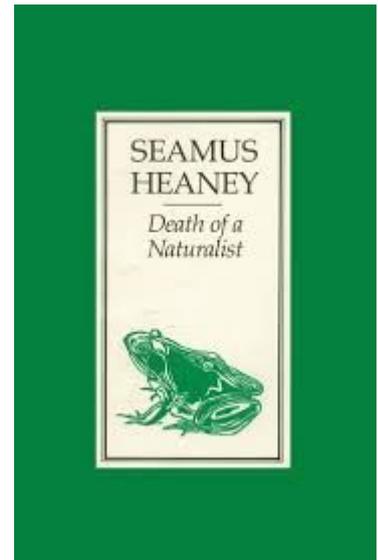


# 'Death of a Naturalist'

## BY SEAMUS HEANEY



All year the flax-dam **festered** in the heart  
Of the townland; green and heavy headed  
Flax had **rotted** there, weighted down by huge sods.  
Daily it **sweltered** in the **punishing sun**.  
Bubbles **gargled delicately**, bluebottles  
Wove a strong gauze of **sound** around the **smell**.  
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. Here, every spring  
I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied  
Specks to range on window sills at home,  
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until  
The fattening dots burst, into nimble  
Swimming tadpoles. 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**. You could tell the weather by frogs too

For they were yellow in the sun and brown  
In rain.

**Then** one hot day when fields were rank  
With cowdung in the grass the **angry frogs**  
**Invaded** the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges  
To a **coarse croaking** that I had not heard  
**Before.** The air was thick with a bass chorus.  
Right down the dam gross bellied frogs were cocked  
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:  
The slap and plop were **obscene threats**. Some sat  
Poised **like mud grenades**, their blunt heads farting.  
**I sickened, turned, and ran.** The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for **vengeance** and I knew  
That if I dipped my hand the **spawn would clutch it.**

(IMAGERY: visual-sight; auditory-sound; tactile-touch; olfactory- smell; gustatory-taste)

In his poem, *Death of a Naturalist*, Seamus Heaney conjures a richly evocative image of the countryside, focusing in on this flax dam where all the action takes place. The sensory journey created by him covers the journey in the life-cycle of frogs. Through the effective use of a myriad of poetic devices, the poet informs all readers about the making of flax which opens an arena of rich visual images and knowledge about the natural world. Through the eyes of a child we sense the intrigue and excitement as he sees nature up-close and watches the tadpoles metamorphosing into adult frogs. But the poem also depicts a **loss of innocence** as the poet/speaker feels threatened and frightened by the onslaught of the overwhelming number of the frogs.

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. *Death of a Naturalist* appeared in his first major anthology of the same name, which was published in **1966**. Heaney died in 2013, aged 74.

Heaney has been acclaimed as one of the greatest poets of our age and admired for his 'wonderful gift of eye and ear' and for being an immense story teller. Upon his death in 2012, The Independent described him as "probably the best known poet in the world."

Born into a farming family, Heaney's father being a farmer and a cattle dealer he spent his childhood in close proximity with the land, farming and ploughing. His mother came from a family employed in the local linen mill, thus, his keen knowledge of the flax-dam and detailed observations about what goes into the making of linen.

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**

### **LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY:**

#### **STANZA ONE**

- The opening stanza of the poem captures with passion the scene about the "*flax-dam*" "*in the heart of the townland*" as observed by Seamus Heaney, all around in his childhood days. Yet, there are warning signs that create an **ominous tone**. **Vivid visual and colour imagery** is presented as he captures the sight of "the green in heavy headed" flax rotting "weighted down by huge sods." The **alliterative effect** along with **color imagery** and the use of **adjective phrases** helps the readers to visualise the scene. The

poet captures nature in the minutest of details as could be seen only by one who had the closest interaction with nature.



- Striking a **negative tone**, “*Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun*”, the poet uses **active verbs** like, “*festered*”, “*rotted*”, “*sweltered*” in order to convey the sense of the rotting flax in the summer. Creating **nature imagery** with the brush of an artist, the poet watches and listens intently; he uses **olfactory** and **auditory images** with reference to the “*blue bottles*” that “*wove a strong gauze of sound*” around the smell so that the smells and the sounds intermingle and become one, captivating the poet’s imagination rather than warning him. The **oxymoronic bubbles** that “*gargled delicately*” evoke **graphic details** of the flax-dam under the influence of the Summer Sun, as they **juxtapose** the varied **sounds** and the **visual impact** of the ‘*festered*’ flax-dam.
- The **visual images** of the “*dragonflies, spotted butterflies*” represent the young boy’s fascination with nature which infused him with the special enthusiasm. The **visual** and **tactile image** of “*the warm thick slobber of frogspawn*” which seems to have caught his imagination and sense of adventure re-energizes the experience of the poet as a young boy. The **consonant effect** with the emphasis on the **consonant ‘r’** leads the readers to have a real life experience. Using the **simile** he justifies the frogspawn that “*grew like clotted water*” “*in the shade of the banks*”. “*Clotted water*” gives a **negative connotation** as it brings to mind the clotted blood.



