

The Fish



SUMMARY

The speaker remembers one day catching a huge, amazing fish and holding him up out of the water, hook still in the fish's mouth. The fish didn't struggle but just dangled there next to the boat looking beat-up, ancient, grand, and ugly all at once. His skin was peeling and raggedy as old, brown wallpaper, with blotches on it that looked like faded brown roses. He was all covered in growths and parasites, and strips of seaweed hung off his body. While he tried to breathe the air, which wasn't suited for him, through his sharp, dangerous, bloody gills, the speaker imagined his innards: his white, feathery flesh; all his different bones; his bright red and black guts; and his flower-like swim-bladder. Gazing into the fish's eyes, the speaker saw that they were huge, round, and shallow, and looked as if they were stuffed with old tinfoil, seen through a thin, scratched-up translucent coating. The fish's eyes moved a little, not looking at the speaker, just tilting a bit in the light. While admiring the fish's big heavy moody face, the speaker spotted five ancient, imposing fishhooks firmly embedded in the fish's blunt lower lip. There were still bits of broken fishing line dangling from these hooks, like old medals of honor, or like a wise old man's beard. The speaker just kept staring at this fish until it felt like all the parts of the rusty old boat were being filled up with a sense of victory, a feeling that spread over everything like the puddle of oil in the bottom of the boat, until everything the speaker saw seemed to be covered in rainbows. And then, the speaker released the fish back into the water.

speaker [personifies](#) the fish from the get-go, calling it "him." And this "him" has a personality: the speaker notices that it doesn't fight and that it seems to have lived a long, full life. While people might be inclined to see animals as plain old trophies (or as dinner!), the poem suggests, it's hard not to also appreciate that animals are also alive and aware, living their lives just as people do.

That sense of empathy only gets stronger as the fascinated speaker examines the fish. The fish seems utterly alien at first: its skin hangs in rags, it has a "grim, wet, weaponlike" jaw, and it's encrusted with barnacles. But even as the speaker looks at all the ways that the fish seems like a strange sea monster, the speaker relates those peculiar qualities to human things.

The fish's eyes, for instance, are "far larger" than the speaker's—but by comparing its eyes to theirs, the speaker subtly points out that eyes are a feature they share! The fish's body also makes the speaker think of "wallpaper" and "tinfoil," homey, human-made objects. Even the ways in which the fish is weird feel curiously familiar to this speaker.

In identifying with the fish, the speaker begins to feel a strange respect and empathy for it—a respect that comes to a climax when the speaker realizes that the fish has five fishing hooks embedded in its lip. Noticing this, the speaker begins to feel an overwhelming sense of "victory." But the victory they feel isn't their own victory over this fighter of a fish: it's the *fish's* victory, its survival against all the odds.

When the speaker finally "let[s] the fish go," they seem to be sharing in that victory, full of empathy for the being whose life they've briefly touched. But they're also relinquishing their human dominance, granting the fish real respect as a fellow creature of the world. By seeing this battered, ragged, grotesque old fish as a beautiful and fascinating equal, the speaker also gains a flash of "rainbow"-colored insight into the loveliness of life itself: the speaker is as much a part of the struggle and beauty of existence as the fish is.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-76



THEMES



HUMANITY'S KINSHIP WITH NATURE

The speaker of "The Fish" is at first just proud of their "tremendous" catch when they haul an ancient fish up out of the water. But while looking at that fish more closely and taking in all its strangeness, the speaker also starts to feel a strange kinship with the animal—a kinship that leads the speaker to eventually let the fish go. While animals might seem fascinatingly weird and alien, this poem suggests, it's also possible for humans to feel deep, boundary-crossing empathy and respect for them. The poem illustrates how that empathy can be humbling, reminding people that, even if they might be used to seeing themselves as distinct from animals, they're really in the same boat: animals and humans alike take part in all the mess, struggle, and beauty of life.

Displaying this amazing catch, the speaker immediately sees the huge fish they've hauled in as more than a prize. The



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-9

*I caught a ...
... and homely.*

From its very first line, "The Fish" gleams with relish and mystery. The speaker recalls catching not simply a *big* fish, but a

"tremendous" fish—a word that suggests the fish was both huge and spectacular. This was a fish to remember, in other words, a fish to tell stories about. And the rest of the poem will indeed be the story of this speaker's encounter with that tremendous fish.

The speaker's first feeling about this fish is surprise. The fish doesn't seem to be struggling to get free, but hanging heavily from the line, looking "battered and venerable" as some grand old man. And, indeed, the speaker [personifies](#) the fish, calling it "him"—already seeming to feel not just pride in having caught such a monster, but connection and fellow-feeling with this peculiar creature.

As it will turn out, it's not just the speaker that catches the fish, but the fish that catches the speaker. Right away, the speaker seems fascinated by the fish: its strangeness snags the speaker's attention just as firmly as the speaker's hook holds "fast in a corner" of the fish's mouth.

As the poem's [free verse](#) takes shape, forming one long column of short lines, it reflects the speaker's intense, minute attention to all this fish's details. This will be a poem about the "tremendous" things that can happen when one really stops to look hard at the natural world.

LINES 9-15

*Here and there ...
... lost through age.*

As the speaker holds up the "tremendous fish" to admire it, the poem's vivid language suggests that the speaker is already fascinated, paying such careful attention to the fish that it's as if the speaker never saw a fish before.

Take a look at the [similes](#) and [repetitions](#) in these lines:

his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:

That repeated simile makes it seem as if the speaker is doubling down on that first impression upon getting a closer look: "It's like wallpaper—yes, just like wallpaper!"

