

Seamus heaney – death of a naturalist

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



Through this anthology of poems by the great Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, we can see how a young Heaney matures through childhood and how he crosses metaphorical bridges to conquer fears and how he grows from a small boy on a farm to becoming one of Ireland's greatest poets.

Through each of the poems we see one underlying factor through his childhood: Fear. Heaney shows fear through each of these poems and eventually he conquers his fears while becoming a man.

The Barn

This poem is about an early stage in Heaney's childhood and shows genuine childhood fears.

Heaney uses very effective textural images to create his poems. In line one he uses the simile " piled like grit of ivory". The texture image image of grit is sharp and painful. The " ivory" represents death; it is icy and cold. He also uses the simile " solid as cement" to show how hard the atmosphere is.

The word " lugged" is a colloquialism used by Heaney. It is a typical Irish word for ears. He refers to " the two lugged sacks" to represent a rat's ears. He shows his fear of rats as he imagines the sacks are a rat. This shows Heaney's fantastic imagination. He uses more imagery as " the musty dark hoarded an armoury". Heaney shows his fear as he imagines the darkness hiding weapons.

The reference to a harness and plough socks represents the farming community in the 1950s in Ireland. This is Heaney referring to his background.

Heaney creates great atmosphere, texture and visual images by using alliteration in " mouse-grey, smooth, chilly concrete". Claustrophobia hits him by being inside the barn. It has no windows and no escape. The young boys breathing is getting harder and isn't helped by the " clogging cobwebs". The barn " burned like an oven", shows how Heaney was feeling the heat of his fear. Heaney uses hard, sharp repetition of p in the phrase " pitch-fork's prongs".

Then the young Heaney " scuttled" into the yard to safety. This metaphorical verb again shows reference to the rats he fears so much.

The poem moves from day to night and Heaney displays surrealism as kids live in a surrealistic world. When he mentions " bats on the wing" he again thinks about the rats and mice. He feels so small in this " gulf". At the end of the poem the child escapes his fear by waking up from his nightmare or falling asleep.

Death of A Naturalist

Even the title is metaphorical. In this poem Heaney displays a concentration on growing up; a development and discovery of sexuality and shows his perception of sexuality at the time of growing up. Looking at the poem through the " eyes of a child" shows perceptions at different stages in life.

Heaney's fears are now psychological fears, which have deeper meanings. He is at the onset of puberty and his views at the time are reflected in the poem. There is more of a fantasy and a quite surreal reality.

He is disgusted at the thought of reproduction because he sees things through the surrealistic eyes of a child because of the stage he is at. He isn't ready to accept sex. He can't rationalise. Puberty makes him feel guilty. Similarly to the Barn he runs away at the end. " I sickened, turned and ran", shows how he has not fully grown up.

The use of the term " festered" shows the oppressive atmosphere. The flax-dam is old and rotten. There is bacteria, mould and a feeling of guilt in the air. The young Heaney feels that something bad and dirty is growing. Heaney uses terms to set the atmosphere like " rotted, weighted, huge sods, sweltered and punishing sun". Alliteration is also used in " flax and festered". Heaney shows that something is growing by writing " bubbles gargled delicately".

He uses the word " gauze" to show how he is trapped and the smell is also shown. The typically Northern Irish word " slobber" is used to show the mess and dirtiness of what is going on around Heaney. Everything is coming together. Heaney captures the texture by using two key phrases: " clotted water" represents the dirt and " jellied specks".

" Fattening dots burst" shows growth and reproduction. Heaney's school teacher, Ms Walls, is hiding the reality of reproduction from the young children as they are not yet ready to accept the reality of the situation.

The second stanza shows the change to realising the reality. Heaney is disgusted. The smell is disgusting, like cow dung, which shows how Heaney feels. Heaney shows the atmosphere by writing about the "angry frogs", the "coarse" sounds and the "thick air, gross bellied frogs" and the "groans". He sees the reality as "cocked on sods, necks pulsed". He is horrified. The sound images created by "slap and plop" shows how disgusting he thinks it is. "Poised like mud grenades" creates more imagery. Heaney sees it as a war and a fight.

The young boy "sickened, turned and ran." He isn't mature enough to accept the reality.

The Early Purges

Again Heaney shows fear, this time his fear is of death. Even from the title this is shown. The "purge" is used when something is killed for a reason, for example when something has to be put down. But what makes this different is that Heaney shows an acceptance of the reasons for killing the kittens. At the time of the kittens being drowned Heaney could have only been about six years of age. It was the first time he had seen this being done.

"The scraggy wee shits" is an ingenious term to use because it is a realistic thing that a man like Dan would say. This also shows the Northern Irish background of Heaney's upbringing. Heaney accepts that Dan was just doing what he had to.

