lost door keys, the hour badly spent.” Here, the recurrence of asyndeton—the speaker omits the conjunction “and” that might normally appear between the clauses “some realms I owned,” “two rivers,” and “a continent”—suggests that this list of things the speaker has lost are similar in scale to those earlier losses. Yet this [parallelism](#) can only be read [ironically](#), as the losses described here are almost overwhelming in scope.

Another level of irony can also be read in the speaker’s tone, when she remarks that she lost “some realms I owned.” Usually, “realms” are thought of as kingdoms or domains, the kind of things that might be evoked in fairy tales. Since the poem is a contemporary poem, and the speaker seems to inhabit a contemporary world of door keys and wasted time, this raises questions about how the reader should interpret these lines.

At the same time, the word choice (“realms”) and the scope of what the speaker says she has lost asks the reader to consider the *meaning* of loss and the different ways in which someone can experience loss. For example, if someone lived in a place they loved, and that place was close to two rivers, and on a particular continent, and then this person had to leave this place forever, then they would, in a sense, have lost these rivers and even the whole continent.

In fact, Bishop had experienced this; she lived for over a decade in Brazil with her then-partner, the architect Lota de Macedo

Soares, before the deterioration of the couple’s relationship and Soares’s death in 1967. With this loss, Bishop also lost, in effect, an entire “continent,” what had been her home in Brazil, and which she might well have viewed as the kind of mythical “realms” of fairy tales.

It is also notable that the word “love” which had appeared in the previous stanza, appears again in a different form—an instance of [polyptoton](#)—in the descriptor “lovely.” While in both instances, the word is used to describe inanimate things, its repetition also subtly implies the looming presence of something else, some other kind of potential or imminent loss, of what the speaker loves and values and maybe love itself.

Despite the almost unbelievable scale of loss evoked in these lines, the speaker still insists at the end of the stanza, “I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.” It is worth noting, though that this [repetition](#) contains an instance of change, building on the poem’s shifts from “their loss is no disaster,” to “[n]one of these will bring disaster,” to, now, the brief acknowledgment “I miss them.” These slight changes undercut the speaker’s insistence; they sound instead, like the speaker trying to convince herself, over and over, that in spite of what she has experienced, these losses are manageable.

Interestingly, this stanza is the first in the poem to be entirely [end-stopped](#): the end-stopped “vaster,” is followed by two full-stopped lines, each of which coincides with the ending of a sentence. This slows the poem down dramatically before its closing stanza, and what will crucially emerge with it.

LINES 16-17

*—Even losing you ...
... shan't have lied.*

The last stanza of “One Art” begins with a dash-line, as though the speaker is interrupting herself and even interrupting the form of the poem. “—Even losing you,” the speaker says, and the reader suddenly becomes aware for the first time that there is a “you,” and an imminent or possible loss of this “you,” that has been present in the poem the whole time. It becomes clear, at this point, that the poem wasn’t really just about the speaker’s many losses, or how the reader can “master” loss, but about the potential loss of this unnamed person; this revelation asks the reader to reconsider the entire poem and its form up to this point.

And in fact, the introduction of the “you” *does* change the poem’s linear structure, as the speaker goes on to describe this “you” through a parenthetical, showing that this is a person both familiar and beloved to the speaker. In losing the “you” the speaker makes clear, she will also lose “(the joking voice, a gesture / I love).”

The /j/ sound in “joking” [alliterates](#) with the soft /g/ of “gesture,” creating a sense of this joking voice as connected to a gesture. The omission of a conjunction between the two phrases,

another instance of [asyndeton](#), further connects them. Meanwhile, the word “love,” which has subtly, and almost dismissively, occurred in the two previous stanzas, comes to its full realization here, as it is clear that is not just the “gesture” the speaker loves but this person, this “you.”

Notably, too, the word “gesture” is the last in a sequence of rhyming, or [slant-rhyming](#) line endings, that have progressed from “master,” “fluster,” “faster,” “last, or,” and “vaster” to this final iteration of the rhyme. While in tracking the previous words, the reader can see a progression from slighter losses (the “fluster” of those lost door keys) to losses “vaster” in physical scope and size, this last rhyming word, “gesture” reverses that progression, as what the speaker evokes here is not something that is literally huge but intensely private and small, this “gesture” of the beloved. Yet it is *this* loss, the poem makes clear, that is the *most* threatening, the *most* overwhelming of all.

At the beginning of the stanza's second line, the speaker insists that even with this loss, “I shan't have lied.” Here, the word “shan't”—which is in the future tense, a kind of formal or archaic version of “won't”—makes clear, even more painfully, that this loss of the “you” hasn't happened yet, but that the speaker believes it is both possible and imminent or inevitable. The formality of “shan't,” communicates a kind of wrenching [irony](#), as though the speaker's voice is almost, but not quite, cracking as she speaks.

Finally, the alliteration of /l/ sounds of “losing,” “love,” and “lied” emphasize both this irony and the pain within it, as the speaker finally makes clear what she really fears losing: the person she loves. The word “lied,” with its beginning /l/ sound, echoes back through the poem, as does the word “you,” asking the reader to consider if in fact the poem *has* been a lie—simply an attempt, on the speaker's part, to tell herself these things in order to cope with the losses and this last, unbearable and imminent loss.

In a sense, then, the phrase “I shan't have lied” communicates two things at the same time: it conveys both the speaker's claim that this loss *isn't* a disaster *and* the feeling of loss and grief that presses up against this claim, threatening to destabilize it altogether.

LINES 17-19

*It's evident ...
... it!) like disaster.*

This tension between what the poem *says*—conveyed in the speaker's claims and casual tone—and what it *means*—conveyed at the level of feeling that threatens to overwhelm the form—becomes fully articulated in the poem's closing, as the speaker reiterates both the [refrain](#) and other rhyme word (“disaster”), but now with completely different layers of meaning.

