



# The Fish

by Elizabeth Bishop

## Content Synopsis

"I caught a tremendous fish" (1) begins Elizabeth Bishop's poem of dense visual details, which narrates the story of this catch. Like many of her poems, "The Fish" creates a slightly altered world from the one we know, though the events of the poem are recognizable, even mundane. The descriptions, accurate and illuminating, of the caught fish, point towards an inner world at work that informs the perception of the speaker, giving it the images that quietly transcend the actual scene in odd, associative leaps.

Most of the poem is given over to descriptions of the fish, beginning with the outside and working in: "his brown skin hung in strips / like ancient wallpaper" (10-11) then "the coarse white flesh / packed in like feathers" (27-8). The poet thinks of the inner organs of the fish, "the dramatic reds and blacks / of his shiny entrails" (30-1). Looking into his eyes the poet is reminded of "tarnished tinfoil / seen through the lenses of old scratched isinglass" (38-9). Lastly, she sees the fish's jaw—"grim, wet, and weapon-like" (50)—and the multiple hooks and lines that the fish has broken in previous attempts to catch him. The poet feels an overwhelming sense of "victory" (66) at first, and then—strangely, perhaps—she lets the fish go.

While there is not much action to speak of in the poem, there is a sense of movement, which we could account for by calling it the movement of

the observer's own mind. As the poet "stared and stared" (65) at the fish, his body (the fish is gendered male by the poet) takes on a life of its own, even as he lies slowly dying in "the little rented boat" (67). What drives the poem is not the dramatic action, which is nominal, but the action of observation, which repeatedly transforms the fish with simile: the fish's body is "like ancient wallpaper" (11), "like full-blown roses" (14), "like feathers" (28), "like a big peony" (33); the pieces of line are "like medals with their ribbons" and "a five-haired beard" (62-3). All of these images crowd and intersect with our actual vision of the fish, transmogrifying him into an impossibly complex organism who is half-fish, half-man, and-mathematics be damned—half-imagined being.

The concluding line of the poem is as plain as the opening one: "And I let the fish go" (76). However, just before she lets him go (perhaps even the cause for his release) she has visions of "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow" (75): a transcendent rainbow spreads through the sheen of oil in the "pool of bilge" (68) and seems to cover the boat, and implicitly, beyond it. This moment is brought on by the process of observation and comparisons the poet has made earlier, which seem to have excited the mind and eyes to the point that the rainbows overload them with sensory information, and the release of the fish is as necessary as letting go of an electrified fence.

## Historical Context

Bishop wrote “The Fish” in late 1939 or early the next year, according to her letters written to Marianne Moore (“Letters” 79). She recounts a story of catching a parrotfish in a letter in January of 1939, while she was living in Key West, Florida. Here she vividly describes it to Moore: “They are ravishing fish—all iridescent, with a silver edge to each scale, and a real bill-like mouth just like turquoise; the eye is big and wild, and the eyeball is turquoise too—they are very humorous-looking fish” (Ibid). After Bishop sent her a draft of the poem, Moore replied that she found it “concentrated and valorous” (“Selected Letters of Marianne Moore” 397).

The poem appeared in “The Partisan Review” in 1940, and in Bishop’s first book, “North & South,” in 1946. “The Fish” was singled out by reviewers, especially the poet-critic Robert Lowell, who was to become a close friend of Bishop’s. Lowell wrote to Bishop that the poem was “perhaps your best; I’m a fisherman myself, but all my fish become symbols, alas!” (Goldensohn 166). The peculiarity of the poem, then and now, lies in the refusal to make the fish an identifiable symbol; in refusing to be metaphor for Death, Forgiveness, Male/Female identity (and many more), the fish remains an enigmatic, though closely observed figure. As Bonnie Costello observes, “He remains a contradictory figure and returns to the flux he never entirely leaves” by reentering the ocean at the end of the poem (61).

## Societal Context

“Elizabeth Bishop is spectacular in being unspectacular,” wrote the poet Marianne Moore in a review of “North and South,” Bishop’s first book (“Complete Prose” 406). Indeed, Bishop’s poems often are not spectacular, nor do they overwhelm with virtuosic cascades of language. However, today Bishop stands as perhaps the most celebrated mid-century American female poet. Moreover, she stands as the perhaps most relevant figure from

that era, having survived the Modern, Formalist, Confessional, and Post-Modern eras with her reputation and admirers intact. During her lifetime, in comparison, esteem for her work was limited to a small number of admirers, her close friend and widely-acclaimed poet Robert Lowell among them. Today, Lowell, as well as other then-popular poets like Theodore Roethke, Weldon Kees, and John Berryman lags behind Bishop in anthologies and academic studies; her poems are more widely read than any female author save Emily Dickinson. In a prophetic moment, Lowell, who himself was America’s premier poet at the time, wrote in a letter that Bishop’s language and images seemed to “belong to a later century.” This description has proved correct, as the 20th and 21st centuries have seen an incredible increase in the volume of study on her life and work.

