

# MOSDOS PRESS *Literature*

GOLD

Part One  
Workbook Answer Guide



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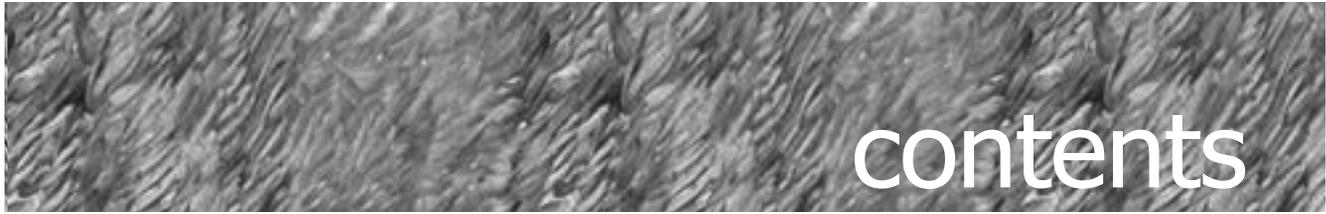
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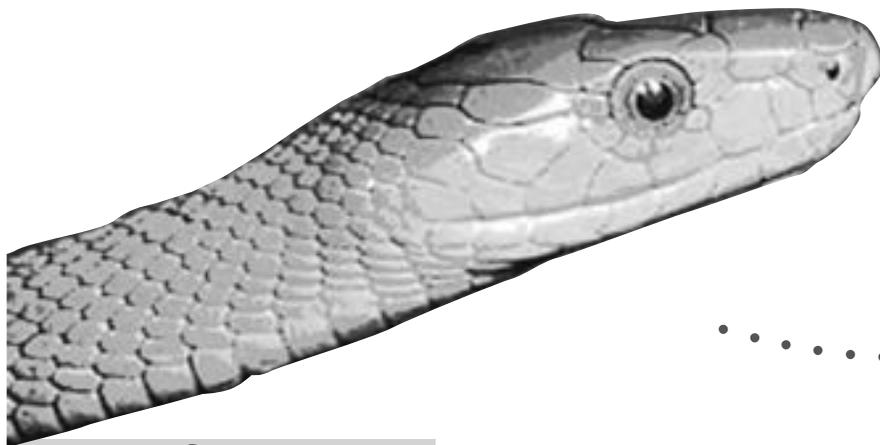


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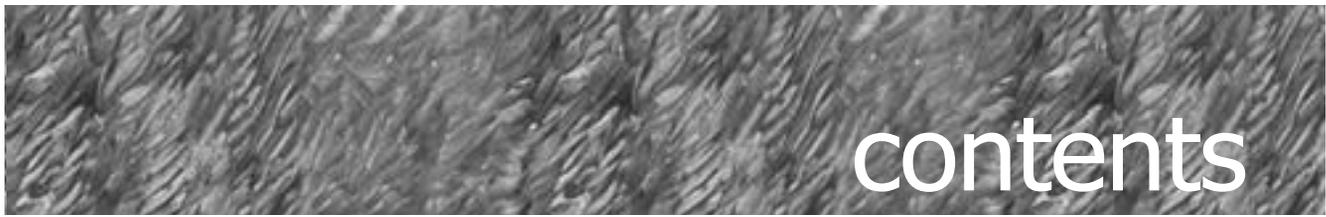
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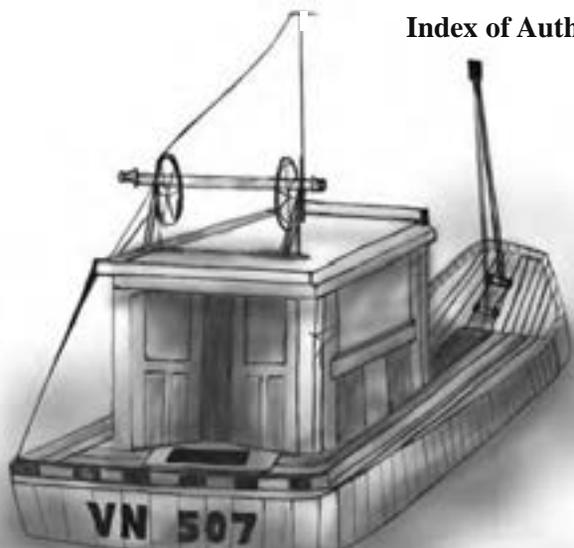
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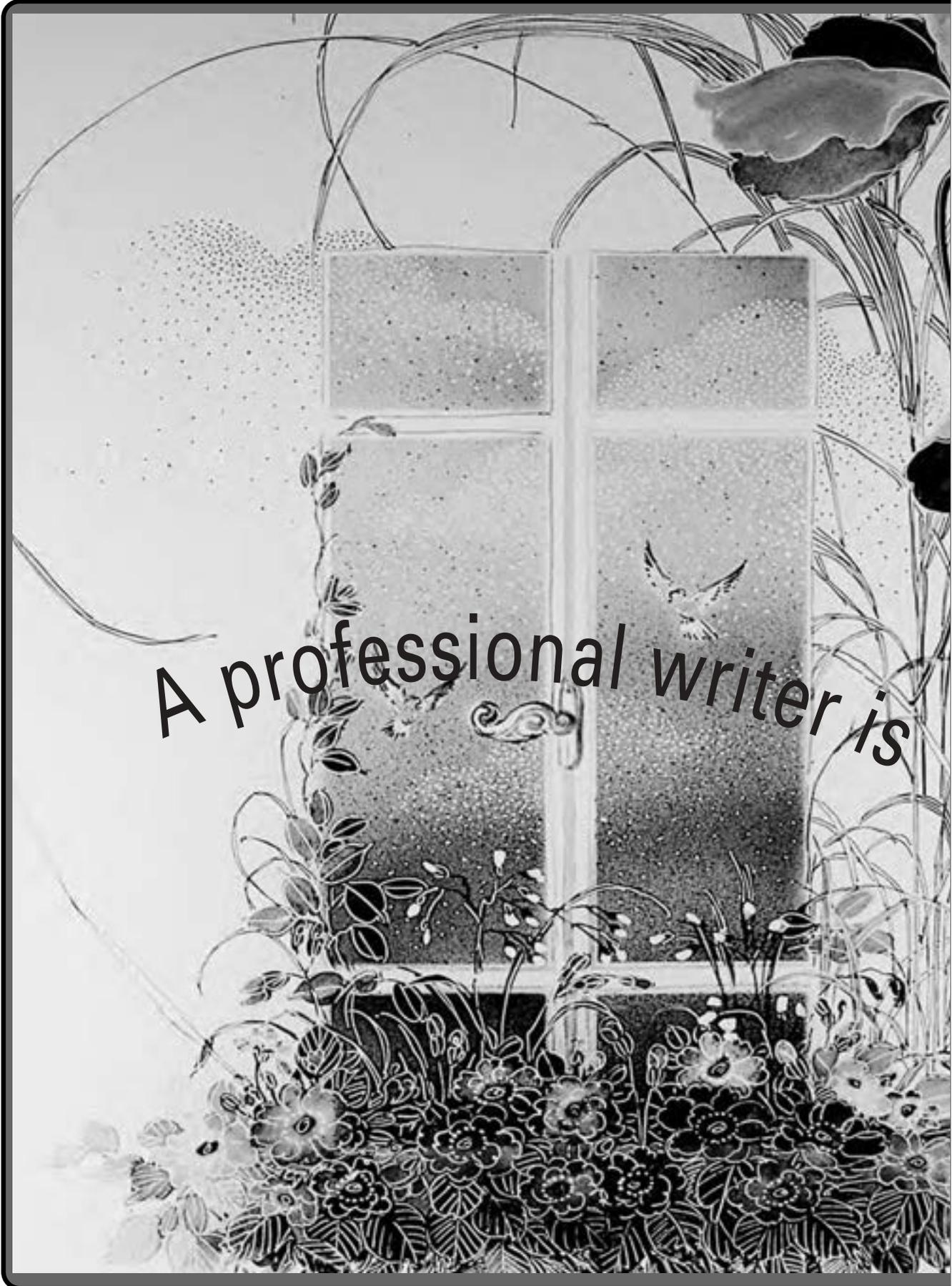
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御帝



*A professional writer is*



**SHORT**  
**Stories**

*an amateur who didn't quit.*

# Blueprint for Reading

## the Author

**Arthur Gordon  
(1912- )**

Arthur Gordon was born in Savannah, Georgia. He graduated Yale University, later receiving a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University. He was managing editor of *Good Housekeeping* magazine as well as editor of *Cosmopolitan*. As a freelance writer, he turned out more than 200 stories and magazine articles, as well as a novel and several nonfiction books. His hobbies include fishing, hunting, and boating—all reflected in *The Sea Devil*.

## Background Bytes

Which do you think is more important: work or play? In contemporary society, do we work so many hours, with such intensity, that we need to renew ourselves with mental and physical recreation? Do we also develop skills while playing that enable us to better focus when we are back at work?

We are no longer a society of farmers, hunters, and laborers. Appliances assist all of us with household tasks. Much of our professional work consists of thinking and sitting. To offset the absence of physical conditioning, many people go jogging each day. Others take yoga, go to exercise classes, or play sports regularly.

Are those folks who engage in strenuous and dangerous activities responding as well to the lack of physical challenge in modern society? Is the additional element of risk a big draw in mountain climbing and underwater exploration? The human neurological and physiological design may be exactly why some of us feel the call of the wild!

## Into "The Sea Devil"

*The Sea Devil* is an action-adventure story about a person who ordinarily works with his head, not with his hands. His job requires clear thinking, but provides no physical challenge. Consequently, he seeks out a challenging hobby.

