

The Fish

Glossary and explanations

Tremendous: Extremely large and powerful; awful, dreadful, terrible. From Latin *tremendus* (fearful, terrible), literally 'to be trembled at', form of *tremere* 'to tremble.' This connotation of the word helps us explain the narrator's ultimate response to the fish.

Beside: At the side of

Hook: Fishhook, a sharp metal hook used for catching fish

Half out of water: Half of its body in water

Fast: Stuck firmly

Didn't fight: Indicative of passivity, indifference and a sense of resignation

Grunting: Making a low rough noise. The phrase "grunting weight" signifies fatigue and hopelessness. The fish could be feeling this way because it could be so tired of having to fight from being caught, as described later in the poem about the five different fishing lines found in the fish's mouth.

Battered: Damaged; showing signs of wear

Venerable: Impressive and respectable

Homely: Not very attractive to look at; comfortable and relaxed

Strips: Long flat pieces

Wallpaper: paper, usually printed with designs, that is pasted on walls and sometimes ceilings

Pattern: A repeated decorative design

Full-blown: Fully in bloom

Stained: Having discolored marks

Lost: Erased

Speckled: Covered with small marks, spots or shapes. "Speckled with barnacles" is an accurate description, but the addition of the phrase "fine rosettes of lime" as a corrective allows us to focus on the tiniest of details in order to appreciate the beauty that we might not have otherwise seen. "Speckled" is a gentle term that implies a kind of natural artistry, and the "fine rosettes" bring us closer to the barnacles and allow us to see them as beautiful objects rather than ugly fixtures.

Barnacles: Small shellfish that clings to rocks and ships and draws food by using slender hairs

Rosette: A large circular decoration resembling a rose made from colored ribbons

Lime: A substance containing calcium; it is found in water and soil.

Infest: Live as a parasite; carrying a large number of something

Sea-lice: marine external parasites that feed on the blood and mucus of the host fish

Rags: Old torn clothes

Gill: Breathing organ of fish

Terrible oxygen: The word *terrible*, etymologically related to *tremendous* from the first line, has multiple connotations. This fish breathes oxygen like people, but this particular oxygen

circulating in the air is perhaps “terrible” because the fish can’t access it with his gills. There is also something terrible about the fish himself—terrible in the sense of terrifying—that is associated with its attempt to breathe the air, and this sense is immediately reinforced through the speaker’s description of its “frightening gills” in the next line. The terrible quality of the fish also increases the speaker’s awe of it. Also remember the expression “A terrible beauty is born” from the poem ‘Easter 1916.’

Crisp: Dry and firm but easily broken

Badly: Severely, seriously

Coarse: Rough; without taste

Shiny: Bright and polished

Entrails: Internal organs of humans and animals

Swim-bladder: An internal gas-filled bladder that helps a fish remain afloat (also called air-bladder, float, fish maw and gas bladder)

Peony: a medium-sized garden plant which has large round flowers, usually pink, red, or white

Backed: Rolled back

Packed with: Full of

Tarnished: Dull, stained and discolored

Tinfoil: Thin aluminum sheet used to wrap food

Isinglass: Gelatin made from the air bladders of various fish and used as a clarifying agent and in adhesives and jellies

Scratched: Having scratches

Stare: Long concentrated look

Tipping: Turning. The speaker’s primary goal in describing the fish is accuracy; when she describes how the fish’s eyes shift, she makes sure that we understand that it was not to return her stare. These lines form a near simile because a thing is described as “more like” something than like something else. The speaker encourages us to imagine “the tipping / of an object toward the light” without telling us what that object might be. We must imagine it, which is what an effective image encourages us to do.

Sullen: Showing bad temper or hostility by refusing to talk and behaving sociably.

Grim: Unpleasant and disturbing

Wire leader: A wire leader is a metal string attached between the hook and the main line so that toothy fish do not have an opportunity to bite through the line. Usually braided from several metal strands, wire lines may be made of stainless steel, titanium, or a combination of metal alloys.

Swivel: Turning mechanism (a joint) that allows something attached to it to turn freely

Frayed: Worn area on cloth or rope, with loose threads showing

Crimped: Pressed into small folds

Strain: Force that stretches something

Snap: Breaking of a light and brittle object

Wavering: Shaking, flickering

Beard of wisdom: There is an almost universal belief that beard denotes wisdom

Trailing: Dangling

Rented boat: Sense of transience; the insignificance of human life is stressed by the adjective 'little'

Bilge: Dirty water that collects inside the bottom of a boat

Rainbow: "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:13).

Rusted: Connotes old age and approaching end

Bailer: Bucket with which water is removed from a boat

Sun-cracked: With cracks caused by exposure to sunlight

Thwart: A crosswise seat on a rowboat or a small boat

Oarlock: A U-shaped pivoting metal rest attached to the side of a boat, in which an oar rests.

