

Elizabeth Bishop

"Manners"

*for a child of 1918*

My grandfather said to me  
as we sat on the wagon seat,  
"Be sure to remember to always  
speak to everyone you meet."

We met a stranger on foot.  
My grandfather's whip tapped his hat.  
"Good day, sir. Good day. A fine day."  
And I said it and bowed where I sat.

Then we overtook a boy we knew  
with his big pet crow on his shoulder.  
"Always offer everyone a ride;  
don't forget that when you get older,"

my grandfather said. So Willy  
climbed up with us, but the crow  
gave a "Caw!" and flew off. I was worried.  
How would he know where to go?

But he flew a little way a time  
from fence post to fence post, ahead;  
and when Willy whistled he answered.  
"A fine bird", my grandfather said,

"and he's well brought up. See, he answers  
nicely when he's spoken to.  
Man or beast, that's good manners.  
Be sure that you both always do."

When automobiles went by,  
the dust hid the people's faces,  
but we shouted "Good day! Good day!  
Fine day!" at the top of our voices.

When we came to Hustler Hill,  
he said that the mare was tired,  
so we all got down and walked,  
as our good manners required.

## Memory in Elizabeth Bishop's "Manners"

The subject of Elizabeth Bishop's "Manners" has to do with behaving well, but the theme of the poem has more to do with a way of life than with etiquette. The poem suggests that modern society has lost something important—a friendly openness, a generosity of spirit, a sense of decency and consideration—in its race towards progress. Although the narrative is simply told, Bishop enriches this poem about manners by developing an implicit theme through her subtle use of such elements of poetry as speaker, setting, rhyme, meter, symbol, and images.

The dedication suggests that the speaker is "a child of 1918" who accompanies his or her grandfather on a wagon ride and who is urged to practice good manners by greeting people, offering everyone a ride, and speaking when spoken to by anyone. During the ride they say hello to a stranger, give a ride to a boy with a pet crow, shout greetings to a passing automobile, and get down from the wagon when they reach a hill because the horse is tired. They walk because "good manners required" (line 32) such consideration, even for a horse. This summary indicates what goes on in the poem but not its significance. That requires a closer look at some of the poem's elements.

Given the speaker's simple language (there are no metaphors or similes and only a few words out of thirty-two lines are more than two syllables), it seems likely that he or she is a fairly young child, rather than an adult reminiscing. (It is interesting to note that Bishop herself, though not identical with the speaker, would have been seven in 1918.) Because the speaker is a young child who uses simple diction, Bishop has to show us the ride's significance indirectly rather than having the speaker explicitly state it.

The setting for the speaker's narrative is important because 1918 was the year World War I ended, and it marked the beginning of a new era of technology that was a result of rapid industrialization during the war. Horses and wagons would soon be put out to pasture. The grandfather's manners emphasize a time gone by; the child must be told to "remember" what the grandfather says because he or she will take that advice into a new and very different world.

The grandfather's world of horse and wagon is uncomplicated, and this is reflected in both the simple quatrains that move predictably along in an abcb rhyme scheme and the frequent anapestic meter (as we sat on the wagon [2]) that pulls the lines rapidly and lightly. The one moment Bishop breaks the set rhyme scheme is the seventh stanza when the automobile (the single four-syllable word in the poem) rushes by in a cloud of dust so that people cannot see or hear each other. The only off rhymes in the poem—"faces" (26) and "voices" (28)—are also in this stanza, which suggests that the automobile and the people in it are somehow off or out of sync with what goes on in the other stanzas. The automobile is a symbol of a way of life in which people—their faces hidden—and manners take a back seat to speed and noise. The people in the car don't wave, don't offer a ride, and don't speak when spoken to.

Maybe the image of the crow's noisy cawing and flying from post to post is a foreshadowing that should prepare readers for the automobile. The speaker feels "worried" about the crow's directionless: "How would he know where to go?" (16). However, neither the child nor the grandfather (nor the reader on the first reading) clearly sees the two worlds that Bishop contrasts in the final stanza.

"Hustler Hill" is the perfect name for what finally tires out the mare. There is no hurry for the grandfather and child, but there is for those people in the care and the postwar hustle and bustle they represent. The fast-paced future over takes the tired symbol of the past in the poem. The pace slows and the wagon passengers get down to walk, but the reader recognizes that the grandfather's way has been lost to a world in which good manners are not required.