Night fishing is hard work and dangerous, with the additional satisfaction of yielding food for the practitioner's table. For the protagonist, night fishing allows him to experience his skill in activity fundamental to human survival, by himself. Here there is no boss nor the team work required at so many job sites.

However, this hunter who thinks he is safe is suddenly plummeted into the world of his prey and becomes one of the hunted. The pace of the narrative leaves the reader breathless. The action is described as it occurs chronologically, with the events in sequence. The **theme** of the story is revealed in the life-and-death struggle of the protagonist. A secondary theme is the enforced physical idleness and safety of contemporary culture. The protagonist is weary of this and seeks out a confrontation with natural forces. Another powerful thematic thread is the desire to return to an earlier, more primitive state that requires self-reliance and gives life deeper meaning.

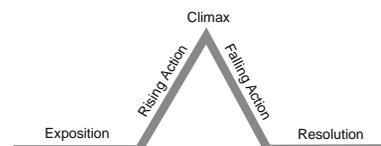
# The Sea Devil

## Before you read the story:

Make two lists of at least five entries each. One list will have jobs requiring brains; the other list will have jobs requiring muscles. After making your lists, look them over. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of job? Then, write a brief statement telling what would be satisfying and unsatisfying about a job requiring only brains. Write the same kind of statement for a job requiring only muscles.

## Focusing on the Plot

Every story has a **plot**. Simply put, this means every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. More specifically, in literary terms, the beginning is the **exposition**, the part of the story that explains background, characters, and setting. The middle of the story includes the **rising action**, adding complications to the story's conflicts, the **climax**, or point of greatest suspense or interest, and the **falling action**, the logical result of the climax. The end of the story is the **resolution**, showing how the conflict is resolved.



## Word Bank

**Lagoon** is an odd word for the English language—with that funny “-oon” ending. What other words can you think of that end “-oon”? **Lagoon** has two sources: The Irish word *loch*, meaning “lake,” as in the Loch Ness monster, and the Latin word *lacuna*, meaning “a pool, a pond” or “a gap”—as a gap in an old manuscript.

barnacle	imminent	placid	tenaciously
droning	impeding	preeminence	torrent
equilibrium	lagoon	respite	
furrow	mottled	simultaneously	
futile	perimeter	teeming	

## GETTING STARTED

Read aloud the first paragraph.

The man came out of the house and stood quite still, listening. Behind him, the lights glowed in the cheerful room, the books were neat and orderly in their cases, the radio talked importantly to itself. In front of him, the bay stretched dark and silent, one of the countless lagoons that border the coast where Florida thrusts its green thumb deep into the tropics.

Ask the students to listen for the two items being contrasted. Now read the paragraph aloud again, and ask them to write a sentence or two explaining the contrast the author sets up. Students should easily catch the author's contrast of civilization—represented by the cheerful room, the books, and the radio—with the wilderness, represented by the dark, silent bay.

## BACKGROUND BYTES

The conflict in the story occurs between man and nature, but there is a sub-text: discontented, modern man. He is unhappy with work that seems purposeless, with an overly *civilized* existence, where the idea of hunting for food is outdated. He wants to be tested as a man, pitting his strength and wits against a hostile environment.

Our protagonist separates play, his net-casting activity, from work (or home, for that matter). He does not bring *hunter* attitudes or skills to the job. His work is apparently slow paced, as is his home life. Today the workplace moves at a faster pace. We might have similar attitudes toward work and play. When this happens, how do we keep the slower paced home life apart from all else?

## INTO "THE SEA DEVIL"

The plot is arranged in **chronological** order. However, an interesting plot feature is the snippets of **exposition** given in the brief respites during the stingray's rush. These highlight the contrast between the peace and order of the man's home and the chaos he experiences as he fights for his life. We ask—why would a man leave the comforts of home to face the terrors of a dark sea? What causes people to search for something unfamiliar?

The students' conclusions should show some insight into jobs requiring brains as opposed to jobs requiring muscles. Obviously, both have advantages and disadvantages.

## **FOCUSING ON THE PLOT**

---

The five elements of **plot** can be seen as a pyramid, with **exposition** at the left base, **rising action** going up the left-hand slope, **conflict** at the top, **falling action** going down the right-hand slope, and **resolution** at the right base. This visual image is often too symmetrical. In this story, for example, the action keeps rising after the conflict is introduced. Also, as happens in many short stories, the falling action and the resolution are both very brief.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The man goes outside on a September night and looks at the lagoon facing his house.
- He sees a mullet jumping in the moonlight, then he goes to the garage to get his net.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

- ▶ **1. Setting:** The scene is evenly described, but it also sets up a **conflict** between man and nature. The bright, orderly room with the noisy radio contrasts with the dark, quiet wildness of the sea.
- ▶ **2. Plot:** The **exposition** explains what the man is about to do and that there is skill involved in casting for mullet. It also explains the value of the mullet—that it makes a meal for a family.
- ▶ **3. Plot:** The man's decision to go casting alone at night begins the **rising action** of the plot.



- ▶ The man came out of the house and stood quite still, listening. Behind him, the lights glowed in the cheerful room, the books were neat and orderly in their cases, the radio talked importantly to itself. In front of him, the bay stretched dark and silent, one of the countless lagoons that border the coast where Florida thrusts its green thumb deep into the tropics.  
It was late in September. The night was breathless; summer's dead hand still lay heavy on the land. The man moved forward six paces and stood on the sea wall. The tide was beginning to ebb.  
Somewhere out in the blackness a mullet<sup>1</sup> jumped and fell back with a sullen splash. Heavy with roe,<sup>2</sup> they were jumping less often, now. They would not take a hook, but a practiced eye could see the swirls they made in the glassy water. In the dark of the moon, a skilled man with a cast net might take half a dozen in an hour's work. And a big mullet makes a meal for a family.
- ▶ The man turned abruptly and went into the garage, where his cast net hung. He was in

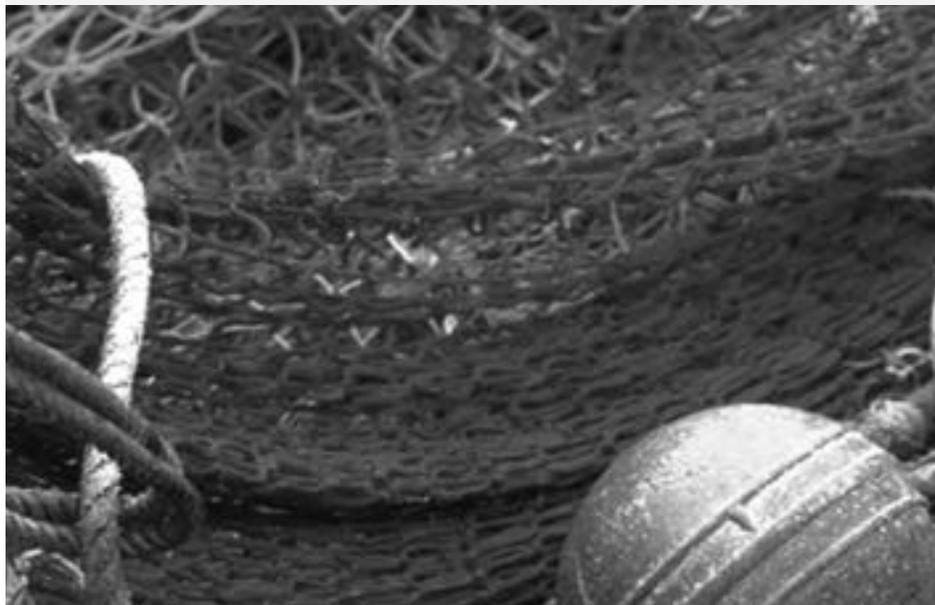
1. A *mullet* (MUL it) is a spiny-finned fish that lives in shallow seas.

2. The term *roe* (RO) refers to fish eggs.

**Word Bank** **lagoon** (luh GOON) *n.*: an area of shallow water open to the sea but separated from the ocean by low, sandy dunes

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The man does not fish for a living or for food; he enjoys the contrast between the physical pleasure of fishing and his intellectual work.



his late twenties, wide-shouldered and strong. He did not have to fish for a living, or even for food. He was a man who worked with his head, not with his hands. But he liked to go casting alone at night.

4

He liked the loneliness and the labor of it. He liked the clean taste of salt when he gripped the edge of the net with his teeth as a cast netter must. He liked the arching flight of sixteen pounds of lead and linen against the starlight, and the weltering crash<sup>3</sup> of the net into the unsuspecting water. He liked the harsh tug of the retrieving rope around his wrist, and the way the net came alive when the cast was true, and the thud of captured fish on the floorboards of the skiff.<sup>4</sup>

He liked all that because he found in it a reality that seemed to be missing from his twentieth-century job and from his daily life. He liked being the hunter, skilled and solitary and elemental.<sup>5</sup> There was no conscious cruelty in the way he felt. It was the way things had been in the beginning.

5

The man lifted the net down carefully and lowered it into a bucket. He put a paddle beside the bucket. Then he went into the house. When he came out, he was wearing swimming trunks and a pair of old tennis shoes.

The skiff, flat bottomed, was moored<sup>6</sup> off the sea wall. He would not go far, he told him-

3. A *weltering crash* is one that causes a lot of noise and movement in the water.

4. A *skiff* (SKIF) is a small, flat bottomed boat suitable for one person.

5. Here, *elemental* (EL uh MEN til) means simple or basic.

6. When a boat is *moored* (MOORD), it is secured by an anchor or cable.

THE SEA DEVIL / 17

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

► **4. Characterization:** We are given the man's age and physical description. We are also told he works "with his head, not with his hands." But he enjoys casting alone at night; he wants to be a man of action, not just a thinker.

► **5. Characterization:** The man enjoys pitting himself—his skill and strength—alone, against the elements, revealing character, as it illustrates the **theme** of the conflict between man and nature.