Gunnels: Rail around the edge of a boat

Summary and paraphrase

'The Fish' is a compact meditative lyric, relaying a first person narrator's experience of catching a huge fish, coming to an empathetic understanding and appreciation of it, and subsequently letting it go. The narrator's unspoken and self-transforming reaction to this fish, conveyed largely through imagery, contains the poem's theme and underlies the narrator's external actions.

At the start the narrator is detached and objective in describing the caught fish through clipped and laconic sentences. But as the poem progresses the fish is described in greater detail and the sentences become longer, more descriptive and more ornamental. Strong and emotive adjectives are used. The narrator passes through excitement, enjoyment, observation, repulsion, sympathy, empathy, sublimity and beatitude. The fish ceases to be an insignificant creature but is transformed into an object of beauty and wonder.

The narrator has just caught a fish. It is huge and half of its body is still in water and the hook is firmly stuck in its mouth. The fish is passive and the narrator keeps it on the side of the boat. The fish is making a low rough noise. The body of the fish is damaged and not so attractive to look at though it is impressive and respectable. Its brown skin is hanging in long flat pieces here and there like wallpaper. There are some designs that resemble roses which have become discolored and at some places disappeared.

There are small spots of barnacles (a small shellfish that clings to rocks and ships), lime in the shape of rosettes circular decoration resembling a rose) and lice on the body of the fish. Two or three old weeds remain on the half body of the fish. Its potentially dangerous gills are breathing in with a lot of difficulty. It is a painful sight.

The narrator thinks about the rough and tasteless flesh of the fish which is packed like feathers, about its bones, the colors of its bright entrails and its swim-bladder that looks like a peony.

Now the narrator looks into the eyes of the fish. They are larger than his eyes but shallower and yellowed. The irises have rolled back, indicating fatigue and unconsciousness. They look like as if they were covered with stained and discolored tinfoil. There is an isinglass like (gelatin made from the air bladders of various fish and used as a clarifying agent and in adhesives and jellies) liquid in its. But it has many scratches and since we look through them, it is impossible to gauge the full emotions in the eyes of the fish. The eyes shift a little. It is not to return the narrator's stare but was like the turning of an object towards light.

The narrator develops a liking towards its face that shows bad temper and the way in which its jaw moves. Then she sees that from its unpleasant and wet lip pieces of four lines and a wire leader with hooks are hanging. They dangle like medals with ribbons or like a wise man's beard. There is a strong sense of victory. In the dirty water inside the bottom of the boat spilled oil creates a rainbow. It is everywhere in the boat. The narrator allows the fish to go back to water.

Answer these questions in a sentence or two

1. Why does the poet let the fish go?

A: The poet is deeply impressed by the determination, perseverance and heroism of the fish. Moreover, she seems to have realized the oneness of the world through her experience with the fish.

2. Bring out the significance of the medal with the ribbons.

A: They are like the medals won by a veteran soldier and indicate the successful escapes of the fish from previous attempts by fishermen.

3. What is the significance of the rainbow?

A: The rainbow indicates victory. At the same time it evokes the Biblical covenant between man and God, and thus is a symbol of the narrator's realization of oneness of the world.

4. Why does the poet describe the gills as frightening?

A: The gills are crisp, bloody and sharp enough to cut seriously.

5. Why is oxygen described as terrible?

A: The fish cannot access oxygen with his gills and in its attempts to inhale, it produces a terrifying sound.

6. How does the poet describe the eyes of the fish?

A: The eyes of the fish were bigger than the narrator's but were dull and impassive.

7. What does the poet see hanging from the lower jaw of the fish?

A: The poet sees five fish lines hanging from the lower jaw of the fish.

Answer these questions in about 100 words each

1. How does the poet describe the body of the fish?

A: The body of the fish is damaged and not so attractive though it is impressive and respectable. Its brown skin is hanging in long flat pieces here and there like wallpaper. There are some designs that resemble roses which have become discolored and at some places disappeared. There are small spots of barnacles, lime in the shape of rosettes and lice on the body of the fish. Two or three old weeds remain on the half body of the fish. Its potentially dangerous gills are breathing in with a lot of difficulty. It is a painful sight.

2. Describe the poet's experience of beatitude at the end of the poem.

A: The narrator is jubilant at catching such a big fish and feels a strong sense of victory. The body of the fish is damaged and unattractive though it is impressive and respectable. develops a liking towards its face that shows bad temper and the way in which its jaw moves. But then things change. In the dirty water inside the bottom of the boat spilled oil creates a rainbow. It is everywhere in the boat and evokes the Biblical rainbow, the covenant between God and mankind. The narrator realizes the essential oneness of the world and allows the fish to go back to water.