The [imagery](#) of that wallpaper, with its blotchy, faded dark-brown roses, also reminds readers that this is a truly "venerable" fish—a real old-timer, whose skin might make readers think of the decor in a house that hasn't changed in a hundred years.

This imagery is also just plain vivid: readers can clearly see the fish's vague, blotchy brown spots and its weathered, ragged skin.

These lines begin a pattern that will continue all through the poem: the marriage of the strange and the everyday. By describing this fish in terms of ordinary dingy wallpaper, the

speaker manages to make both wallpaper and fish skin seem lively and weird. It's the *connection* between those two different things that brings the images to life.

And that reflects exactly what's happening between the speaker and the fish! Linked to the fish by hook and line, the speaker is beginning to really *connect* with the fish—not by treating it like another person, but by seeing it for its own fishy self.

LINES 16-21

*He was speckled ...
... weed hung down.*

Looking even closer at the fish's skin, the speaker observes that it's got whole colonies of other life attached to it. Listen to the way the speaker's [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) reflect the bustling world of all these little clinging creatures:

[...] speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed [...]

All these dense patterns of sound suggest that the fish is so clustered with barnacles, lime, lice, and seaweed that he's a little ecosystem in himself. And they give readers the sense that they're looking closer and closer at this fish's endlessly complex body right alongside the speaker.

"Looking closer and closer," in fact, seems to be a developing theme here! The speaker's minute attention to this fish just keeps revealing more detail. No matter where the speaker looks on this "tremendous" fish's body, there's something new to see.

Just as in the [simile](#) that compared the fish's skin to wallpaper, there's something both grungy and splendid about the fish's infestations:

- On the one hand, the speaker is describing a bunch of parasites.
- On the other, the speaker is describing a world of color and growth and detail. That "lime" isn't just encrustations, but fine "rosettes" like blooming flowers or medals of honor. And even the [metaphorical](#) "rags of green weed" feel as if they might be the remains of an elegant suit.

In other words, the speaker is seeing the beauty in the fish just as it is—not going, "ew, lice!" or thinking that this fish must have been better-looking when it was a lot younger, but delighting in all the minute detail of this battered old beast's scaly skin.

LINES 22-26

*While his gills ...
... cut so badly—*

The speaker notices the fish's gills struggling with the "terrible oxygen" of the open air. The fact that this air is "terrible" to the fish reminds readers that the fish is ultimately a creature who's very different from the speaker. The fish can't breathe above the water, and something that is so essential to human life actively hurts this animal.

Noticing the fish's struggle to breathe makes the speaker see with a wary fisher's eye, noticing the "frightening gills [...] that can cut so badly." A lot of bony ocean fish have razor-sharp gills; fishers know to avoid them because they can slice right through a finger.

Here, the speaker both sees the fish as a potentially dangerous creature and feels that it's in pain as it struggles to breathe. Both fish and humans, these lines thus suggest, are alike in that they're vulnerable (albeit in different ways).

The fish is still [personified](#) here, too, still a "him": even as the speaker notices all the ways in which the fish is strange and alien up here above the water, the speaker also thinks of the fish as a fellow creature, just another sufferer in a tough world.

Listen to the way the speaker's [enjambment](#) here evokes the way they're relating to this fish:

While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen

The break between "in" and "the" here happens in a place where one wouldn't usually pause in everyday speech—a pause that evokes the fish's strained gasps.

LINES 27-33

*I thought of ...
... a big peony.*

The fish's gills seem to form a doorway, inviting the speaker in to consider the animal's innards. The vivid [imagery](#) here suggests that, while this fish's outsides are "homely" and battered, its insides are still fresh and lively. That, in turn, also reminds readers that a lot of hooked fish end up on the dinner table: catch of the day!

The speaker describes the fish's flesh and guts with a fisher's experienced eye. They imagine its flesh "packed in" as densely as "feathers"—an image of fine white flakes that will feel pretty familiar to anyone who has ever had a tasty bit of fish for dinner. The speaker can judge where its "big bones" and "little bones" would be. And they envision what they'd see if they gutted the fish: the gleaming "reds and blacks" of its "entrails," and its swim-bladder (an organ that fish inflate and deflate to maintain their buoyancy).

Take a look at the [simile](#) the speaker uses here:

and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.

Imagining the fish's swim-bladder as a many-petaled "peony," the speaker envisions its guts are as fresh, healthy, and lively as a spring garden. The straightforward adjective "big" here gives readers a sense of the speaker's pure and simple relish of this thought.

Once again, there's a sense that the speaker is starting to feel a general delight in everything about this fish—even the parts of it that a lot of people might see as gross. Not everyone can appreciate the vibrant springtime colors of fish guts! Catching this fish seems to have cast a spell on the speaker, allowing them to see everything about this creature as equally fascinating and beautiful—and encouraging them to imagine their way right under its skin.

But there's also a hint of carnivorous relish here. After all, the only way the speaker will *actually* see all these innards is if they gut and clean the fish for dinner—something that this precise description suggests the speaker has done many times before.

LINES 34-40

*I looked into ...
... old scratched isinglass.*

Having imagined the fish's insides, the speaker turns back to the fish's outsides, looking into its strange eyes—and again sees something that's familiar and alien at once.

The speaker's [metaphors](#) here might remind readers of the wallpaper [similes](#) from earlier in the poem: everything the speaker compares the fish's eyes to is something one might expect to find in a trash pile or an abandoned garage. But the precision and specificity of these grungy images makes the fish's eyes sound ancient, mysterious, and rather beautiful.

