

## More Help with the Neruda Assignment

Because the prompt for the assignment is so specific, it's hard to model for it exactly, but using patterns of diction and imagery to write about a poem is easily done. If nothing else, you can see the sorts of language choices I make when describing these patterns.

Since it is a Neruda assignment, I will model with his "Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market." It is part of a series of observational poems in which Neruda lionizes everyday things, including odes to his socks, salt, laziness, broken things, olive oil, the piano, the smell of wood, etc.

A word about the tuna that Neruda is describing in the poem: of the species of tuna harvested by the Chilean fishing industry, Neruda is probably describing the Bigeye tuna, which can exceed eight feet in length. In other words, this is a really impressive fish.

### Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market

By Pablo Neruda

Translated from the Spanish by M.S. Peden

Among the market greens,  
a bullet  
from the ocean  
depths,  
a swimming  
projectile,  
I saw you,  
dead.

All around you  
were lettuces,  
sea foam  
of the earth,  
carrots,  
grapes,  
but  
of the ocean  
truth,  
of the unknown,  
of the  
unfathomable  
shadow, the  
depths  
of the sea,  
the abyss,  
only you had survived,

a pitch-black, varnished  
witness  
to deepest night.

Only you, well-aimed  
dark bullet  
from the abyss,  
mangled  
at one tip,  
but constantly  
reborn,  
at anchor in the current,  
winged fins  
windmilling  
in the swift  
flight  
of  
the  
marine  
shadow,  
a mourning arrow,  
dart of the sea,  
olive, oily fish.

I saw you dead,  
a deceased king  
of my own ocean,  
green  
assault, silver  
submarine fir,  
seed  
of seaquakes,  
now  
only dead remains,  
yet  
in all the market  
yours  
was the only  
purposeful form  
amid  
the bewildering rout  
of nature;  
amid the fragile greens  
you were  
a solitary ship,

armed  
among the vegetables  
fin and prow black and oiled,  
as if you were still  
the vessel of the wind,  
the one and only  
pure  
ocean  
machine:  
unflawed, navigating  
the waters of death.

## **Oda a un Gran Atún en el Mercado**

En el mercado verde,  
bala  
del profundo  
océano  
proyectil  
natatorio,  
te vi,  
muerto.

Todo a tu alrededor  
eran lechugas,  
espuma  
de la tierra,  
zanahorias,  
racimos,  
pero  
de la verdad  
marina,  
de lo desconocido,  
de la  
insondable  
sombra,  
agua  
profunda,  
abismo,  
sólo tú sobrevivías  
alquitranado, barnizado,  
testigo  
de la profunda noche.

Sólo tú, bala oscura  
del abismo,  
certera,  
destruida  
sólo en un punto,  
siempre  
renaciendo,  
anclando en la corriente  
sus aladas alets,  
circulando  
en la velocidad,  
en el transcurso  
de  
la  
sombra  
marina  
como enlutada flecha,  
dardo del mar,  
intrépida aceituna.

Muerto te vi,  
difunto rey  
de mi propio océano,  
ímpetu  
verde, abeto  
submarino,  
nuez  
de los maremotos,  
allí,  
despojo muerto,  
en el mercado  
era  
sin embargo  
tu forma  
lo único dirigido  
entre  
la confusa derrota  
de la naturaleza:  
entre la verdura frágil  
estabas  
solo como una nave,  
armado  
entre legumbres,  
con ala y proa negras y aceitadas,  
como si aún tú fueras

la embarcación del viento,  
la única  
y pura  
máquina  
marina:  
intacta navegando  
las aguas de la la muerte.

Aside from the verbal echoes (which are interesting, but not always concerning words or phrases that connote anything beyond their denotation), perhaps the most obvious repetitions are words and images associated with *that which is mysterious*, all used to describe or re-name the sea from which the tuna hails. This would seem to be mere verbal excess were it not for the last line, where Neruda links the sea of a living fish with a sea of the death. This sharpens up the reason why there are so many abysses, unknowns, and shadows in the poem, as clearly Neruda means for the two concepts to be read against one another-- implying, at least in this context, a rough equivalence.

[As an aside, notice I'm not drawing a sharp distinction between diction and imagery; that's because they are analyzed in precisely the same manner.]

The second obvious pattern would be the contrast between that which possesses or suggests form (the fish) and that which does not possess or suggest form (the fish's surrounding: the sea in life and the marketplace vegetables in death). It's also crystal clear that this is an intentional pattern as 1) the one is described in terms of the other (vegetables as sea foam), and 2) so much attention is paid to the physical structure of the fish ("purposeful form"), culminating in its description of the tuna as a "machine."

A final important repetition is more literal than suggestive (i.e., more about what words denote than connote): the contrast between death and life. This consists almost entirely of iterations of the words "birth" and "death," though the use of the word "survive" ("sobrevivías") (Latin root: *vivere* or to live) in stanza 2 and "reborn" in stanza 3 which suggest (in context) a motive force in death (among the vegetable in the marketplace) that is as "alive" as the fish's motive force in life. While this obviously exists to set up the final simile of stanza 4 ("as if you were still / the vessel of the wind, / the one and only / pure / ocean / machine"), it also works as paradox, since one literally cannot be as alive in death as one was in life (even if viewed from a very specific point of view).

