Humans, Nature and the Importance of Stewardship

“The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop is a powerful and persuasive poem that highlights the importance of keeping man and nature separate but connected through the use of symbolism. Bishop does this by using several different methods. Her description of the fish shows mankind’s influence on Earth. As the fish is described, the reader gets a sense of how the Earth is very similar to the beaten and battered fish. In the poem, oil is present in the water. This presence represents the footprint humans have by being intertwined with nature. Positive or negative, humans leave an imprint where they trod. Whether humans accept it or not, they are a vital part of nature and its survival, which is also clearly expressed in this poem. Bishop uses the fish to represent nature, its qualities paralleled to the Earth itself, from age to wear and tear. The fish never fights back, which is representative of the Earth’s quiet submission, and when it is released, victory is achieved. The narrator also holds symbolic position in the representation of humans and their personification as a whole. Their actions are to show how the author thinks humans should act, while perhaps not being how they are acting now.

The fish is a very symbolic character in this poem. Bishop wanted to assign many images to the fish, the first having to do with how it is described. The narrator describes the fish he caught as “tremendous” (Bishop 1). If the reader assumes that the fish is a representation of the Earth, this adjective makes a lot of sense. “Battered and venerable” (Bishop 8) the fish’s “skin hung in strips” (Bishop 10). The fish was also “speckled with barnacles,” (Bishop 16) and
“infesting/with tiny sea lice” (Bishop 19). All of these descriptions describe natural aging of the fish and the earth. As the poem moves on, the reader sees more and more human impact on the fish. Taken out of its natural state, it gasps for air as the narrator examines the “five old pieces of fish line” (Bishop 51) and “all…five hooks” (Bishop 54). In this the reader can clearly see the impact of mankind has had on the fish. While the hooks have a sinister representation, there might be a more positive message to be found.

The narrator also plays a very symbolic role. Never described in the poem, the narrator’s actions are enough to paint a picture of self-introspection and revelation. The reader gets the idea that the narrator is not much of a fisherman, or has never caught a fish as big as this one. Phrases such as “I stared and stared,” (Bishop 65) and “I admired his sullen face” (Bishop 45) show that the narrator was literally gawking at what he had just caught. One could say the sullen face could represent the seeming resentment the Earth would have for humans if it was alive. The narrator quite possibly felt resentment from the fish, however he/she was surprised when it seemed to care little about being caught. The reader can tell that the narrator has been impacted by a fish in a positive way in the end of the poem. The narrator observes the oil leaking out of their boat and into the water. A theme of separation occurs as oil does not dissolve in water showing that mankind’s affects are not simply absorbed by nature. The more the narrator stares, however, the more he seems to realize that neither force should be overbearing on the other. “Rainbow, rainbow, rainbow” (Bishop 75) is all the narrator sees, which is a symbol of the hope and commitment for the future. He lets the fish go and seems to commit to a new relationship with nature.

Pollution and poor stewardship are also both key underlying themes of this poem. These problems are an occurrence of not keeping man and nature separated. “The human footprint is a
global map of human influence on the land surface, which suggests that human beings are stewards of nature, whether we like it or not” (“The Human Footprint and the Last of the Wild”). This accurately describes the human condition. Humans all affect the Earth in different amounts, unfortunately, mostly in negative ways. Bishop wanted to highlight this carelessness. From the oil spilling out into the lake, to hooks and lines stored in the fish’s mouth, mankind, according to Bishop, cannot go anywhere without leaving it’s mark. Bishop highlights carelessness, yet she highlights ignorance even more. The narrator goes through a complete change of heart in a short amount of time in which Bishop highlights his/her educational experience. The narrator goes from setting out on a voyage to catch fish to letting the fish go, a complete 180 degree turn. This is interesting because after the person is educated, even in the slightest, they realize what they are doing is questionable. While fishing might not be the worst thing for the eco-system, it is the carelessness of leaving oil behind, or catching too many fish that can lead to problems.

