This poem is based on an actual experience the poet had of catching a huge Caribbean Jewfish in Key West, Florida.
Form: Written in one long narrative. It is unrhymed except for the last rhyming couplet which brings a sense of closure to the poem.
Theme: Survival, Resilience of the Human Spirit
Tone: Awe, Respect and Celebration

The speaker brings us directly to the focus and subject of the poem from the beginning, “I caught a tremendous fish”. The use of the word “tremendous” is important here as the reader’s mind immediately conjures up pictures of fish that are of a huge and immense size. It is the speaker herself who has caught the fish, “my hook”. The fact that it is “Half out of the water” brings a sense of immediacy to the scene as it heightens the drama for the reader.
Line five begins the focus on the fish itself, “He didn’t fight”. The fish seems to have accepted his fate. He hangs in the air heavily, “grunting weight”. He is described as being “battered” and “homely” which emphasise the exhausted state of the plain looking fish. However, this is juxtaposed with the word, “venerable” (one who should be respected and admired). From the beginning, the fish is more than just a creature from the sea. Bishop anthropomorphizes him by giving him overtly human characteristics. This is a literary technique that is often used in fables (stories that contain a moral lesson).
Thereafter the speaker uses a powerful simile to describe this alien creature in terms that we understand and accept, “like ancient wallpaper”. The age of the fish is further emphasised, “Barnacles, and fine rosettes of lime”. It is as if the act of survival has bestowed medals of bravery on the fish’s skin. It is important to notice Bishop’s use of colour and texture here to create a tangible picture of the fish in the reader’s mind.
His otherness is highlighted by the speaker calling our attention to “infested with tiny white sea-lice”. Furthermore, we cannot help but notice how its survival is based on factors that are the complete opposite to our own, “While his gills were breathing in the terrible oxygen – the frightening gills”. Thus the speaker manages two things at once: to make the fish seem totally familiar to the reader yet also appear to be utterly foreign.
The emphasis shifts in the line 27 from the exterior of the fish to its innards. More powerful similes are used to describe this in a visceral way, “The coarse white flesh packed in like feathers” and “like a big peony”. Again colour and texture are used in an evocative manner. Moreover it is important to notice the soft and pleasant images that the speaker uses to describe the fish, “feathers” and “flowers”. This serves to make the strangeness of the fish seem familiar to the reader again. It further serves to elicit a feeling of pity in the reader for the fish’s predicament.

The empathy that the reader feels for the fish is evident in the line, “I looked into his eyes which were far larger than mine”. She is comparing her bodily organs to the fish’s. They are noticeably similar. The sense of the relationship they now share is stressed. The fish looks at the speaker, “seen through the lenses of old scratched isinglass.” Isinglass is a gelatinous substance made from fish bladders that is used to make windows. Thus, the world of the fish, the world of humans, the eye of the fish and the eye of the speaker are all blurring together here. The eyes of the fish then “shifted a little, but not to return my stare.” This suggests the dignity that the fish still retains despite its capture.

“I admired his sullen face”, here, the fish is being personified which has the effect of humanising him in the reader’s mind. However, immediately afterwards his status as a creature that is totally other to us emphasised when our attention is brought to, “the mechanism of his jaw”.

The fish’s lip bears the marks of past battles with other fishermen, “and weaponlike, hung five old pieces of fish-line,” The evidence of the fish’s previous capacity for survival is described in war-like terms. It’s heroic struggle is evident in the adjectives and verbs that are used to describe his past escapes, “broke”, “strain”, “snap”, “crimped”.

The speaker notes how the hooks and their lines bring to mind the medals and ribbons that heroes of war are festooned with, “Like medals with their ribbons frayed and wavering, a five-haired beard of wisdom trailing from his aching jaw.” At this point in the poem the speaker and reader are fully engaged with the image of the fish as a war weary general who should be venerated. Furthermore, our attention is brought to the sensation that the fish feels, “his aching jaw”. This is further cause for sympathy.

“I stared and stared and victory filled up the little rented boat,” Now the fish has been finally caught. The speaker’s sense of achievement is evident in the line as she realizes where other fishermen have lost before, she has now won. As she looks around her at the boat, the water, the fish, she becomes overcome with the profundity of her emotion. “Until everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!” In a moment of epiphany the speaker perhaps realized that she, like the fish, has survived past battle and hurts in her life to be alive on that boat on that day. It therefore comes as no surprise that her final act is one of triumphant freedom, “And I let the fish go.”

Language:
Similes: “like ancient wallpaper” “like full blown roses” “packed in like feathers” “like a big peony” “like the tipping” “like medals”. This abundance of similes illustrates Bishop’s descriptive abilities. She is intent in her desire to make the scene come alive for the reader.
Symbol: “five big hooks” These symbolize the fish’s eternal struggle for survival. Conversational tone: “I looked into his eyes which were far larger than mine”. This ensures that the reader remains closely involved in the drama of the narrative.

Sound effects: Onomatopoeia: “grunting”, “scratched”, “crimped”, “Aching”
Alliteration: “held him beside the boat half out of water with my hook”
Assonance: “but shallower and yellowed” All of these combine to create a musical quality.

Affecting imagery: In the final lines, the effect of the oil swimming on the water is used to give the speaker cause to describe. “Everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!” What she sees is the colours of life, of nature – ugly, beautiful, masculine or feminine all together. The rainbow has traditionally been used as a symbol for hope in fables, myths and even the bible. This gives the reader hope that they too will be able to endure life’s inevitable troubles.