

What Do FISH Have to Do with Anything?

by **Avi**



Read with a Purpose

Read this story to find out what its unusual title means.

Preparing to Read for this selection is on page 507.

Build Background

The “fish” of the title are a strange kind of creature called “cave fish.” In the United States, these fish are found mostly in eastern and southern states, but they are also found all over the world. In fact, dozens of different species have been identified so far. The uniform traits they all share are a whitish or colorless appearance (some of the fish seem nearly transparent) and a lack of eyes!

Every day Mrs. Markham waited for her son, Willie, to come out of school when it was over. They walked home together. If asked why, Mrs. Markham would say, “Parents need to protect their children.”

One Monday afternoon as they approached their apartment building, she suddenly tugged at Willie. “Don’t look that way,” she said.

“Where?”

“At that man over there.”

As they walked, Willie stole a look back over his shoulder. A man Willie had never seen before was sitting on a red plastic milk crate near the curb. His matted, streaky gray hair hung like a ragged curtain over a dirty

face. His shoes were torn. Rough hands lay upon his knees. One hand was palm up.

“What’s the matter with him?” Willie asked.

Keeping her eyes straight ahead, Mrs. Markham said, “He’s sick.” She pulled Willie around. “Don’t stare. It’s rude.” **A**

“What kind of sick?”

Mrs. Markham searched for an answer. “He’s unhappy,” she said.

“What’s he doing?”

“Come on, Willie; you know. He’s begging.”

“Did anyone give him anything?”

“I don’t know. Now come on, don’t look.”

“Why don’t you give him anything?”

A Read and Discuss What are you learning about Mrs. Markham?

“We have nothing to spare.” **B**

When they got home, Mrs. Markham removed a white cardboard box from the refrigerator. It contained poundcake. Using her thumb as a measure, she carefully cut a half-inch-thick piece of cake and gave it to Willie on a clean plate. The plate lay on a plastic mat decorated by images of roses with diamondlike dewdrops. She also gave him a glass of milk and a folded napkin.

Willie said, “Can I have a bigger piece of cake?”

Mrs. Markham picked up the cake box and ran a manicured pink fingernail along the nutrition information panel. “A half-inch piece is a portion, and a portion contains the following nutrients. Do you want to hear them?”

“No.”

“It’s on the box, so you can accept what it says. Scientists study people and then write these things. If you’re smart enough, you could become a scientist. Like this.” Mrs. Markham tapped the box. “It pays well.” **C**

Willie ate his cake and drank the milk. When he was done, he took care to wipe the crumbs off his face as well as to blot the milk moustache with the napkin.

His mother said, “Now go on and do your homework. You’re in fifth grade. It’s important.”

B Read and Discuss What’s the author letting us know about Mrs. Markham and Willie?

C Reading Focus Author’s Purpose What point might the author be making by showing us how Mrs. Markham reacts to Willie’s request for more cake?

Willie gathered up his books that lay on the empty third chair. At the kitchen entrance he paused. “What *kind* of unhappiness does he have?”

“Who’s that?”

“That man.”

Mrs. Markham looked puzzled.

“The begging man. The one on the street.”

“Could be anything,” his mother said, vaguely. “A person can be unhappy for many reasons.”

“Like what?”

“Willie . . .”

“Is it a doctor kind of sickness? A sickness you can cure?”

“I wish you wouldn’t ask such questions.”

“Why?”

“Questions that have no answers shouldn’t be asked.”

“Can I go out?”

“Homework first.”

Willie turned to go.

“Money,” Mrs. Markham suddenly said. “Money will cure a lot of unhappiness. That’s why that man was begging. A salesperson once said to me, ‘Maybe you can’t buy happiness, but you can rent a lot of it.’ You should remember that.”

A cave fish.



The apartment had three rooms. The walls were painted mint green. Willie walked down the hallway to his room, which was at the front of the building. By climbing up on the windowsill and pressing against the glass, he could see the sidewalk five stories below. The man was still there.

It was almost five when he went to tell his mother he had finished his school assignments. She was not there. He found her in her bedroom, sleeping. Since she had begun working the night shift at a convenience store—two weeks now—she took naps in the late afternoon.

For a while Willie stood on the threshold,¹ hoping his mother would wake up. When she didn't, he went to the front room and looked down on the street again. The begging man had not moved.