## GUIDING THE READING

### LITERAL

**Q. Where does the man usually work? What is his hobby?**

**A.** He probably works in an office, and for a hobby he goes cast fishing.

**Q. Specifically, what does the man like about cast fishing?**

**A.** He likes the loneliness, the labor, the taste of salt, the heaviness of the net, the harsh tug of the rope around his wrist.

### ANALYTICAL

**Q. What is it about casting alone at night that the man enjoys?**

**A.** He enjoys the contrast between his day job in an office and the unpredictability of cast-fishing at night—the danger of it and the joy of physical work resulting in food.

**Q. Why are the loneliness, the labor, the salt, the heaviness, and the tug on his wrist so appealing to the man?**

**A.** They are real, in contrast to his office job, which may seem unconnected to purpose.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The man takes his boat, planning to go out about a half-mile.
- The sound of a porpoise reminds the man of the

time he made a fisherman release a captured baby porpoise.

- The method of fishing with a net and a cast line attached to the man's wrist is explained, as well as its ancient origins.

- Although the night is dark, after about five minutes the man spots a mullet jumping.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

► **6. Theme:** The story of the man's earlier encounter with a baby porpoise **foreshadows** his rescue by the porpoise at the end of the story. It also implies a thematic element of good deeds being rewarded measure for measure.

► **7. Theme:** The basic design of the net is unchanged after thousands of years; thus cast fishing contrasts with modern technology. Cast-fishing is elemental, basic—going back to early times—it contrasts strongly with the man's working "with his head."

self. Just to the tumbledown dock half a mile away. Mullet had a way of feeding around old pilings after dark. If he moved quietly, he might pick up two or three in one cast close to the dock. And maybe a couple of others on the way down or back.

He shoved off and stood motionless for a moment, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the dark. Somewhere out in the channel a porpoise blew with a sound like steam escaping. The man smiled a little; porpoises were his friends. Once, fishing in the Gulf, he had seen the charter-boat captain reach overside and gaff<sup>7</sup> a baby porpoise through the sinewy<sup>8</sup> part of the tail. He had hoisted it aboard, had dropped it into the bait well, where it thrashed around, puzzled and unhappy. And the mother had swum alongside the boat and under the boat and around the boat, nudging the stout planking with her back, slapping it with her tail, until the man felt sorry for her and made the captain let the baby porpoise go.

He took the net from the bucket, slipped the noose in the retrieving rope over his wrist, pulled the slipknot tight. It was an old net, but still serviceable; he had rewoven the rents<sup>9</sup> made by underwater snags. He coiled the thirty-foot rope carefully, making sure there were no kinks. A tangled rope, he knew, would spoil any cast.

The basic design of the net had not changed in three thousand years. It was a mesh circle with a diameter of fourteen feet. It measured close to fifteen yards around the circumference and could, if thrown perfectly, blanket a hundred fifty square feet of sea water. In the center of this radial trap<sup>10</sup> was a small iron collar where the retrieving rope met the twenty-

three separate drawstrings leading to the outer rim of the net. Along this rim, spaced an inch and a half apart, were the heavy lead sinkers.

The man raised the iron collar until it was a foot above his head. The net hung soft and pliant<sup>11</sup> and deadly. He shook it gently, making sure that the drawstrings were not tangled, that the sinkers were hanging true. Then he eased it down and picked up the paddle.

The night was black as a witch's cat; the stars looked fuzzy and dim. Down to the southward, the lights of a causeway made a yellow necklace across the sky. To the man's left were the tangled roots of a mangrove swamp;<sup>12</sup> to his right, the open waters of the bay. Most of it was fairly shallow, but there were channels eight feet deep. The man could not see the old dock, but he knew where it was. He pulled the paddle quietly through the water, and the phosphorescence<sup>13</sup> glowed and died.

For five minutes he paddled. Then, twenty feet ahead of the skiff, a mullet jumped. A big fish, close to three pounds. For a moment it hung in the still air, gleaming dully. Then it vanished. But

7. To *gaff* (GAF) a porpoise is to use a hook-like iron instrument to spear and capture it.

8. The *sinewy* (SIN yoo wee) part of the tail is the part that is tough and firm, without bone.

9. *Rents* (RENCE) are tears in the net.

10. *Radial trap* refers to the way the drawstrings of the net radiate from a small iron collar, like spokes from the center of a wheel.

11. Something that is *pliant* (PLY unt) is easily bent, or flexible.

12. A *mangrove swamp* is a grove of low trees with tangled roots growing on a tract of wet, spongy land.

13. *Phosphorescence* (FAHS fuh RESS intz) refers to the glowing or luminous appearance of some sea-life at night.

6

7

## GUIDING THE READING

### LITERAL

**Q. What does the story about the baby porpoise tell us about the man?**

**A.** The story about the baby porpoise shows the man's compassion.

**Q. Is the design of the net modern or ancient?**

**A.** The design of the net is ancient—at least 3,000 years old.

### ANALYTICAL

**Q. What does the story tell about the nature of porpoises?**

**A.** Like other mammals, porpoises are attached to their young. In that sense, they are closer to humans than to fish.

**Q. What does the ancient design of the net say about the act of cast fishing?**

**A.** It connects the man with his ancestors, who hunted their food the same way.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The man prepares for his first cast, feeling the tension of the hunt.
- He catches one mullet, then continues boating to the dock.

the ripples marked the spot, and where there was one there were often others.

The man stood up quickly. He picked up the coiled rope, and with the same hand grasped the net at a point four feet below the iron collar. He raised the skirt to his mouth, gripped it strongly with his teeth. He slid his free hand as far as it would go down the circumference of the net, so that he had three points of contact with the mass of cordage<sup>14</sup> and metal. He made sure his feet were planted solidly. Then he waited, feeling the tension, the fierce exhilaration of the hunter at the moment of ambush, the atavistic desire<sup>15</sup> to capture and kill and ultimately consume.

A mullet swirled, ahead and to the left. The man swung the heavy net back, twisting his body and bending his knees so as to get more upward thrust. He shot it forward, letting go simultaneously with rope hand and with teeth, holding a fraction of a second longer with the other hand so as to give the net the necessary spin, impart the centrifugal force<sup>16</sup> that would make it flare into a circle. The skiff ducked sideways, but he kept his balance. The net fell with a splash.

The man waited for five seconds. Then he began to retrieve it, pulling in a series of sharp jerks so that the drawstrings would gather the net inward, like a giant fist closing on this segment of the teeming sea. He felt the net quiver, and he knew it was not empty. He swung it, dripping, over the gunwale,<sup>17</sup> saw the broad silver side of the mullet quivering,

saw too the gleam of a smaller fish. He looked closely to make sure no stingray<sup>18</sup> was hidden in the mesh, then raised the iron collar and shook the net out. The mullet fell with a thud and flapped wildly. The other victim was an angelfish, beautifully marked, but too small to keep. The man picked it up gently and dropped it overboard. He coiled the rope, took up the paddle. He would cast no more until he came to the dock.

The skiff moved on. At last, ten feet apart, a pair of stakes rose up gauntly<sup>19</sup> out of the night. Barnacle-encrusted, they once had marked the approach from the main channel. The man guided the skiff between them, then put the paddle down softly. He stood up, reached for the net, tightened the noose around his wrist. From here he could drift down upon the dock. He could see it now, a ruined skeleton in the starshine. Beyond it a mullet jumped and fell back with a flat, liquid sound. The man raised the edge of the net, put it between his teeth. He would not cast at a single swirl, he decided; he would wait until he saw two or

14. *Cordage* (KOR dij) refers to the mass of cord or ropes making up the net.

15. An *atavistic desire* (AT uh VISS tik dih ZY ir) is a strong longing.

16. A *centrifugal force* (sen TRIF yoo gul FORSS) causes an object moving in a circle to move away from the center of the circle.

17. The *gunwale* (GUN il) is the upper edge of the side of a vessel.

18. A *stingray* (STING RAY) is a fish with a long, flexible tail, armed with a bony, poisonous spine.

19. Here *gauntly* (GAWNT lee) means desolately or grimly.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

► **8. Plot:** The expectation and tension of the man mirror the **rising action** of the plot.

► **9. Plot:** This first uneventful cast sets up the contrast with the events to follow. The man looking for a stingray **foreshadows** the trouble he will have with his next cast.

8

9

### Word Bank

**simultaneously** (SY mul TAY nee iss lee) *adv.*: concurrently; occurring at the same time  
**teeming** (TEEM ing) *adj.*: occurring or existing in great quantities or numbers; swarming  
**barnacle** (BAR nih kul) *n.*: a sea-dwelling, hard-shelled creature that often attaches itself to ship bottoms and timber

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- Once at the dock, the man waits until he sees mullets jumping.
- Just before his second cast, the man sees two swirls in the water, indicating the presence of

something big below the surface.

- He alters his cast in mid-swing, but the net still lands where he originally wanted it to go.
- A stingray, like a huge bat, shoots out of the water, trapped in the net.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

▶ **10. Plot:** The porpoise is heard again. **Ironically**, a porpoise in the area is irritating to the man.

▶ **11. Plot:** The sea exploding is the **narrative hook**, marking the start of the rising action.

▶ **12. Plot:** The man is the **protagonist** or hero of the story; the stingray is the **antagonist**, the person or thing in conflict with the hero.

three close together. The skiff was barely moving. He felt his muscles tense themselves, awaiting the signal from the brain.

10 Behind him in the channel he heard the porpoise blow again, nearer now. He frowned in the darkness. If the porpoise chose to fish this area, the mullet would scatter and vanish. There was no time to lose.