The speaker begins by noticing that the fish's eyes are "far larger" than their own, "but shallower, and yellowed." That little moment of comparison points out the way the fish is at once like and unlike the speaker: their two sets of eyes might be very different, but they've both got 'em! The [consonance](#) and [assonance](#) between "shallower" and "yellowed" connects the two words, creating a vivid picture of a huge, dish-shaped, jellied fish eye, discolored with age.

Then, the speaker looks deeper into the fish's eyes. Take a look at the metaphorical [imagery](#) here:

the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.

The [internal rhyme](#) of "backed and packed" suggests that the fish's eyes look crammed full of that "tarnished" silver beneath their yellowy surface—an image of crinkled, gleaming silver-blackness that will ring true to anyone who's had the chance to look a fish in the eye. The dim "lenses / of old scratched isinglass" here seem to cover up the fish's internal shine.

And the fish's internal shine is exactly what the speaker is paying attention to here. The poem's careful description of the *layers* of the fish's eye suggest the way the speaker is seeing something deeper beyond this fish's surfaces—or, rather, *through* this fish's surfaces. Through admiring and embracing all the fish's physical peculiarities, from its battered old hide to its parasites to its worn-but-gleaming eyes, the speaker is about to start seeing something strange shining in the surfaces of the whole world.

LINES 41-44

*They shifted a ...
... toward the light.*

As the speaker stares into the fish's eyes, those eyes move—but not in order to stare back at the speaker. At this moment, the speaker's minute attention to detail reveals a way in which the fish is very much in its own strange world.

Some poets, writing about a person connecting with a fish, might choose to [personify](#) the fish more aggressively: to suggest, for instance, that it looked up at the fisher with great big soulful eyes, begging to be spared. But this speaker doesn't do any such thing. Though they've thought of the fish as a "he" all through the poem, the speaker remains committed to the idea that this fish *isn't* a human—and that's all part of its wonder and its charm. It's the fish's *combination* of familiarity and strangeness that fascinates the speaker, not some sense that the fish is just a little guy in a fish suit.

Listen to the [simile](#) the speaker uses here:

They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.

Imagining the fish's moving eye as an unknown "object" tipped "toward the light," the speaker gives readers a sense that the fish's movements are inscrutable, almost mechanical-feeling. But there's also a sense of kinship here. After all, the speaker is also "tipping [...] an object toward the light," examining this fish just as one might examine some mysterious treasure, tilting it this way and that to admire it.

LINES 45-55

*I admired his ...
... in his mouth.*

All the time the speaker has been admiring this fish, they've missed one important detail. Listen to how one of the poem's rare moments of [rhyme](#) evokes the speaker's jolt of surprise:

I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his **jaw**,
and then I **saw**
that from his lower lip
[...]
hung five old pieces of fish-line,

That unexpected movement from "jaw" to "saw" suggests that the speaker spots the broken fishing lines the very instant they turn their unhurried, fascinated attention to the jaw. Perhaps it makes them jump a little.

Because this is a pretty big surprise! Not only is this fish as striking and strange as a sea monster, it's been hooked at least five times, and has always gotten away. Its history is written in its lip by "five big hooks" that have grown into its flesh. That "grim, wet, and weaponlike" lip suggests that this fish is a true fighter.

That might seem a little strange to the speaker, and to readers who think back to the beginning of the poem and remember that, this time around, the fish doesn't "fight" the fisher "at all." Perhaps this sixth catch has finally worn this "tremendous" old fish out.

LINES 56-64

*A green line, ...
... his aching jaw.*

The fish's whole body has told the story of a long, long life. But the battered old remnants of fishing gear embedded in its body tell some even more specific stories. Listen to the speaker's [imagery](#) here:

A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain [...]

These fishing lines are like tall tales about what happened when the fish was hooked before. The "frayed" and "crimped" ends of these lines are a testament to the fish's fierce struggle: the fish must have fought so hard that the lines sprang back and curled when they finally broke. And all those different kinds of fishing line also bring to mind all the different fishers who have caught—and lost—this fish before.

The sight of all these lines makes the speaker see the fish in rather human terms again. At first, the lines strike the speaker as "medals," badges of honor; then, they seem like a "five-haired beard of wisdom." These [metaphors](#) present the fish as something like an old general, a venerable fellow whose

suffering in battle has made him wise.

And the speaker also imagines the fish's "aching jaw," identifying more closely with him, imagining how painful it must be to have a lip full of hooks.

The speaker's [personification](#) here suggests that they're feeling more closely connected with the fish than they have before. Something about the relics of this old-timer's battles makes the speaker relate to his suffering and his strength. In this moment, the fish becomes almost [symbolic](#): it's no longer just a miraculously strange and wonderful creature, but an image of endurance and persistence.

LINES 65-74

*I stared and ...
... the gunnels—*

The sight of the old hooks in the fish's lip makes a big impression on the speaker—an impression that begins to transform the whole world around them.

All through this poem, the speaker has "stared and stared," gazing intently at everything strange and wild about this fish. Their staring has made even things that people might usually see as a little gross, from "sea-lice" to tattered skin to the "dramatic reds and blacks" of fish guts, seem entrancing. In other words, this speaker has been deeply appreciating this fish for what it is, getting absorbed in its pure weird reality.

The speaker has noticed, too, the ways in which the fish is like a person, and the ways in which the fish is utterly unlike a person. They've delighted in all the ways that the fish's eyes, for instance, are so completely different from their own, even though they're clearly eyes, a feature that fish share with humanity.