Willie returned to his mother's room.

"I'm going out," he announced softly.

Willie waited a decent interval² for his mother to waken. When she did not, Willie made sure his keys were in his pocket. Then he left the apartment.

Standing just outside his door, he could keep his eyes on the man. It appeared as if he had still not moved. Willie wondered how anyone could go on without moving for so long in the chilly October air. Was staying in one place part of the man's sickness?

During the twenty minutes that Willie watched, no one who passed looked in the beggar's direction. Willie wondered if they

even saw the man. Certainly no one put any money into his open hand.

A lady leading a dog by a leash went by. The dog strained in the direction of the man sitting on the crate. The dog's tail wagged. The lady pulled the dog away. "Heel!" she commanded.

The dog—tail between its legs—scampered to the lady's side. Even so, the dog twisted around to look back at the beggar.

Willie grinned. The dog had done exactly what he had done when his mother told him not to stare.

Pressing deep into his pocket, Willie found a nickel. It was warm and slippery. He wondered how much happiness you could rent for a nickel. **D**

Squeezing the nickel between his fingers, Willie walked slowly toward the man. When he came before him, he stopped, suddenly nervous. The man, who appeared to be looking at the ground, did not move his eyes. He smelled bad.

"Here." Willie stretched forward and dropped the coin into the man's open right hand.

"Bless you," the man said hoarsely, as he folded his fingers over the coin. His eyes, like high beams on a car, flashed up at Willie, then dropped.

Willie waited for a moment, then went back up to his room. From his front room he looked down on the street. He thought he saw the coin in the man's hand but was not sure.

After supper Mrs. Markham got ready to go to work. She kissed Willie good night. Then, as she did every night, she said,

1. **threshold** (THRESH ohld): doorway; entrance.

2. **interval**: period of time between events.

D Read and Discuss What is Willie up to here?



Analyzing Visuals Viewing and Interpreting

What scene in the story does this photograph show?

“If you have regular problems, call Mrs. Murphy downstairs. What’s her number?”
“274–8676,” Willie said.
“Extra bad problems, call Grandma.”
“369–6754.”
“Super-special problems, you can call me.”
“962–6743.”
“Emergency, the police.”
“911.”
“Don’t let anyone in the door.”
“I won’t.”
“No television past nine.”
“I know.”
“But you can read late.”
“You’re the one who’s going to be late,” Willie said.
“I’m leaving,” Mrs. Markham said.
After she went, Willie stood for a long while in the hallway. The empty apartment

felt like a cave that lay deep below the earth. That day in school Willie’s teacher had told them about a kind of fish that lived in caves. These fish could not see. They had no eyes. The teacher had said it was living in the dark cave that made them like that. **E**

Before he went to bed, Willie took another look out the window. In the pool of light cast by the street lamp, Willie saw the man.

On Tuesday morning when Willie went to school, the man was gone. But when he came home from school with his mother, he was there again.

“Please don’t look at him,” his mother whispered with some urgency.

During his snack Willie said, “Why shouldn’t I look?”

“What are you talking about?”

“That man. On the street. Begging.” **F**

E Literary Focus Symbol Think about the symbol of the cave fish introduced by the author. In what ways is Willie’s situation similar to that of an eyeless fish in a dark cave? Who or what else in the story might be compared to a fish that cannot see?

F Read and Discuss What does it say about Willie that he keeps thinking about the homeless man?

Vocabulary urgency (UR juhn see) *n.*: pressure; insistence.

“I told you. He’s sick. It’s better to act as if you never saw them. When people are that way, they don’t wish to be looked at.”

“Why not?”

Mrs. Markham thought for a while. “People are **ashamed** of being unhappy.”

“Are you sure he’s unhappy?”

“You don’t have to ask if people are unhappy. They tell you all the time.”

“Is that part of the sickness?”

“Oh, Willie, I don’t know. It’s just the way they are.”

Willie contemplated the half-inch slice of cake his mother had just given him.

He said, “Ever since Dad left, you’ve been unhappy. Are you ashamed?”

Mrs. Markham closed her eyes. “I wish you wouldn’t ask that.”

Willie said, “Are you?”

“Willie . . .”

“Think he might come back?”

