

The early purges by seamus heaney



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In the poem 'The Early Purges' by Seamus Heaney, the literal meaning of it is the poet is tracing his history to his attitude towards killing the animals on the farm: from the past as a child, to now as an adult.

The poet's attitude changes as time went on, i. e. as he gets older. On the second level, the idea is about how we lose innocence and the difference in belief of urban people and the rural people on treating animals on the farm. The main method used is by proving us with many striking details. Through this poem we can see the poet is tracing his history to his attitude: from the past as a child, to now as an adult.

His viewpoint changes, as the poet gets older. Firstly the title of the poem "Early Purges" tells us that the child's sentiments get purged i. e. in this poem, his child purity had been overlaid by the killings. The very first line that Heaney uses, "I was six when I first saw kittens drown." is very powerful.

This is because it shows that reader that he is making it vivid, by stating that he was only six. This means that the event made such an impression on him. Being so young, and he is able to remember every little detail. The poet's attitude as a child is that he is upset about it 'Suddenly frightened'. By using the phrase 'frail metal', a soft consonance 'l', and with the meaning of 'frail' refers to the kittens, the poet first time shows the pitying feeling towards the animals. The country life is seen here through the eyes of the young Heaney is brutal and unfair on the animals.

But as an adult, he sees these killings necessary. He rationalises the situation 'I just shrug' i. e. he accepts the point of view of the rural people.

Also now, there is even a sense of cruelty in him, he calls the dead pups: "Bloody pups". But there is this little ambiguity that he still feels a little pitying to the puppies by the use of the connotation ' pups', which produces a soft sound.

The poet's attitude towards the case at the end is probably it is still a horror to kill, but it has to be done. It is far less emphasized by the poet i. e. there is less emphasize on the physical shock. Now he uses one line to describe the killing and in the past he uses four stanzas. This might even mean to him that it almost make sense to kill these creatures.

The poem is about how we lose innocence as time passes. It is ambiguous and ironic – poet appears to endorse the view that " sentiments" displaced by " living" are " false", but ends with an unconvincing cliché: " Pests have to be kept down". The poem recalls a particular incident, the " first" time Heaney, as a boy, witnessed the farmhand killing kittens and how he became used to this in time. Now he has a similar indifference to the death of animals. Also we can see how Dan justifies action by suggesting kitten have no value " scraggy wee shits" and adult Heaney does the same, even swearing like Dan " bloody pups".

We see older person try to deceive child to protect him from his compassion " Sure isn't it better for them now? " – but the child is not convinced. We can see from this idea that time is able to change anything. There is a quite difference in belief between the urban people and the rural people on how to treat the animals. From the urban people's point of view they see death are

unnatural and it creates even a horror " Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town where they consider death unnatural'.

While from the rural people's point of view, they see these killings necessary, ' On well-run farms pests have to be kept down'. This shows that the country people think it is perfectly normal. A good example of a country person will be Dan Taggart. He kills all sorts of animals, from kittens to puppies. Dan uses words and phrases such as " pitched", " scraggy wee shits", " soused" and " slung" and we can see vividly the kind of person that Dan is.

He is not, at first impression, a nice man, because the words imply heartless and rough and uncaring behaviour towards the kittens. The words such as " pitched" are images of Dan's cruelty to the animals, because it implies that he throws them rather than places them with care into the bucket. From him we get a good idea of life on the farm, because he plays a major part in Heaney's memories. The contrast between the different beliefs is even more emphasized when the poet gives out examples of ' kittens drown' and ' pups are prodded to drown'. This emphasized the main idea of the poem because the image of kittens, pups towards the urban people is quite domestic. They refer to them as pet.

However, to the farmers, ' kittens, pups, rats, rabbits, crows' they are all regarded in the same catalogue: pest. All the above facts show the difference between rural and urban sentiments. The poet has used lots of striking details in describing the poem. These details include describing Taggart, the killing of kittens, and the life on farms. The first one is describing Taggart.

In the first stanza, “ Taggart, scraggy” a consonance with the hard ‘ g’ sound, intensifies the hardness of Taggart. The second one involves the connotation of the word ‘ kittens’, which is probably the heart of the poem. It reflects the poet’s sentiment. It starts as a soft gentle connotation (kittens are pets), which is when the poet was young; he thinks the kittens might not be pests.

However, in the last line the ‘ kittens’ moves to the image of ‘ pests’- a negative connotation, which is when he grows up and has a similar sentiment to the rural people. The connotation of ‘ kittens’ opens up the poem, Taggart sees them as a waste, no use: ‘ the scraggy wee shits. ‘ However, in the phrase ‘ Sure isn’t it better for them now? ‘ actually shows some ambiguity. The tone seems to show that he is actually comforting the boy.

This may suggest that even Dan may feel a little sorry to those animals he killed. The poet also describes the kittens’ struggling before death by the phrase ‘ like mad’. The phrase ‘ like mad’ has two meanings, one is the sound when the kittens try to get out, and the other is it shows the poet’s attitude: this echoes the effect of this event on him. Also from the phrase ‘ glossy and dead’, where ‘ glossy’ creates the image that the kittens died recently, still shining with water we get the image representing the child’s disbelief of this death, the kittens look still young and alive just like him, but the word ‘ dead’ shows it all.

The third one is the life on farm. Heaney uses words such as “ drown”, “ trapped”, “ snared”, “ shot” or “ tug” to describe the various ways in which

animals are killed on the farm. These words show that country life can be brutal because it is not necessarily enjoyable to kill these animals, but it is something that has to be done. The images, which he uses here, such as “with a sickening tug, pulled old hens’ necks.” are not pleasant, but they are certainly very effective because the reader immediately knows what is going on, and can relate to both sides of the argument, i. e.

Taggart and the young Heaney. The poem is composed of tight and regular rhymed three-line stanzas, which carry the argument clearly. The form of the poem is sort of ‘terza rima’, but it is fully followed only at the last 2 stanzas, this creates the effect of concluding on an strong point i. e. when the sentiment of the poet changes, the rhyme also changes.

For other stanzas, it follows a rhyme pattern of ‘a, c’. In the poem, a triple structure is formed. The poet first spends lots time talking about the killings of the kittens. Then follows by other similar examples e. g.

rats, rabbits etc. Lastly, the last two stanzas are about the summary of the lessons that is taught to him through age i. e. those killings have made him cruel as he grew.