This last point would seem to suggest there is some sort of ironic undercurrent at work here, as situational ironies (especially important structural ones) are one of the markers of an ironic tone, and this is, in fact, the case here. Neruda is being playful on a number of levels. Most apparently to anyone who knows what an ode is, Neruda's use of the term as a title is surprising. *Merriam-Webster* defines it as a "lyric poem usually marked by exaltation of feeling and style, varying length of line, and complexity of stanza forms"; it is, in other words, a formally constructed celebratory poem with roots in ancient Greek and Latin models, almost always

concerning lofty themes. Even if you have no idea what meter is in poetry, it should be obvious that Neruda's verse here is very free (often using a single word for a line), and similarly, the ostensible subject matter of the poem (a dead fish on a bed of lettuce) is far from elevated. Neruda, then, is writing a poem about life and death using the most humble subject matter one could imagine.

That this is a poem about what it means to be alive or dead works only if one remembers that literature in general (and poetry in particular) usually works according to the principle of *synecdoche*, a literary device where the part is made to stand for the whole. In other words, Neruda writes about life and death in general by substituting a particular instance of life and death. Why poets do this should be obvious: to write a poem about DEATH as your literal subject is unlikely to be anything but glib. This sort of literalizing of the subject also cuts against how poetry works-- almost always a condensing of experience for greater examination. Poems, in other words, tend to examine the particular because it's more likely to produce the sort of insights that are worth reading.

Enough of the preliminaries, however, as I'm sure you're more interested in seeing an actual model of how to write about diction, imagery, and connotation than you are in reading in how a poem works. Let's see if I can combine these more or less random observations into a coherent reading of the poem:

**Neruda's "Ode to a Large Fish in the Market" compares its subject in two states, life and death, conflating the two to suggest a manner of existence that the poet admires.**

**Most obviously, the tuna's habitat is described in a manner that links it with death. There is, for example, the initial description of the sea, defined by Neruda as "the unknown" (18) and "the / unfathomable / shadow" (19-21), a depiction that makes a sort of literal sense from the point of view of the speaker (as it is so alien to the surface world), but little from the point of view of the fish (given it is its natural environment). This split in point of view helps establish the tuna as a voyager in places the speaker can only begin to grasp, both in the way that the tuna lived in an "abyss ... [of] deepest night" (24-28) when compared to the speaker's "own ocean" (50)-- i.e., the world sunlight and oxygen-- and in the way that it now "[navigates] / the waters of death" (78-79). The sea, like death, is a place of shadow and mystery, and the tuna, unlike the speaker, is at home in these environs where the light of the sunlight world cannot penetrate, places that connote (to the human observer) both mystery and oblivion.**

**This rough equivalence between the two realms is strengthened by the blurring of the boundaries between life and death in the poem. The speaker sees the fish only in death (8), and yet he directs the poem to the tuna in the second person "you" (7), as if it were still capable of interaction. Similarly, though dead and surrounded by the vegetables of the marketplace (9-14), the speaker describes the fish as having "survived" (25), a "witness / to deepest night" (27-28). On the one hand, this idea is paradoxical, since that which is dead cannot be both**

living (the etymology of *survive* derives from the Latin *vivere*, “to live”) and one who bears testament (in Spanish, a *testigo*, from the Latin *testāri*, one who gives a firsthand account of something seen, heard, or experienced); however, if the sea is understood as metaphorically commensurate with death, this idea is more comprehensible. That this is the case is even clearer when the fish is imagined as it once existed in the sea: a “bullet” (2, 30), a “projectile” (6), an “arrow” (45), and a “dart” (46). All these words figuratively capture the shape of the tuna, but they are also all weapons-- suggesting, in this context, both the possibility of death and a trajectory from one state to another (in this case, life to death). In the same way, Neruda juxtaposes images of life and death to describe the tuna’s life, as the tuna is “mangled, / at one tip, / but constantly / reborn” (32-35) and “windmilling / in the swift / flight / of / the / marine / shadow” (37-44, emphasis mine), as if the fish’s vitality and movement contains within itself the seeds of its eventual demise. In the logic of the poem, there is both life in death, just as there is death in life.

All of this helps to explain the speaker’s admiration for the tuna, for it has mastery and grandeur in both worlds. In contrast to the “sea foam / of the earth” (11-12) (the vegetables of the market, here linking the two settings of the poem), the tuna has a “purposeful form” (62), and it is this functionality that Neruda commemorates as the subject of his ode. As a “bullet” through the abyss, the fish has solidity in the formless chaos of the water, like it alone possesses dignity in the marketplace of dead food items. More than this though, even in “the waters of death” (79) the fish continues its navigation, since it is “still / the vessel of the wind, / the one and only / pure / ocean / machine” (72-77, emphasis mine), implying a sort of purpose and continued trajectory (even in death). This command of its own fate is, for the speaker, a noble ideal. Not only does the tuna not fear to explore realms beyond human understanding, but it does so in a manner that reveals its own determination and tenacity of vision-- even death cannot impede its voyage. This supreme confidence, then, exemplifies for Neruda a dignity of existence that is powerful enough to withstand the seeming indignity of death itself.