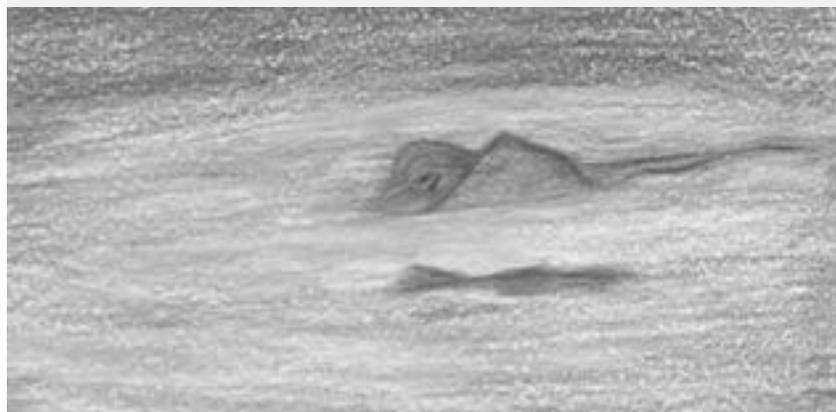
A school of sardines surfaced suddenly, skittering along like drops of mercury. Something, perhaps the shadow of the skiff, had frightened them. The old dock loomed very close. A mullet broke water just too far away; then another, nearer. The man marked<sup>20</sup> the spreading ripples and decided to wait no longer.

He swung back the net, heavier now that it was wet. He had to turn his head, but out of the corner of his eye he saw two swirls in the black water just off the starboard bow.<sup>21</sup> They were about eight feet apart, and they had the sluggish oily look that marks the presence of some-

thing big just below the surface. His conscious mind had no time to function, but instinct told him that the net was wide enough to cover both swirls if he could alter the direction of his cast. He could not halt the swing, but he shifted his feet slightly and made the cast off balance. He saw the net shoot forward, flare into an oval, and drop just where he wanted it.

11 Then the sea exploded in his face. In a frenzy of spray, a great horned thing shot like a huge bat out of the water. The man saw the mesh of his net etched against the mottled blackness of its body and he knew, in the split second in which thought was still possible, that those twin swirls had been made not by two mullet, but by the wing tips of the giant ray of the Gulf Coast, *Manta birostris*, also known as *clam cracker*, *devil ray*,

20. *Marked* (MARKT) means noticed or noted.  
21. Facing the front of the boat, the *starboard bow* (STAR BORD BOU) is the right-hand side of the front of a vessel.



**Word Bank** **mottled** (MAHT ild) *adj.*: marked with spots or blotches of different colors or shades

20 / SHORT STORIES

## GUIDING THE READING

### LITERAL

**Q. What does the man think of the two swirls in the water about eight feet apart?**

**A.** He thinks he sees at least two mullet, and hopes there are more beneath the surface.

### ANALYTICAL

**Q. What is actually making the two swirls?**

**A.** The two swirls are the two wing tips of the giant ray.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The man tries to claw the slipknot off his wrist, but there is no time.
- He is pulled out of the skiff and dragged through the water.
- As the ray jumps, the man is able to stand in the shallow water and take in air, but he is unable to free himself from the rope on his wrist.
- Although prepared for the ray's next run, the man is helpless against it.
- Hurtling through the water, the man closes his eyes and pictures his wife at home and the fish in the skiff.

sea devil.

The man gave a hoarse cry. He tried to claw the slipknot off his wrist, but there was not time. The quarter-inch line snapped taut. He shot over the side of the skiff as if he had roped a runaway locomotive. He hit the water headfirst and seemed to bounce once. He plowed a blinding furrow for perhaps ten yards. Then the line went slack as the sea devil jumped again. It was not the full-grown manta of the deep Gulf, but it was close to nine feet from tip to tip and it weighed over a thousand pounds. Up into the air it went, pearl-colored under belly gleaming as it twisted in a frantic effort to dislodge the clinging thing that had fallen upon it. Up into the starlight, a monstrous survival from the earliest of times.

The water was less than four feet deep. Sobbing and choking, the man struggled for a foothold on the slimy bottom. Sucking in great gulps of air, he fought to free himself from the rope. But the slipknot was jammed deep into his wrist; he might as well have tried to loosen a circle of steel.

The ray came down with a thunderous splash and drove forward again. The flexible net followed every movement, impeding it hardly at all. The man weighed a hundred seventy-five pounds, and he was braced for the shock, and he had the desperate strength that comes from looking into the blank eyes of death. It was useless. His arm straightened out with a jerk that seemed to dis-

locate his shoulder; his feet shot out from under him; his head went under again. Now at last he knew how the fish must feel when the line tightens and drags him toward the alien element that is his doom. Now he knew.

Desperately he dug the fingers of his free hand into the ooze, felt them dredge a futile channel through broken shells and the ribbon-like sea grasses. He tried to raise his head, but could not get it clear. Torrents of spray choked him as the ray plunged toward deep water.

His eyes were of no use to him in the foamstreaked blackness. He closed them tight, and at once an insane sequence of pictures flashed through his mind. He saw his wife sitting in their living room, reading, waiting calmly for his return. He saw the mullet he had just caught, gasping its life away on the floorboards of the skiff. He saw all these things and many others simultaneously in his mind as his body fought silently and tenaciously for its existence. His hand touched something hard and closed on it in a death grip, but it was only the sharp-edged helmet of a horseshoe crab, and after an instant he let go.

He had been underwater perhaps fifteen seconds now, and something in his brain told him quite calmly that he could last another forty or fifty and then the red flashes behind his eyes would merge into darkness, and the water would pour into his lungs in one sharp painful shock, and he would be finished.

This thought spurred him to a desperate

13

14

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

- ▶ **13. Characterization:** Even in the midst of the fast-paced action, the man has time for rational thought. This distinguishes him from the stingray.
- ▶ **14. Plot:** During his intense danger, the man **flashes back** to images of his home, emphasizing the contrast between civilization and the wild.

### Word Bank

**furrow** (FUR oh) *n.*: a narrow groove-like or trench-like depression in any surface  
**impeding** (im PEED ing) *v.*: causing delay, interruption, or difficulty  
**futile** (FYOO till) *adj.*: incapable of producing any result; useless; not successful  
**torrent** (TOR int) *n.*: a stream of water flowing with great rapidity and violence  
**tenaciously** (tih NAY shiss lee) *adv.*: holding fast; characterized by keeping a firm hold

THE SEA DEVIL / 21

## GUIDING THE READING

### LITERAL

**Q. What does the man see when he closes his eyes under the water?**

**A.** He sees his wife in their living room, waiting calmly for his return.

### ANALYTICAL

**Q. What is ironic about his wife's calmly waiting? (Irony is the difference between appearance and reality.)**

**A.** She does not know her husband's life is in danger.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- He tries to thrash about and slow the stingray's charge.
- He forces the ray to jump, giving him another chance to get some air.
- He sees the stakes that signal the beginning of deep water and certain doom. He grabs for the stakes, catches one and holds on, stopping the ray.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

► **15. Plot:** The two forces—man, combining wit and strength, and the stingray, combining instinct and strength, are in equilibrium briefly, but the greater strength of the ray triumphs.

effort. He reached up and caught his pinioned<sup>22</sup> wrist with his free hand. He doubled up his knees to create more drag. He thrashed his body madly, like a fighting fish, from side to side. This did not disturb the ray, but now one of the great wings tore through the mesh, and the net slipped lower over the fins projecting like horns from below the nightmare head, and the sea devil jumped again.

And once more the man was able to get his feet on the bottom and his head above water, and he saw ahead of him the pair of ancient stakes that marked the approach to the channel. He knew that if he was dragged much beyond those stakes he would be in eight feet of water, and the ray would go down to hug the bottom as rays always do, and then no power on earth could save him. So in the moment of respite that was granted him, he flung himself toward them.

For a moment he thought his captor yielded a bit. Then the ray moved off again, but more slowly now, and for a few yards the man was able to keep his feet on the bottom. Twice he hurled himself back against the rope with all his strength, hoping that something would break. But nothing broke. The mesh of the net was ripped and torn, but the draw lines were strong, and the stout perimeter cord threaded through the sinkers was even stronger.

The man could feel nothing now in his trapped hand, it was numb; but the ray could feel the powerful lunges of the

unknown thing that was trying to restrain it. It drove its great wings against the unyielding water and forged ahead, dragging the man and pushing a sullen wave in front of it.

The man had swung as far as he could toward the stakes. He plunged toward one and missed it by inches. His feet slipped and he went down on his knees. Then the ray swerved sharply and the second stake came right at him. He reached out with his free hand and caught it.

He caught it just above the surface, six or eight inches below high-water mark. He felt the razor-sharp barnacles bite into his hand, collapse under the pressure, drive their tiny slime-covered shell splinters deep into his flesh. He felt the pain, and he welcomed it, and he made his fingers into an iron claw that would hold until the tendons were severed or the skin was shredded from the bone. The ray felt the pressure increase with a jerk that stopped it dead in the water. For a moment all was still as the tremendous forces came into equilibrium.

Then the net slipped again, and the perimeter cord came down over the sea devil's eyes, blinding it momentarily. The great ray settled to the bottom and braced its wings against the mud and hurled itself forward and upward.

The stake was only a four-by-four of

22. His wrist was *pinioned* (PIN yund), or bound very tightly, to the net.

### Word Bank

**respite** (RESS pit) *n.*: a delay or stopping for a time, especially of anything distressing or difficult; an interval of relief

**perimeter** (puh RIM ih ter) **cord** *n.*: a rope marking the boundary or outer limits of an area or object

**equilibrium** (E kwill LIB ree um) *n.*: a state of rest or balance

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The ray's next jump snaps off the stake at its base.
- The ray is dragging the man and the stake out to sea, when it meets an incoming porpoise.
- The porpoise smacks the ray with its tail, stunning it temporarily, and giving the man a last chance for air and survival.
- The man musters his strength and swims for the second stake, wrapping the rope around its base.

creosoted<sup>23</sup> pine, and it was old. Ten thousand tides had swirled around it. Worms had bored; parasites had clung. Under the crust of barnacles it still had some heart left, but not enough. The man's grip was five feet above the floor of the bay; the leverage was too great. The stake snapped off at its base.

