

Decisions, Decisions

Many fishermen long to master, in some mythic battle, that one legendary, enormous fish that constantly evades capture. At the culmination of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Fish", the speaker makes an inscrutable decision to release just such a catch. Bishop never explicitly states the speaker's intentions or attitude toward the fish, and at first, it may seem as if the speaker releases the fish on a sudden impulse. However, on close attention to Bishop's language, it can be inferred that a gradual change in the speaker's attitude toward the fish and connection with the fish is what ultimately motivates her to release it. Bishop paints the speaker's perception of the fish as evolving over the course of the poem from decay to grotesque beauty and finally to tough and battle-scarred war-weariness.

As the poem opens, the speaker catches a "tremendous fish" (42). The fish is large enough that as she holds him out beside the boat he is only halfway out of the water. Initially, this size is all that preoccupies the speaker's mind. The fish hangs "a grunting weight" (42) and the speaker views him as mass and form, with no deeper qualities. She begins to examine his exterior, but there is no real connection yet. The fish is "homely" and "battered", and although the speaker may use the term "venerable", in context this word seems to emphasize the fish's physical age without any particular sentiment attached to it. Through this language Bishop portrays an attitude of casual revulsion, and it is not until the speaker notices a similarity between the fish and wallpaper that the attitude changes. First, the speaker uses the analogy to further the depiction of the

ugliness of the fish, describing his skin hanging “in strips like ancient wallpaper” (42). However, this comparison to wallpaper triggers something in the speaker’s mind and she begins to see the fish differently, marking the first major turning point, for Bishop repeats the wallpaper comment from a new perspective: the wallpaper now has “shapes like full-blown roses stained and lost through age” (42). Not only does this convey a burgeoning understanding that the fish has had experience and known loss, but also introduces the speaker’s blossoming view of strange beauty through the rose image.

The flower imagery continues strongly through the next section of the poem and beyond, reinforcing that the speaker is mesmerized. As the poem continues, this fascination grows as the speaker finds the bizarre beauty in the fish’s grotesque form. The speaker continues to notice the repulsive aspects of the fish, but this time she sees them in a different light. Bishop now begins to use language with positive connotations to describe ugly things. Barnacles are not clinging creatures, but “fine rosettes of lime”, a decoration; the sea lice are tiny and white, and the seaweed that trails from the fish’s underside is described as “rags of green weed”, a combination of vivid color and a contrasting texture of cloth’s softness (42). This language indicates the speaker’s dawning realization that there is more than meets the eye to this fish, the first step in her steady progress towards the decision to release it.

The next turning point comes with the speaker’s realization that the fish is dying from “the terrible oxygen” of the dry world (42). The awareness of the fish’s steady progress towards death draws her attention to his gills, and her reaction is that they are “frightening gills, fresh and crisp with blood, that can cut so badly” (42). This reaction adds yet another layer to her understanding of the fish – the fish “hadn’t fought at all”,

and in some respects prior to now she had seen him as conquered. Now, for the first time, she begins to see the potential power within him. This turns her mind from the strange beauty and opens it to imagine the visceral power of the fish, quite literally. Phrases such as the “dramatic reds and blacks of his shiny entrails” conjure up new visions of strength and boldness. “The coarse white flesh packed in like feathers” and “big bones and little bones” are even more detailed descriptions, and show that the speaker is using her imagination to examine the fish rather than merely observing the exterior, forging a connection (42). These descriptions also have connotations of density and its accompanying strength, but the vulnerability that lies in “feathers” and “little bones” serves as a juxtaposition between that strength and the fish’s impending death. In this way Bishop shows us that the speaker’s thought process is beginning to connect the fish’s death with his being, now seen as powerful, taking it to another level of depth.

Now that she has given thought to the power within the fish, the speaker’s view of the fish’s exterior becomes even more complex. Bishop takes a moment to reinforce the eerie beauty through flower imagery with describing his bladder as “a big peony” and making the decision to use “irises” in describing his eyes (42, 43). Having reaffirmed this, Bishop adds the speaker’s new perception of the fish by beginning to use harder, tougher words: the fish’s eyes are described by more materialistic words such as “tinfoil”, “lenses”, and “isinglass” (43). Her depiction of the “mechanism of his jaw” makes him seem like a machine, which brings with it the concept of durability, function, and power. He has without question become more than just mass now, and the speaker is examining the fish deeply enough that she can actually compare him to something else, something

she is familiar with in her own world, which makes her feel more connected to him and continues to contribute to changing her mind.

The next change of perspective builds on the speaker's new concepts of power and toughness. In the third major turning point, the speaker notices "five old pieces of fish-line" (43). These pieces of line pull the speaker further along the path of changing perception into a view of the fish as not only tough, old, and powerful, but a now-humanized combination of the three, as a battle-scarred warrior. It seems that the more the speaker reflects on these lines, described as "grim, wet, and weaponlike", the more significance they take, eventually seeming "like medals with their ribbons" (43). Furthermore, the lines are depicted as "grown firmly in his mouth" (43). This implies that the lines are part of him and now physical aspects of him are not only intriguing but actually characterize him. Several lines later, this is taken to its farthest point, in which the fish is given its first true human characteristic: "a five-haired beard of wisdom" (43). With this description, the speaker's transformation of point of view has reached its peak. Now, not only is the fish more than meets the eye, but the speaker actually is capable of seeing it in terms of human characteristics, indicating the depth of connection that she can feel with it.

Having established this evolution of vision and the formed connection, Bishop now subtly portrays how this change of perception leads to the speaker's final conscious realization that she cannot keep this fish. After the description of the beard is added, the speaker says that she "stared and stared", intimating a passage of time during which the wheels are turning in her head (43). Next the speaker comments, "victory filled up the little rented boat" (43). Something has changed now. She feels a connection with this

warrior fish, senses his victories, and they become part of her and suffuse her environment. Now that she has undergone this change of viewpoint completely, she gets a moment of deep clarity and understanding: “the oil had spread a rainbow around the rusted engine” (43). Like the fish, things that may seem ugly at first glance have taken on a new and unusual beauty in her eyes. The speaker has evolved from hauling a mass of dead weight halfway out of the water and idly examining its homeliness to looking at a thing that is strangely beautiful, filled with battle-scarred power, and that she can even feel a human connection with, and furthermore share a sense of victory with. Because of this change, the decision to let the fish go is a gradual process of realization rather than any sudden decision or impulse.

In this poem, Elizabeth Bishop makes the most of her beautiful grasp on the subtle implications that each word, carefully chosen, can have, as well as her capability of portraying minute observation and the resulting perceptions. She states none of these perceptions outright; she simply describes what her speaker sees and leaves it to the reader to decrypt the meaning of these tantalizingly mysterious descriptions, a difficult task given their subtlety. However, with close attention, patterns and sections begin to form out of the blended picture. Mere mass becomes terrible beauty; grotesque beauty leads to a realization of bold, raw power; power enables the perception of toughness; ultimately, all these combine in a characterization of an animal that that the speaker would never have imagined. This change in perception allows for a deep, if brief and bizarre, connection with something so seemingly unlike herself. And, having discovered a fleeting glimpse of a deeper truth in a rainbow-colored, if apparently ugly world, the speaker decides to let the fish go.

Works Cited

Bishop, Elizabeth. "The Fish." *Elizabeth Bishop: the Complete Poems*. New York City: Farrar, Starus and Giroux, 1983. 42-43.

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