But the fish's old war wounds add a new note to these feelings. Take a look at the speaker's [metaphor](#) here:

*I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,*

Just a few lines before, the speaker related to the battle-scarred fish, [personifying](#) it as a bearded old soldier, empathizing with its pain, and rejoicing in its wisdom. Now, the speaker seems to be sharing in its "victory" over capture and death, which floods the boat as if it were water. But this is a deeply joyful flood. Everywhere the speaker looks, they see triumph.

The boat, like the fish, has seen better days: it's swimming in a "pool of bilge" (or dirty water), its engine and bailer are so corroded that the speaker has to [repeat](#) the word "rusted" twice to convey just how battered they are, and its crossbeams are "sun-cracked." But the speaker notices all this with delight. Their careful attention to the fish's strangeness and their

empathetic joy in its survival has started to make the whole beat-up world look as wonderful as the fish. Even the oily film on the bilgewater is transformed into a "rainbow!"

LINES 74-76

*until everything ...
... the fish go.*

The oil on the "bilge" at the bottom of the boat provides this poem's final, shining image. The speaker's experience with the fish—their fascination with its strangeness, their empathy with its struggle and survival—seems to work a lot like the iridescent oil on the water.

Gazing at the fish, the speaker has been able to see the astonishing beauty in everything about it that is messy, battered, weird, worn-out, and imperfect—and in the fish's struggle to go on living, in spite of suffering. The rainbow on the oil works just the same way: it's a shimmering glory that comes from a mess.

And that [paradoxical](#) sense of perfect beauty emerging from a mess might also be an image of life itself. Paying close enough attention to the world just as it is, this poem seems to say, allows one to see the "rainbow" on the oil, the splendor of the imperfection.

It makes sense, then, that "everything" that the speaker sees in these last lines transforms to "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" That [repetition](#) (specifically [epizeuxis](#)) evokes just how joyfully overwhelmed the speaker feels by everything they've experienced in gazing at this fish—and how the whole world seems suddenly brighter, shining with vibrant color in the light of their understanding.

Take a look at the way the speaker shapes the very last lines of the poem:

*until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.*

That firm, final [end-stopped](#) line feels inevitable. Of course the speaker must release this "tremendous fish" back to its life in the ocean; it's the only thing to do. But it also suggests that these flashes of "rainbow" insight have to be released, too: they don't come every day, and one can't keep them. Some days, the boat just looks cruddy and the fish just looks ugly.

But the speaker's examination of the fish's battered old body—and their shared sense of "victory" in its determination to go on living—suggests that there's something mysterious and "tremendous" about life, even at its ugliest and strangest.



SYMBOLS



THE RAINBOW

The rainbows at the end of the poem [symbolize](#) hope and beauty.

Rainbows are an ancient image of loveliness emerging from difficulty. (For instance, a rainbow heralds the end of the great flood in the biblical story of Noah's ark.) It's thus especially significant that the speaker first sees a rainbow the speaker in the oil-streaked "bilge" at the bottom of the boat. This image of beautiful iridescence shining on top of an oily mess feels a lot like what the speaker understands through gazing at the fish: even the strange, ugly, painful difficulties of life can seem gorgeous, when looked at with careful and unjudgmental attention.

Seeing "everything" lit up with "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow," the speaker thus seems to see the enduring beauty of life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 69:** "where oil had spread a rainbow"
- **Lines 74-75:** "until everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"



THE FISH

The fish itself [symbolizes](#) persistence, endurance, and wisdom—and perhaps even represents the speaker.

This poem's fish is a survivor. Not only is it ancient, it had to work hard to get that way: with five hooks embedded in its lips, it's clearly made it through many battles. And in the speaker's eyes, its struggles have shaped it. The fish-lines dangling from its lip seem like a "five-haired beard of wisdom"—an image of the way that suffering can mold and mature a personality.

The speaker's deep empathy for this "venerable" old fish suggests that they see themselves in it, too: like this fish, the speaker has perhaps fought some hard battles and lived to tell the tale.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-64



POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

By [personifying](#) the fish, the speaker draws attention both to the ways in which the fish seems human and the ways in which it seems deeply alien.

There's something a little strange about using the pronoun "he" to refer to a creature whose "brown skin h[angs] in strips / like ancient wallpaper," and whose "grim, wet, and weaponlike" lips are full of hooks. A lot of fishers would probably be more likely to think of such a catch as an "it"—especially if that catch were as monstrous and timeworn as this fish seems to be.

But the strangeness is exactly the speaker's point. Looking at this peculiar, ancient fish, the speaker marvels at everything that's weird and striking about him—and it's *through* that weirdness that the speaker begins to feel a strange fellow-feeling with him. Delighting in how strange the fish is, the speaker just kind of starts to like him on his own terms!

It's thus precisely *because* it's odd to relate to a creature so totally unlike a human that the speaker keeps calling this fish a "he." The speaker's experience in this poem is all about being so struck by the detailed strangeness of this fish that they begin to feel a peculiarly personal connection with it.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-7:** "and held him beside the boat / half out of water, with my hook / fast in a corner of his mouth. / He didn't fight. / He hadn't fought at all. / He hung a grunting weight,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "his brown skin hung in strips / like ancient wallpaper,"
- **Line 16:** "He was speckled with barnacles,"
- **Lines 22-23:** "While his gills were breathing in / the terrible oxygen"
- **Lines 30-31:** "the dramatic reds and blacks / of his shiny entrails,"
- **Line 34:** "I looked into his eyes"
- **Line 45:** "I admired his sullen face,"
- **Line 60:** "when it broke and he got away."