“It’s more than likely,” Mrs. Markham said, but Willie wondered if that was what she really thought. He did not think so. “Do you think Dad is unhappy?”

“Where do you get such questions?”

“They’re in my mind.”

“There’s much in the mind that need not be paid attention to.”

“Fish that live in caves have no eyes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My teacher said it’s all that darkness. The fish forget to see. So they lose their eyes.”

“I doubt she said that.”

“She did.”

“Willie, you have too much imagination.”

G

After his mother went to work, Willie gazed down onto the street. The man was there. Willie thought of going down, but he knew he was not supposed to leave the building when his mother worked at night. He decided to speak to the man tomorrow.

Next afternoon—Wednesday—Willie said to the man, “I don’t have any money. Can I still talk to you?”

The man’s eyes focused on Willie. They were gray eyes with folds of dirty skin beneath them. He needed a shave.

“My mother said you were unhappy. Is that true?”

“Could be,” the man said.

“What are you unhappy about?”

The man’s eyes narrowed as he studied Willie intently. He said, “How come you want to know?”

Willie shrugged.

“I think you should go home, kid.”

“I am home.” Willie gestured toward the apartment. “I live right here. Fifth floor. Where do you live?”

“Around.”

“Are you unhappy?” Willie persisted.

The man ran a tongue over his lips. His Adam’s apple bobbed.

Willie said, “I’m trying to learn about unhappiness.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think I want to say.”

“A man has the right to remain silent,” the man said and closed his eyes.

Willie remained standing on the pavement for a while before walking back to his apartment. Once inside his own room, he

G **Read and Discuss** How do these conversations add to what we’ve already been thinking about Willie and his mother?

Vocabulary **ashamed** (uh SHAYMD) *adj.*: embarrassed.

looked down from the window. The man was still there. At one moment Willie was certain he was looking at the apartment building and the floor on which Willie lived.

The next day—Thursday—after dropping a nickel in the man’s palm, Willie said, “I’ve decided to tell you why I want to learn about unhappiness.”

The man gave a grunt.

“See, I’ve never seen anyone look so unhappy as you do. So I figure you must know a lot about it.”

The man took a deep breath. “Well, yeah, maybe.”

Willie said, “And I need to find a cure for it.”

“A *what*?”

“A cure for unhappiness.”

The man pursed his lips and blew a silent whistle.

Then he said, “Why?”

“My mother is unhappy.”

“Why’s that?”

“My dad left.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. But she’s unhappy all the time. So if I found a cure for unhappiness, it would be a good thing, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose.”

Willie said, “Would you like some cake?”

“What kind?”

“I don’t know. Cake.”

“Depends on the cake.” **H**

On Friday Willie said to the man, “I found out what kind of cake it is.”

“Yeah?”

“Poundcake. But I don’t know why it’s

called that.”

“Probably doesn’t matter.”

For a moment neither said anything. Then Willie said, “In school my teacher said there are fish that live in caves and the caves are dark, so the fish don’t have eyes. What do you think? Do you believe that?”

“Sure.”

“You do? How come?”

“Because you said so.”

“You mean, just because someone *said* it you believe it?”

“Not someone. You.”

Willie said, “But, well, maybe it *isn’t* true.”

The man grunted. “Hey, do you believe it?”

Willie nodded.

“Well, you’re not just anyone. You got eyes. You see. You ain’t no fish.” **I**

“Oh.”

“What’s your name?”

“Willie.”

“That’s a boy’s name. What’s your grownup name?”

Willie thought for a moment. “William, I guess.”

“And that means another thing.”

“What?”

“I’ll take some of that cake.”

Willie smiled. “You will?”

“Just said it, didn’t I?”

“I’ll get it.”

Willie ran to the apartment. He took the box from the refrigerator as well as a knife, then hurried back down to the street. “I’ll

“I’ve decided to tell you why I want to learn about unhappiness.”

H Read and Discuss What’s going on between Willie and the homeless man?

I Literary Focus Symbol What does the homeless man mean here? In what ways is Willie “not a fish”?

cut you a piece,” he said.

As the man looked on, Willie opened the box, then held his thumb against the cake to make sure the portion was the right size. With a poke of the knife he made a small mark for the proper width.

Just as he was about to cut, the man said, “Hold it!”

Willie looked up. “What?”