What the human race leaves behind on the Earth is important. While the narrator’s life will come and pass, the Earth stays the same. The narrator’s body is organic, however what he creates and leaves behind is not. “Plastic bags, string, twine, rope, fish hooks, wire, paper, cellophane, synthetic sponges, rubber bands, and stockings,” (Beck) the list goes on and on. In a report by Cathy Beck, these are just some of the things that Florida manatee’s ingested and died from. While this isn’t necessarily backwoods bass or trout fishing, it is the danger’s human’s create on a macro-scale. Again from this the reader sees the importance of humans realizing they are connected in a long-term commitment with nature. Bishop wants the underlying theme of this poem to make humans realize, just like the narrator did, the dangers of their ignorance. She also wanted her poem to be that little bit of education that changes a person’s mind or actions regarding their respect for the Earth. It was there when the narrator stared at “the dramatic reds
and blacks” (Bishop 30) of the fish’s insides that he was taught that other things on the Earth have to live there as well as him.

The human race only has one Earth, with a set amount of resources. “It is no wonder that humans have devastated the planet so extensively. It was only a collection of objects to be used. Associated with this attitude is the loss of realization that the planet Earth is a onetime endowment” (Gottlieb 493). If humans damage nature, they damage not only their resources, but their chance of survival. The “rusted engine” and oil in the water causes the water to be polluted and dangerous for the fish to live in. This leads the reader to consider stewardship. Stewardship is the responsible overseeing and protection of something considered worth caring for and preserving (“The Definition of Stewardship”). With only one Earth with a limited number of resources, perseverance is a key element to the survival of the human race. What is interesting about “The Fish” is that Bishop could have gone far enough to introduce this topic in her poem as well. The narrator in the poem comments “I looked into his [the fish] eyes which were far larger than mine” (Bishop 34-35). This could be referring to the fish being a representation of the Earth as a much bigger version than just one person. These eyes are “shallower” (Bishop 36) than the narrators however, meaning that they aren’t human and therefore do not have a soul. This parallels to the earth and how it is related to humans. The Earth can’t fight for itself and cannot manage its own resources. Humans can either capture Earth’s resources, just like the narrator captures the fish, or they can release their hold and manage what they have in a more proper manner.

In “The Fish,” the hooks are described as “medals with their ribbons” (Bishop 61). These medals symbolize the amount of times the fish has been caught, treated poorly, and released. If the reader assumes that the fish is a metaphor for the earth, the medals symbolize drastic
negative impacts humans have made on the earth. Again these poor decisions of pollution, poor stewardship, and neglect of Earth’s resources all can be inferred from this one poem. The fish seems to take on the purpose of telling the narrator to think about the consequences of his or her actions. As “victory” (Bishop 66) filled up the boat, the fish achieved its goal of persuading the narrator to think about their own impact on nature. The narrator lets the fish go, which symbolizes his/her recognition that mankind needs to separate itself from nature, if either wants to survive.

Another point that seems to make the narrator realize that nature and mankind are intertwined is the fish’s age. The fish is obviously old by the way it is described to have “stained” skin “lost through age” (Bishop 15). Also, the five hooks discussed earlier show its experience with fishermen. The fish, symbolizing the earth, is old and experienced while the narrator is young by comparison. It seems as if the narrator learns to respect the age of the fish, which leads him to throw it back. This act of reverence toward the fish could be part of the revelation involving the rainbow as discussed earlier. Bishop wants the reader to realize that the earth has been here longer than humans have and that they should to show reverence towards it.

Overall, “The Fish” is a poem above the relationship between man and nature. The fish takes on many symbols which leads the narrator to have a revelation involving himself and the treatment of nature. The narrator also takes on symbols by personifying the human race. By the education of the narrator, Bishop hopes to sway her audience into realizing the dangers of not being stewards of their planet. By using symbols like the age and description of the fish, along with the oil in the water, Bishop shows the importance of a healthy relationship between humans and nature. The narrator is forced to reconsider his/her position on human relationships with nature, and how much involvement there should be in each party. Humans leave behind evidence
of wherever they go while the Earth watches without reminding them of the consequences of what they are doing. Bishop hopes to educate and prevent ignorance through her depiction of the actions of fish and the narrator.
Works Cited


