



The Fish

Elizabeth Bishop

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks

of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Vocabulary

- **Venerable** - old and respected
- **Barnacles** - molluscs that cling to the bottom of a ship or boat
- **Entrails** - guts or internal organs of a fish
- **Isinglass** - a jelly like substance found in some fish
- **Rosettes** - small flower like patterns
- **Peony** - bright red flower
- **Bilge** - dirty water collected in the bottom of a boat

Pre-reading task

- Have you ever caught a fish? What was the experience like?
- What expectations did the title create when you first read it?

Questions

1. How does the poet describe the moment when she caught the fish?
2. Does anything strike you as unusual about how the fish behaved when it was caught?
3. What is the poet's initial reaction to the fish?
4. How does she describe the fish?
5. What similes does she use to describe the fish?
6. 'Terrible oxygen', 'frightening gills', 'crisp with blood'. What do these quotes tell us about the poet's feelings or response to the fish?
7. The poet describes the fish's eyes in detail. Pick out some phrases she uses. Why do you think she concentrates on the eyes?
8. The poet then focusses on the fish's mouth. What details does she notice? What hints does it give us about its past?
9. What do you think the line - 'victory filled up the little rented boat' means?
10. Why do you think the poet let the fish go?

Overview

This deeply personal poem captures a moment of revelation for the poet. The setting and story of the poem are everyday and ordinary. The poet (a keen angler) has caught a large, 'venerable' fish which surprisingly has not put up much of a fight.

She is initially fascinated and somewhat revolted by the fish, describing in detail its body both inside and out. On closer inspection she focusses on the eyes and begins to identify with the fish on a human level.

Next she examines its mouth and realises that the line of old hooks stuck in its jaw are actually scars of battle and a record of the fish's previous escapes.

She realises that she has no need to keep and kill the fish - that 'victory filled up the little rented boat'.

Out of respect for the fish as a worthwhile adversary she lets it go to fight another day.

Key Points

- Deeply Personal
- Vivid Imagery
- Nature
- Moment of revelation
- Autobiographical
- Beauty in the ordinary

Word Bank

- Create a bank of words you might use when writing about the poet's work.
- Some are provided for you.
- Add your own.
- You can write definitions of words you don't know.
- You can pick out suitable quotes to go with the words.

• Intense	
• Melancholy	
• Graphic	
• Personal	
• Autobiographical	
• Descriptive	
• Evocative	
• Realistic	
• Thought provoking	
• Challenging	
• Detailed	

Past Questions

Honours

2019

2. Elizabeth Bishop

“Bishop makes skillful use of a variety of poetic techniques to produce poems that are often analytical but rarely emotional.”

Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the poems by Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

2017

4. Elizabeth Bishop

From the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop that you have studied, select the poems that, in your opinion, best demonstrate her skilful use of language and imagery to confront life's harsh realities.

Justify your selection by demonstrating Bishop's skilful use of language and imagery to confront life's harsh realities in the poems you have chosen.

2016

3. Elizabeth Bishop

“Bishop uses highly detailed observation, of people, places and events, to explore unique personal experiences in her poetry.”

Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop on your course.

2013

1. Elizabeth Bishop

“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.

2009

4. “**Elizabeth Bishop** poses interesting questions delivered by means of a unique style.”

Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Your answer should focus on both themes and stylistic features. Support your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems you have studied.

2006

3. “Reading the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop.”

Write out the text of a talk that you would give to your class in response to the above title.

Your talk should include the following:

- *Your reactions to her themes or subject matter.*
- *What you personally find interesting in her style of writing.*

Refer to the poems by Elizabeth Bishop that you have studied.

C

THE FISH (EXTRACT: LINES 45 – 76)

I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
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Elizabeth Bishop

1. (a) Identify three images used by the poet in this extract. Which one of your chosen images do you find the most appealing? Explain your answer. (15)
- (b) Do you find this extract from Bishop's poem "The Fish" joyful? Explain your answer with reference to the poem. (15)

2. Answer **ONE** of the following: [Each part carries 20 marks]

- (i) Imagine you are the poet, Elizabeth Bishop. You have been invited to talk to a Leaving Certificate class about the above extract from your poem, "The Fish". In your talk you should explain what takes place in the extract, and help the class to understand the meaning of the extract. Write the text of the talk you would give, demonstrating your understanding of the extract.

OR

- (ii) Do you find the above extract from "The Fish" easy or difficult to understand? Explain your response, supporting your answer with reference to both the language and the content of the extract.

OR

- (iii) Do you think the poet makes effective use of the natural world to teach readers a valuable lesson or lessons in the above extract? Give reasons for your response. Support your answer with reference to the extract from "The Fish".

1. (a) Based on your reading of this extract, which of the following statements do you think best describes the poet's response to the fish?
- The poet admires the fish.
 - The poet is disgusted by the fish.
 - The poet is fascinated by the fish.

Support your answer with reference to the poem. (10)

- (b) Based on what you have read in the above extract, what is your own response to the fish? Explain your answer with reference to the poem. (10)

- (c) Identify one comparison in the poem that you found to be unusual or surprising and explain why you found it to be so. (10)

2. Answer **ONE** of the following: [Each part carries 20 marks]

- (i) Do you admire Elizabeth Bishop's use of language in this poem? Explain your answer with reference to the poem, "The Fish". In your answer you may choose to refer to the extract provided or to the poem as a whole.

OR

- (ii) At the end of this poem, Bishop releases the fish, *And I let the fish go*. Based on your knowledge of the poem, explain why you think she did this. Support your answer with reference to the poem. In your answer you may choose to refer to the extract provided or to the poem as a whole.

OR

- (iii) You have been asked to make a short video to accompany a reading of this poem on YouTube. Describe the images, colours, music, sound effects, etc. that you would use as a background to the reading and explain your choices based on your knowledge of the poem. In your answer you may choose to refer to the extract provided or to the poem as a whole.

Mind Map