IMAGERY

Vivid [imagery](#) evokes the speaker's almost trance-like fascination with the fish. Often working hand in hand with [similes](#) and [metaphors](#), the poem's images help readers to feel as if they were standing right next to the speaker, marveling at their catch.

For one particularly good example, take a look at the way the speaker describes the fish's 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.

There's something both everyday and magical about this

passage of imagery. On the one hand, the speaker sees the fish's eye in terms of trash you might find lying around in an old garage: "scratched isinglass" and "tarnished tin foil."

These images make the fish sound ancient and weatherbeaten, with eyes that have literally and [figuratively](#) seen better days. But these images are also fresh, accurate, and surprising in a way that makes them leap off the page. Anyone who has ever looked into the eyes of even a grocery-store fish will recognize exactly the kind of silvery, crinkly, layered texture the speaker evokes here.

That combination of the everyday and the surprising gets right at the heart of this poem. Looking at the fish, the speaker sees everything that's marvelous in what might otherwise seem like a relatively everyday experience.

That gets even clearer toward the end of the poem, when the speaker looks around their rusty rental boat:

[...] oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
[...] everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!

Here, the speaker's triumphant delight in the fish's repeated "victory" over death makes even this cruddy little boat—so encrusted with "orange" rust that the speaker has to [repeat](#) the word "rusted" twice—seem to shine with a "rainbow" light. By deeply immersing themselves in observations of the fish, the speaker seems to emerge into a world where everything is bright and vivid and meaningful—and their imagery lets readers follow them there.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-21
- Lines 24-33
- Lines 34-40
- Lines 56-60
- Lines 68-75

SIMILE

The poem's powerful [similes](#) often point out how captivatingly strange this fish is by comparing it to peculiar and unlikely objects.

For instance, when the speaker first pulls the fish from the water, they observe that he has skin "like ancient wallpaper," covered in faded brown roses. On the one hand, this simile is just plain vivid: readers can see those irregular dark-brown blotches clearly in their minds' eyes, and imagine the fish's worn skin: once beautiful, now tattered. But the image also helps to suggest that this "venerable" fish is a real old-timer.

The vision of that "ancient wallpaper" might evoke a grandparent's house, unchanged for 50 years.

When the speaker imagines the fish's insides, by contrast, they start to think of cleaner, fresher things. For instance, the speaker imagines the fish's meat in fibrous chunks "like feathers," an image that will immediately ring true to anyone who's eaten a piece of perfectly flaky fish. And the fish's "swim-bladder" is like a big pink "peony," a lavish, many-petaled spring flower.

These similes make the fish sound a lot less weathered and monstrous: its outsides might be "stained" and battered, but its insides are full of life. Imagining the fish's innards, the speaker also reminds readers that most hooked fish turn into dinner! The appealing liveliness of the similes here gives the poem a little carnivorous edge.

Similes also remind the reader of ways in which this fish seems alien, like a specimen from a cabinet of curiosities. When its eye moves, for instance, it doesn't meet the speaker's eye with any kind of feeling: it's "more like the tipping / of an object toward the light." This image evokes the distance between the speaker and the fish. Part of the speaker's delight in this experience is their sense that this fish is so unlike a human. The fish isn't looking up at the speaker with big puppy-dog eyes, begging to be released. Instead, it's just flicking its strange eyes around, almost automatically, inscrutable.

The poem's final simile, though, gives the fish some more human qualities. When the speaker imagines the many snapped fishing lines dangling from the fish's lip as the ribbons on medals, they're seeing the fish as if it were an old general, decorated for his many victories in battle.

The poem's similes thus help readers to follow how the speaker's mind is working as they examine this "tremendous fish."

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-15:** "his brown skin hung in strips / like ancient wallpaper, / and its pattern of darker brown / was like wallpaper: / shapes like full-blown roses / stained and lost through age."
- **Lines 27-28:** "the coarse white flesh / packed in like feathers,"
- **Lines 32-33:** "the pink swim-bladder / like a big peony"
- **Lines 43-44:** "—It was more like the tipping / of an object toward the light."
- **Lines 49-50:** "—if you could call it a lip— / grim, wet, and weaponlike,"
- **Lines 61-62:** "Like medals with their ribbons / frayed and wavering,"

METAPHOR

The poem's [metaphors](#), like its [similes](#), help readers to

appreciate and share the speaker's perspective.

For instance, take a look at the way the speaker moves from a simile into a metaphor in these lines:

Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.

Layering the metaphor of a "beard of wisdom" on top of the simile of medals, the speaker paints a picture of this fish as something like a venerable old soldier: a warrior who has learned from his suffering. Each of those "hair[s]" (pieces of snapped fishing line) represents a time the fish has fought for his life and escaped, and each seems to have taught him something. This metaphor presents the fish almost as a [symbol](#) of hard-earned wisdom in himself.

