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Fishes' Cry: An Analysis of "The Fish Are All Sick" by Anne Stevenson Essay Sample

The poem, "The Fish Are All Sick" by Anne Stevenson, speaks a lot about the relationship between humans and nature, specifically the marine ecosystem, in the world today. Looking closely at the title of the poem, it seems that the poem is fictional - we usually hear fishes getting sick in fictional literary pieces. In addition to that, the use of the word "all" is an exaggeration of the dramatic situation of the poem - fishes are all sick. And the fact that it goes on to saying that whales are dying (an irony - whales are dying but inferior creatures such as fishes are only sick) aggravates the situation.

The first line of the poem already introduces the conflict. The phrase "great whales dead" further exaggerates the dramatic situation of the poem.

However, being one who lives in the modern world, one will think twice about this statement since at this point in time, it is highly possible for all fishes to get "sick" due to the modern advancement of the world. In line with that, this ambiguity connotes a dichotomy of feelings - an ambivalence as to how humanity should act. Should humanity recognize the graveness of this issue (fact), or is it an exaggeration of environmentalists' sentiments (hyperbole)?

Notice that the poem is able to produce this effect only because of humanity's incognizance of the present condition of nature. Otherwise, it would be clear as to whether the first line of the poem is a hyperbole or a statement of fact.

Lines 2 to 7 describe two different classes of men in relation to their roles in the environment. Lines 2 to 5 pertain to the people virtually living near the

bodies of water, with most of them being fishermen. The phrases " sea men" and " low houses" denote poverty. The villages along the coast being described as " stranded" and like " ornamentals" represent the " helplessness" of the people - that is, if they are aware that the " fishes are all sick", they refuse to enter into an altruistic stance. Being described as ornamentals like " pearls on the fringe of a coat," the villages, specifically the villagers, are doing nothing about the situation. Also, the use of the word " ornamental" also suggests how people value material things over the aquatic life, turning the sea into a capitalist resource rather than a gift from God. As the fifth line goes, they opt to " turn their low houses away from the surf."

On the other hand, lines 6 to 7 pertain to the rich, suggested by the words " big glass views" and " begonia beds." These people not only ignore the current environmental crises, but also worsen the situation. The word " add" in line 7 implies buying or purchasing marine products with the word " begonia beds." Ironically, these people who may be considered as the smarter group of people are the ones worsening the scenario!

Between lines 7 and 8 is a blank line which symbolizes the gap between human and nature. It is not a physical gap, but an imaginative division made by humans. At present, the relationship between human and nature seems unilateral - humans benefiting from nature and never the other way around. When nature slowly deteriorates due to human actions, this imaginary gap starts to form at the back of the humans' minds. And this gap finally materializes when humans do not benefit from a species (e. g. a plant or a

tree) anymore. Because of this compartmentalization of nature, humans will eventually suffer in the long run as resources slowly get depleted.

This gap is also emphasized by the first word in line 8, " water." In the first stanza, the author speaks about the role of men in preserving or destroying nature. As mentioned in my earlier text - humanity refuses to enter into an altruistic stance, and the line " water keeps to itself" just provokes a certain air of negligence. Not only does helping the environment become perfunctory, humanity assumes that the environment refuses to be helped, since it is virtually closing its borders and is reluctant to reach out. It is atypical to human nature - to say something to appease the guilt of negligence inside.

The effect of this compartmentalization is stated in lines 9 and 10 - " white lip after white lip/ curls to a close on the littered beach." White lips are the waves coming from the sea. Notice that the use of the word " white" is contrasted to the word " littered" in the next line (white or cleanliness against black or pollution), giving more emphasis and impact to the pollution. The litter found on the beach suggests two things: literally the pollution coming from humans, or dead fishes that are carried by the waves to the seashore. Either ways, this line further emphasizes that the marine ecosystem is suffering, and humans are the cause of this suffering.

Anne uses the word " something" (not naming what the " something" is) in the 11th line for two possible reasons. First, this " something" is already understood through context. In the first stanza, images of humans are

repeated through out the lines. Humans are ignorant if not, unaware, of what crisis the environment is going through. Anne blames the humans for letting the great whale die and the fishes get sick. On the other hand, not explicitly stating that she is pertaining to humans somehow reduces the guilt the readers may feel. Unlike stating it as " humans are sicker and blacker than fish," there is less emotional impact. It also lessens the guilt the readers may feel by replacing human with some " thing."

Anne plays with the length of the vowel sounds throughout the play - " fish" and " sick" against " great whales", " keeps" against " lip", " littered" against " beach"... However, there is a sudden shift from long vowel sounds to a short vowel sound in the last line, specifically " closing its grip." The repetition of this phrase, as well as the sudden change of vowel sound, produces a ghastly effect. Notice also that Anne uses the consonant combination " ckr" in the words " sicker" and " blacker" to stress the seriousness of the whole poem.

As a conclusion, the title, as well as line 1, is a hyperbole. The title and line 1 being a hyperbole help in achieving the main purpose of the poem - to evoke into humans the sense of urgency, that the environment is still suffering because of his actions! But the irony also lies in here - even though humans are already aware of the situation (the fact that humans are able to exaggerate the nature's call for help), they continue to ignore this. Will we still continue to be deaf to the fishes' cries?