

Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" is a seemingly simple poem about a speaker who catches a fish, scrutinizes it, and lets it go. Yet the richness of the imagery in this poem cause us to evaluate it as a deeper poem that is about transformation, most specifically about the speaker's gradual transformation from near indifference to the fish to someone who appreciates its power and beauty in an ecstatic, almost mystical way. As a poem about the interaction between humanity and nature, it reveals the complexity of power and beauty within nature and the mystery that resides there, even in modern times.

The speaker's tone shifts over the course of the poem. At the beginning, her lines are short and relatively nondescriptive: "He didn't fight. / He hadn't fought at all" (5-6). But as the speaker begins to examine the fish more carefully, her language becomes more descriptive, and she indulges in more metaphors and similes: "I looked into his eyes / which were far larger than mine / but shallower, and yellowed, / the irises backed and packed / with tarnished tinfoil / seen through the lenses / of old scratched isinglass" (34-40). By the end, she is lost in a reverie: "everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" (74-75). What brings about such a decisive transformation?

The speaker's transformation is based on her own perspective, not any change in the fish itself. The fish doesn't do anything in the poem other than hang from a hook and try to gulp "terrible oxygen" (23) from the air. Yet the speaker gradually develops an appreciation for this creature, who is undeniably powerful, experienced, and beautiful despite the fact that it didn't put up a struggle and at first appears no more attractive than brown wallpaper (8-12). The speaker is "filled up" with "victory" (66) when she realizes that the fish has survived at least five other human conquests. Yet this victory is complicated: It is not merely the powerful sense of having done what many other fishing enthusiasts have failed to do; it is also an appreciation of the glory of nature, its power and its beauty. The fish is tremendous (1) in every sense by the end of the poem, so the speaker lets it go rather than keeps it as a trophy. What she has gained is nothing so common as a fish, but rather a keener vision that allows her to transform her rusty, rented boat into nature's most beautiful spectacle—a rainbow.

On a fundamental level, this poem is a twist on the classic fishing story. The big one that got away has never been the subject of this kind of contemplation before. It is both repulsive and beautiful, powerful and powerless, terrifying and terrified. It embodies nature in that it is mysterious, and it functions as the basis for imaginative reverie. It is ancient yet alive, and it causes the reader to contemplate nature deeply and to scrutinize it closely, just as the speaker does.