But perhaps the most striking metaphor in the poem comes at the very end, when "everything" the speaker sees becomes "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" Literally, the speaker is referring to the "rainbow" created by the pool of oil that has leaked around the boat's engine. But this rainbow becomes a kind of metaphor here as well, one that evokes the speaker's sudden, joyful epiphany, the moment they decide to release the fish once more. Looking so closely at the fish, seeing how many times it's survived encounters with death, the speaker's whole world seems to flood with color: all those rainbows (which are also an ancient symbol of hope) suggest that the speaker suddenly feels the beauty, worth, and meaning of life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-21:** "two or three / rags of green weed hung down."
- **Lines 37-40:** "the irises backed and packed / with tarnished tinfoil / seen through the lenses / of old scratched isinglass."
- **Lines 63-64:** "a five-haired beard of wisdom / trailing from his aching jaw."
- **Lines 66-67:** "and victory filled up / the little rented boat,"
- **Lines 74-75:** "everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"

ENJAMBMENT

By making one line flow smoothly into the next, the poem's many [enjambments](#) help to evoke the speaker's absorption in the fish, and to draw attention to all the fish's strangeness.

For instance, take a look at the enjambments in lines 41-44, in which the speaker studies the fish's eyes:

They shifted a little, but not

to return my stare.

—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.

Here, the enjambed lines interweave with [end-stopped lines](#) to suggest both fascination and surprise. The first enjambed line break here draws attention to the word "not," underlining just how not-human this fish's gaze is. The next enjambment makes the new thought in lines 43-44 seem to emerge in one flowing motion, as if the speaker has been suddenly struck by exactly the right [simile](#) to describe what they're seeing.

That feeling of continuous flow is even more pronounced near the very end of the poem:

the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!

Here, the enjambment between "everything" and "was" evokes how swiftly and completely the world transforms for the speaker as their boat seems to overflow with "victory." Enjambment makes that feeling of "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow" seem like it might just go on forever.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "hook / fast"
- **Lines 8-9:** "venerable / and"
- **Lines 9-10:** "there / his"
- **Lines 10-11:** "strips / like"
- **Lines 12-13:** "brown / was"
- **Lines 18-19:** "infested / with"
- **Lines 20-21:** "three / rags"
- **Lines 22-23:** "in / the"
- **Lines 30-31:** "blacks / of"
- **Lines 32-33:** "swim-bladder / like"
- **Lines 37-38:** "packed / with"
- **Lines 39-40:** "lenses / of"
- **Lines 41-42:** "not / to"
- **Lines 43-44:** "tipping / of"
- **Lines 47-48:** "saw / that"
- **Lines 52-53:** "leader / with"
- **Lines 54-55:** "hooks / grown"
- **Lines 56-57:** "end / where"
- **Lines 58-59:** "thread / still"
- **Lines 61-62:** "ribbons / frayed"
- **Lines 63-64:** "wisdom / trailing"
- **Lines 66-67:** "up / the"
- **Lines 68-69:** "bilge / where"
- **Lines 69-70:** "rainbow / around"
- **Lines 74-75:** "everything / was"

REPETITION

The poem's [repetitions](#) often evoke the speaker's curiosity and

wonder over the "tremendous fish" they've hauled up from the depths.

For instance, take a look at the [anaphora](#) in lines 5-7:

He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,

All those identical openings make it sound as if the speaker is doing a triple take, surprised at how docile this huge fish seems.

The [diacope](#) in lines 10-13 has a similar effect:

his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:

Repeating the word "wallpaper," the speaker seems to be doubling down on an initial impression, as if they were saying: "Its skin is like wallpaper—yes, it's *really* like wallpaper!" This repetition helps readers to feel the speaker getting interested in this peculiar catch.

Something similar happens in lines 48-49:

that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—

Here, the repeated word "lip" suggests that the speaker sees the fish's face in human terms, then reconsiders, noticing that a "lip" is hardly what you'd call the "grim, wet, and weaponlike" jaw on this monster. Here, the diacope keeps readers from getting too comfortable: this fish isn't just a little person in a fish suit, it's a truly strange creature.

Elsewhere, the speaker's [polyptoton](#) evokes just how battle-scarred this fish is:

A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,

All those "lines" suggest that this fish is really trailing an impressive collection of broken fishing equipment.

But perhaps the most telling moments of repetition come in the poem's last few lines, when the speaker remembers how they "stared and stared" at the fish until they felt a "rainbow" of victory shimmering all around them. It's through this staring, the reader suspects, that this "rainbow" comes into being. Look at the world carefully and patiently enough, the speaker seems to suggest, and "everything" becomes bright, beautiful, and overwhelming as "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" That closing moment of [epizeuxis](#) evokes just how joyfully overwhelmed the speaker feels about what they've seen and understood.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "like ancient wallpaper,"
- **Line 13:** "like wallpaper: "
- **Line 48:** "lip"
- **Line 49:** "lip"
- **Line 56:** "line"
- **Line 57:** "lines"
- **Line 65:** "I stared and stared"
- **Line 69:** "rainbow"
- **Line 75:** "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"

ASSONANCE

The rich [assonance](#) of "The Fish" helps to evoke the speaker's trancelike fascination with their catch. Densely repeated vowel sounds weave the poem tightly together, making its language feel as constant and seamless as the speaker's gaze.

For instance, listen to the repeated sounds in this passage of description:

fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.

Here, a long /i/ sound connects all those teeny-tiny "white lice" to the "fine rosettes of lime" that grow on the fish's skin, evoking an odd combination of grime and delicacy: even the fish's parasites look rather beautiful to this speaker. And the repeated /ee/ that comes in at the end of these lines draws out as long as those "rags of green weed," helping readers to really feel its trailing sliminess. The short /eh/ sound of "rosettes" and "infested," meanwhile, works as a kind of bridge, linking these different-sounding passages of description.

