

Fish Swimming

A Poem by Moniza Alvi

1. The title of the poem, 'Fish Swimming', tells us half the story. The other half through the voice of the poet. It is a poem in which a person, the poet, is addressing a fish. The most obvious starting point is to think about the differences and similarities between a fish and a human.

	Different	Similar
Biological		
Environmental		
Social		
Aspirational		

2. Perhaps we can examine the concept of a person addressing a fish as a metaphor. There are a number of metaphors and similes in English which refer to fish:

- He is like a fish out of water.
- A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.
- It smells fishy to me.
- She's a big fish in a small pond.



Which meanings can you match them up to?

- Something seems to be wrong*
- There is no correlation*
- Important in a local context*
- Not in the right environment*

3. The poem, 'Fish Swimming', might be seen as a metaphor (but probably not one of those give above). What would be the context of the metaphor of the poem:

Fish Swimming

Fish swimming in the deep-water coves
 I can do nothing with your slow recollections.
 Hints of foam and shadow, that's all I know of you,
 And that one day, like me, you must die.

So why do you come to peer into my dreams
 As if I could be of some help to you?
 Swim out to sea, leave me on dry land.
 We weren't meant to mix up our lives.

- coves* a small bay or inlet of the sea
- foam* bubbles on surface, or suspension of air in water
- peer* to look closely, intently

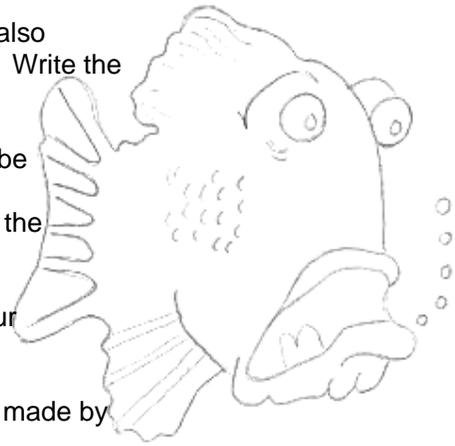
4. Devise a shape that uses all the words of poem and also describes one or more elements contained in the poem. Write the words out so they form that shape.

5. Imagine that the shape you have made (in 4) was to be animated. What movement would it make? Would the movement it makes reflect anything that is mentioned in the poem?

6. Rewrite the subject of the poem but using prose - your own words, in 2 or 3 sentences.

7. Watch the two short animations based on this poem, made by some Portuguese students.

8. What is the significance, in your opinion, of the following scenes:



9. In which ways were the two films different? Think about both the visual aspects and the messages each film gave.

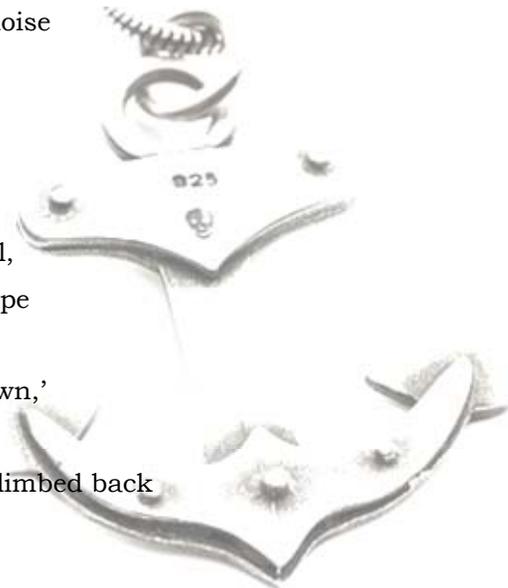
10. Now set about designing your own short animated film to illustrate the poem 'Fish Swimming'.

- Start by discussing the message you want to give.
- Think of the images that will help you give this message
- Think about the sequence of events
- Think about the effect that the final frame will have on the viewer
- Sketch out the ideas in simple frames – make a story board
- Think about the sound track

11. What are the similarities and differences between 'Fish Swimming' and the following poem by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney?

From Lightenings: VIII

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
 Were all at prayers inside the oratory
 A ship appeared above them in the air.
 The anchor dragged along behind so deep
 It hooked itself into the altar rails
 And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,
 A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
 And struggled to release it. But in vain.
 'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'
 The abbot said, 'Unless we help him.' So
 They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
 Out of the marvellous as he had known it.



From [Seeing Things](#) (Faber & Faber, 1991).