“It's evident,” the speaker says, “the art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.” After the introduction of the “you” at the beginning of this stanza, the speaker seems, here, to attempt to reassert the authority and confidence of the poem up to this point. The logical “it's evident” recalls the earlier apparent logic of the poem. Yet here the phrase seems almost excruciatingly [ironic](#), since what is *actually* evident, from what the speaker has just said about the “you,” is that the loss of this “you” will bring overwhelming pain to the speaker.

And this true realization is evident in the slippages that follow. First, the speaker's [repetition](#) of the refrain is changed, from the straightforward repetition in the poem up to this point to, “the art of losing's not *too* hard to master.” This slight revision, which also can be read as [ironic understatement](#), shows the cracks in the speaker's own façade, in her own claims and ability to believe these claims. Far from the casual tone with which the refrain was previously recounted, here the speaker seems to be grasping for some element of that control.

Importantly, too, this refrain is not how the poem ends. This is in keeping with the [villanelle](#) form: the last line of a villanelle is not the refrain that began the poem, but the *other* rhyme word that has occurred throughout the poem—in this case, “disaster.” *Both* the refrain and the other rhyme word appear in a villanelle's last stanza, making it, not a tercet as has appeared throughout the poem up to this point, but a [quatrain](#).

In this last line, the poem again shows the speaker interrupting herself, this time enacting the effort of acknowledging the loss that feels so imminent and clear. This loss “may look like” disaster, the speaker says, but before she can bring herself to say that final word, “disaster,” the parenthetical intervenes, the speaker commanding herself to “(*Write it!*)”.

The parenthetical in the last line communicates the sense of the poem existing in real time, as though the reader is witnessing the speaker in the act of writing. In a sense, this moment also recalls the poem's beginning, and its title, which connected the poem's subject—loss—to art, including the art of poetry. At the poem's ending, then, the speaker seems to suggest that the “mastery” she has claimed throughout the poem is *enacted* in the poem, as though the speaker can only “master” this loss through poetry, through being able to write it down, and through forcing herself to write down this final, unimaginable loss.

And the speaker *does* go on to write it down. After the parenthetical, the word “like” repeats again, conveying the sense of the speaker faltering, and then the poem ends with the word “disaster.” After the “mastery” the speaker has asserted over and over again, this ending to the poem suggests that this has been the poem's true subject all along: the *feeling* of disaster in the face of loss, the potential for loss to truly be disastrous, and the effort involved in coping with this

loss—which, the poem implies, is an art one must learn, over and over.



SYMBOLS



THE WATCH

In the fourth stanza of “One Art,” the speaker says, “I lost my mother’s watch.” It seems that the speaker is talking, here, quite literally; she means that she actually lost the watch that had belonged to her mother, an heirloom of emotional value.

Yet watches are also often [symbolic](#): they represent time and the passage of time. They can also symbolize logic, stability, and reason. With all of the losses the speaker has undergone, the poem implies that at some level, she has lost a sense of steadfastness, stability, and longevity, instead having to acclimate to another “logic” of constant loss and grief.

Additionally, the word “watch” has multiple meanings. It can refer to an object—a watch—but it also can be a verb, in the sense of someone “watching over” another person. This also contributes to the symbolic presence of the watch in the poem. As a child, Bishop had lost her mother literally and figuratively; her mother suffered a series of breakdowns and was committed to an institution when Bishop was five—she never saw her mother again. She may have lost, then, her mother’s physical watch, but she also lost her mother’s care and guardianship.

In the context of a poem that is overall concrete and direct, the presence of this symbol has even more meaning, suggesting that despite the speaker’s casual, almost dismissive tone, even those earlier losses recounted in the poem are losses of life-changing proportions.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** “I lost my mother’s watch.”



POETIC DEVICES

APHORISM

In “One Art,” the speaker repeats the line “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.” This line can be read as an [aphorism](#), since it seeks to express a general truth about the world or about human experience. Through the poem, the speaker goes on to “prove” this aphorism by describing losses she has experienced and insisting, again and again, that they haven’t been a “disaster.”

The poem’s use of this aphorism has several effects. First, since the line sounds like a general, indisputable truth, the speaker’s

repetition of it imbues the poem with authority. The speaker sounds confident and sure of herself, and the reader might—at least at first—take the aphorism at face value, assuming that it is true and logical since it *sounds* true and logical.

At the same time, aphorisms often oversimplify human realities. They are pithy and concise by nature, but this also means that they often leave out a lot in what they express.

In this case, the line “The art of losing isn’t hard to master” certainly seems to oversimplify the experiences of loss. And, as the poem progresses, the line sounds reductive to the point of being unbelievable, since the losses the speaker evokes grow bigger and bigger. By the end of the poem, in fact, it appears that the *reverse* of the line is true, as it seems unlikely that the speaker can truly “master” the loss of this beloved “you.” The speaker emphasizes this in the poem’s penultimate line, when she changes the aphorism to “the art of losing’s not *too* hard to master.”

Ultimately, the aphorism works as key part of the poem’s [irony](#). As the speaker repeats this phrase again and again, it sounds less like an *actual* general truth, and more like a claim the speaker is asserting and repeating herself to try to *convince* herself of its truth. This creates a powerful tension in the poem between what the speaker claims about loss—that it is not such a big deal—and what the poem *shows* about loss, which is how truly devastating and painful it can be for the person experiencing it.

Where Aphorism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “The art of losing isn’t hard to master;”
- **Line 6:** “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.”
- **Line 12:** “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.”
- **Line 18:** “the art of losing’s not too hard to master”

REPETITION

As a [villanelle](#), “One Art” includes [refrains](#) that [repeat](#) throughout the poem. The first refrain is the line that begins the poem: “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.” This line repeats in stanzas 2, 4, and 6. The poem’s second refrain is the end-word “disaster,” a line-ending word that first appears in stanza 1 and then repeats in stanzas 3, 5, and 6. This pattern of repetition, in which the refrains both occur in stanza 1, alternate in stanzas 2-5, and recur as the last two lines of the poem, is in keeping with the villanelle form.

