Bishop
Themes and Style
Insights - Revelations

- The Fish - like her, it has fought to survive.
- The Prodigal - flashes of awareness of his situation but lacking true and lasting understanding
- First Death in Nova Scotia - child’s realisation of permanence of death
Filling Station - Somebody loves us all

In the Waiting Room - Child is overcome by realisation that she is just like everybody else
Childhood

- First Death in Nova Scotia - accurate portrayal of child’s viewpoint of death

- In The Waiting Room - vivid portrayal of child’s epiphany
Addiction

- The Prodigal - difficulty of fighting addiction even when hitting rock bottom

- Questions of Travel - addictive nature of travel - why do we insist on doing it?
Home - Exile

- The Prodigal - self-imposed exile but longing for home nonetheless

- Questions of Travel - do we travel in search of home? Endless and fruitless quest
The Fish - connection between poet and nature - despite differences - beauty of nature

Questions of Travel - lack of appreciation of nature by travellers but moments in which beauty breaks through
Style

- Precise descriptions
- Immediate: ‘Be careful with that match!’
- Conversational: ‘There are too many waterfalls here’
- Close observation leading to reflection
- Artist’s eye
- Interest in the natural world
- Striking metaphors and similes
- Humorous
“[Bishop’s] voice affirms, hesitates, corrects itself: the image comes clear to us as it came clear to her, a process of adjusting perception until the thing is seen. Or the feeling is released” - Michael Schmidt

Bishop asks us to ‘focus not on her but with her’
‘The poems as we read them are working something out’ - Niall MacMonagle

Bishop felt an outsider for much of her life and that is clear in her poetry. She writes indirectly rather than directly in ‘The Prodigal’. However, she is also capable of being explicitly autobiographical, as we see in ‘In The Waiting Room’: ‘you are an Elizabeth’
When discussing childhood, she captures the complexities, terror, panic and alienation of that period of her life.

‘Arthur’s coffin was / a little frosted cake, / and the red-eyed loon eyed it / from his white, frozen lake.’
What might you be asked?

- Deals with the familiar and the unusual and does so in an interesting and unusual way
- Effectively evokes the complexities of childhood and adulthood
- Is a curious and sympathetic observer
Description is never mere description; her poetry is a moral landscape, an emotional journey.

Has a plain style in which vivid images appear.

Painterly qualities in her work.

Poems explore but do not come to conclusions.

Asks us to focus not on her but with her.
Directions to examiners

Note that, in the case of each poet, the students have the freedom of choice in relation to the poems studied.

Note that there is not a finite list of any “poet’s themes and interests”.

Note that, in responding to the question set on any given poet, the students must refer to poem(s) they have studied but they are not required to refer to any specific poem(s), nor are they expected to discuss or refer to all the poems they have chosen to study.
In each of the questions in Prescribed Poetry, the underlying nature of the task is the invitation to the students to engage with the poems themselves.

** Expect appropriate quotations and suitable references to support statements.
** Reward fluency and a comprehensive response.
** Penalise for misspelling, poor grammar and lack of punctuation.
** Reward any valid discussion which is supported by appropriate quotations.
** Answers which are mere summaries of the poems merit a low C, at the very most.
“Bishop’s carefully judged use of language aids the reader to uncover the intensity of feeling in her poetry.”

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the above statement? Support your answer with reference to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.
Code UL for carefully judged use of language
Code IF for intensity of feeling
Material might be drawn from the following:

- precise language highlights memorable/emotional encounters with places/people/animals
- absorbing reflections/preoccupations revealed through a wide range of tones/moods
- clearly-defined personal experiences suggest hidden depths of emotion
- control of emotions and the presence/absence of moralizing about childhood, nature and death
- moments of insight/epiphany heightened by vivid detail, striking imagery/symbolism Etc.
“Bishop is a perceptive observer of the realities of life in poems that are often illuminated by deep and thought-provoking insights.”
Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to both the themes and language found in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.
Points may include:
– evocative exploration of realities of life, e.g. childhood, identity, death, passing of time, growth and the possibility of change, etc.
Language:
– her perceptions are illuminated by suggestive metaphors, memorable images, poignancy of her authentic poetic voice
– variety of subtle / lyrical tones (reflective, nostalgic, sympathetic, critical, wistful, ironic)
– precise language highlights memorable / emotional encounters with places, people, animals
– clearly-defined personal experiences suggest hidden depths of emotion
– control of emotions and the presence / absence of moralising about childhood, nature and death
– moments of insight / epiphany heightened by vivid detail, striking imagery / symbolism, etc.