A Life in another Pair of Shoes

Students observe and idolize the older school children and believe those younger than themselves are naive. These same observers will grow to be the older school children that are idolized, perhaps without even knowing it. Jan Heller Levi’s poem “Not Bad, Dad, Not Bad” portrays a young narrator who glances back at the expectations she had of her father. These expectations become more realistic when the narrator grows up and realizes that her father is only human. He does not have an instruction book to help him raise his daughter. Similarly, “The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop shows how the narrator fails to notice the resemblance of the fish to herself and then realizes the two share many characteristics. Both poems demonstrate how wrongfully people misjudge those different than themselves.

Parents are the first to influence their child and leave the greatest imprint. Small children are typically realistic and do not wish to be Batman or another comic superhero. Their first response to who they want to be when they grow up is to be like their mother or father. Jan Heller Levi emphasizes this concept by stating “You wouldn’t get any medals, Dad, / but you wouldn’t drown” (Levi 7-8). Children grow up believing they have the best parent in the world. As the child grows older, she realizes that her father would not win a prize for the best dad. She accepts that there could always be better. By saying that he would not drown, she clarifies that he is not the worst father either. He made positive choices in raising his daughter, and she respects him regardless.
In “The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop, the narrator also changes her mind about a breathing organism. This time, this live creature is much smaller. The poem begins with the narrator fishing, whether it is to consume the prey or simply as a past-time. This appears as nothing out of the ordinary, since fishing is common. However, the speaker lets her mind wander as she observes the fish and the marks on the fish’s face. The marks are from previous hooks catching him. This shows the visible obstacles in the life of this fish. “He didn’t fight. / He hadn’t fought at all” (Bishop 5-6). The fish did not fight when he was caught. This shows that he has grown weary of all the struggles he has encountered. The fish could be respecting his fate and the dominant being holding him. The narrator appears more powerful to the fish than the fish does to itself. This relates to “Not Bad, Dad, Not Bad” because parents usually have the last word in an argument.

“No Bad, Dad, Not Bad” seems to be a coming of age poem because each stanza brings the narrator closer to understanding her dad. She describes an “icy ocean” that shows a distant relationship. “I always thought you were moving too slowly to save me, when you were moving as fast as you can” (Levi 15-16). The relationship between the father and daughter was tense, which could be due to the lack of communication between them. The narrator reflects on how different her relationship with her dad had been when she states, “I think how different everything might have been had I judged your loving…”(9-10). If their relationship had been different, they would be different people. Humans adjust and became immune to their environment, which includes living through an unaffectionate relationship. The narrator did not have a strong father figure and had to push herself to find her identity.

Similarly, Elizabeth Bishop makes the connection to comprehending the fish and its existence. She mentions a rainbow, and that is when the narrator decides to let the fish go.
“…Until everything/ was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow! / And I let the fish go” (72-74). The rainbow represents the victories in difficult moments that the fish overcame. The fisherwoman realized that this fish deserved respect because it had previously escaped death. The fish did not fight back this time, and the narrator decides to give the gift of life because she sees herself in the fish. The five hooks protruding from the fish signify the fish’s struggle to live and separate himself from dictates of others.

The fish, the dad, and both narrators from the poems share age and hardship. The little girl who grew up misunderstanding her father finally began to understand him. This could be because she is now grown and will soon have children of her own. The parent’s interests are always the best for the child, and sometimes those interests are not known to the child or do not make sense. Both the father and his child could have tried to understand one another sooner in life. Children could be struggling with something school related or from being neglected by a parent. Fathers have struggles such as working to support a family, but what should not be forgotten is that children have struggles too. The fisherwoman was able to make the same conclusion simply by observing the physical features of the fish, who was torn and beaten, similar to how an elderly person is after many years of hard work.

People encounter obstacles all around the world every day, and these encounters are presented in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Fish.” She was an only child, and her father died when she was only eight months old (Biele). As a result, her mother grew mentally ill. Bishop developed chronic asthma, and life was difficult for her. These setbacks in life became positive when she began receiving an independent income that was an inheritance from her father. She met a poet, Marianne Moore, who nominated Bishop for the Houghton Mifflin Prize for Poetry.
Like the narrator in “Not Bad, Dad, Not Bad,” Bishop’s life shows how difficult it can be to understand others, family, and the self, but how a moment of introspection can bring true clarity.
Works Cited

