

# Oppression and opportunity: the fish



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In our modern American society, oppression is something that still exists and has been detrimental to people, hurting their lives. The process of fishing can symbolize how regular people fair versus the clutches of oppression they cannot control. For a lot of people, opportunity can be very scarce. Through Bishop's depiction of fishing, she uses powerful visual and kinesthetic imagery, creative metaphors, and long stanzas to show clutches of oppression. Bishop also manipulates the diction of words to make the fish seem beautiful, but it is not. Throughout this poem, Elizabeth Bishop uses extreme imagery about how fishing works. With this imagery, we can get a good idea of what oppression can do to the regular person in society.

When there is oppression, and lack of opportunity in someone's life, it can be crippling and cause hopelessness. Hopelessness can be a metaphor for what happens when a hook becomes fastened into a fish's mouth. " He didn't fight/He hadn't fought at all. /He hung a grunting weight/battered and vulnerable/and homely" (Bishop, 767). When a fish has been hooked, there is very little chance of escape. If the fish attempts to escape from the hook, the pain is extreme, and the chance of escaping the hook becomes unlikely. So, by the time the fish has been pulled into the boat, hopelessness engulfs their thought process. That's why when Bishop pulls the fish up the side of the boat, it just dangles there. When someone is experiencing the deep pits of oppression, there is a sense to just give up because there is no escape.

When Bishop describes the fish, she uses very deep imagery in her language that paints a very detailed image of the fish. Bishop notes, " While his gills were breathing in the terrible oxygen/ -the frightening gills/fresh and crisp with blood/that can cut so badly" (Bishop, 767). The way she describes this

fish is very vivid and has a negative connotation. The fish's gills were "fresh and crisp with blood/that can cut so badly" showing the fish could be hurt from the process of reeling the fish in. That line alone, gives a very powerful and negative image of the fish. If you were to read that line as a description of the fish, you would probably think this is a killer fish. Although, it is just a normal fish that has been stabbed with a hook. So, from those lines that is what caught the eye when the description of the fish came into play.

Throughout the poem, Bishop uses changes in diction to describe the fish, which can give off different meanings of what the fish is like. Bishop explains, "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." It is interesting the way Bishop describes the outer appearance of the fish. When she first references the coating of barnacles on the fish, she uses the word "speckled" to describe the layer of barnacles. Barnacles are a crustacean that attaches to the outer cover of a fish and feed from the water. They are a parasite that lives in the ocean, so they are not pretty in any way. The word speckled a lot of times is used to describe something that could be "pretty." People can use the word speckle if they are talking about a nice pattern of colors. In this case, we are talking about a gross crustacean who lives on the skin of fish and feeds off of them. Also, it is very interesting how she uses "fine rosettes of lime" to describe what was on the fish. The way it is worded, it seems like something elegant or clean is hanging off it. But, from the context of the fish, it could be a lily-pad or a bunch of weeds hanging off the fish, which would not have been considered a "fine rosette." In faces of evil the oppressor can have the final power over

life and death. Here, Bishop is in that power threshold with the fish.

McFarland points out, " Death is at the edges of Bishop's poem if only because the speaker has the power of life or death over the fish" (McFarland, 1982). Bishop may look at the catch as a victory, but in this situation, she is the deciding factor between life or death. From the details of the fish, it has already seemed to be a battered one. Bishop describes, "-if you could call it a lip-/grim, wet, and weapon like/ 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" (Bishop, 768). This fish has already been fooled multiple times by the process of fishing. The fisherman baits the hook so the fish believes it to be food. This happens a lot with the beginning of oppression, empty promises can lead to damage at the end. This fish had five big hooks already jarred in his mouth from other incidents. In this poem, Bishop dives so deep into the metaphors about the fish that she loses her grip on the reality of the fish.

In " The Fish," Bishop gets a big sense of joy from catching this fish.

Throughout her poem, she uses very provocative metaphors to discuss the beauty of the fish. But, at times in the poem her diction towards the description of the fish drifts from the reality of it. Doty points out, " People slip out of the story they're living all the time; daily life is full of small moments of rupture, disappearance, and interiority. But sometimes these experiences are more lasting, and more profound. The woman in the boat holding her catch has floated out of causality; her encounter with otherness restructures her sense of the world" (Doty, 2010). For the most part, the fish was not a beautiful creature. Right from the start of the poem, she tells you

that she caught a “ tremendous fish.” From that sentence, you might believe that the fish Bishop caught was a beautiful catch she belonged on the wall. Bishop went from describing the outer part of the fish in detail, then to the inside of the fish, and back to the outside again (Doty, 2010). By doing this, the format of the poem was very short lines but were all grouped into one giant stanza. By formatting the poem this way there is a story being told throughout these short lines. Bishop uses the strategy of one long stanza to create a build up to the climax of the story, to keep the reader engaged. She uses short powerful sentences to really try to persuade you this fish is incredible. Catron elaborates, “ Bishop conveys this empathy to the reader through dense and exacting descriptive phrases replete with similes and metaphors” (Catron, 2002). Bishop builds the story throughout this poem about the fish being beautiful. When you read the poem at first, there is a feeling of a rising action like there will be a big climax at the end of the work. The deeper she dove into the physical problems of the fish, the more guilt she seemed to feel. “ Ashamed and horrified by the abuse she has inflicted on the fish, she experiences a dramatic change of heart” (“ Overview: “ The Fish”). When this change of heart seems to occur, is when the entire story changed. She was praising this fish like a trophy win, but after seeing the full fish, and after the whole story build up, she ends up letting the fish go.

Finally, in our modern American society, oppression is something that still exists and has been detrimental to people and has hurt their lives. The process of fishing can represent how regular people fair versus the clutches of oppression they cannot control. Opportunity can come to people in all shapes and forms. For a lot of people though, opportunity can be scarce and

impossible to get. Bishop uses powerful imagery, short sentences, and long stanzas to show a build up as the story progresses to sell the beauty of the fish.

## **Works Cited**

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