These refrains structure the poem: on the surface, their insistent repetition demonstrates the speaker’s own insistence that despite the enormity of the losses she has experienced, she can “master” them and ultimately, they aren’t a “disaster.” At the same time, this insistent repetition also suggests the *opposite*, since the refrains sound, in a way, like sayings the speaker must keep repeating to herself in order to convince herself that she will be okay.

This second interpretation is reflected in the ways in which the speaker incorporates *changes* into the refrains' repetition. First, the line "The art of losing isn't hard to master" changes in its last iteration to "the art of losing's not too hard to master," revealing the pain the speaker is actually experiencing, and the true difficulty involved in coping with this final, unimaginable loss.

Secondly, in a traditional villanelle, the second refrain is, like the first refrain, supposed to be an entire line. However, in the case of "One Art," the second refrain only repeats the end-word "disaster"; the lines leading up to this repeating word are different in each instance, from "to be lost that their loss is no disaster"; to "to travel. None of these will bring disaster"; then, "I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster"; and finally, "though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster."

These shifts imply that despite what the speaker claims, the work and effort of coping with loss are actually, for her, ongoing, since each loss requires a slightly different response, a new insistence that it is not a "disaster." What *does* stay the same, in this refrain, is the word "disaster"—suggesting that, at some level, these losses *have* been disastrous, and that the final, imagined loss of this "you" will not only "look like" disaster, but will actually be a loss of catastrophic proportions for the speaker.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The art of losing isn't hard to master;"
- **Line 3:** "to be lost that their loss is no disaster."
- **Line 6:** "The art of losing isn't hard to master."
- **Line 9:** "to travel. None of these will bring disaster."
- **Line 12:** "The art of losing isn't hard to master."
- **Line 15:** "I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster."
- **Lines 18-19:** "the art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (/ *Write / it!*) like disaster."

POLYPTOTON

In addition to its direct repetition of lines and words, the poem also makes powerful use of [polyptoton](#), in which a single word repeats in multiple forms. Specifically, the word "loss" pervades the poem, in the form of "losing," "lost," "loss," and "lose." In fact, the word in its different forms appears 13 times over the course of the poem!

This repetition makes clear that loss is a continual experience in the speaker's life, pervading every aspect of her experience. The multiple forms of the word also show the different ways loss can be experienced: as a past experience, as a quality of things that have been "lost," and finally, as an experience that is ongoing or imagined in the future, implied through the gerund form, "losing."

A similar instance of repetition occurs in with the word "love." First, in stanza 4, the speaker says she has lost "three loved

houses." In stanza 5, she describes cities that she lost as "lovely ones." While perhaps spaced too far apart to be considered true polyptoton, the effect on the poem is similar. This also occurs alongside another instance of repetition, specifically [diacope](#), as the speaker repeats the word "last" in stanza 4, with "my last, or / next-to last."

These instances of polyptoton/repetition come together in the poem's ending, when the speaker imagines "losing you," and specifically evokes "a gesture / I love." If the speaker's earlier uses of the word "love" seemed casual, almost dismissive, it is clear at the end of the poem that in fact the speaker was building toward this final use of the word. Alongside the poem's many iterations of the word "loss," and the repetition of "last," these different forms of the word "love" show the poem's true meaning, revealing that this is the "last" loss the speaker is coping with, and which is the hardest of all: the potential loss of the person she loves the most.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "losing"
- **Line 3:** "lost," "loss"
- **Line 4:** "Lose"
- **Line 5:** "lost"
- **Line 6:** "losing"
- **Line 7:** "losing," "losing"
- **Line 10:** "lost"
- **Line 11:** "loved"
- **Line 12:** "losing"
- **Line 13:** "lost," "lovely"
- **Line 16:** "losing"
- **Line 17:** "love"
- **Line 18:** "losing's"

END-STOPPED LINE

The majority of the lines in "One Art"—12 out of the total 19 lines in the poem—are [end-stopped](#). Of these, nine lines are full stopped, meaning that the line ending coincides with the ending of a sentence and a period.

These end-stopped lines, including the nine stronger full stops, contribute to the feeling of formal control in the poem. They convey, at the level of the poem's pacing, the "mastery" that the speaker implies.

They also help to create the poem's meaning, reinforcing the speaker's claims. Since each end-stopped line requires the reader to slow down and pause, these pauses suggest that the speaker, likewise, isn't overwhelmed by emotion in the face of her losses, but can describe them in a measured, even detached way.

It's worth noting, too, that for the most part these end-stopped lines are evenly distributed over the course of the poem. In the first four stanzas, two out of the tercet's three lines are end-

stopped, and in the fifth stanza, all three lines in the tercet are end-stopped. This pattern suggests that despite the small instances of [enjambment](#) in stanzas 1 through 5, which imply moments when feeling threatens to overwhelm the poem's form, the speaker is able to retain control and mastery over the poem and its subject—at least until the poem's ending.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “master;”
- **Line 3:** “disaster.”
- **Line 5:** “spent.”
- **Line 6:** “master.”
- **Line 7:** “faster.”
- **Line 9:** “disaster.”
- **Line 11:** “went.”
- **Line 12:** “master.”
- **Line 13:** “vaster,”
- **Line 14:** “continent.”
- **Line 15:** “disaster.”
- **Line 19:** “disaster.”

ENJAMBMENT

While “One Art” contains mostly of [end-stopped lines](#), it also contains a few instances of [enjambment](#). Working in tension with the measured, even pacing of the end-stopped lines, these moments of enjambment are crucial to the poem's meaning.

Note that in each of the first four stanzas of the poem, one of the lines ends with enjambment; in each of these cases, the instance of enjambment occurs either at the end of the first or second line of the tercet.

It's important that in all of these instances, the enjambment occurs when the speaker is describing loss, and what she has lost, in more specificity. In the first stanza, for instance, the enjambment occurs when the speaker acknowledges that “so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost.” In stanza 2, the enjambment comes after the speaker's admission of the “fluster” that can result from losing keys or wasting time; the enjambment enacts, in a sense, this experience of “fluster” or disorientation.