In an article in “The New Criterion” Gioia speculates that Bishop’s later ascendancy to her current reputation can partially be attributed to the academy’s increased interest in marginalized and displaced voices. Bishop occupied an almost constant status as outsider, since she was often a stranger to her surroundings, living a peripatetic life from such a young age. Additionally, Bishop’s status as a lesbian has encouraged study of her poems using ideas from gender studies and Queer theory. However, Gioia concludes, these factors are secondary to the poems themselves in making Bishop so popular. Comparing her to Keats, Gioia writes that Bishop possessed what Keats described as “negative capability,” a term describing the poet’s state of ambiguity and mystery. “She had a native genius for reflecting the rich complexity of experience without reducing it into abstraction or predetermined moral judgment,” writes Gioia, echoing Moore’s description. “She is inclusive by being artfully inconclusive” (8). “The Fish,” with its refusal to symbolize any one particular meaning, is an apt demonstration of this inclusiveness: it has been read in multiple ways, yet has not suffered the

death-by-paraphrase of many anthologized poems as a poem about something, and end up taught as being about only one thing.

### Religious Context

It is difficult, in a symbol so charged with religion and mysticism as a fish, to deny religious associations in “The Fish.” However, nowhere in her letters and notes does Bishop allude to this interpretation of the poem; the poem itself avoids images of religion. The symbol of the fish, of course, has long been identified with Christianity, but it is also a mystic figure from pre-Christian religions—a symbol of fertility, the feminine; a deeply shamanistic figure whose folklore history Bishop explores later in the poem “The Riverman,” in “Questions of Travel.”

### Scientific & Technological Context

Bishop’s interest in optics, the science of visual perception, was keen. In Key West she had worked in a factory making binocular lenses, and knew the intricacies of light refraction and reflection. “The Fish,” with the “lenses / of old scratched isinglass” (39-40), as well as the ending rainbows, contains numerous references to this knowledge, as well as a knowledge of the fish’s anatomy (isinglass is actually the clear, gelatinous material that comprises the fish’s swim bladder). The ability of see farther and in more detail than with the normal human eye, which is the power of the binoculars, also is the power of Bishop’s poem, which enlarges at the same time as it focuses on the visual appearance of the fish.

### Biographical Context

“The Fish,” as we can learn from Bishop’s letters, is based on a “real” experience, yet the facts of it are largely irrelevant to the poem’s focus. Although she maintained that one need not know the biography of a poet in order to appreciate the poem, Bishop’s life certainly informs and enlarges the scope

of her own poetry, which alludes obliquely, when it does at all, to biographical experiences.

From an early age, Bishop had to deal with loss and displacement. When she was five years old, her mother was committed to a sanitarium in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, after a prolonged period of mental illness. Her father was already gone, having died when she was eight months old, so Bishop was left in the care of her mother’s parents, who took her to the Nova Scotia town of Great Village. This age and landscape are described in “Sestina,” and in the prose stories “Primer Class” and “In the Village” (*Collected Prose*). Bishop moved from Nova Scotia in 1917 to Worcester, Mass., to live with her father’s parents, and then to her aunt’s house a year later. At the age of eight, she had lived in four households with four different families. For Bishop, the themes of travel and loss became intertwined at a young age. As author Bonnie Costello notes, Bishop’s poetry, despite domestic settings as in “Sestina,” illustrates that “a house is no shelter from pain and loss” (199).

In 1930, Bishop enrolled at Vassar, where she majored in English Literature and co-founded the school’s literary magazine, “Con Spirito” and served as the editor of the college yearbook. The most important event of her college life occurred in 1934, however, when she first met the poet Marianne Moore. The friendship between them lasted until Moore’s death, and was instrumental in bringing Bishop to New York, where she moved after graduation. Moore wrote an introduction for the first publication Bishop received, a group of poems in the anthology “Trial Balances.” Moreover, the two women discussed and criticized each other’s work; Bishop was heavily influenced by the interplay between formal structure, rhyme, and rhythm that is a hallmark of Moore’s work.

Bishop traveled extensively throughout her life. In the three years following her graduation she lived mostly in Paris, and took multiple trips throughout Europe, Morocco, and Florida, where she lived

briefly in Key West. In 1942, on a trip through Mexico, Cuba, and Haiti, she met Lota de Macedo Soares, a Brazilian woman from a prominent family in Rio de Janeiro; in 1951 the two would begin living together in Brazil. By this time, Bishop was an acclaimed, if not wildly popular poet, having been offered a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947, an appointment as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress in 1949 (similar to the current position of Poet Laureate), and an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1950. However, she continued to have trouble with depression and alcoholism, problems that had not been helped by her lifestyle in New York. Her trip to Brazil was part of an around-the-world tour she hoped might be a welcome break from the pace and anxieties of the city—she later wrote to Lowell “I was miserably lonely there most of the time” (Goldensohn 9). However, upon arrival, Bishop had a violently allergic reaction to a cashew she ate, and was hospitalized for five days. Soares, who Bishop had planned to visit, invited her to extend her stay and recuperate her home, which was a meeting place for many Brazilian architects and writers. Bishop accepted and ended up staying for over a decade.

