

Meaning in Metaphors

By Shannon Crattie

"You become what you always were: a very big fish," Will says to his father, Edward, as he quietly passes on. Edward had always been a storyteller of sorts, charming and charismatic. However, it is Will that tells this final elaborate story of Edward's departure from his life, a story far removed from the reality of meeting his demise from cancer. As memories are played throughout the film *Big Fish*, I am intrigued by its effective use of metaphors.

Big Fish is the fictional, fantastical story of a dying man named Edward Bloom. He always has extraordinary tales to tell with some so far-fetched they seem too impossible to be true, beginning with a story about "the uncatchable fish" that had been sought after by fishermen for decades. A young Edward narrates how he finally managed to catch the legendary fish, transitioning to the present day of the film as Edward finishes the story as his toast to his newlywed son Will and his bride. He finishes the tale with "sometimes, the only way to catch an uncatchable woman is to offer her a wedding ring." Was the fish in the story symbolic, and if so, in what way? The uncatchable fish is revisited later in the film, but with different narratives. One speculation is that Edward's wife Sandra is the fish, and that Edward was unfaithful to her (TheEndGrain). However, he shares some knowledge about the growth of a goldfish being limited by the size of its home, which is true (Bogert). When he reaches adulthood, he becomes a hometown hero when he faces Karl the Giant and agrees to leave town with Karl. Edward says to Karl that he is not "too big" but rather that the town was too small for him, similarly to that of a goldfish. Maybe the uncatchable fish is Edward, a clever man whose curiosity and tenacity were too limited in the town he called home.

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Karl and Edward travel on foot out of town and come to a worn sign with a path leading away from the road. Edward decides to explore this route, convincing Karl that he will meet him on the other side of the path. The forest becomes ominous; Edward begins swiping thick spider webs with his arms as he continues through the darkness. Eventually he reaches the Town of Spectre, specifically created for the film (Matthews), where pairs of shoes are shown tied together and thrown over a line. There is no road, but the ground is covered in lush grass. The town has a heavenly glow, with the inhabitants seeming content. The townsfolk greet him but tell him that he is early. They extend an offer of hospitality, forcibly convincing him to oblige. Norther Winslow and the mayor sit barefoot with Edward as he eats a slice of pie, when the mayor's young daughter Jenny removes his shoes and runs off. Jenny runs to the line of hanging footwear with Edward chasing her and tosses his shoes over the line. Edward eventually departs Spectre, promising Jenny that he will return someday. When Edward returns, he finds the once charming town is now mostly abandoned and the structures are in great disrepair. He is told that he is "late" this time. Through the relationships he had established over the years, Edward secures resources to purchase the town and restore it entirely. The metaphor perceived by the viewer of the Town of Spectre might be that of a ghost town, Edward having a brush with death, or perhaps Utopia (August).

Edward catches up with Karl after leaving Spectre for the first time, and they attend a big top circus. Colossus is brought out to perform, and Edward calls Karl out of the shadows following the act. Karl agrees to join the circus when Edward notices Sandra from across the tent. Everything and everyone except Edward become frozen in time as he approaches her. Once he reaches her, time speeds up and his opportunity to meet her is lost. Without knowing her name he proclaims that she is the woman he will one day marry. Edward approaches Ringmaster

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Amos Calloway to find out who she is, but Amos will not budge. Edward offers to work for Mr. Calloway for the cost of just one clue a month about his future bride. After several months of work and all but her name, Edward decides to demand the woman's name but is instead attacked by a wolf. Morning comes and it is discovered that Mr. Calloway is a werewolf, and he agrees to divulge her name-- Sandra Templeton. He tells Edward that she attends Auburn University and quickly Edward catches the train to reach her. He knocks on the door, and Sandra greets him. He proclaims his love for her, but Sandra tells him that she is engaged to his hometown bully Don Price. Edward will not admit defeat and uses the clues that Mr. Calloway had provided to woo her. He presents her with a field of her favorite flowers, daffodils, and seems to have won Sandra over. As the two stand together among the daffodils, Don notices them. As he approaches the pair Sandra asks Edward not to hurt him. He promises her that he will not and takes a beating from Don. Sandra throws her ring at Don, breaking off their engagement. Edward was right -- Sandra was the woman he would marry and love until the day he died.

Is there something more to be seen in Edward's courtship of Sandra? Rather than be frightened by what some might call a troubling obsession of a man, Sandra seems enamored by Edward's displays of affection. While there is little character development of Sandra, her love for him is palpable. Fully clothed and submerged beneath the water in a clawfoot bathtub, Edward opens his eyes to his wife looking down at him. He sits up from the water, making room for Sandra to sit with him in the tub. She steps in, fully clothed and they share a tender moment of an older couple who remain very much in love; it is then that Sandra's grief becomes obvious as Edward comforts her. I think the bathtub full of water is a representation of the life that Edward has left. In contrast, the beginning of the movie begins with young Edward narrating the tale of the catfish who was swimming alone in a large and murky body of water. This scene could

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represent his coming of age, and the sea of opportunity that awaits him but is unclear. Now we see Edward as man in a bathtub of transparent water, who appears to have lived a grandiose life, with just enough room left for his wife to join him. The bathtub is confining unlike lakes and seas, Edward is shown as a matured man embracing his wife who remained devoted to him thorough all his misadventures. Sandra stepping into the tub clothed shows an unwavering loyalty, wasting no time to undress but rather chooses to sit with him in the very moment.

In the story that Will tells his father about the end of his life, Sandra wades in the water and the characters from Edward's memories await him. Edward is carried into the water by his son, where he gives his wife a final goodbye and his wedding ring, and Will releases him into the water where he transforms into a large catfish. In this part of the movie, it seems that Will has accepted that some of what his father has told him is true, and they reconcile in Edward's final moments. As the scene returns to the hospital it is obvious that Edward has passed. Like Will's story, the people that Edward called his friends gathered for his funeral; some of them appearing as he described and some without the added pizzazz.

Perhaps *Big Fish* offers a reminder that perspectives of experiences vary from one person to the next, or that people do not have to be extraordinary to be memorable. It also offers a lesson in following through on promises made. Although this story is told during what might be considered "a dark time" in Edward's life, the tales that are shared provide joy and comfort to him and his family. His legacy is not lost in his death; the movie ends several years after Edward's passing with Will barbequing pool side, his son telling one of Edward's stories to some friends while wading in the water. The friends express their disbelief in the tale they have heard, but Will confirms that what they have just heard is true.

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Tim Burton's *Big Fish* is a movie worth watching with a partner or friend and sharing individual perspectives with each other. You both may be surprised to learn how similarly—or differently-- you see things.

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