In stanza 3, the enjambment occurs midway through the phrase “where it was you meant / to travel,” conveying this experience of interruption and disorientation. And in stanza 4, the enjambment is even harder, appearing when the speaker describes how her “last, or / next-to-last, of three loved houses went.” Throughout these stanzas, as the losses the speaker describes grow in scale and importance, the lines become enjambed in increasingly disruptive, dissonant ways.

At the level of the poem's pacing, then, these moments of enjambment convey what is working in tension with the speaker's apparent control and authority. In each moment, the loss the speaker describes threatens, however slightly or

briefly, to overwhelm the poem's form and its even pacing. Yet the speaker, in each of these moments, reasserts control by the stanza's end. And stanza 5 is *entirely* end-stopped, suggesting a stronger reassertion of control on the speaker's part.

It is in the last stanza that the balance shifts. Here, for the first time, the majority of lines in the stanza are enjambed, as the speaker describes the “you” she fears losing, and “the gesture / I love.” Even when she returns to her [refrains](#), and her insistence that this loss *won't* be a disaster, the enjambment persists in the stanza, suggesting that something else has emerged in the poem that can't be brought back into full control or containment. Despite the poem's ending, which appears to reassert formal control and mastery, these enjambments at the poem's closing, and the overflow of feeling and meaning they convey, continue to reverberate, suggesting that it is the speaker's control that is actually temporary or conditional, in the face of this final loss.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “intent / to”
- **Lines 4-5:** “fluster / of”
- **Lines 8-9:** “meant / to”
- **Lines 10-11:** “or / next-to-last”
- **Lines 16-17:** “gesture / I”
- **Lines 17-18:** “evident / the”
- **Lines 18-19:** “master / though”

ASYNDETON

Throughout “One Art,” the speaker makes lists of things that can be lost or that she has lost. She also lists instructions to the reader (and implicitly to herself), when describing how to “master” loss. In four of these lists, the speaker uses [asyndeton](#).

For example, in the second stanza, the speaker tells the reader to “[a]ccept the fluster / of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.” Here, the word “and” which would normally link the two clauses is omitted; this omission helps to convey the sense that these losses are minor and inconsequential, since the speaker doesn't need to devote much time to describing them.

The speaker uses asyndeton again in stanza 3, when she directs the reader to “practice losing farther, losing faster.” Here, the asyndeton is further emphasized by the repetition of “losing” and the sound echoes of “farther” and “faster.” The poem speeds up, in a sense, at the same time that it directs the reader to try losing even more, and more quickly.

Asyndeton occurs again in stanza 5, when the speaker says that she lost “some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.” This list recalls, through its asyndeton, the first list in the poem of “lost door keys, the hour badly spent”; the parallel syntax implicitly suggests that all of these items are on an equal plane, as though it is not that much of a bigger deal to lose a “continent” as it is to lose an “hour.”

This instance, and the parallel syntax between these two lists, is also a moment of [parataxis](#). Parataxis is a form of syntax in which each item in a list is presented as having equal value. Throughout “One Art,” the speaker implicitly suggests that though some losses are small and some huge, they are all “not too hard to master” and their loss won’t be a “disaster.” In other words, the poem implicitly connects all the losses it describes through parataxis, suggesting that they are all of equal weight—and they are all equally manageable. These moments of asyndeton and parallel syntax reinforce this claim.

Yet these parallel instances of asyndeton, and the poem’s parataxis, can only be read [ironically](#). By stanza 5, it’s clear that the things the speaker is losing are growing to such a scale that they are almost overwhelming and unbelievable. Her insistence that they don’t matter, then, is harder and harder to take at face value.

Finally, the speaker again uses asyndeton at the end of the poem, when she describes the beloved “you” she fears she will lose. In losing this “you,” the speaker says, she will lose “the joking voice, a gesture / I love.”

Here, the speaker’s use of asyndeton, leaving out the conjunction “and” between these two attributes of the “you,” reverses the poem’s earlier meaning of asyndeton and parataxis. It is clear, here, that these attributes of the “you” are so beloved to the speaker that she can recall them in precise detail. Far from suggesting that these aspects of the “you” are inconsequential—or that the loss of the “you” is equal in meaning and weight to the poem’s earlier losses—the speaker’s use of asyndeton, here, suggests only that this list could go on and on, including more and more attributes of the “you,” and implying that the speaker’s experience of this loss, too, will be never-ending.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “lost door keys, the hour badly spent.”
- **Line 7:** “losing farther, losing faster.”
- **Line 14:** “some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.”
- **Lines 16-17:** “(the joking voice, a gesture / I love)”

IRONY

Throughout “One Art,” the speaker insists that it “isn’t hard to master” loss, and that no matter what losses she has experienced, these losses are “no disaster.” As the poem progresses, however, it becomes harder to take the speaker’s claims at face value. After all, can the reader really believe that it is no big deal to lose “two cities” and a “continent”? By the poem’s ending, when the speaker tries to insist that “[e]ven losing you,” won’t be a “disaster,” the reader hears the speaker’s true meaning as the opposite of what she claims: the poem strongly implies that this loss *will* be a disaster for the speaker, despite her insistence to the contrary. This tension between

what the speaker *claims* to feel and what the poem conveys about how she *actually* feels is a form of [irony](#).

As the poem goes on, and the losses the speaker evokes grow in scale, her claims that these losses aren’t a “disaster” can only be heard as ironic [understatement](#), [paradoxically](#) conveying just how disastrous these losses actually are. Even those instances in “One Art” that feel [hyperbolic](#)—such as when the speaker says she has lost a “continent”—are also ironic, since she recounts such enormous losses in a dismissive, casual way completely at odds with the feeling the reader would expect.

