# Fish Swimming
Teachers Notes and Key

Notes

The poem 'Fish Swimming' by Moniza Alvi was first published in the collection 'Europa' (Bloodaxe Books, 2008). In this teaching resource kit there are some activities for classroom use, a copy of the poem, an audio of the poem being read by the author and two versions of flash animations based on the poem made by students at Escola Secundário José Estévão in Aveiro, Portugal.

The worksheet for students starts with two activities that are designed to be carried out before the students are introduced to the poem. In the first activity they are presented with the most simple image of the poem, that of binary opposites and then the first stages of mediating between them by plotting differences and similarities.

The second activity extends the concept to metaphors and similes and although the metaphors given are different from the metaphor of the poem in general, it starts the process of thinking. Students are then lead to think what the metaphor of the poem might be, and are introduced to the poem itself in the third activity.

The students are then asked to further manipulate concepts about the poem, and to become more familiar with it by manipulation. In activities 4 or 5 they are invited to make a shape poem, that is to write the words out (longhand?) to form a shape they think says something about the poem itself. The most obvious shape to be formed here would be a fish, as in the example here by students from Escola Secundário Carolina Michaëlis in Porto, Portugal.

This activity is extended and looks forward to activities 7, 8 and 9 by asking the students to imagine and describe what kind of animation their shape might have to make it even more effective as a description or interpretation of the poem.
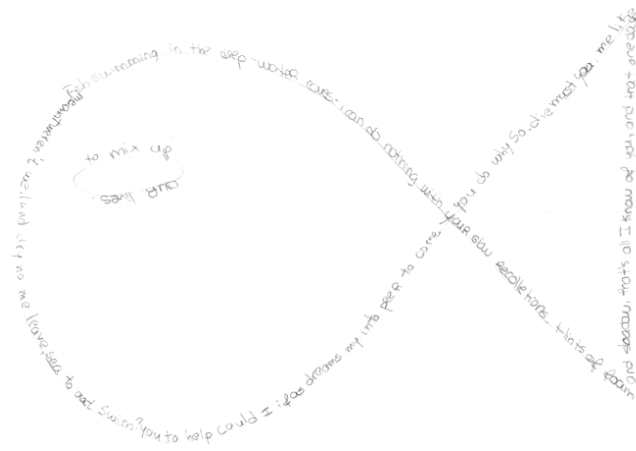
In activity 6, students are asked to think about the meaning of the poem but to use their own words and make a prose passage containing the same meaning. They are next asked to watch the two short animations made by other students and to comment on them. By this time they should be familiar enough with the

poem to be able to form robust arguments for and against the treatment they see in the animations.

Activity 8 looks at 5 scenes from the two films and to comment on them. The purpose here is to make sure that comment is directed to what they see not what they think they see. Activity 9 asks the students to compare and contrast the two treatments they have seen.

In activity 10 the students are asked to design their own animation of the same film. This might only go as far as the storyboard items (i.e. where the scenes are sketched out using very rough drawings which give the basic information to explain the sequence of events and the content). If your school has access to flash animation software then this would be an excellent project for your students to produce the film and perhaps share with others through BritLit. However, the main purpose of this activity is for students, working in groups, to think about how they would present their interpretation of the poem and to present their interpretation and to defend their reasoning.

The final activity, should the teacher feel a follow up is necessary, is to compare Moniza Alvi's poem with one by Seamus Heaney. Both share the state of finding that two worlds cannot coexist and both share the difficulty of the basic elements of air and water offering both life and death simultaneously.

Taken all together the activities use a short poem and the focussed tasks to create opportunities for different means of expressing interpretation - graphic, kinetic, oral, and, if a sound track for the film is made, musical. The teacher should take care to allow students to express their own feelings and interpretations, taking care to encourage affective as well as cognitive processes. In developing these thoughts, students may need to use L1. Final presentations and arguments should, however, be in English.

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Key

Activity 1

There is no definitive list for this activity, and students may explore some fairly abstract concepts if they wish (for example, the aspirations of a fish!). However, some basic elements may be included including:

	Different	Similar
Biological	Skin/scales legs/fins Lungs/gills	Eyes ..... mouths ..... oxygen .....
Environmental	Water/air	Food chain
Social	Shelter/	Shoals/communities
Aspirational	Sense of achievement Possessions	Survival Procreation

Activity 2

He is like a fish out of water.	*Not in the right environment*
A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.	*There is no correlation*
It smells fishy to me.	*Something seems to be wrong*
She's a big fish in a small pond.	*Important in a local context*

Activity 3

Suggestion: allow the students to read the poem quietly themselves and then try to work out any meanings with colleagues before giving explanations. Then ask students to read the poem for a second time while listening to the poet, Moniza Alvi, reading it.

They should then discuss any metaphors that come to mind (e.g. 'It's really about two people who shouldn't get married') and share with the class if they wish.

Activity 4

See **Notes** above. Make sure that all the words in the poem are used in the 'design'.

Activity 5

This activity is asking the students simply to think about very basic animation, but they need to discover the language required to describe it. For example, they might choose that a fish they have designed will appear to be swimming - how will this be done? Will the fins be moving? Will the tail be moving? Will the mouth open and close? etc

Activity 6

To create a prose version of the poem, students may take words and phrases from the original poem. Insist that two or three sentences are made - and perhaps suggest a change of voice. The poem addresses the fish in the second person. Perhaps make it a first person reflection, or more remote by making it in the third person.

Activity 7

It doesn't matter which order the animations are shown in. Remember to switch on the sound!

Activity 8

In the first 3 pictures there are strong references to death - inevitable. The figure is questioning what it is that is wanted of her (Why do you peer into my dreams?). In the second set of pictures there is more of an abstract element at work, perhaps, with images in the mind (the eye) and an unlikely - a magical? - fish appearing. What is important here is for the students to openly reflect on what the images *might* mean. Anything they reasonably suggest can be taken as correct.

Activity 9

Like activity 8 this is a chance for students to talk openly and freely. They might, for example, decide that the films are the same in meaning, but they will have to justify this view. Likewise, any differences will need to be explained.

Activity 10

Divide the students up into working groups - between 5 and 10 in each group. It is important that a physical record of the plans for the film are made. These may take the form of notes but more likely will include drawings. At different stages of the process students should be asked to explain to other groups what their ideas are, and they will need something tangible to take this from the abstract to the physical.

To turn the ideas into short films you will need access to computers and to flash animation software. There is a short online video course for teachers on how to make basic flash animation.

Other animated poetry ideas can be found here and here.

Activity 11

Teachers may want to take the work a stage further by having a look at the Seamus Heaney poem.

Asking questions

Take a verse at a time and gather questions as you go; or use the Think, Pair, Share technique. Questions might include:
- What are annals? An oratory? Altar rails?
- Is this a dream? What makes you think this?
- What is the ship? Why is it there? Where has it come from?
- Why can't the crew man bear the life of the monks?
- "the man climbed back out of the marvellous as he had known it" – what might this mean? What is "the marvellous"?
- What about the title? Can you create one of your own?

Creating pictures

Draw a 4-picture storyboard to capture the story of this poem, and add a quote from each verse for each picture, rather in the form of a comic strip.

Compare

What elements are similar to 'Fish Swimming'? (Mutually) hostile environments and a sense of mortality; dream like sense; metaphor.