

A Brief Analysis of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Death of a Naturalist'

Why Should I Care?

Our world and our lives are constantly undergoing change. Some changes are big (birth and death, for example) while others aren't so big (growing up you liked hot dogs, but now the smell of them makes you queasy). Our knowledge is always growing, and our opinions and preferences are subject to change. If you've ever looked back at a family photo and wondered what you were *thinking* with that haircut, you know what we mean.

That's what this Seamus Heaney poem is about. At first our speaker is thrilled by the slimy frogspawn and starts his own private collection (practically a shrine) of it, but as the bigger picture becomes clearer (mainly, where frogspawn comes from), he becomes repulsed. How on earth slimy green-gray frog goop wasn't immediately disgusting to the speaker is beyond us, but that's not the point. The point is, because of what he experiences and learns, his opinions and feelings completely change. Growing up will do that to you.

Commentary:

In the title poem of his first ever collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, Seamus Heaney gives a very sensuous and sumptuous description of the goings on at his local flax-hole. This hole or 'flax-dam' contained the flax which had been harvested and was now being soaked in a man-made hole in the corner of the flax-field in August. When the process was complete the flax was taken out and became the raw material for the thriving linen industry which had long flourished in Northern Ireland but was now showing some signs of decay in the nineteen fifties.

In this poem, 'Death of a Naturalist', Seamus Heaney gives a brilliant description of the local flax-hole. It is a memory poem, one of the many poems written about his childhood and early school days. Heaney, in this first collection of early poems mines a rich vein of childhood

memory. It is, however, embellished memory – childhood through a rosy adult lens. The poem is extremely sensual and evokes the senses of sight and sound and smell to perfection. Indeed, the poem invites the reader to read it aloud such are the myriad examples of assonance and alliteration scattered throughout.

The flax-dam or flax hole came into its own each August when the flax crop was ready for harvest. Flax pulling by hand was a backbreaking job, taken on by casual, often transient workers. Hand pulling was necessary because the whole stem, from root to tip, was required to give the longest fibre, for the finest quality linen cloth. The pulled flax was tied up in beats (sheaves) and put in rows or stooks on the flax field. The stooks were collected and put into flax holes, or dams, and kept under water for ten to fourteen days. This was to 'rot' or 'rot' the inside wood part from the outside fibres.

The 'flax-dam' festered and 'sweltered in the punishing sun' in high Summer. We can almost hear the bluebottles as they, *'Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell'*.

Each August the flax was immersed in the flax hole and sods of earth were used to keep it submerged.

The flax hole may have only been used by the farmers during the harvest but of course, it lay there unused all year round. The young poet, as naturalist, is obviously drawn to the pool at other times of the year as well, especially when there were great clots of frogspawn evident each Spring. He also visits in May to see the dragonflies and every July and August to spot the butterflies:

*There were dragonflies, spotted butterflies,
But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks.*

The poet uses onomatopoeia to great effect to aid his description: 'bubbles gargled', 'slobber of frogspawn', 'coarse croaking', 'the slap and plop', and the brilliant 'blunt heads farting'. We are also reminded of his age with the use of the

word 'jampotfuls' and by the childish simile 'Poised like mud grenades'.

Like all other budding young naturalists, he is lucky to have a great teacher! 'Miss Walls' encourages him and provides him with the necessary information, always appropriate to his age of course!

Miss Walls would tell us how

*The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn.*

Her ecology classes sent him out to the meadows to collect samples for the classroom and for the windowsill at home in his kitchen in Mossbawn. Miss Walls also imparted other vital pieces of information which are seized upon by the young eager naturalist:

*You could tell the weather by frogs too
For they were yellow in the sun and brown
In rain.*

There is a sense of childhood foreboding and fear of the flax hole and the mating frogs which is recreated with great accuracy by the poet – he knew, or he had been told by his elders, that 'if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it'. These stories were obviously very effective in keeping inquisitive young boys away from the vicinity of these dangerous flax dams and he feels threatened and frightened by the scene that confronts him at the flax-dam.

The great slime kings

*Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch
it.*

Indeed, the whole poem can be seen as a metaphor for growing up, laden with imagery which could be interpreted as sexual: we sense a child's revulsion as he discovers the facts of life and his ensuing loss of innocence. He will never feel the same again about the countryside after this encounter with the bullfrogs! As the poem's title suggests, therefore, his days as a naturalist are drawing to an end!

... and I knew / That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

In this poem, *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney conjures a richly evocative image of the countryside, focusing in on this flax dam where all the action takes place. He creates such an sensory journey that even the most uninitiated city dweller feels a keen sense of the beating heart of the countryside. Through the eyes of a child we sense their intrigue and excitement as he sees nature up-close and watches as tadpoles become frogs. But the poem also depicts a loss of innocence as the poet/speaker sees the harsher side of nature and feels threatened and frightened by the end. You can read the whole poem [here](#).