“What were you doing with your thumb there?”

“I was measuring the right size. The right portion. One portion is what a person is supposed to get.”

“Where’d you learn that?”

“It says so on the box. You can see for yourself.” He held out the box.

The man studied the box, then handed it back to Willie. “That’s just lies,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“William, how can a box say how much a person needs?”

“But it does. The scientists say so.

They measured, so they know. Then they put it there.”

“Lies,” the man repeated.

Willie studied the man. His eyes seemed bleary.³ “Then how much should I cut?” he asked.

The man said, “You have to look at me, then at the cake, and then you’re going to have to decide for yourself.” **J**

“Oh.” Willie looked at the cake. The piece was about three inches wide. Willie looked up at the man. After a moment he cut the cake into two pieces, each an inch and a half wide. He gave one piece to the man and kept the other.

“Bless you,” the man said, as he took the piece and laid it in his left hand. He began to break off pieces with his right hand and one by one put them into his mouth. Each piece was chewed thoughtfully. Willie watched him piece by piece. **K**

When the man was done, he dusted his hands of crumbs.

“Now I’ll give you something,” the man said.

“What?” Willie said, surprised.

3. **bleary** (BLIHR ee): blurred; misty; dim.

J Reading Focus Author’s Purpose How does the author use the cake to communicate a message? How would you state this message?

K Read and Discuss What just happened between Willie and the man?

Analyzing Visuals

Viewing and Interpreting

How might the gesture pictured here be symbolic of something?



“The cure for unhappiness.”

“You know it?” Willie asked, eyes wide.

The man nodded.

“What is it?”

“It’s this: What a person needs is always more than they say.”

Willie thought for a while. “Who’s *they*?” he asked.

The man pointed to the cake box. “The people on the box,” he said.

Willie thought for a moment; then he gave the man the other piece of cake.

The man took it, saying, “Good man,” and then ate it. **L**

The next day was Saturday. Willie did not go to school. All morning he kept looking down from his window for the man, but it was raining and he did not appear. Willie wondered where he was but could not imagine it.

Willie’s mother woke about noon. Willie sat with her while she ate the breakfast he had made. “I found the cure for unhappiness,” he announced.

“Did you?” his mother said. She was reading a memo from the convenience store’s owner.

“It’s, ‘What a person needs is always more than they say.’”

His mother put her papers down. “That’s nonsense. Where did you hear that?”

“That man.”

“What man?”

“On the street. The one who was begging. You said he was unhappy. So I asked him.”

“Willie, I told you I didn’t want you to even look at that man.”

“He’s a nice man . . .”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve talked to him.”

“When? How much?”

Willie shrank down. “I did, that’s all.”

“Willie, I forbid you to talk to him. Do you understand me? Do you? Answer me!”

“Yes,” Willie said, but in his mind he decided he would talk to the man one more time. He needed to explain why he could not talk to him anymore.

On Sunday, however, the man was not there. Nor was he there on Monday.

“That man is gone,” Willie said to his mother as they walked home from school.

“I saw. I’m not blind.”

“Where do you think he went?”

“I couldn’t care less. And you might as well know, I arranged for him to be gone.”

Willie stopped short. “What do you mean?”

“I called the police. We don’t need a nuisance like that around here. Pestering kids.”

“He wasn’t pestering me.”

“Of course he was.”

“How do you know?”

“Willie, I have eyes. I can see.”

Willie stared at his mother. “No, you can’t. You’re a fish. You live in a cave.”

“Willie, don’t talk nonsense.”

“My name isn’t Willie. It’s William.”

Turning, he walked back to the school playground. **M**

Mrs. Markham watched him go. “Fish,” she wondered to herself; “what do fish have to do with anything?” **N**

L **Read and Discuss** What did you learn here?

M **Read and Discuss** What are Willie and his mother trying to say to each other?

N **Literary Focus Symbol** Who is the blind cave fish in the story? Explain.

Applying Your Skills

SKILLS FOCUS **Literary Skills** Analyze the use of symbolism in fiction. **Reading Skills** Compare and contrast author's purpose. **Vocabulary Skills** Demonstrate knowledge of literal meanings of words and their usage. **Writing Skills** Write descriptive essays; use figurative language.

What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything?