Take a look at what happens when the speaker describes the fish's eyes:

which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed

Once more, a whole series of repeated vowel sounds help to make these lines sound smooth and hypnotic. But here, they're also part of the poem's punchy [internal rhyme](#): the short /a/ of "backed and packed" suggests just how densely shiny and crinkled the fish's eyes look.

Throughout the poem, then, assonance helps the speaker's language to reflect what it's describing. But it's also just plain delicious to say or hear, and thus evokes the speaker's own pleasure in this "tremendous fish."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “hung,” “grunting”
- **Line 10:** “skin,” “strips”
- **Line 11:** “ancient,” “wallpaper”
- **Line 13:** “wallpaper”
- **Line 14:** “shapes,” “full-blown roses”
- **Line 15:** “stained,” “age”
- **Line 17:** “fine,” “rosettes,” “lime”
- **Line 18:** “infested”
- **Line 19:** “tiny white sea-lice”
- **Line 20:** “underneath,” “three”
- **Line 21:** “green weed”
- **Line 25:** “blood”
- **Line 26:** “cut”
- **Line 27:** “flesh”
- **Line 28:** “feathers”
- **Line 30:** “dramatic,” “blacks”
- **Line 34:** “eyes”
- **Line 35:** “far larger,” “mine”
- **Line 36:** “shallower,” “yellowed”
- **Line 37:** “backed,” “packed”
- **Line 40:** “scratched isinglass”
- **Line 41:** “shifted,” “little”
- **Line 46:** “jaw”
- **Line 47:** “saw”
- **Line 50:** “wet,” “weaponlike”
- **Line 51:** “five,” “line”
- **Line 57:** “lines”
- **Line 58:** “fine”
- **Line 59:** “still crimped”
- **Line 62:** “frayed,” “wavering”
- **Line 63:** “haired”
- **Line 64:** “trailing,” “aching”
- **Line 72:** “thwarts”
- **Line 73:** “oarlocks,” “strings”
- **Line 74:** “everything”
- **Line 75:** “rainbow”
- **Line 76:** “go”

ALLITERATION

Like [assonance](#), [alliteration](#) reflects the speaker's feelings and gives the poem some of its music.

For instance, listen to the dense repeated sounds packed into these lines:

—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—

All the sounds here reflect exactly what these lines are describing: the fish's dangerous gills (which fishers know to beware—fish gills can be so sharp they can slice right through a

finger!). The /fr/ of “frightening” and “fresh” feels razor-sharp, and the /c/ sounds of “crisp” and “can cut” are just as finely-honed. The /b/ of “blood” and “badly,” meanwhile, has a rounder sound that might evoke blood welling up in a new wound.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “beside,” “boat”
- **Line 3:** “half,” “hook”
- **Line 10:** “skin,” “strips”
- **Line 24:** “frightening”
- **Line 25:** “fresh,” “crisp,” “blood”
- **Line 26:** “can,” “cut,” “badly”
- **Line 29:** “big bones”
- **Line 32:** “pink,” “bladder”
- **Line 33:** “big,” “peony”
- **Line 34:** “looked”
- **Line 35:** “larger”
- **Line 38:** “tarnished tinfoil”
- **Line 43:** “tipping”
- **Line 44:** “toward”
- **Line 48:** “lower lip”
- **Line 50:** “wet,” “weaponlike”
- **Line 51:** “five,” “fish”
- **Line 52:** “four”
- **Line 53:** “swivel still”
- **Line 55:** “grown,” “firmly”
- **Line 56:** “green,” “frayed”
- **Line 59:** “still,” “strain,” “snap”

**VOCABULARY**

Homely (Lines 8-9) - A little bit ugly.

Venerable (Line 8) - Much respected, especially because of old age.

Swim-bladder (Lines 32-33) - An internal organ like a balloon full of gas, which fish use to stay balanced in the water. Here, the speaker compares the fish's swim bladder to a peony, a kind of flower.

Tarnished (Lines 37-38) - Stained with age.

Isinglass (Line 40) - Here, “isinglass” refers to a thin sheet of a translucent mineral, [metaphorically](#) suggesting that the fish's eyes look glassy and aged—but appropriately enough, isinglass can also mean a kind of jelly that comes from fish!

A wire leader with the swivel still attached (Lines 52-53) - A “leader” and “swivel” are both pieces of fishing gear. The former refers to a strong piece of fishing line that attaches to the main fishing line; the latter is a device that keeps the fishing line from twisting.

Crimped (Lines 58-59) - Made wavy.

Bilge (Line 68) - Dirty water in the bottom of the boat.

Bailer (Line 71) - A bucket used for emptying water out of a boat.

Thwarts (Line 72) - Beams of wood that run across the middle of a boat to brace it.

Oarlocks (Line 73) - Sockets that hold the oars of a rowboat.

Gunnels (Line 74) - The top edges of the front end (or hull) of a boat.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Fish" is written as one long stanza of 76 lines. That continuous shape evokes a few things:

- Subtly, it might suggest the long body of the massive fish that the speaker just caught.
- It also suggests just how captivated the speaker feels by this fish: the speaker is so enthralled that there's simply no time for a stanza break.

This seemingly endless stanza pulls readers down the page, taking them along on the speaker's emotional journey with the fish:

- At first, they're just delighted to have caught such a massive fish;
- Then, they get caught up in its strange, ancient beauty;
- Then, they notice that it's a real old-timer, a survivor of many past battles;
- And finally, struck with a strange joy, the speaker decides to release their fabulous prize back to its life in the water.