Finally, “One Art” creates [dramatic irony](#), which occurs when the reader or audience understands more about a given situation than the character within the situation. By the end of “One Art,” the reader understands that despite what the speaker claims—and what she seems to be trying to convince herself of—in fact, these losses and especially this last, imagined loss of the beloved “you” are truly painful and catastrophic. This dramatic irony structures the poem as a whole, as the tension builds between the speaker’s claims and the reader’s understanding. Ultimately, the irony works to reveal just how disastrous these losses *are* for the speaker, since she has to work so hard to insist otherwise.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

ALLITERATION

“One Art” contains multiple instances of [alliteration](#) that add a lightness and musicality to its lines. This most notable alliteration revolves around the /l/ sounds that occur throughout the poem. In the first three stanzas, all of these alliterative /l/ sounds appear in different forms of the word “loss”: “losing,” “lost,” and “loss” in stanza 1; “lose,” “lost,” and “losing” in stanza 2; and “losing” repeated twice in stanza 3.

This alliteration, which pervades these stanzas, works to convey what the poem describes: a sense of loss as something that pervades all aspects of life. Additionally, in stanza 3, the repeated and alliterative word “losing” is connected to another instance of alliteration, in the /f/ sounds of “farther” and “faster.” This doubled alliteration emphasizes what the speaker is saying, making it clear that the losses the speaker is describing are multiplying in scale and weight.

As the poem goes on, it introduces other words with alliterative /l/ sounds, implicitly connecting these words, in their meaning, to “loss.” In stanza four, for example, alliterative /l/ sounds appear in “lost,” “look,” “last,” “loved,” and “losing.” The poem, here, subtly connects the apparently casual instruction to “look!” to the fact that what the speaker is actually losing are those “last” things that are most dear to her, and that she has “loved.”

Stanza 5 contains relatively fewer alliterative /l/ sounds, appearing only in “lost” and “lovely.” Yet it is important that “lovely” is also another form of the word “love,” again connecting the idea of loss to the loss of love itself.

Finally, the stanza’s closing stanza overflows with alliterative /l/ sounds, in “losing,” “love,” “lied,” “losing,” “look,” and “like.” The crucial new /l/ word in this stanza is “lied”: the speaker insists that even if she loses this beloved “you,” the poem won’t have been a lie, and even this loss won’t be “too hard to master.” Yet the alliteration gives the speaker away. It connects this word, at the level of sound, to the loss that has pervaded the poem, as well as the repetition of “love” and “last”: what the speaker is truly losing here, the poem suggests, is her “last love.” Implicitly, this alliteration suggests that the poem *is*, in a sense, a lie, since the speaker’s loss at the poem’s end seems almost impossible to bear.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “losing,” “master”
- **Line 2:** “many”
- **Line 3:** “lost,” “loss”
- **Line 4:** “Lose”
- **Line 5:** “lost”
- **Line 6:** “losing”
- **Line 7:** “losing,” “farther,” “losing,” “faster”
- **Line 10:** “lost,” “watch,” “look,” “last”
- **Line 11:** “last,” “loved,” “went.”
- **Line 12:** “losing”
- **Line 13:** “lost,” “lovely”
- **Line 14:** “realms,” “rivers”
- **Line 16:** “losing,” “joking,” “gesture”
- **Line 17:** “love,” “lied”
- **Line 18:** “losing’s”
- **Line 19:** “look,” “like,” “like”

CONSONANCE

In addition to the [alliteration](#) that appears throughout “One Art,” the poem also makes use of other forms of [consonance](#) to create music and connect words together in their sound and meaning. Because the poem is so intensely repetitive, much of this consonance revolves around the /l/, /s/, and /t/ sounds, which appear in the poem’s rhymes.

The /l/ sound is the most common here. In addition to the many alliterative instances of /l/ sounds, which connect the idea of “loss” to the speaker’s “love,” the poem also contains numerous *internal* /l/ sounds, in such instances as “filled,” “fluster,” “badly,” “places,” “travel,” “will,” and “realms.” These internal /l/ sounds, which are consonant with each other and with the alliterative /l/ sounds in the poem, connect these words—many of which have to do with specific things the speaker has lost—to the overarching idea of loss in the poem.

Other notable instances of consonance occur in the /r/ sounds of “farther” and “faster” (these words are also, of course, connected through their alliterative /f/ sounds), and in the /j/ sound of “joking,” which echoes the soft /g/ sound of “gesture” (another example of alliteration as well). In both of these instances, the sound echoes work to connect the words and their meanings together. The first instance conveys a sense of loss as accruing in scale as well as speed. The second instance conveys the inextricably unified qualities of this “you” who the speaker loves and fears losing at the poem’s end.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “art,” “losing,” “isn’t,” “hard,” “to,” “master”
- **Line 2:** “so,” “many,” “seem,” “filled,” “intent”
- **Line 3:** “lost,” “loss,” “disaster.”
- **Line 4:** “Lose,” “something,” “day,” “Accept,” “fluster”
- **Line 5:** “lost,” “door,” “badly,” “spent”
- **Line 6:** “art,” “losing,” “isn’t,” “hard,” “master”
- **Line 7:** “practice,” “losing,” “farther,” “losing,” “faster”
- **Line 8:** “places”
- **Line 9:** “to,” “travel,” “will,” “disaster.”
- **Line 10:** “lost,” “my,” “mother’s,” “look,” “last”
- **Line 11:** “last,” “loved,” “went”
- **Line 12:** “art,” “losing,” “isn’t,” “hard,” “to,” “master”
- **Line 13:** “lost,” “two,” “cities,” “lovely,” “vaster”
- **Line 14:** “realms,” “owned,” “two,” “continent”
- **Line 15:** “it,” “wasn’t,” “disaster.”
- **Line 16:** “losing,” “joking,” “gesture”
- **Line 17:** “love,” “lied,” “It’s,” “evident”
- **Line 18:** “art,” “losing’s,” “not,” “too,” “hard,” “to,” “master”
- **Line 19:** “it,” “look,” “like,” “Write,” “it,” “like,” “disaster.”

ASSONANCE

“One Art” uses [assonance](#) throughout to create patterns of music, connect words together, and create meaning. For example, in the third stanza, long /a/ sounds connect the words “places” and “names,” linking these items in the list together at the level of their sounds; this assonance emphasizes the unity of the list, suggesting that all of these things are inextricably connected to each other and to their inevitable loss.