The ray lunged upward, dragging the man and the useless timber. The man had his lungs full of air, but when the stake snapped he thought of expelling the air and inhaling the water so as to have it finished quickly. He thought of this, but he did not do it. And then, just at the channel's edge, the ray met the porpoise, coming in.

The porpoise had fed well this night and was in no hurry, but it was a methodical creature and it intended to make a sweep around the old dock before the tide dropped too low. It had no quarrel with any ray, but it feared no fish in the sea, and when the great black shadow came rushing blindly and unavoidably, it rolled fast and struck once with its massive horizontal tail.

The blow descended on the ray's flat body with a sound like a pistol shot. It would have broken a buffalo's back, and even the sea devil was half stunned. It veered wildly and turned back toward shallow water. It passed within ten feet of the man, face down in the water. It slowed and almost stopped, wing tips moving faintly, gathering strength for another rush.

The man had heard the tremendous slap of the great mammal's tail and the snorting gasp as it plunged away. He felt the line go slack again, and he raised his

dripping face, and he reached for the bottom with his feet. He found it, but now the water was up to his neck. He plucked at the noose once more with his lacerated hand, but there was no strength in his fingers. He felt the tension come back into the line as the ray began to move again, and for half a second he was tempted to throw himself backward and fight as he had been doing, pitting his strength against the vastly superior strength of the brute.

But the acceptance of imminent death had done something to his brain. It had driven out the fear, and with the fear had gone the panic. He could think now, and he knew with absolute certainty that if he was to make any use of this last chance that had been given him, it would have to be based on the one faculty that had carried man to his preeminence above all beasts, the faculty of reason. Only by using his brain could he possibly survive, and he called on his brain for a solution, and his brain responded. It offered him one.

He did not know whether his body still had the strength to carry out the brain's commands, but he began to swim forward, toward the ray that was still moving hesitantly away from the channel. He swam forward, feeling the rope go slack as he gained on the creature.

Ahead of him he saw the one remaining stake, and he made himself swim faster until he was parallel with the ray and the rope trailed behind both of them

23. *Creosoted* (KREE uh SO tid) means treated with creosote, a strong-smelling, oily liquid used to preserve wood.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

- ▶ **16. Plot:** Rescue comes in the form of the porpoise.
- ▶ **17. Plot:** The man's strategy of fighting the stingray has not worked against the ray's greater strength. The man has to use his brain to battle the ray; in this sense, the man has the advantage.
- ▶ **18. Irony:** At first the man seemed unhappy that he worked with his brains, not his hands. Now, ironically, he realizes his superior intellect is all that can save him from death.

16

17

18

**Word Bank** **imminent** (IM ih nint) *adj.*: likely to occur at any moment  
**preeminence** (pree EM ih nintz) *n.*: superiority to all others

THE SEA DEVIL / 23

## GUIDING THE READING

### LITERAL

**Q.** After the porpoise slaps the ray, the man has one last chance. What is his first impulse?

**A.** He would fight the ray as he had been doing.

### ANALYTICAL

**Q.** What is his only chance to free himself from the ray?

**A.** He realizes he must use his brains, not his strength, to escape death.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The ray takes off, pulling the man toward the stake, but the rope breaks, setting him free.
- Exhausted and bleeding, the man sobs, realizing he has escaped death.

- He climbs into the skiff and returns the still-living mullet to the water. He realizes he will no longer cast alone at night.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

- ▶ **19. Plot:** At the **climax** of the struggle, the man's plan works; the rope breaks, and he is free.
- ▶ **20. Plot:** The **falling action** leaves the man sobbing, as he realizes he is free.
- ▶ **21. Theme:** The airplane overhead reminds the man—and the reader—that nature can be mastered only by intellect.
- ▶ **22. Plot:** The **resolution** comes at the end. Never again can the man cast alone at night.



in a deep U. He swam with a surge of desperate energy that came from nowhere, so that he was slightly in the lead as they came to the stake. He passed on one side of it; the ray was on the other.

Then the man took one last deep breath, and he went down under the black water until he was sitting on the bottom of the bay. He put one foot over the line so that it passed under his bent knee. He drove both his heels into the mud, and he clutched the slimy grass with his bleeding hand, and he waited for the tension to come again.

The ray passed on the other side of the stake, moving faster now. The rope grew taut again, and it began to drag the man back toward the stake. He held his prisoned wrist close to the bottom, under his knee, and he prayed that the stake would not break. He felt the rope vibrate as the barnacles bit into it. He did not know whether the rope would crush the barnacles, or whether the barnacles would cut the rope. All he knew was that in five seconds or less he would be dragged into the stake and cut to ribbons if he tried to

hold on, or drowned if he didn't.

He felt himself sliding slowly, and then faster, and suddenly the ray made a great leap forward, and the rope burned around the base of the stake, and the man's foot hit it hard. He kicked himself backward with his remaining strength, and the rope parted, and he was free.

He came slowly to the surface. Thirty feet away the sea devil made one tremendous leap and disappeared into the darkness. The man raised his wrist and looked at the frayed length of rope dangling from it. Twenty inches, perhaps. He lifted his other hand and felt the hot blood start instantly, but he didn't care. He put this hand on the stake above the barnacles and held on to the good, rough, honest wood. He heard a strange noise, and realized that it was himself, sobbing.

High above, there was a droning sound. Looking up, he saw the nightly plane from New Orleans inbound from Tampa. Calm and serene, it sailed, symbol of man's superiority. Its lights winked red and green for a moment; then it was gone.

Slowly, painfully, the man began to move through the placid water. He came to the skiff at last and climbed into it. The mullet, still alive, slapped convulsively with its tail. The man reached down with his torn hand, picked up the mullet, let it go.

He began to work on the slipknot doggedly with his teeth. His mind was almost a blank, but not quite. He knew one thing. He knew he would do no more casting alone at night. Not in the dark of the moon. No, not he.

**Word Bank** **droning** (DRONE ing) *adj.*: continuous, low, monotonous  
**placid** (PLASS id) *adj.*: pleasantly calm or peaceful

24 / SHORT STORIES

## GUIDING THE READING

### LITERAL

**Q.** After the man is free, what does he see overhead?

**A.** He sees an airplane.

### ANALYTICAL

**Q.** What does the airplane represent?

**A.** It represents man's mastery over nature, a theme of this story.



THE SEA DEVIL / 25

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

In simple terms, our protagonist is sadder but wiser. He has been humbled by nature. At work *he* is in charge and controls any encounter with his work environment. In the water he is a *visitor*, a tourist—perhaps

a trespasser. After the encounter with the ray, he realizes he is lucky to be alive. True, his intellect has saved him, but only because the strategically placed stakes gave him one last desperate opportunity to escape. He may still enjoy the

hunt, but he has lost the confidence given to the innocent (and ignorant). He may go back, but he will never again hunt alone at night. He has learned to respect the unseen adversary.

## QUICK REVIEW

1. He was cast-fishing. He was casting a large net to catch fish.
2. The first cast went smoothly, and the man caught a mullet.
3. The second cast caught a giant stingray that pulled the man overboard.
4. The ray would pull him into deep water and he would drown.

## IN-DEPTH THINKING

5. He knows where to find the fish. He knows how to cast the net. He knows how to repair his net. He checks his rope for kinks and tangles.
6. He imagines his wife sitting in the living room, reading, calmly awaiting his return. The scene contrasts with his life and death struggle. It is ironic, since his wife is unaware of his situation.
7. The author tells the story because later a porpoise swats the stingray, giving the man a chance to free himself. This gives the reader a sense of good deeds being rewarded. The man saved a porpoise; now a porpoise saves him.
8. The man enjoys the tension derived from pitting his wits and strength against nature, subduing a living creature, then killing and eating it. By contrast, the man's normal way of getting food is to do office work, take home his pay, and buy food at the store. The danger, challenge, and thrill of cast-fishing at night provide a direct link between the man's skill and his food.

## DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

9. The author shows the contrast between man and nature, mentioning "the radio [which] talked importantly to itself." There is a lot of noise in "civilization," but who listens to the noise? Work in "civilization" is often separate from purpose. In nature, where struggle against the elements is constant, challenge is unavoidable. The price of failure is high.
10. Some occupations, such as fire fighter and police officer, bring people into an obvious struggle for survival. Builders, carpenters, and engineers make actual things; the results of their labors are visible. Cooks and bakers create useful and enjoyable products. Jobs that create actual products—things people buy and use—are probably more satisfying than office jobs that create reports. On the other hand, office jobs can be satisfying if the worker understands the end result of his work.

## Studying the Selection

### First Impressions

*Which brief passage does most to bring the story to life for you?  
Which part do you find most amusing?*

### ✓ Quick Review

1. What activity was the man engaged in? What method did he use?
2. What was the result of his first cast?
3. What was the result of his second cast?
4. What would happen if the man were pulled out past the old dock?

### 📖 In-depth Thinking

5. Give three examples that show the man is skilled at cast-fishing.
6. Dragged by the ray, the man closes his eyes and imagines the scene at home. What is gained by contrasting the imagined scene with the present experience of the man?
7. Why are we told the man had saved a baby porpoise? How is it related to the story?
8. What does the author mean when he says the man feels "the tension ... the fierce exhilaration of the hunter at the moment of ambush, the atavistic desire to capture and kill and ultimately consume"? Contrast this feeling with his usual way of obtaining food.