Choosing not to separate these different stages of feeling into different stanzas, the speaker makes this change of heart feel gradual: it's a decision that slowly creeps up on the speaker the longer they look at this wonderful fish.

METER

"The Fish" is written in [free verse](#), so it doesn't use a [meter](#). The speaker's language feels conversational and unrehearsed—like they're just riffing off the cuff.

But while there's no regular rhythm here, most of the lines are about the same length: short! That means the poem looks like one narrow column on the page, a shape that reflects the speaker's intense focus and absorption. All these brief lines in a row mirror the speaker's way of looking the fish over, bit by tiny bit.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in [free verse](#), "The Fish" doesn't have a [rhyme scheme](#). As with the poem's lack of meter, this keeps things feeling casual and conversational. The story feels immediate and urgent rather than carefully crafted and rehearsed.

But that doesn't mean it's rhymeless! The poem's frequent [internal rhymes](#) and [slant rhymes](#) help to heighten its emotion.

For example, take a look at the rhymes in lines 34-37:

I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
[...]
the irises backed and packed

Comparing their own eyes to the fish's eyes, the speaker notices both similarity and difference—just like the similarity and difference of the slant rhyme between "eyes" and "mine." And the dense internal rhyme of "backed and packed" evokes just how full of that silvery tinfoil shine the fish's eyes appear.

Now listen to what happens at the very end of the poem:

the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Here, the speaker *does* break into rhyme, for just a brief harmonious moment—a moment that reflects their delighted appreciation of the fish and their sense of connection with it.

In other words: the rhymes in this poem flash out to highlight moments of particularly intense feeling and observation.



SPEAKER

Everything the reader learns about this poem's speaker is internal and emotional. The speaker has no gender and no backstory: all readers know is that this is someone who rented a fishing boat for the day. Still, it's clear that this speaker is sensitive and keenly observant, able both to paint a meticulous word-portrait of the fish and to feel a joyfully empathetic "victory" when they let it go.

It wouldn't be unreasonable for readers to interpret this speaker as Elizabeth Bishop herself, a poet known for her intense attention to detail and her joy in the natural world.

But all readers really need to know about this speaker is that, whether or not they're literally a poet, they're unquestionably *poetic*: they're a person who sees the world with blazing clarity, and wants to share what they see.



SETTING

"The Fish" is set in a creaky old fishing boat—a rental that has perhaps seen better days. The speaker is so caught up in their observations of the fish that readers don't really get a good glimpse of this boat until the very end of the poem. In the last few lines, on the verge of letting the fish go, the speaker observes leaking oil "spread[ing] a rainbow" in the dirty water sloshing around the boat's "rusted" engine and its "sun-cracked thwarts."

All in all, this boat seems about as weathered and battered as the "venerable" old fish the speaker catches. Perhaps this subtly underscores the fact that the fish and the speaker are, for a moment, "in the same boat" both [metaphorically](#) and literally!



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was one of the most distinctive voices in 20th-century poetry. During a period when [Confessional poets](#) like [Sylvia Plath](#) and [Robert Lowell](#) were writing intensely personal poems about their inner lives, Bishop took a different tack, looking outward to record the beauty and strangeness of the world around her. Her poetry is noted for its rich detail, its subtle emotion, and its objectivity.

While Bishop's style was pretty different from Robert Lowell's, the two poets were good friends. Like [Wordsworth](#) and [Coleridge](#), they were opposites who attracted, balancing each other out. They had a peculiar friendship: after getting to know each other at a party when they were in their 30s, they rarely met in person again, instead exchanging long letters and critiques of each other's work.

The poet Marianne Moore was also an important friend and colleague, and balanced Bishop in the other direction. Where Lowell tended to write intimate, confessional poems, Moore was even more reserved and detailed than Bishop (though also prone to adventures: famously, Moore and Bishop once [concocted a scheme](#) to pluck hairs from the tail of a baby elephant). And Moore also wrote a poem about a fish: [compare and contrast!](#)

Bishop won many honors over the course of her long poetic career, and references to her influential work appear everywhere from the novels of [Nicholson Baker](#) to the TV series *Breaking Bad*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop had a difficult, traumatic early life: her father died when she was only a baby, and her mother was institutionalized not long after. She lived with her mother's parents in Nova Scotia until her father's family (whom she

hardly knew) demanded custody, and at the age of six, she had to move to Massachusetts to live with them. She bounced between cold and often abusive households until she finally escaped to Vassar College, where she met Marianne Moore and, inspired, began to develop a whole new style of writing.

The wider 20th-century world around Bishop was just as chaotic and troubled. She lived through World War I, World War II, and the turbulent 1960s and '70s. But for the most part, the painfully shy Bishop strove to avoid the outside world: she was most at ease when traveling to secluded islands, or holed up in the Library of Congress (where she worked for a time as a poetry consultant).

All through these difficult times, poetry was Bishop's escape and solace. The exquisitely detailed portrait of the fish in this poem suggests that pure, focused attention was one way she learned to transcend an often painful life.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Aloud](#) – Listen to Elizabeth Bishop reading the poem out loud. (https://youtu.be/bnkD_m3rh8)
- ["Elizabeth Bishop's Art of Losing"](#) – Learn more about Elizabeth Bishop's personal life in this article from the New Yorker. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/elizabeth-bishops-art-of-losing>)
- [Bishop's Biography](#) – Read more about Bishop's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop>)
- [Bishop's Legacy](#) – Learn about Elizabeth Bishop's enduring influence. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/feb/08/elizabeth-bishop-centenary>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BISHOP POEMS

- [One Art](#)



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