Death of a Naturalist Context

Born in 1939 County Londonderry (or Derry as it is more often referred to by Nationalists) Seamus Heaney is often known as a 'farmer poet' since many of his earliest poems are based on and around the farm and neighbourhood where he was raised.

Flax is the plant from which linen is manufactured. Sown in the spring, the plants were then harvested in summer. The plants were then bundled into sheaves and placed in a flax dam to 'rot'. The purpose of this was to rot the stems and expose the fibre within from which linen is made. A flax dam was a large pond, usually fed by an adjacent brook. The linen industry thrived in Northern Ireland until the mid-twentieth century, when the advent of synthetic fabrics diminished its appeal. The word 'townland' is a colloquial term used to describe the farm and surrounding fields and land owned by the farmer.

Structure and Form

The poem is set out in two stanzas with a distinct volta in the second, signalled by the word 'Then' to indicate a change in the poet/speaker's relationship with nature. It is written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) throughout.

Death of a Naturalist Analysis

Stanza One

Although this stanza focuses on the child's excitement, there are warning signs in the first line that there is a darker element to this poem. An ominous tone is created in by the use of the words 'festered', 'rotted', 'sweltered' and 'punishing'. Already there is a sense of nature at its most unforgiving, but rather than alarm the child it seems to captivate him. He watches and listens intently and doesn't seem repulsed as the 'bluebottles/Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.' The juxtaposition of the bubbles which 'gargled delicately' makes it seem like a chemistry experiment. This somewhat gruesome theme is continued by the simile 'like clotted water'; a macabre image which makes us think of blood and vampires: all fascinating to a child.

This excitement is conveyed by the superlative phrase: 'But best of all was the warm thick slobber of/Frogspawn'. The 'slobber' is doubly thrilling as not only is it and 'gunge-like' in texture, but it actually transforms into something else, which he documents in detail, tracing their evolution from 'jellied specks to 'fattening dots' to 'nimble swimming tadpoles'. Through the eyes of the speaker/poet we almost turn the pages of a science book. The alliteration in the phrase 'I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied specks' creates a jaunty tone and creates a sense of the child's delight, as his investigations are supported at home and in school by Miss Walls. He is encouraged in his pursuits as sets them around the house and at school. Childish vernacular is used as the teacher 'Miss Walls' explains about the 'mammy' frog and the 'daddy' frog. The colloquialism of 'mammy' firmly places this poem in an Irish context. The simplistic language and the repetition of 'frog' in this stanza's final sentence echoes a child reporting what he has learnt in school that day.

Literary Devices in Stanza One

In the first stanza Heaney makes such extensive use of alliteration and assonance that the

language almost feels heavy and sticky, to emulate a hot summer's day on the farm. The process of rotting the flax took time, and this is suggested by how the poet has drawn out the vowels, for example in the long 'e' sounds of 'green and heavy headed' and the proliferation of 'o' sounds in line six referring to the bluebottles. The Irish countryside is damp and this sense of wetness is suggested by the phrase 'huge sods'. It is impossible to read this verse quickly, until the childlike patter of the last sentence.

His use of enjambement and caesura also contribute to this slow moving style. There is a sense of him sitting and watching as events unfold, as illustrated in line thirteen.

While the poem has no end rhyme in the lines there is an abundance of internal rhyme and repetition, which again create a denseness in the writing.

Stanza 2

The change of tone occurs abruptly with the word 'Then'. After the languorous language of the first stanza this verse begins with a harsh monosyllabic line: 'The one hot day when fields were rank/with cowdung'. Both 'rank' and 'dung' sound cacophonous with harsh consonance. The word 'dung' is an Anglo-Saxon word for cow manure, used colloquially in Northern Ireland.

He describes the frogs as an army, coming back to seize what was theirs. This is indicated by the word 'invaded' and reinforced by words used to suggest battle: 'cocked', 'poised' and 'grenades'. The words 'coarse croaking' sound abrasive and unpleasant, and they form a 'bass chorus'. Again the proliferation of 'o' sounds combined with the harsh 'c' show that this is eerie and grating on the child's nerves.

Again he makes use of graphic visual imagery as we can almost feel the pulse in the toad's neck in the simile 'like a sail'. He continues to use language that a child would find entertaining, and it reads in part almost like a cartoon with the onomatopoeic 'slap' and 'plop', except here

they are juxtaposed beside the words 'obscene threat'. This should be a spectacle to a child, but is instead frightening because of the number of toads and their perceived indignation at human intrusion.

Like in the first stanza, his use of run-on lines and caesura pauses seems to slow the verse down, as though the child is rooted to the spot, taking it all in. The hyperbole of the line the 'great slime kings' could sound humorous, but placed immediately after 'I sickened, turned, and ran' we feel the child's terror. This is confirmed in the final lines when he states with certainty: 'I knew/That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.' Once more the line is sharp with monosyllabic words.

The whole poem could be seen as a metaphor for growing up, laden with imagery which could be interpreted as sexual: we sense a child's revulsion as he discovers the facts of life and his ensuing loss of innocence.

He will never feel the same about the countryside after this encounter.