

Questions on Exchanging Hats by Elizabeth Bishop:

1. What do hats and the “trying on” of hats (2) symbolize in the poem? What explanation might be suggested in the second stanza? Does the poem suggest a difference in the meaning and significance of the uncle’s and the aunt’s “experiment[s]” (line 8)? If so, how are they different?
2. Who is the “we” of the poem? How might you interpret the poem differently depending on how you identify the “we”? What does Bishop’s use of “we” (rather than “I” or “they”) contribute to the poem? Who are “they” in the final stanza of the poem?
3. Is there any significance in the fact that “unfunny uncles” (1) and “anandrous aunts” (9) are alliterative phrases? What importance is there in referring to these characters in the plural at the beginning of the poem but in the singular when directly addressed at the poem’s conclusion?