**Plot Summary**

The fourteen-year-old narrator of “Fish Summer” feels like he has the natural right to enjoy the summer but he can’t. His summer school teacher is overbearing and sanctimonious. After class the narrator must babysit his accident-prone baby sister and rambunctious little brother and perform lots of chores. Their house is cramped and confining. His parents are demanding and unsympathetic. He discovers a refuge in a deserted stretch of beach isolated by cliffs. During a particularly angry tirade from his teacher, the narrator flees class and runs to his refuge. There he is calmed by the natural beauty of the place and by the warm ocean. In a deep tidal pool he notices a large and beautiful fish. He begins to identify with the fish and take great pleasure in watching it. Suddenly an eel appears and tears the fish to pieces. At first the boy feels intense anger, but soon he is able to realize that it is natural for the eel to eat the fish. This realization causes him to examine the anger he feels at his teacher, parents, and siblings. He decides that his anger contributes nothing to his life and vows to live differently. The writer vividly creates the narrator’s cramped, frustrating life and contrasts it to the vast, open beach refuge. The death of the fish gives the narrator a dramatic insight into his own situation.

**Interpreting the Story: Focus on Setting and Mood**

1. Ask students to **contrast the three settings** in the story—the summer school classroom, the narrator’s house, and the refuge by the ocean. You might split the class into three groups, with each group taking a location. Allow students five minutes to skim the story again to pick up details which describe their location. Students might list their details on newsprint and share with the class. (Possible details may include, for example, words and phrases like cramped, howling brother, mother exploded for “Home.”)

2. How do each of these places make the narrator feel when he is there? Why, at one point, does he run from one setting, the school, to another, the place at the beach? Through discussion, help students to **explore the connection between setting and emotional state.**

**Responding Creatively to the Story**

Students can use “Fish Summer” as a model for using a place to write about a strong emotion. In “Fish Summer” the place becomes the writer’s refuge; places will mean different things to different students. In the After You Read activity, students survey places important in their lives and begin a writing in which a character moves from one setting with one emotional state to another which evokes a very different emotional state as the author of “Fish Summer” has done. This exercise can serve as the basis of a short story.
Connecting with Cultural Values and Students’ Lives

These questions may guide your students to a deeper understanding of how the story relates to their own lives. The discussion of the story may also be used to foster positive ways of dealing with anger and frustration and maturely handling stress.

1. The narrator in “Fish Summer” feels tremendous frustration and anger—with his teacher, his family, and his general situation. How does he deal with his feelings? Students will probably note that he deals with his anger and frustration in a number of ways. He feels resentment for the teacher who picks on him and he walks out of class ten minutes before it is over, an irrational and inappropriate choice. When he gets home, he feels on the verge of fighting and opts to run to the deserted beach instead, a more mature response. He walks alone to wind down the hostility. Finally, he tries to analyze his anger and, after watching the eel and fish, he realizes that his hatred and hostility result only in wasted energy. He vows to focus on love and understanding, and he returns to the beach frequently to unwind and relax.

2. Students might consider alternatives for the narrator. How else might he have responded to his anger and frustration? Students can place their ideas on a continuum from “appropriate” or “healthy” at one end to “inappropriate” or “unhealthy” at the other. Possible answers may include getting in verbal or physical battles with his family and refusing to fulfill his responsibilities at home to meeting with the teacher after class to talk and sharing his feelings with his parents.

3. What are examples that we see every day of people dealing with anger and frustration? Point out current events (protest marches on the Capitol steps, domestic shootings, peace negotiations between nations) and ask students to evaluate the choices people are making.

Brainteasers for Critical Thinking

1. Why does the narrator identify with the fish?

2. What prompts the narrator to reconsider his anger toward his family and teacher? What does he mean when he says, “Hate is too costly”?

3. Are the narrator’s feelings fully resolved at the story’s end? Do you agree with his solution?

4. In what ways does the narrator grow in this story?

5. Have you ever experienced an event like the one described here? Describe it. Did it change you? How?

6. Had the narrator not decided that “hate is too costly,” would you view him differently?

7. As a result of their experiences, other characters in this book come to revelations, reach conclusions, or change their views. Compare these experiences and the character changes they inspire.
**Fish Summer** (p. 117)

Name _____________________________  Date _____________

**After You Read**

1. **Make a list of places important to you**—places that have a special meaning or to which you attach strong memories. Try to be specific. For example, the top of Old Rag Mountain or your grandmother’s back porch are specific, not Paris or the woods. Next to each place, jot down a few sentences about how the place makes you feel.

2. Select one of the places from your list above and write, either in first person or third (creating a character). Try to **show the relationship** between the physical setting and the individual’s emotional state. For example, your character can feel, like the narrator of “Fish Summer,” soothed and relaxed by the soft ebb and flow of the waves and the serenity of a beach. Conversely, an approaching ocean storm could parallel the turbulence a character feels inside. Write for about ten minutes.

