

Comparing the fish and snake essay

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The relationship between man and animal is often explored in literary works, and poetry is no exception. In Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish," a man catches a fish, but after scrutinizing him carefully and noting the array of fish hooks already in the fish's jaw, the fisherman releases it back into the water. D. H. Lawrence's "Snake" depicts a man at a water trough, who soon finds a snake drinking with him. After considering what others would say about him not killing the snake, he finds he both respects the snake and misses it when he is gone. In both works, the speakers have feelings of resistance or distance at first toward the animals they interact with, but then, after seeing the dignity and majesty of these creatures, realize that they have more in common than they thought previously.

When the speakers first see their respective creature, they have preconceived notions about what is expected they should do about it. In "The Snake," Lawrence's narrator, after seeing the snake and admiring its shape, letting it drink from the water trough, considers what others expect him to do: "voices in me said, If you were a man / You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off" (Lawrence). The narrator is expected to do harm to the animal, killing the snake in the name of self-preservation. The narrator, at first, is afraid of the creature, he knows he "must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me." This feeling comes from the preternatural fear he has of snakes and other creatures, as well as the threat that society has told him the snake represents. "The voice of my education said to me He must be killed, For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous."

Over the course of the poems, however, these speakers understand new things about the animals, finding a majesty that they did not recognize before in other creatures. Lawrence's snake-handler sees the snake not as a threat, but as a companion, thanking it for deigning to come " like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough / And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless, / Into the burning bowels of this earth?" (Lawrence). The narrator starts to see a certain nobility in the nomadic nature of the animal; once the snake is done drinking, it " looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air" and slowly exit. From this, the narrator knows that the snake sees him as no threat, and the snake is no threat to the man, either.

As for Lawrence's man at the water trough, he goes through many more swings and roundabouts of emotion before his interaction with the snake is done. After understanding that he did not want to kill the snake, he feels guilt for not doing what society (and manhood) expected him to do, and meekly throws a log at the snake as it departs. It spooks the snake, just outing the speaker as a coward. The speaker regrets it right afterwards: " I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act! / I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education" (Lawrence). From that point, he realizes that he has upset his inspiration, damaged the spiritual connection he had with the snake out of pettiness. Since he " missed [his] chance with one of the lords / of life," he understands now that he needs to be more honest and secure with himself. The speaker recognizes his own humiliation at the hands of the snake; he is pathetic and frightened, willing to strike out at a majestic creature because of a false sense of masculinity if he were to kill it and 'prove himself to be a man'.

This same process happens for the protagonist of "The Fish," who is a fisherman who catches the titular creature. The fisherman, after catching the fish, knows that he is to keep the fish and eat it, something the fish presumably would not want. However, despite what the fisherman typically thinks of fish, "He didn't fight. / He hadn't fought at all." (Bishop). He calls the fish 'tremendous,' clearly admiring its size, and doing so out of a sense of personal pride - as he is fishing in order to get food and/or engage in sport, he feels good about himself at first that he caught the fish. Seeing the fish only as game, the speaker initially pays it no mind, not thinking about it as a creature with desires and agency at first.

The fisherman notices a strange defiance in the fish, since it appears as though the fish pays him no mind. The fish's eyes "shifted a little, but not / to return my stare. / --It was more like the tipping / of an object toward the light" (Bishop). From this point, the fisherman starts to pay a bit more attention to the fish - seeing the huge number of hooks that are in the fish's mouth, the fisherman concludes that the fish is a fighter, something that struggles fiercely for its life and has won numerous times against people just like him. That powerless fish suddenly takes on a frightening, threatening quality: "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" (Bishop).

The fisherman's thoughts about himself change along with his perception of the fish. The fisherman finds himself feeling pride at his catching of this elusive fish who, from the many fish hooks of snapped lines that had come

before, seemed to be quite the master at evading capture. " I admired his sullen face, the mechanism of his jaw," says the fisherman, noting the age and the wisdom in the fish's face and identifying with it himself as something he should respect. The fact that the fisherman was able to catch this majestic escape artist makes him feel great: " I stared and stared / and victory filled up / the little rented boat" (Bishop). He also denotes the destitute circumstances by which he mastered this defiant fish - with a 'little rented boat' that had plenty of bilge, oil spills, and a rusted engine and bailer. He was likely without a lot of money, and he did what many others who likely had more resources simply were not able to do - catch this prize fish that had escaped captivity five times previous. Upon understanding the accomplishment he made that day, he lets the fish go, feeling that it deserved another chance to live considering how hard it had fought up to that point.

In conclusion, both of these poems have interesting things to say about the relationship between man and nature. In Elizabeth Bishop's " The Fish," the man spends his time catching any old fish that comes across, but when he recognizes the battle-weary and accomplished fish that he catches in the poem, he decides to respect the fish's bravery, and let it go. In DH Lawrence's " Snake," a man learns to respect the snake who comes to visit his water trough like a companion, but his own doubt and his insecurity about being a man costs him that companion. These respective animals show a sophistication and strange dignity, showing both the best and worst of the humans who interact with them. The fisherman learns humility and respect, while the man at the water trough discovers his own pettiness and

lack of respect for himself. Both of these poems show individuals who either overestimate or underestimate the animals they are dealing with, seeing them as things to kill; however, further inspection of the fish and the snake show them to be smart, agile, wise and tough creatures that should be respected. As a result, the speakers let go their respective animals, feeling either shame or respect at their actions toward the creature.

Works Cited

Bishop, Elizabeth. " The Fish." .

Lawrence, DH. " Snake." . 1923.