### 📁 Drawing Conclusions

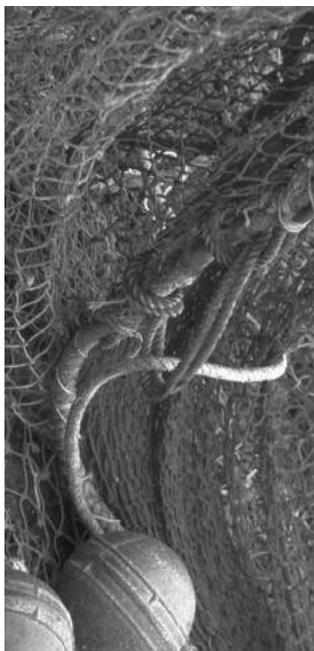
9. The author uses many contrasts in this story. The silence outdoors contrasts with the noise of the radio in the house. The wild struggle of the man and the sting ray contrasts with the peaceful setting of the man's home. The man's job contrasts with his fishing experiences. Referring to these contrasts, explain how the author uses them to make a statement about the conflict between man and nature. What is the author's view of the conflict? Why do people challenge nature?
10. People who work in offices, at desks, looking at computer screens all day, often feel apart from the natural world. What kind of jobs put people in more direct contact with nature? Would these jobs be more satisfying than office jobs? Why or why not?

## FOCUSING ON THE PLOT

### **F**ocusing on the Plot

The **plot** of *The Sea Devil* is a series of events told in **chronological** order. There is a major **conflict**, encompassing minor **conflicts** as well. Complete the following activities to help you better understand plot.

1. Assign each part of the story to the proper plot element, explaining which action corresponds to which plot element: **exposition**, **rising action**, **climax**, **falling action**, and **resolution**.
2. Find the bits of **exposition** occurring in the middle of the action. Show how they reveal theme.
3. Another element of plot is **foreshadowing**. **Foreshadowing** is an early incident or comment hinting at or predicting a later action. Find an example of **foreshadowing**, and explain how it connects with a later event in the story.



### Creating and Writing

1. Discuss the character's irritation with everyday life and his desire for adventure. Does the author favor this quest for excitement, or does he disapprove? Is he neutral? Use specific references to the story to support your thesis.
2. Write a brief sketch in which a character's search for adventure takes a bad turn. Pay attention to setting, action, and the character's thoughts. Use vivid words.
3. Give an oral report on the differences between sting rays and porpoises. Explain why a porpoise is a good choice as the 'hero' of the story and the sting ray is a good 'villain.'

THE SEA DEVIL / 27

1. **Exposition:** The man lives in a house facing the sea. He works with his head, but he is also a skilled fisherman, enjoying cast-fishing alone at night. The **rising action** starts with the man going out in his boat. The **conflict** begins when the entangled stingray shoots out of the water. The action rises until the **conflict** ends; the man uses his wits against the ray's strength, breaking the rope linking him to the ray. There is little **falling action**, only the man's sobs and his slow, painful exit from the water. The **resolution** lies in the man's promise to avoid cast-fishing alone at night.
2. Bits of **exposition** reveal the man's character in the midst of his struggle. He pictures his wife at home reading a book, showing the contrast between civilization and the wildness of the sea. When the man thrashes around, creating more drag on the rope, he realizes he is now the fish at the end of the line. His humanity is revealed in his thoughtfulness and introspection.
3. The story of the man freeing the captured baby porpoise **foreshadows** the man's release through the intervention of the porpoise. After casting for the first time, the man checks the net for stingrays. This **foreshadows** the danger posed by the stingray, realized in the second cast.

## CREATING AND WRITING

1. The essay should have a thesis statement—somewhere in the first paragraph—giving the student's position. For example: *A careful examination of the text shows the author has a neutral stance toward the man's quest for adventure.* Then the essay should support the thesis with references to the story and analysis that shows how the references support the thesis.
2. Creative efforts will vary. However, sketches can be evaluated based on the creative nature of the conflict, how well the conflict is described, and on skill displayed at character development. They should try to catch the reader's interest.
3. Students should realize the main difference is that the porpoise is a mammal, and therefore more closely related to man than the stingray. Also, porpoises are considered *cute*, nurturing their young; people have tried to communicate with them. The stingray, on the other hand, is not just a fish. It is big, powerful, and ugly. It is a frightening predator.

**Most pages are omitted from this preview.**

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# Blueprint for Reading

## Background Bytes

When used as a verb, the word *lure* means to attract. For some people, *lure* has **connotations** of attracting or drawing in a deceiving way. When used as a noun, a lure is a kind of decoy, live or especially artificial bait used in fishing or trapping.

Who made the first lure? Legend has it that one day James Heddon, while waiting for some friends at Dowagiac Creek in Dowagiac, Michigan, was whittling a piece of wood, shaping it like a fish. When he cast the wood into the lake, almost immediately a bass snapped at it. Fishing lures had been invented. Some fishing lures are very beautiful—even to humans, although not to eat!—and the older fishing lures are valued by collectors.

## Into “The Fish”

*The Fish* is quite an extraordinary poem, longer than many of the other works included in this anthology, with some very subtle **allusions**. (An **allusion** is a passing or casual reference to something, either direct or implied.) Look up the words *grunt* and *isinglass* in the dictionary, and see if you can find definitions that fit cleverly with the poem.

As you re-read the poem—and it surely deserves at least three readings—see if you can begin to sense the theme. What is the poet telling us? What happens to the speaker in the poem? Think about how the speaker notices things about the fish. In the beginning of the poem, what does the speaker say about the fish that is positive? What does the speaker say about the fish that may make the fish seem distasteful or that makes you squeamish? What happens after the speaker mentally dissects the fish? By the end of the poem, what has the speaker learned? What have you, the reader learned? If you can answer these questions, it is likely that you understand the theme.

## Focusing on Figurative Language and Simile

When Babette Deutsch describes fireworks as a “chrysanthemum,” we are not expected to take this idea **literally**. There is, of course, no flower in the sky. We are, however, expected to take the image **figuratively**. Many of us have seen fireworks that in fact look like huge flowers.

By making such comparisons—and **figurative language** is the **language of comparisons**—poets help us to *see*, *hear*, *touch* (the physical experience of feeling), *smell*, and *taste*. In a figurative way, they give us eyes to see with and ears to hear with.

As you read *The Fish*, look for Bishop’s use of **similes**, figurative language in which the writer makes a comparison by using the words *like* or *as*. For example, Ms. Bishop writes that the brown skin of the fish “hung in strips like ancient wallpaper.” What do her **similes** help us see?

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## GETTING STARTED

See Appendix: page 734

## BACKGROUND BYTES

Elizabeth Bishop uses language both powerfully and cleverly. The poem has some “technical” words, and several have double meanings. You may want to talk to your class about these words, before they read the poem, so that they may more fully appreciate it.

- ♦ In lines 7 and 8, while writing about the fish with admiration (*battered and venerable*), Ms. Bishop also describes the fish in seemingly unattractive terms: “He hung a grunting weight.” (Note the **assonance** here with the repeated **-un-** sound.) The juxtaposition of attractive vs. unattractive in fact lays out the speaker’s conflict very strongly. More than that, a *grunt* is a type of warm-water fish that emits grunts when it is taken from the water!
- ♦ In lines 27-33, when the speaker of the poem is mentally dissecting the fish, she mentions the *pink swim-bladder* “like a big peony.” A *swim-bladder* is an air-filled sac in bony fishes in the top of the body cavity. If you have never seen one, you may recall that a *peony* is a plant with large, showy flowers.
- ♦ *Gills* are the respiratory organ fish use to breathe oxygen that has been dissolved in water. The oxygen of line 23 is *terrible*, because it has not been dissolved in water—the fish will die of suffocation. Gills are also very sharp, and the person cutting up a fish can be cut, as well, by the “frightening gills” of line 24 that are “fresh and crisp with blood,” as a fish is being cut up to be cooked.
- ♦ In line 40, the lenses of the fish’s eyes are described as “old scratched isinglass.” The isinglass of which she speaks is made of mica. But there is another kind of *isinglass*: a pure, transparent or translucent gelatin obtained from the air bladders—or swim-bladders—of certain fish.

## INTO “THE FISH”

The **theme** of the poem is that if we just take the time to notice, we will see nobility in creatures that we tend to see just in terms of their utility—as if they existed only for us. Their struggles to live and survive also may be imbued with, and are an expression of, honor and courage. The victory that fills the little rented boat in line 66 is not the speaker’s—rather it is the victory of the fish over adversity and human blindness.

Regarding the **theme**, the poet “plays” the reader wonderfully in this poem, just as a fisherman plays out a line and allows a hooked fish to exhaust itself. The speaker’s awareness shifts back and forth—and with it, the reader’s awareness—from “fishing” to the physical nature of fish to the character of this particular fish.

We don’t go fishing in order to admire the fish. We go fishing for the pleasure of the sport, to admire ourselves, and to catch a good meal. When we cut up a fish, at best we are neutral, at worst, squeamish. The dignity of this fish is magnified, rather than diminished, by the repeated juxtaposition of its battered physical being.

## FOCUSING ON FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND SIMILE

**Figurative language** is used by poets to heighten or to intensify understanding, to give us visual and mental acuity. The focus of this lesson is the **simile**. A **simile** is a type of figurative language in which a comparison is made between two unlike things or between people

and objects, using the words *like* or *as* to make the comparison.

A poem of seventy-six lines, *The Fish* is one of the longer poems in this eighth-grade anthology. Although it tells a story, it is unlike a ballad or the typical long narrative poem, in that it focuses on a very short period of time and is devoted to the observations and thoughts of the speaker, rather than relating a series of events.