Again Heaney uses imagery by describing the "frail, metal sound". When he hears the "scraping" sound it is as if the kittens are metaphorically scrapping on his conscience and he feels guilt for their deaths. He also hears the "tiny din" showing how weak the kittens are against the world.

Heaney uses Irish words like "soused" and "sogged remains" as texture images to show how the kittens are drowned. He shows how they are treated like vermin by being "slung" as if they are worthless. When Dan says "sure isn't it better for them now" he is rationalising the situation to justify himself to the boy.

"Sluiced" is a texture verb, which has internal rhyming and links well to the "glossy and dead" kittens. The weakness of the dead kittens is highlighted as they are described as "mealy and crisp as old summer dung". This simile typifies Heaney's upbringing on a farm as he describes the rotting kittens.

As the poem continues with the theme of death Dan kills other animals and Heaney describes this very effectively by using verbs, which capture death like "sickening tug". He uses false sentiments to stay away from reality.

Heaney moves from fear of death to accepting it as a part of life. Heaney shows the rationality of death. Death is now a natural part of his life. He now realises death is part of being involved in the day-to-day running of a farm.

An Advancement of Learning

This poem is a metaphor for growing up. In this poem Heaney crosses metaphorical bridges, which transform his life from a frightened boy to a

confident young man. He conquers fears and then crosses a metaphorical bridge.

There are two halves in this poem with a climactic moment. The climactic moment is when Heaney stares out the rat as it trained on him. He stared out the rat and the rat retreats. Heaney has won the battle with the rat.

At first Heaney was going to "defer the bridge" as he has a fear of rats. Similarly to Death of A Naturalist he wanted to avoid his fear. The "river nosed" and is described as "oil-skinned" sets the dirty and bad atmosphere. The "transfer of gables" is a metaphor. Heaney tells how he "hunched over the railings", suggesting he isn't comfortable with his surroundings. He is scared. "A rat slimed, slobbered, curtly close and smudging the silence" are all metaphors and show how disgusting the rat is and how dirty this place is.

Heaney tried to run away again from his fear but there is another rat on the other route. He is forced to confront his fear. The rat notices him and also is frightened by the boy. The rat circles and "establishes a dreaded Bridge-head", this is an image of war. It is a battle of wits. Heaney "turned to stare". He takes a stand against his fear. His excitement pushes him to defeat his fear. He takes control.

The rat doesn't know what to do and circles "aimlessly". Now Heaney realises that there is nothing to be afraid of. He has conquered his fear. He isn't frightened anymore. He takes in the opposition and forgets about being afraid. The rat is terrified, cold and wet. It retreats up the pipe.

Heaney sees the rat for what it really is. Reality dawns. The rat runs away and Heaney walks across the bridge. He crosses a metaphorical bridge, which represents his conquering of his fear.

Dawn Shoot

This poem differs from the others as Heaney is now more mature and it is he who is killing and hunting. He isn't the one who is scared and unsure. He has accepted the reality of death and is using it to make money and helps to get rid of vermin. He doesn't care so much for animals because once the fox is dead they " dander off".

The theme of the poem is emphasised in the title " Dawn Shoot". Heaney is out hunting and it is dawn. In the first stanza there is an image of warfare. Heaney has become the victimiser and not the victim. He imagines that he is a soldier and uses words like " mortar" and " clicked tartly" to represent the military. The silence highlights the early morning mission. The cows are still asleep, " cuddling, watching and knowing".

" Rails scored a bulls eye", shows a shooting target. The hoarse sentry shows another military image. Heaney imagines he is a soldier as he dresses in rubber boots and is belted. Similes such as " tense as two parachutists also show the military influence and he shows his imagination of being in the army as he " dropped down".

In the second stanza they are down on their bellies with " ravenous eyes". He really wants to shoot something. Heaney shows how the foxes were " loping

under ferns.... flashing brown orbits". The sky is starting to brighten. " Cock sounding reveille" again shows the military imagery. The lines become shorter and emphasise the action.

Then comes the shooting. The drama is added to by dialogue. They are doing it for fun and this is emphasised as they call the fox a " playboy". Donnelly sings as he shoots, " Wild Rover no more", which also shows their insensitivity towards the creature. He " Empties two barrels" to make sure the fox is dead. The two boys simply don't care.

They aren't interested in catching anymore as the shot scares away any other animals. They " dander off" and at their age they are very insensitive towards the fox. It wasn't worth cutting out the tongue. There is no sentiment shown. It is a clear fact that the money is no issue. The whole point of killing the animal was simply for pleasure. This ending is significant and it shows that Heaney has again matured to another level.