

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 reread 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?

The Fish

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 venerable¹
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,²
fine rosettes³ of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
20 and underneath two or three

rag of green weed hung down.
While his gills⁴ were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills
25 fresh and crisp with blood,
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,⁵
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.⁶
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.⁷

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.

They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.

—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.

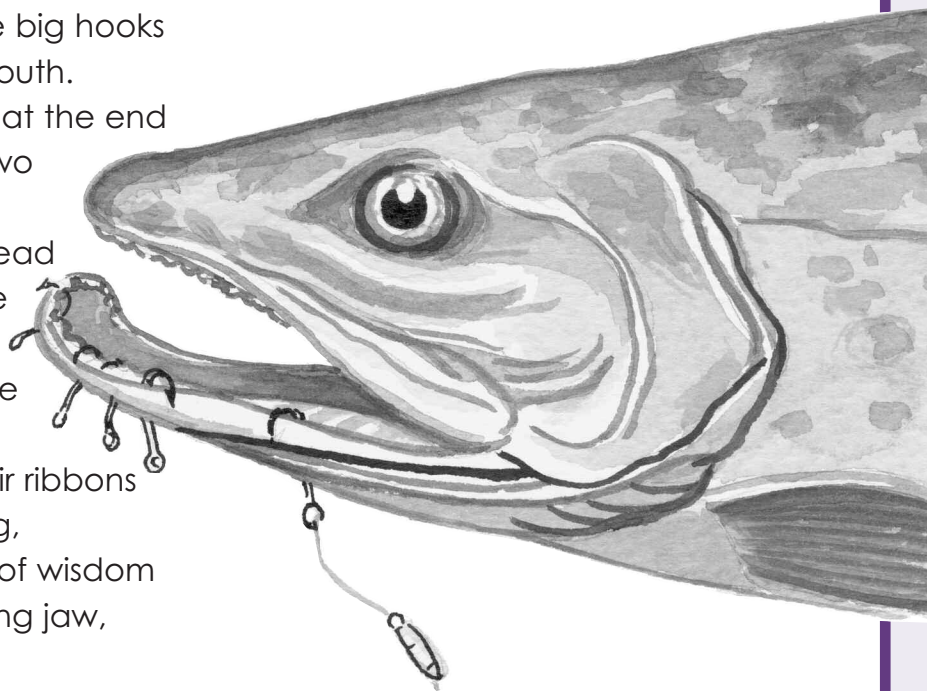
45 I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
50 grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
and with all their five big hooks
55 grown firmly in his 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 bilge⁸
where oil had spread raining
70 around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange
and sun-cracked thwarts,⁹
the oarlocks¹⁰ on their strings,
the gunnels¹¹—until everything
75 was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.



8. Here, *bilge* (BILJ) 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.