Examples of **simile** within the poem include “his brown skin hung like ancient wallpaper,” “shapes like full-blown roses stained and lost through age,” “the coarse white flesh packed in like feathers,” “the pink swim-bladder like a big peony,” “It was more like the tipping of an object toward the light,” and so forth.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The speaker catches a “tremendous” fish.
- The fish didn’t fight—hadn’t fought at all.
- He is battered, venerable, and homely.
- His brown skin hangs in strips like ancient wallpaper.
- He is speckled with barnacles and infested with sea-lice.
- His gills are breathing in terrible oxygen—the fish is dying—and the speaker thinks about the internal organs, bones, and entrails, which can be seen when a fish is gutted.
- The speaker looks into the eyes of the fish, which look as though they are backed and packed with tarnished tinfoil.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

*The Fish* is such a rich work. You may want to divide your class into seven groups of students working together to get the most from their assigned verses. Afterwards, each group can present its observations.

**Group I:** Line 1 through the middle of line 9.

**Group II:** The middle of line 9 through line 21.

**Group III:** Line 22 through line 33.

**Group IV:** Line 34 through line 44.

**Group V:** Line 45 through line 55.

**Group VI:** Line 56 through line 65.

**Group VII:** Line 66 through line 76.

Student groups need to be reminded to consider how their verses function within the entire poem.

► **Imagery:** Strong visual images appealing to the sense of sight, as well as images appealing to the sense of touch—as the physical sense of squeamishness, pulling, and pain. **The visual images** include “a tremendous fish,” “brown skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper,” “shapes like full-blown roses stained,” “fine rosettes of lime,” “two or three rags of green weed hung down,” “fresh and crisp with blood,” “packed in like feathers,” “dramatic reds and blacks,” and so forth.

► **Sense of Touch:** **The sense of touch, as in the physical experience of pain,** is stirred by “with my hook fast in a corner of his mouth,” “that can cut so badly,” “from his lip...grim, wet, and weapon-like, hung five old pieces...,” “their five big hooks grown firmly in his mouth.” **The sense of touch, as in the physical sense of pulling,** is elicited by “He hung a grunting weight” and “a fine black thread still crimped from the strain and snap.” **The sense of touch, as in the physical sense of being without air to breathe,** is stimulated quite powerfully by “While his gills were breathing in the terrible oxygen.” For some, **the sense of smell** is stirred by “where oil had spread raining.”

► **Similes:** These include “skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper,” “shapes like full-blown roses stained and lost through age,” “coarse white flesh packed in like feathers,” “the pink swim-bladder like a big peony,” “more like the tipping of an object toward the light,” and “Like medals with their ribbons frayed and wavering.”

Elizabeth Bishop



I caught a tremendous fish  
and held him beside the boat  
half out of water, with my hook  
fast in a corner of his mouth.

5 He didn't fight.  
He hadn't fought at all.  
He hung a grunting weight,  
battered and venerable<sup>1</sup>  
and homely. Here and there

10 his brown skin hung in strips  
like ancient wallpaper,  
and its pattern of darker brown  
was like wallpaper:  
shapes like full-blown roses

15 stained and lost through age.  
He was speckled with barnacles,<sup>2</sup>  
fine rosettes<sup>3</sup> of lime,  
and infested  
with tiny white sea-lice,

20 and underneath two or three

rags of green weed hung down.  
While his gills<sup>4</sup> were breathing in  
the terrible oxygen  
—the frightening gills  
fresh and crisp with blood,  
25 that can cut so badly—  
I thought of the coarse white flesh  
packed in like feathers,  
the big bones and the little bones,  
30 the dramatic reds and blacks  
of his shiny entrails,<sup>5</sup>  
and the pink swim-bladder  
like a big peony.<sup>6</sup>  
I looked into his eyes

35 which were far larger than mine  
but shallower, and yellowed,  
the irises backed and packed  
with tarnished tinfoil  
seen through the lenses  
40 of old scratched isinglass.<sup>7</sup>

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1. *Venerable* (VEN er uh bil) means worthy of respect or reverence because of old age or other admirable characteristics.

2. *Barnacles* (BAR nih kulz) are small, shelled marine creatures that attach themselves to ship bottoms and other floating objects.

3. *Rosettes* (roe ZETZ) are rose-shaped arrangements of ribbon or other material used as ornaments or badges.

4. The *gills* are the organ through which fish breathe oxygen dissolved in water.

5. The *entrails* (EN tray ilz) are the inner organs of the body, sometimes specifically the intestines.

6. A *peony* (PEE uh nee) is a plant with large, showy flowers.

7. *Isinglass* (I zin GLASS) is a thin, tough, and transparent material. The term *isinglass* also refers to a pure, translucent or transparent form of gelatin obtained from the air bladders—or swim bladders—of some fish.

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► **Metaphors:** These include “a grunting weight,” barnacles as “fine rosettes of lime,” seaweed as “rags of green weed.” The irises of the fish’s eyes are “backed with...tarnished tinfoil,” as much costume jewelry was made in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The oil spreads a “rainbow”—although this may be literally true—as sunlight refracted through oil often creates rainbows. The figurative language helps us see the fish and the boat clearly, through the perceptions and attitudes of the speaker. The five hooks with their attached lines are a “five-haired beard of wisdom,” such as worn by a sage.

► **Alliteration:** The author does not use much alliteration, but we see fish, fast, fight, fought, beside the boat, pink...peony, big bones, tarnished tinfoil, lower lip, wet and weaponlike, grim...grown...green.

► **Assonance:** Examples include “hung a grunting,” “green weed,” “far larger.”

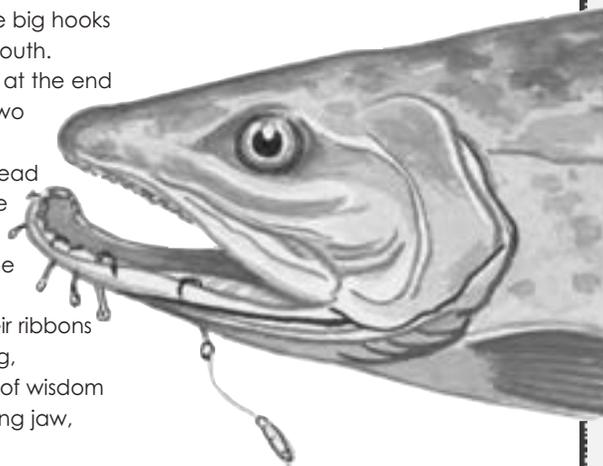
► **Consonance:** The author uses the double “ll” throughout: “wallpaper,” “full-blown,” “gills,” “shallower,” “yellowed,” “sullen,” “sullen face,” “call,” “still,” “all,” “filled,” as well as the single “l” sound frequently. There are other double consonants (“pattern,” “rosettes”), as well as interesting use of “sh” and “sp” (“fresh and crisp”) and other consonant combinations (“crimped from the strain and snap”).

► **Repetition:** “brown...brown,” “wallpaper...wallpaper,” “big bones and little bones,” “stared and stared,” “rusted engine...rusted orange,” “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow”

► **Rhyme:** “Here and there,” “backed and packed”

They shifted a little, but not  
to return my stare.  
—It was more like the tipping  
of an object toward the light.  
45 I admired his sullen face,  
the mechanism of his jaw,  
and then I saw  
that from his lower lip  
—if you could call it a lip—  
50 grim, wet, and weaponlike,  
hung five old pieces of fish-line,  
or four and a wire leader  
with the swivel still attached,  
and with all their five big hooks  
55 grown firmly in his mouth.  
A green line, frayed at the end  
where he broke it, two  
heavier lines,  
and a fine black thread  
still crimped from the  
strain and snap  
60 when it broke and he  
got away.  
Like medals with their ribbons  
frayed and wavering,  
a five-haired beard of wisdom  
trailing from his aching jaw,

65 I stared and stared  
and victory filled up  
the little rented boat,  
from the pool of bilge<sup>8</sup>  
where oil had spread raining  
70 around the rusted engine  
to the bailer rusted orange  
and sun-cracked thwarts,<sup>9</sup>  
the oarlocks<sup>10</sup> on their strings,  
the gunnels<sup>11</sup>—until everything  
75 was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!  
And I let the fish go.



8. Here, *bilge* (BIL) refers to the water, or seepage, that accumulates in the enclosed area at the bottom of a vessel.  
9. The *thwarts* (THWORTS) are the seats on a boat, especially those used by the rowers.  
10. The *oarlocks* (OR LOX) are U-shaped devices that provide pivots for the oars in rowing.  
11. The *gunnels* (GUN ilz) refer to the gunwales or the upper edges of the side of a vessel.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The eyes of the fish shift, but do not look back at the speaker.
- The speaker admires the sullen face, the mechanism of the fish's jaw.
- And then the speaker suddenly sees—*grim, wet, and weaponlike*—the five old pieces of fish-line hanging from the lip of the fish, with five big hooks embedded in his mouth.
- The hooks are five medals—a five-haired beard of wisdom trailing from the fish's aching jaw.
- The speaker stares and stares and victory fills up the little rented boat.
- Oil has rained from the engine to the bailer to the thwarts to the oarlocks to the gunnels, and everything is all rainbow, rainbow, rainbow.
- The speaker lets the fish go.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

► **Play on Words:** The poet writes that the fish "hung a grunting weight." A *grunt* is a type of warm-water fish that emits grunts when it is taken from the water. The lenses of the fish's eyes remind the poet of "old scratched isinglass." In fact, *isinglass* is a translucent gelatin obtained from the swim-bladders of certain fish.

► **Rhythm:** Used very effectively throughout, for example, the line of monosyllables with which the poem closes.

► **Antithesis (Figure of Speech Meaning Opposites):** The fish is "tremendous" and the boat is "little." The fish is entrails and bones and gills and the fish is a noble creature with spirit.

► **Personification:** The fish is "venerable," has decided not to fight, and, subjected to the indignity of her dissection and scrutiny, refuses to return her stare. He has a "sullen face" and "a lip." He wears medals and his jaw is aching. The fish's bravery and struggle are the victory that fills the boat.

► **Theme:** Age and surviving life's tribulations can cause physical deterioration and ugliness. But the accompanying courage, depth, and moral stamina, are, to those perceptive enough to recognize them, intoxicatingly beautiful.

