



“Moonfish” from *Tales from The Inner City* and the Problem of Pain in Fish

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Abstract

“Moonfish” by Shaun Tan is a story about children who, living in a modern, polluted city, practice skyward angling from the rooftops of the skyscrapers and end up catching an immensely rare fish. This article’s purpose is to suggest a pedagogical application of Tan’s story for a lesson promoting fish welfare along with a reading of the story that could be used for such a lesson. As a framework, the article also introduces the debate concerning pain in fish. Education on the subject becomes all the more important in recent times, as this discussion remains quite heated and many anglers raise objections to the very notion that fish feel pain. A lesson utilizing the story is to challenge these views and encourage an empathetic approach to fish.

Keywords

fish pain, climate education, children’s literature, ecocriticism

Overview: The Debate Concerning Pain in Fish

Teaching children about fish pain is undoubtedly a difficult task, not least because the scholarly debate remains heated and generates a great deal of controversy. While more and more scholars affirm the capability of pain in fish, strong objections are regularly raised to the view. For an entry point to the discussion, a book *Do Fish Feel Pain?* by Victoria Braithwaite can be suggested. Braithwaite refers to a study co-

conducted with Mike Gentle and Lynne Sneddon titled “Do fishes have nociceptors”, which included injecting small amounts of bee venom or vinegar into trout (Braithwaite, 2010, p. 46-65). The results showed the breathing rate of the fish increasing and their appetite lessening (Braithwaite, 2010, p. 62-64). Furthermore, a subsequent study found that trout treated with vinegar or venom paid less attention to their surroundings and were less avoidant of unknown things, unless treated with a pain-relieving drug (Braithwaite, 2010, p. 65-68). These findings point strongly towards fish being capable of pain, and some researchers are of the opinion that it would be increasingly difficult to argue against fish pain (Sneddon et al., 2018, qtd. in Franks et al., 2018, p. 1). Others are skeptical and raise objections to the quality of the evidence. Paul J. B. Hart writes that words such as “pain,” “suffering,” or “consciousness” are used to describe human mental states and thus are not applicable to animals, as we do not understand their cognitive processes (2023, p. 1273-74). Additionally, he demands more precision in our understanding of what consciousness is before we can determine pain in animals (p. 1274-75).

“The Moonfish”

Tan’s story focuses on an adventure of five siblings who catch a rare, beautiful fish. They practice “urban fishing” (Tan, 2019, p. 91) on the rooftops of skyscrapers as the only fish in the city can be found in the sky. This pastime has cultural significance. It is suggested that many people engage in angling in the sky and that they tend to exchange their experiences, which leads to the circulation of rumours and creation of urban legends, like those surrounding the moonfish. This legendary status among “sky angler[s]” (but also among the rich and the elite) is especially important in the case of the moonfish, as its rarity leads to it becoming very desirable (Tan, 2018, p. 92) and makes the prospect of selling it all the more tempting. Since the family sells the fish, their actions can be effectively seen as poaching for gain.

The children themselves might not have material gain on their minds and seem more concerned with the achievement of catching the fish itself. Yet they are not completely free of the materialistic approach, which shows when the narrator compares the smell of the fish to the smell of money (Tan, 2018, p. 95). Their parents, on the other hand, fully embrace the financial opportunity. Both adults and children only acknowledge their wrongdoings after the attempt at selling the fish, only a half-successful one as they find out that moonfish’s parts rot away when close to Earth’s surface, and the amount of money they are worth is less than satisfactory. Only then do they realize that they had killed and destroyed innocent creature.

One must note that the process of catching the fish must have been extremely painful to it. It was angled, wounded and made to struggle for its life while slowly suffocating in the atmosphere closer to the Earth's surface. It is undeniably a moral failure on the part of the family. Pim, one of the siblings, is the first to realize their wrongs and makes at least partial redemption possible by releasing the fish's eggs and helping to protect the species as a whole. Refusing to bait the hooks hereafter is another step in the right direction, which, however, does not make up for the harm done to the individual fish. The story can be seen as advocating for combining the protection of the species and care for individual fish welfare.

The story closes with an illustration portraying a child standing on a rooftop at night, holding a giant, mirror-like fish that reflects the light of the city. It is contrasted with a dark human figure with a knife at their belt, perhaps suggesting the violence and cruelty that human beings are capable of. The fish can be seen as reflecting the moral state of humanity in that moment, both its beauty and corruption. The city, however, might also reflect the fish in a mutual relation, which may evoke a more hopeful message of a possible coexistence of the human and non-human worlds. The illustration and the story both portray the point at which two worlds (urban and natural) meet and alter each other. Humans are shown as capable both of causing great harm if they act irresponsibly and inconsiderately and of care for and appreciation of more-than-human beings if they approach them with empathy, attentiveness, and a willingness to recognize their intrinsic value.

Possible Teaching Application

The story and its reading incorporating the perspective of fish pain could be used to conduct a lesson promoting fish welfare. Since it would inevitably deal with graphic and disturbing content, it would be most suitable for children over twelve years old. It might be beneficial to start with a warm-up activity and ask students for their opinions on fishing or angling. This should be followed by presenting the students with various voices present in the debate around fish pain. Afterwards, a fragment of the story dealing with the catching of the fish (paragraphs 1-10 could be suggested) would be read. Finally, after a short discussion of the text checking its understanding and gathering the students' ideas, they would be invited to write a short story (around 250 words) presenting the events through the perspective of the fish. Such an approach would enable them to empathize with the creature to a greater degree and realize the importance of fish welfare.

Developing care for animal welfare appears especially important in the light of evidence that children are being socialized into attributing different value to different

animals. Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart have observed a tendency to divide animals into four categories: friends (subjectified and treated with higher sensibility), nature (subjectified but approached with lesser sensibility), things (objectified but looked at with high sensibility) and killing zone (objectified with a lack of sensibility) (2018, p. 4). It can be argued that fish often fall under the category of 'things,' and a task like the one proposed herein could help children apply greater subjectification to fish, along with a less anthropocentric approach in their future interactions with animals at large.

References

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