

Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish": A Psychoanalytic Reading

Elizabeth Bishop's speaker in "The Fish" describes her catch— "battered and venerable and homely"—with a mixture of sympathy and bravado. This fish, with his hook-filled mouth, emerges as a symbol of pain, an occasion for the speaker to confront that which is normally repressed and unseen. But with her elaborate, lyrical description, the speaker can be read as an artist who is able to translate this anguish into a "five-haired beard of wisdom." As she celebrates her mastery over the fish, the poem ends triumphantly with the paradoxical suggestion that creativity is produced through destruction: suffering, Bishop concludes, can be the impetus for the imagination.

Bishop's speaker first describes the fish as a relic, a living diary upon which layers of meaning are physically inscribed. Coated with relics of the sea, he is "speckled with barnacles" and "infested with tiny sea lice." In the fish, the speaker sees not only the vestiges of the sea, but also the traces of a domestic, human scene. She characterizes him in familial terms: his brown skin is like "ancient wallpaper" in "shapes like full-blown roses/stained and lost throughout the ages."

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker, solitary and introspective, observes with cool detachment her fish "beside the boat/half out of water." While the fish is initially only partly visible, he soon emerges for the full scrutiny of the speaker and her reader. Though "tremendous" and "of a grunting weight," the fish remains passive and resigned; unresponsive to her gaze, the fish becomes a spectacle that she may probe and interrogate. She describes each crevice of his body, providing a detailed inventory of each physical attribute:

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.

Suddenly viewing the copious hooks in the fish's mouth, his gruesome lip "grim, wet, and weaponlike," the speaker is filled with admiration—and then an overwhelming sense of personal triumph. She realizes her unprecedented success: "I stared and stared/and victory filled up/the little rented boat."

It is her vivid imagination that allows her to confront the fish's grizzly visage, punctured with five hooks and sundry broken fish-lines. Each thread of line suggests also the narrative "threads" of the past, each one another story of anguish. The speaker casts the grim mementos as "medals with their ribbons/frayed and waving,/a five-haired beard of wisdom." She boldly holds the fish where he is "breathing in/the terrible oxygen," but once she does so is free to release him.

Bishop evokes the speaker's moment of victory over both the fish and the repressed "threads" he symbolizes—events that are left unexplained in the poem—in the patterns made by the oil in the water, an unlikely image of beauty. Yet it is in this oil that the speaker sees a rainbow, also the subject of her final exaltation at the end of the poem.

“The Fish” concludes on a note of bittersweet celebration as the speaker drops the fish back into the water; filled with oil that is both toxic and beautiful, it suggests a world that is dangerous as well as rich in possibility. The fish, like the speaker, survives in such a world of threat. Her concluding cry—“rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!”—is an insistence on the ability to create as a means to endure.