## ANALYZING THE POEM

Elizabeth Bishop's *The Fish*, which begins with an ordinary incident, catching a fish, describes a defining moment for the speaker. Throughout much of the poem the speaker alternates between admiring the fish (it is "tremendous" and "venerable") and diminishing the fish (it hangs "a grunting weight," it is "homely"). Its brown skin is "like ancient wallpaper," and so it has the positive attributes associated with age. It is "speckled with barnacles" and is "infested with...sea-lice," and so is also distasteful and disgusting. The speaker mentally dissects the fish, while sympathizing with its

"breathing in the terrible oxygen." The speaker is frightened by the gills "that can cut so badly." But its eyes, like "old isinglass," do not deign to return the speaker's human stare. *Then*, the speaker begins to shift away from common human perceptions, admiring the sullen face and jaw of the fish. This is the start of a vision, in which the speaker really sees the fish: the remarkable passage that begins, "grim, wet, and weaponlike" and ends with "trailing from his aching jaw." This is when the world of the fisherman's "little rented boat" begins to swim. Victory fills the boat because the speaker has been able to go

beyond normal superficial impressions. The "swimming," of the sort that occurs when one is about to faint, is marvelously captured by the "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow." The speaker's victory derives from the victory of a fish that has repeatedly escaped its human foes. This is a fish that should not die, should not be consumed at the dinner table. The details are revealed gradually, wonderfully, until we, like the speaker, are victorious, recognizing the nobility of the fish, the insignificance of the boat, and the rightness of the decision.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Most students will agree that this incident is too meaningful for the speaker to use it as a “fish story.” (You may need to remind students that a fish story is an exaggerated or incredible story. This American

term derives from the tendency of fishermen to exaggerate the size of their catches—or even of the “one that got away.”) However, a student could legitimately argue that this is a story that a fisherman might want to retell, perhaps embellishing the fish’s nobility.

## QUICK REVIEW

1. The skin is brown-patterned, hanging in strips. Barnacles and sea-lice have attached themselves to the fish. From the underbelly of the fish, seaweed is hanging. The speaker imagines the fish’s innards: the gills covered with the blood of the torn fish, the white flesh, the big and little bones, the entrails, and the fish’s air- or swim-bladder. Its eyes are large—larger than the speaker’s—shallow, yellowed, the iris seemingly backed with a metallic material, and the lenses scratched. From the fish’s lip hang four old pieces of fish-line and a wire leader with the swivel still attached. Five big hooks are embedded in the fish’s mouth.
2. The colors are brown (the skin); lime (the color of the barnacles); white (the tiny sea-lice); green (seaweed); white (flesh); red and black (the entrails); pink (the swim-bladder); yellow (eyes); and the implied metallic grey (of the material that backs the irises).
3. The boat is little, rented by the speaker. Clearly it is a motor boat, as oil has spread from the “rusted” engine. There is a pool of bilge water. The bailer is rusted orange, and the thwarts are sun-cracked. Encourage students to define *bilge*, *bailer*, *thwarts*, *oarlocks*, and *gunnels* in their responses. Spilled oil has spread a rainbow in the bottom of the boat.

## IN-DEPTH THINKING

4. The fish, caught five times previously, is battered and tired. It seems to have no energy left for another fight. Perhaps the fish is ready to relinquish his hold on life.
5. Bishop may offer the details in the order in which the speaker notices them. But it can also be argued that she organizes them in such a way that we experience the speaker’s change in attitude towards the fish. Students will have many different responses to the poet’s details.
6. Encourage students to see “sections” in the poem, as the speaker’s focus shifts. First she tells us that the fish is “tremendous” and that “he didn’t fight.” We admire his size and sympathize with his acquiescence in his own capture. He is “venerable,” a term of respect, but he hangs “a grunting weight”—hardly an endearing description. His skin shows his age, for which we can admire him, but he is infested with sea-lice. In this way, the poet keeps us moving back and forth in terms of how we feel about this fish. When she dissects him, we can figure he is a goner. But she regrets the breathing in of the “terrible oxygen.” Then the eyes draw her attention. He won’t look at her—which really means he won’t acknowledge her. She simply is not important enough. There is a great sadness in “It was

more like the tipping of an object toward the light.” Finally, she notices the fish’s lip. It may seem that the noticing of the lip is most important to the poem. But only because of the gradual build up and all of the details that have preceded this section. Up to this point, she has wavered—but the hooks clinch it for her.

7. The fish is tremendous. The boat is little. The fish is venerable, the boat is rented. Both fish and boat share the battered appearance that may attend old age and

poor care. The rainbows that can be seen in the oil that has sprayed from the rusted engine explode in the speaker’s consciousness—like fireworks—because the nobility of the fish so overwhelms both boat and fisherman. The importance here is that the spirit transcends puny reality.

## Studying the Selection

### First Impressions

Is *The Fish* a ‘fish story’?

#### ✓ Quick Review

1. Bishop offers a complete description of the fish. Describe its skin, its insides, its eyes, its lip.
2. Which colors does Bishop use in her description?
3. Describe the boat. Note: This boat is not a rowboat.

#### 📖 In-depth Thinking

4. Why doesn’t the fish fight back?
5. Why do you think Elizabeth Bishop gives the details of the fish’s appearance in the order that she does? How does each group of details affect you?
6. The speaker’s attitude towards the fish changes several times. How does the speaker feel in the beginning? In the middle of the poem? At the end? Which words or phrases does the speaker use at various points that lead you to the conclusions you have drawn?
7. What is the contrast between the fish and the boat? Why is that contrast so important?

#### 📁 Drawing Conclusions

8. Why does the speaker throw the fish back? What is the theme of the poem?
9. Would you have thrown the fish back? Describe the thinking that would have led to your decision.
10. Do you think the speaker’s experience would have a lasting effect on a person?



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## FOCUSING ON FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND SIMILE

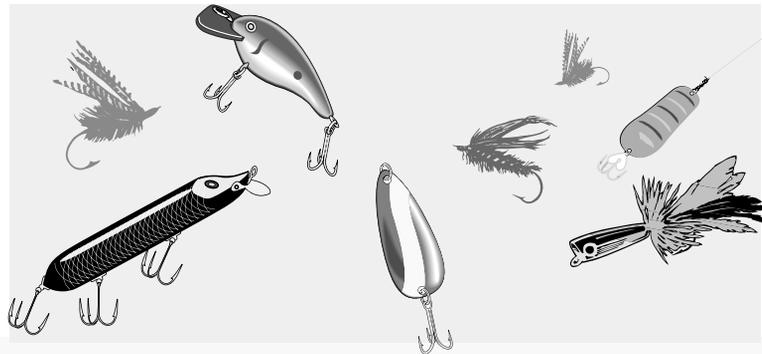
### **F**ocusing on Figurative Language and Simile

One kind of figurative language is the **simile**, a comparison between two unlike people, objects, or creatures using the words *like* or *as*. For example, if we say that a kitten's fur is as black as night, we are suggesting to the mind's eye a quality of the color of the fur. (We may also be **alluding to** a quality of mysteriousness!) There are many overworked or cliched similes: for example, "as warm as toast," "as stubborn as a mule," "as quiet as a mouse." When writers use similes, they try to create comparisons that offer fresh ways of seeing.

1. Find six similes in the poem. Explain the comparison in each one.
2. What other comparisons can you find in the poem that may not use the words *like* or *as*?
3. How does Bishop's use of comparisons add to our understanding of what happens to the speaker in *The Fish*?

### Creating and Writing

1. Write an essay in which you discuss the "victory [that] filled up/the little rented boat."
2. Elizabeth Bishop's description of the fish is so clear that we can easily picture it. Choose an object to describe. Include two similes in your description.
3. Why would it have been a poor idea to call the poem *Victory*?
4. Design a fishing lure.



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1. The fish's "skin hangs in strips like *ancient* wall-paper." We can *see* the skin hanging if we have old wall-paper drooping. We can almost *feel* the age. The pattern on the fish's skin is, once more "like wall-paper: shapes like full-blown roses stained and lost through age." The imagery of "full-blown roses stained and lost through age" is filled with the beauty of an aging, fading, once-lovely pattern. The fish's flesh is "packed in like feathers," suggesting the way the flesh seems neatly stacked within and against the precision of the skeleton. The pink swim-bladder looks like a "big peony," a large showy flower. The hooks in the fish's lip are "Like medals with their ribbons frayed and wavering." This simile gives the fish extraordinary status: He is a survivor of five battles and has earned a hard-won medal for each fight. His medals create a long beard that reminds us of a sage.

2. The other comparisons are cited in **Literary Components, Metaphors and Personification.**

3. Students should note two important results of Bishop's comparisons. First, they help us see the fish vividly. Second, they elevate the fish to a venerable hero. Third, the ongoing contrast between fish as "catch" and fish as noble spirit, is wonderfully articulated through the figurative language.

### CREATING AND WRITING

1. In their essays, students should discuss the victory of both the fish and human as we have described in several sections above.
2. Encourage students to include comparisons that suggest feelings and images to the reader.
3. Had the poem been called, "Victory," the poet would have given away the story at the outset. Besides, the focus is the fish and the speaker's transformation after being exposed to the fish. Finally, it is the wonderful alternation of feelings, the back and forth, back and forth, of the speaker's attitude, that makes the climax so powerful. Were the poem called "Victory" this process would have been sabotaged.
4. As an alternate to this assignment you might have students draw a picture of Bishop's fish.

### DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

8. The speaker throws back the fish as she realizes that this fish has a gigantic spirit. She, in her ordinary, little boat, cannot compare to the fish, and surely does not deserve to kill and eat it. Answers will vary.
9. Answers will vary.
10. Answers will vary, but surely this is a defining, memorable moment for the speaker.