3. Now, select one of the other places from your list that evokes a very different emotional state. Think of a logical transition between the two, a reason for your character to move from one to the other. Now **describe the new setting and altered emotional state.** For example, your troubled character may need to leave the beach because the storm has hit, and runs to a cottage where a warm fire is burning and the character feels secure and comforted. Write for another ten minutes.

**Connecting with Other Stories**

In “Fish Summer” the narrator feels out of sorts, in conflict with the places he spends his time—school and home. In “Taking Off” (p. 139) Elise is flying cross-country to visit her father who has remarried and started a new family, and she has not seen him for several years. Her physical discomfort with the plane ride parallels her emotional discomfort with her relationship with her father. In “Summer’s End” (p. 27) Ben’s painful memories of the previous summer are triggered by sights and sounds. Each “trigger”—the siren of an ambulance, the face of his sister in the study window—evokes a strong emotional response. A very famous story, “A Christmas Memory” by Truman Capote, reveals a boy’s love for an old lady as he remembers Christmastime at her house. The smell of cookies, the taste of ginger cakes, the holiday decorations, and the warmth of her stove create a feeling of love and well-being for the narrator, Buddy.

**Vocabulary from “Fish Summer”**

**Directions:** Based on the way each word in bold below is used in the sentence, write what you think the word means. Then look up the same word in your dictionary and copy the definition that comes closest to the way the word is used in the sentence. Finally, write a sentence of your own using the word. Make sure the sentence shows what the word means. Use a separate sheet of paper.

**Example:** It was only a moment later that I floated back into the moving world and found myself face to face with a woman who reverently believed that all daydreamers were actually undercover agents for the devil himself. (p. 118)

**Definition based on context:** religiously

**Dictionary definition:** with profound awe or respect (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983)

**Original sentence:** The pilgrims gazed reverently at the shrine they had walked days to see.

1., 2. I ran from the chaotic confusion that perpetually festered in our cramped house. (p. 117)

3., 4. It was not a very pretty beach like some which neighbored the immediate vicinity, but it was for me a sanctuary where I could wander alone . . . (p. 118)
**Vocabulary continued**

5. It was a place to drag feet in the hot sand, a place to wade and swim within the **cove's** clear, sweet waters. (p. 118)

6. “I am sending a letter home to your parents because your behavior in class is simply **atrocious** . . .” (p. 119)

7. “You have learned nothing in spite of all my efforts, due to your **abominable** attitude.” (p. 119)

8. After a time, my wonder at the **malignant** black cliffs grew into curiosity . . . (p. 122)

9. I was captivated by it, instantly **mesmerized**. (p. 124)

10. It had fled from the frustrations of its own world to rest in the solitude of this wonderfully fabulous **refuge**. (p. 124)

11. Like me, it was attempting to calm its angered soul, to rest its **anguished** mind. (p. 124)

12. The fish was torn to shreds in the **vise** of the slippery eel’s needle-sharp teeth. (p. 124)

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**Reading Check for “Fish Summer”**

Circle the letters of all correct answers. Some questions may have more than one correct answer.

1. The narrator is unable to enjoy his summer because
   a. he’s in summer school
   b. he has so many chores to do
   c. his family annoys him
   d. all of the above
   e. none of the above
2. The narrator seeks refuge from his troubles
   a. at an amusement park
   b. at a quiet beach
   c. on his grandfather’s farm
   d. in a rowboat on the river
   e. none of the above
3. The narrator cuts his ankle on
   a. his bike
   b. some coral
   c. broken glass
   d. a pitchfork
   e. none of the above
4. The narrator discovers what animal with which he seems to identify?
   a. a fish
   b. a dog
   c. a deer
   d. an eel
   e. none of the above
5. At the end of the story the narrator cries when
   a. his parents finally find him
   b. he discovers his parents are getting a divorce
   c. the animal he’s been watching is killed
   d. he becomes trapped in a rockslide
   e. none of the above
Language Study in Context: Sentence Combining

Directions: Rewrite the passage below. Experiment with ways to combine sentences to make them more effective. You will have to leave some words out and you may make small changes in wording. You may use conjunctions (and, or, but) to join sentences, but you may also want to use words such as “with,” “who,” and “as” to join ideas. When you are finished, compare your work to the original passage on page 118 of “Fish Summer.”

Example: I ran far. I ran hard. I ran to the deserted beach. The beach was several miles from our house.

Combination: I ran far and hard to the deserted beach, which was several miles from our house.

A voice drifted by me. It was like a cloud. I was unconsciously aware of the sudden, electrifying silence. The classroom was usually murmuring. It was only a moment later that I floated back into the moving world. I found myself face to face with a woman. This woman reverently believed that all daydreamers were actually undercover agents for the devil himself. My summer school math teacher loomed larger than life before me. She expected an answer from me to a question I could not have possibly heard.