Respond and Think Critically

Reading Focus

Quick Check

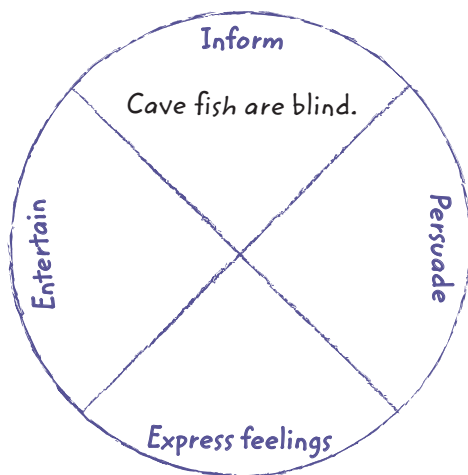
1. Why does Mrs. Markham refuse to give the homeless man money?
2. What happens to the man at the end?

Read with a Purpose

3. What does the story's title mean? Can you answer the question the title asks?

Reading Skills: Author's Purpose

4. Use your completed pie chart to analyze Avi's purpose. Beneath the chart, complete this sentence: *The author's main purpose is to . . .*



Literary Focus

Literary Analysis

7. **Interpret** What was the homeless man trying to say to Willie about the amount of cake? What idea might the cake symbolize here?
8. **Analyze** Why do you think Willie wants to be called "William" at the end? What does this show about how his character has grown?
9. **Make Judgments** Mrs. Markham reveals several ideas about life in this story. Use this scale to rate her statements: 1 = disagree, 2 = no opinion, 3 = agree.
 - "Questions that have no answers shouldn't be asked."
 - "Money will cure a lot of unhappiness."
 - "People are ashamed of being unhappy."Choose one statement and explain why you strongly agree or disagree with it.

Literary Skills: Symbol

10. **Analyze** Think about what Willie's teacher says about why the cave fish have no eyes. What do you think these eyeless fish symbolize? What does the symbol contribute to the story's message?

Writing Focus

Think as a Reader/Writer

Use It in Your Writing Choose something that you could clearly imagine as you read. Write a description of that character, setting, or scene, using two examples of figurative language.

Vocabulary Check

Answer the following questions.

5. What are you feeling when you speak with **urgency**?
6. If someone were **ashamed** of something, would he or she talk about it a lot? Explain.

Storm / The Mysterious Mr. Lincoln / What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything?

Writing Focus

Write a Comparison-Contrast Essay

Choose two of the selections you've just read, and write an essay in which you compare how each writer uses literary devices—imagery, figurative language, symbolism—to support his purpose. You can organize your essay in one of these ways:

- 1. Organize by selection.** In the first paragraph, describe one writer's use of literary devices in his selection. Also discuss how the literary devices support the author's purpose and message. In the second paragraph, do the same for the second selection.
- 2. Organize by literary device and author's purpose.** In the first paragraph, discuss how the two writers' purposes are similar and different. In the second paragraph, discuss how both writers use literary devices to get their messages across.

No matter which organization you use, write a conclusion in which you explain which selection uses literary devices more effectively to get the author's purpose and message across.

Use the workshop on writing a Comparison-Contrast Essay, pages 106–113, for help with this assignment.

What Do You Think Now? What lessons did you learn from these three selections? How could you apply these lessons to your own life?

CHOICES

As you respond to the Choices, use these **Academic Vocabulary** words as appropriate: contribute, perspective, distinct, uniform.

REVIEW

Describe a Character

Use three literary devices to bring a favorite real or fictional character to life. Your description should use imagery, figurative language, and a distinct symbol that stands for the character.

CONNECT

Record a Learning Experience

TechFocus Some radio programs combine interviews, narration, and music to tell real-life stories. With a partner, create a five- to ten-minute radio show–style recording that describes an interesting “learning experience” from your own or someone else's life. Decide on your purpose first. Play the recording for the class.

EXTEND

Write a Letter to the Author

Timed Writing Avi advises young writers: “Don't be satisfied with answers others give you. Don't assume that because everyone believes a thing, it is right or wrong. Reason things out for yourself.” Write a letter to Avi, explaining what you think of this perspective. Use examples from “What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything?” to support your opinion.



Learn It Online

There's more to these stories than meets the eye. Expand your view at:

go.hrw.com

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Go