Similarly, in stanza 1, short /i/ sounds draw attention to the phrase “things seem filled with the intent”—the unity of sound here suggesting that “intent” itself.

Interestingly, the poem also *diverges* from assonance at key places where the reader might expect it. For example, the first lines of stanzas 2-6 are supposed to end with words that rhyme with the refrain words “master” and “disaster.” Yet in the case of stanzas 2 and 6, these lines end only with [slant rhymes](#)—first with the word “fluster,” and later with “gesture.” These words *echo* the [rhyme scheme](#) of the poem, by ending with an /er/ sound. Yet they *diverge* from the rhyme scheme in each word’s first syllable, by using a different vowel sound. In other words,

the poem *diverges* from its own assonant pattern even as it subtly diverges from the rhyme scheme.

A more local divergence from expected assonance occurs in stanza 3, when the speaker directs the reader to “practice losing farther, losing faster.” The words “farther” and “faster” are very similar; they are different in the middle consonants and also, crucially, in how the /a/ sound in each word is pronounced. This slight change works to emphasize the words’ similarity, as well as to enact what the poem is saying; as the speaker tells the reader to get used to losing more, and more quickly, the sounds of the poem become more compressed.

The poem, then, sets up patterns of assonance but also shifts away from them; in doing so, it conveys the fundamental tension in the poem, between the speaker’s apparent control over loss, and the felt consequences of the losses she describes. The music of the poem, like the poem as a whole, enacts both at the same time.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “art,” “hard,” “master”
- **Line 2:** “things,” “filled,” “with,” “intent”
- **Line 3:** “disaster”
- **Line 6:** “master.”
- **Line 7:** “practice,” “faster”
- **Line 8:** “places,” “names”
- **Line 9:** “disaster.”
- **Line 10:** “lost,” “watch,” “last, or”
- **Line 11:** “last”
- **Line 12:** “art,” “hard,” “master.”
- **Line 13:** “cities,” “vaster,”
- **Line 14:** “rivers,” “continent”
- **Line 15:** “miss,” “it,” “disaster.”
- **Line 18:** “art,” “losing’s,” “too,” “hard,” “to,” “master”
- **Line 19:** “like,” “Write,” “like,” “disaster.”

many things seem to actually have the intention and *will* to be lost sooner or later.

Fluster (Line 4) - “Fluster” means a state of agitation or confusion. The word, though, doesn’t suggest an *extreme* feeling of these things; rather, it refers to the relatively slight or brief irritation or confusion one might experience in the face of the things the speaker describes at this moment of the poem, like misplacing keys or wasting an hour of time.

Vaster (Line 13) - “Vaster” means greater or huger, in both physical size and importance.

Realms (Line 14) - “Realms” can refer literally to areas of land. Traditionally, though, the word has been used to refer to kingdoms or domains, such as the “realms” a king would be said to own. The word is relatively archaic and brings to mind the world of fairy tales and myths.

Gesture (Line 16) - A “gesture” is a physical movement or motion, often used to express a thought or feeling. Gestures are often characteristic or unique to people, such as the way someone might move their hands when they are speaking.

Shan’t (Line 17) - “Shan’t” is the contraction of the words “shall” and “not.” It is a fairly archaic word, that means, essentially, “will not,” but is slightly more formal.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

“One Art” is a [villanelle](#). This traditional form, which dates back to the Renaissance, includes a structure of five tercets (three-line stanzas) followed by a closing [quatrain](#) (a four-line stanza). A villanelle also contains two [refrains](#):

- The first and third lines of the first stanza are supposed to repeat, alternating, as the *closing* lines of the stanzas that follow.
- The poem then ends with **both** of these refrains as its last two lines.

Additionally:

- The *first* lines of stanzas 2-6 are supposed to rhyme, in their line endings, with the refrains.
- The *middle* lines of each tercet are supposed to rhyme with a sound that is *different* from the rhyming sound of the refrains.

We go into more depth on the [rhyme scheme](#) in the corresponding section of the guide. Here, let’s focus on how “One Art” both adheres to, and, in crucial ways, diverges from the villanelle more broadly. First, here’s how it fits the form:

- The poem is indeed written in five tercets and has



VOCABULARY

Master (Line 1, Line 6, Line 12, Line 18) - To “master” something means to become an expert or virtuoso in it; for example, painters like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci are considered “masters” in the art of painting. The word can also mean to overcome something, as when someone says that they have “mastered” their fears. Both meanings are relevant in “One Art”; the speaker implies that it is possible to overcome or gain a degree of control over loss. At the same time, through referring to the “art of losing,” she implicitly connects “mastery” over loss to artistic mastery and skill.

Intent (Line 2) - “Intent” can be both an adjective and a noun. If someone is said to be “intent” on their work, this means they are intensely focused on it. As a noun, “intent” refers to purpose and intention. In the poem, the speaker means that

an ending quatrain.

- It opens with a refrain—"The art of losing isn't hard to master"—that repeats in stanzas 2, 4, and 6.
- It contains a second repeating word, "disaster," which appears in the alternate stanzas, and both "refrains" repeat in the last two lines of the poem.
- There is a separate rhyme sound at the middle of each tercet ("intent," "spent," "meant," "went," "continent," "evident").
- Finally, the first lines of stanzas 2-6 end with words that are close, or [slant rhymes](#), to the refrain.

The poem's adherence to the form conveys what the speaker describes, suggesting that the speaker has, in fact, mastered loss, since she is able to bring all of these experiences within the tight control of the poem.

Yet the poem's divergences from its form are equally important to its meaning. A villanelle is supposed to repeat its refrains **exactly**. It is worth noting, then, that the poem's opening line, "The art of losing isn't hard to master," is repeated exactly until its final iteration, when it changes to, "the art of losing's not **too** hard to master." This slight shift reveals a slippage in the speaker's apparent control, suggesting that she hasn't "mastered" loss as much as she claims.