Bishop and Soares lived together intermittently in Rio, in Petropolis, and in a 17th century house in Ouro Preto, Brazil. At the beginning, Bishop’s life in Brazil had a cathartic effect on her health and poetry; she began to confront her longstanding addiction to alcohol and her depression. As her career flourished, though, their relationship began to deteriorate. The publication of “Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring,” which combined her first book with new poems, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1955. “Questions of Travel,” her third collection, was also well received, and dealt with

familiar themes of travel, displacement, and tourism: “Should we have stayed home and thought of here?” she asks in the title poem (14). However, there were significant strains in her relationship with Soares at this time, who was afflicted by her own problems with depression and anxiety relating to her job as a city planner. Bishop spent less and less time in Brazil, teaching instead at universities in the U.S. and coming back to Brazil intermittently. In September of 1967, while visiting Bishop in New York, Soares overdosed on sleeping pills in an apparent suicide.

After her partner’s death, Bishop lived primarily in Boston, teaching at Harvard and writing the poems that would be published in *Geography III*. She continued to travel extensively (a partial list of places includes Yugoslavia, Ecuador, Norway, Sweden, and the Galapagos Islands), and in 1976 received the prestigious Books Abroad / Neustadt Award, the first American and first female recipient. On October 6, 1979 she died at home in Boston.

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### Works Cited

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### Discussion Questions

1. The word “like” appears repeatedly in “The Fish.” What effect does this have on the reader? Does it have different effects at different times?
2. The beginning of the poem begins in a consciously plain way: “I caught a tremendous fish” (1) and “He didn’t fight. / He hadn’t fought at all” (5-6). How does this plain narrative style affect the reader’s perception of the story?
3. Describe the tone of the poem. Is there a shift in tone from the beginning to the end? What words/phrases highlight the poet’s tone?
4. Unlike many of her renowned poems, Bishop wrote “The Fish” in a free verse that adheres, mostly, to three stress lines. But Bishop has clearly paid close attention to other formal elements of the poem, such as enjambments and rhyme. Where do these formal elements influence and shape the poem?
5. What happens at the end of the poem? What prompts all these rainbows? Are they symbols, or figments of imagination, or meant simply to describe the oil pooling in the boat?
6. Is the fish a symbol of death? Of wisdom? Christ? Does it have to be a symbol? Can it avoid being one?
7. Though the poet immediately calls the fish “he,” the poem makes the fish’s gender explicit by giving other details about him—what are these details, and why does the fish’s gender matter in the poem?
8. The fishing story—“He was thiiiiis big”—is ubiquitous in American culture. Some of the fundamental functions of fishing stories are bragging, lying, exaggeration, and regret for “the one that got away.” How does Bishop engage these tropes; how does she utilize/subvert them?
9. Such a cluster of vivid images crowd the lines of “The Fish” that it is difficult, at times, to remember what is being described. What effect does this multitude of objects and comparisons have on the reader?
10. Compare this poem with another of Bishop’s dealing with an encounter with nature.

### Essay Ideas

1. Fish are a common theme for Bishop and Marianne Moore. Compare Bishop's "The Fish" with Marianne Moore's poem of the same name. When Bishop first sent Moore the poem, she wrote that she was "afraid it is very bad, if not like Robert Frost, perhaps like Ernest Hemingway!" ("Letters" 87). How do these two poems reflect the differences and similarities of the two? How do they illustrate Moore's influence and Bishop's resistance to it?
2. Compare "The Fish" with yet another fish poem, "The Drunken Fisherman" by Robert Lowell, who wrote in a letter to Bishop, "All my fish become symbols, alas!" What does the fish in Lowell's poem symbolize? What, if anything, does Bishop's fish symbolize? How do the two poets create these symbols?
3. "You'd just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves," Bishop told "Time" in 1967 for their cover story on Robert Lowell, whose Confessional style included brutal truths about his own troubled life, even excerpts from his wife's anguished letters. In the ensuing 30 years, poetry, at least in the popular imagination, seems to mean something closer to the free verse confessions of Lowell and Sylvia Plath than Bishop's formal poem, "One Art." In what ways does Bishop keep things to herself in this poem? What clues-or even confessions-does she make to the reader in this poem?
4. Bishop's poems often use sea imagery in conjunction with man-made shapes. This juxtaposition is partially what seems to cause the "rainbows" at the end of "The Fish." Using another example from Bishop's work—"Seascape," "At the Fish-houses," "Florida" or others-examine the connections between Bishop's observation of the ocean and human life.
5. The personification of animals is a constant theme in Bishop's work. Using "The Man-Moth," "The Fish," "The Moose" or other poems, write an essay that explores the connections that Bishop finds between the animal world and the human. Why do you think the fish in "The Fish" is compared to so many different things, for example?

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