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Analysis Essay 1: Formal Analysis of “The Fish”

Throughout the poem “The Fish,” visual imagery is dominant in creating a theme of sympathy and admiration for the speaker’s cath. However, Elizabeth Bishop uses other forms of imagery, such as gustatory, tactile and kinetic, and combines them with visual imagery to further integrate these emotions into the poem.

In the beginning of the poem, the speaker of the poem catches a fish. As the speaker pulls the fish into the boat, it is described that the fish “didn’t fight. He hadn’t fought at all. He hung a grunting weight” (lines 5-7). This line gives a visual image of a fisherman pulling a fish into his boat, but although the fish is big, it isn’t fighting. Later on in the poem, as we learn more about the fish, it can be discerned that the fish is tired and worn down, and that is why he no longer has the will to fight. These lines also produce kinetic imagery as the reader can imagine themselves pulling a heavy fish into a boat. As the fish is not fighting this, he becomes dead weight. These two images do not initially invoke sympathy in the speaker of the poem, but as the descriptions continue, this image of pulling a worn out fish from the water will play a part in the change of heart the speaker experiences.

As the fish is described, the reader gets a very visual description of what the fish looks like. The fish is said to have “brown skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper” (lines 9-10) and is “speckled with barnacles, fine rosettes of lime” (lines 16-17). The words “ancient” and “barnacles” lets the reader know that the fish is old, as his skin is falling off and has growths forming on him. These lines also give tactile imagery, as the reader can imagine touching this fish and feeling the papery skin and the rough barnacles. These lines also do not initially convince the speaker to admire the fish, but a sense of pity is starting to be reflected by this visual and tactile image.

Gustatory imagery is introduced into the poem in lines 22-23. The reader is told that the fish’s gills “were breathing in the terrible oxygen.” Just as the reader is able to imagine seeing the fish breathing, they can recall having to breathe when in deep pain, pulling in scattered breaths, and imagine the fish’s breathing being the same way. This introduction of gustatory imagery also starts the sense of pity towards the fish.

As the speaker of the poem looks into the eyes of the fish, the pity turns into sympathy. As the speaker “looked into the eyes, which were far larger than mine but shallower, and yellowed” (lines 34-36), they sense that something is wrong because the fish’s eyes do not look at their eyes, but “it was more like the tipping of an object towards the light” (lines 43-44). The reader sees that the fish is looking towards something beyond the scene in front of them, possibly towards “the light” which is usually conveyed as death’s white light. Therefore, the speaker is actually looking into the fish and seeing this sense of giving up, and pity is no longer the emotion being evoked, but rather sympathy.

The speaker continues with their visual descriptions of the fish, now looking at the fish with a sense of admiration as they see “grim, wet, and weaponlike, hung five old pieces of fishline, or four and a wire leader” (lines 50-52) attached to his lips. The image that is conveyed here can compare the fish to a celebrated war hero, who has medals of Honor pinned upon his uniform. This fish becomes not just an old and worn out fish, but a valiant fish who has recovered many a time from being caught, just as that war hero has survived many battles, and the speaker starts to see that this fish is actually special.

As the speaker looks at this fish, a change of heart is made, and the speaker decides the fate of the fish. Just as “victory filled up the little rented boat” (lines 66-67), the speaker has become filled with admiration, and comes to a decision about this fish. One last time, visual and kinetic imagery come together as the speaker states, “And I let the fish go” (line 76). The reader can imagine the speaker picking up the fish, almost with a sense of dignity, just as war heroes are treated when being acknowledged, and letting it back into the water and watching it swim away.

Elizabeth Bishop fully incorporates many different forms of imagery within this poem, and a regular, old fish becomes a warrior or a retired general of the sea, with his beard of medals hanging from his lip.