The poem also includes changes in its second refrain. The third line of the opening stanza is "to be lost that their loss is no disaster"; technically, according to the form, this line should repeat **exactly** in the alternating stanzas that follow. Yet here, the line changes to "None of these will bring disaster," then, "I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster," and finally, "though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster." These changes show that despite what the speaker insists about having mastered loss, in fact, each loss requires effort and work on the speaker's part to cope with it. The villanelle form, then, enacts both the speaker's attempts to master loss and grief *and* the struggle involved in doing so, suggesting that this struggle is ongoing.

Additionally, "One Art" has been read as working in the mode of an *Ars Poetica*, or a poem written *about* the art of poetry. The title, "One Art," connects the art the poem examines—the "art of losing"—to other arts, including poetry and the artfulness of the poem itself. Then, at the end of the poem, the speaker directs herself to "*Write it!*"—pointing to her own act of writing at the moment when she struggles to accept this final, potential, devastating loss of the beloved "you." This final command implies that for the speaker, writing might be some form of mastery—if she can write it down, the poem suggests, it isn't truly a disaster.

As an *Ars Poetica*, then, the poem can be read as connecting the idea of "mastering loss" to mastery in the craft of writing, suggesting that writing might be one way to cope with loss. But just like the "art of losing," which the poem implies must be learned and re-learned over time, the poem suggests that the

craft of writing must be constantly practiced and honed, if it is to help one deal with what is most difficult in one's life.

METER

"One Art" is written in loose [iambic](#) pentameter. Iambic pentameter is a type of meter in which each line has five metrical feet known as iambs; each iamb contains two syllables, the first being **unstressed** and the second **stressed**. For example, consider the second line of the poem:

so many things seem filled with the intent

The line contains a total of 10 syllables, alternating between unstressed and **stressed** beats.

Iambic pentameter is the traditional meter of Shakespearean [sonnets](#) and classical poetry. The poem's use of this meter—or perhaps what could be called its [allusion](#) to the meter, since its use of the meter is "loose," or inexact—connects the poem to this tradition and imbues "One Art" with authority and weight.

At the same time, the poem also diverges from the meter. For example, the first line of the poem reads:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;

This line sounds like iambic pentameter, because it is made out of feet that begin with **unstressed** and end with **stressed** syllables. However, in this case the line exceeds the pentameter length, as there is an extra, unstressed syllable at the end of the line. This is called a feminine ending. Because many of the rhyme sounds in the poem end with some variation of "aster," these feminine endings appear throughout in the first and third lines of each stanza. Take line 4:

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster

There are also lines that interrupt the iambic pattern altogether. Consider, for instance, line 14:

some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

Though it is possible to read degrees of stress differently here, this line clearly contains a different pattern. Such interruptions to the poem's iambic pattern make the poem sound natural and immediate, as though the speaker is addressing the reader directly in conversation. They also subtly enact the underlying tension in the poem, between the control of the form—and the "mastery" that this control implies—and the speaker's ongoing struggle to assert this control in the face of such overwhelming loss.

RHYME SCHEME

"One Art" follows the [rhyme scheme](#) of a [villanelle](#). It has two

rhyming [refrains](#): “The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” and the word “disaster.” (See the section on Form for how the poem both adheres to and diverges from a villanelle’s traditional use of refrains.) These refrains are typically referred to as A1 and A2 when analyzing a villanelle.

The first lines of stanzas 2-6 rhyme with those refrains. And the middle line of each tercet, as well as the second line of the closing [quatrain](#), rhyme with each other, with a *different* rhyming sound than that of the refrains. The closing quatrain then ends with the two refrains.

The rhyme scheme of the poem, then can be mapped like this, wherein A1 and A2 refer to the poem’s refrains, “a” refers to the lines that rhyme *with* those refrains, and “b” refers to lines that appear in the middle of each stanza and rhyme with *each other*:

A1 b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 A2.

For the most part, the poem is strict in its rhyme scheme. The two refrain words “master” and “disaster” rhyme with each other. And the last words of the middle lines of the tercets, as well as the second line of the closing quatrain, also rhyme: “intent,” “spent,” “meant,” “went,” “continent,” and “evident.” Additionally, the line endings of the first lines of stanzas 2-6, rhyme, for the most part, with the refrains: “faster,” “last, or,” and “vaster” can all be read as fairly straightforward rhymes with “master” and “disaster.”

It is notable, then, that the poem also resists this rhyme scheme. In stanza 2, the word “fluster” is *close* to rhyming with the refrains but is more like a [slant rhyme](#). Similarly, the word “gesture” at the end of the poem *echoes* the rhymes with “master” and “disaster,” but also clearly diverges from them. This final divergence is especially notable, since it is the moment in the poem when the speaker imagines losing the beloved “you”; it is as though, at this point, this imagined loss breaks through the poem’s form and the speaker’s apparent control.

Throughout, then, the poem’s rhyme scheme is part of how it follows the form of the villanelle, enacting its own artistic mastery even as the speaker describes her own “mastery” of loss. Yet in these slight moments of shift *away* from the rhyme scheme, the poem reveals its underlying meaning, suggesting that ultimately, the loss of love and of another human being is not something that can truly be controlled or even “mastered,” but only lived with, day to day.

throughout this guide to reflect this interpretation, but do note that the poem itself never offers specific details about the speaker’s identity.)

First, a number of the losses that the poem evokes match up with biographical details from Bishop’s own life. In fact, Bishop’s life was marked by loss from early childhood. Her father died when she was less than a year old, and her mother suffered a series of breakdowns and was institutionalized when Bishop was five. Bishop was sent to live with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia, and later with paternal relatives in Boston. By the time she was a teenager, then, Bishop had already lost both of her parents and multiple homes. The line that begins “I lost my mother’s watch”—which refers to a literal watch, but also, perhaps implicitly, to the speaker’s loss of her mother’s care and guardianship—and the reference to lost “places, and names” can be read as [allusions](#) to these experiences.

Later in the poem, the speaker’s remark that she has lost “some realms I owned, two rivers, [and] a continent” might seem [hyperbolic](#), or even surreal. But these references again likely allude to experiences in Bishop’s life. For 15 years, Bishop lived in Brazil with her then-partner, the architect Lota de Macedo Soares. The couple’s relationship, however, eventually deteriorated, and Soares died by suicide in 1967. In losing this relationship, Bishop also lost her life in Brazil, which had become her home; in effect, she lost an entire “continent” and what she might have experienced as the magical “realms” of this place and her home there.

Finally, Bishop wrote the poem at a time when she feared she was going to lose her last partner, Alice Methfessel—with whom, in fact, she spent the rest of her life. The poem imagines this potential loss as a final, shattering loss of huge proportions.

In addition to these biographical details, it is also important that within “One Art,” the speaker refers to her own act of writing the poem. In the final line, the speaker directs herself to “*Write it!*” This command can be read as a moment of excruciating acceptance, the speaker forcing herself to acknowledge the potential loss of the beloved “you.” Yet it also powerfully shows the poet in the act of writing, connecting the poet, Bishop, with the speaker, and making the speaker’s experiences even more palpable, immediate, and present.



SETTING

The setting of “One Art” is notably nonspecific; the speaker never indicates where she is during the course of the poem. Some clues, such as the “door keys” and the reference to “an hour badly spent,” as well as the speaker’s casual, contemporary-sounding tone, indicate that she inhabits a present-day world with present-day concerns, yet the poem’s physical setting remains out of sight.



SPEAKER

The speaker of “One Art” is anonymous within the poem. However, several elements of the poem suggest that the speaker is a representation of the poet, Elizabeth Bishop. (We’ve used female pronouns to refer to the speaker

In keeping with the poem's subject—loss—the settings that *are* evoked are settings that the speaker has lost: the “two cities, lovely ones,” as well as the “realms [...] two rivers, a continent.” It seems that the settings that are most present and palpable to the speaker are those that she no longer inhabits, but those whose loss she grieves.

The poem also suggests that the speaker has moved, over the course of her life, through multiple other settings—including the “places” mentioned in stanza 3, and the “three loved houses” in stanza 4. This implies that the speaker has lived in and lost homes, places, and even whole “realms” that she once considered hers, and that, in essence, she has no setting that is truly her own.

Yet even these actual settings are not evoked with much detail. In fact, it is not a setting of time or place but the speaker's beloved—the “you” who she fears losing at the poem's end—that is ultimately described with the most specificity in the poem, through the modifying “the joking voice, a gesture I love.” This suggests that for the speaker, it doesn't so much matter *where* she is now, as how she will cope with living in a world without this “you,” whose voice and gesture are evoked with such loving detail.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

“One Art” was included in Elizabeth Bishop's final collection of poetry, *Geography III*. Bishop was a scrupulous writer, often spending months on drafts, and prior to *Geography III* she published only four other collections of poems: *North & South* (1946); *A Cold Spring* (1955); *Questions of Travel* (1965); and *New and Uncollected Work* (1969). She also published translations from the Portuguese and Spanish.

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 friend [Robert Lowell](#), emphasized the personal 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 draw on her life, they often do so with a degree of distance, and convey their feeling in indirect or [ironic](#) ways, as in “One Art.” Her speakers, too, are often coded; for example, “[Crusoe in England](#)” (another poem in *Geography III*) draws on Bishop's loss of her home and relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares in Brazil. However, the poem recasts Bishop's personal experience in the fictional character of [Robinson Crusoe](#), who famously spent 28 years as a castaway on a remote island. “One Art,” too, is coded in certain ways, as the speaker describes her losses in such a way that they are

both intensely personal and could be interpreted in a variety of ways.

As a collection, *Geography III* goes the furthest in Bishop's work in the ways it draws on and articulates the experiences of her life. The book as a whole is considered the pinnacle of her work, in its precise, clear images and meticulous craft. Though in her life Bishop was less well known than Robert Lowell and others of her generation, she is now considered one of the great American poets of the 20th century—and a true master of her art.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911 and died in 1979. Her life and career, then, spanned the middle part of the 20th century; she published her first book, *North & South* in 1946, and her last, *Geography III*, in 1976, just a few years before her death.

This time frame is relevant to Bishop's work and to the reticence and restraint that critics often comment on in her poems. Although much of this restraint was an aesthetic choice—she rejected the overtly personal style of writing that predominated in Confessional poetry—it is also important to remember that Bishop was a woman, and a gay woman, writing at a time when gender and literary expectations for women were firmly entrenched.

To illustrate the ways in which these expectations might have been felt, consider [The New Yorker](#), which published every poem Bishop sent them—except for her 1955 poem “The Shampoo,” a more open love poem for another woman, in which the speaker describes washing her lover's hair. The coded quality of many of Bishop's poems, then, can, in a certain sense, be understood to reflect some of these realities of her historical context.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Bishop Archives at Vassar College](#) — Elizabeth Bishop attended Vassar College and her papers are now stored in Vassar's Special Collections. Visit the Vassar Archives & Special Collections website to learn more about Bishop's papers stored at the library. (https://specialcollections.vassar.edu/collections/manuscripts/findingaids/bishop_elizabeth.html)
- [Audio of “One Art” in Reaching for the Moon](#) — A 2013 Brazilian film, *Reaching for the Moon*, explores Bishop's life in Brazil and her relationship with the architect Lota de Macedo Soares. Although the movie misinterprets the poem “One Art” as about Bishop's relationship with Soares—the poem was, in fact, about Bishop's last partner, Alice Methfessel—the movie includes a recitation of the poem by the actress Miranda Otto, who played Bishop. In the scene, Bishop reads the poem to her friend Robert

Lowell. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkQf8ArHOCo>)

- [Biography of Elizabeth Bishop](#) – Learn more about the poet's life and work. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop>)
- [The Drafts of "One Art"](#) – Read more about Bishop's writing process and how "One Art" changed over the course of 17 drafts in this essay at Modern American Poetry. (<https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/one-art>)
- ["Elizabeth Bishop's Art of Losing"](#) – Read this article from The New Yorker to learn more about Bishop's life, including the circumstances that gave rise to the poem "One Art." (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/elizabeth-bishops-art-of-losing>)



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