- Through the interim phase of the first stanza in the poem, the poet assumes the **first person narrative voice** recording the “*jampotfuls of the jellied Specks*” which he would arrange on the window sills at home on shelves at school. The **alliterative** and **consonant** effect in “*jampotfuls of the jellied Specks*” leaves a memorable impact on the readers’ mind. Childhood fascination and experimentation with the frog spawn is justifiably captured through the **alliterative note** “*wait and watch*” until “*the fattening dots burst, into nimble Swimming tadpoles*”; the **visual images**, the **onomatopoeic effect** (burst) and the **adjective phrases** used, represent nature as witnessed and experienced through close quarters.
- The use of **caesura**, “*the fattening dots burst, into nimble/ Swimming tadpoles*”; provides the space, leading the readers to imagine the transition of the tadpoles from egg into “*nimble swimming tadpoles.*”
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- **THE THEME OF CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE:**

- A note of Innocence and the fertility of a child's imagination lead the poet to reminisce what the teacher, Miss Walls instructed them about the zoological facts; daddy frog being called “a bullfrog” alongside the **onomatopoeic effect** of the ‘croaking bullfrog’; and how “the mammy frog laid hundreds of little eggs”. The **declarative statement**, “and this was Frogspawn” indicates the young mind’s knowledge as provided by the teachers. The **narration of anecdotes** from school life make the poem easily relatable to the students and the **first person voice** lends authenticity to the experience drawn.



- The use of **enjambment** in each stanza represents the poet’s mental association running through the early childhood years on to his adulthood which marked a phase of his development as a Naturalist. The use of the **run-on-lines (enjambment)** throughout the poem and in each stanza of the poem brings out the poet’s expression of the continuation of his experience from childhood into manhood which revolves around close interaction with nature. This led him to undergo different experiences with relation to nature, which is presented here through the panoramic image of the frogs’ dominance of the scene.
- The frogs as mentioned occupy a central role in the cycle of nature as the poet says, “You could tell the weather by frogs too” and how ‘they changed colour in the sun and in the rain’ “for they were yellow in the sun and brown in rain.” The **visual and color imagery** leads the readers to imagine the scene in its entirety.

## STANZA TWO

### ● THE THEME OF AGGRESSION:

● The **second stanza** of the poem strikes a more **aggressive and violent note** as the poet **etches down** the picture of the angry frog *'invading the flax-dam', 'when fields were rank with cowdung in the grass.'* Here also the poet uses **military jargon** and **active verbs** to capture **visual, tactile and olfactory images** to give an authentic account of the experience around him.

● The **alliterative** "course croaking" is brought into prominence through a **visual image** as the poet recalls the moment when he *"ducked through hedges"* out of curiosity when he heard a croaking of the frog that had never been heard of *"before."* The poet uses **enjambment** and the **adverbial of time** and places the **adverb of time-** *"before"* in the next line, in order to lay emphasis on the fact that he had never heard that kind of *"coarse croaking before."* With this the poet invites the readers to experience the corresponding, **onomatopoeic** *"bass chorus"* which filled the air. The **visual image** of the *"gross bellied frogs"* from *"cocked sods"* right down the dam, which makes effective use of **consonance**, conjures the dominance of the natural scene by the frogs.



● The use of **visual and tactile imagery** and the **simile**, *"their loose necks pulsed like sails"* present the omnipresence of the frogs. The **onomatopoeic** and the **consonant** effect of *"slap and plop"* represents through the **enjambment**, the *"obscene threats"* suggesting the different movements and actions of the frog during the mating season when they are overwhelmed by aggression. The use of **military imagery, simile and personification in** *"Some sat poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting"* present nature as it took negative and repugnant (hateful) turn for the poet. The poet has

**personified** the “*blunt heads*” of the frog in order to lay emphasis. The poem does justice to the poet’s changing feelings as he uses the **triad, (power of three)** “*I sickened, turned and ran*” to represent the feelings of repulsion created within him with the overwhelming, aggressive presence of the frogs all around him.



- **THE THEME OF REPULSION/VENGEANCE:**

- An activity which had appeared exciting and experimental as a young boy when he would ‘gather’ in his hands and clutch and catch the frogspawn, seems to have acquired an abominable (hateful) and a **threatening image** as he **personifies** the frogs and says that he felt that “*the great slime kings were gathered there for vengeance*” which would “*clutch*” his hand, if he “*dipped*” it into the spawn.



- Thus, the **title** gathers significance as the poet represents different phases of his experience with nature that led to the ‘Death of a Naturalist’ as he experienced the series

of the unpleasant aspects of nature. The entire poem which is written in **blank verse** narrates the poet's experience which was witnessed by him through the different stages of his childhood.

- Although the poet was a great nature lover and had spent his entire childhood in close proximity (closeness) with nature yet he also experienced certain negative and repulsive aspects of nature such as in the presence of the the overwhelming influence of the frogs all around him which partly led to the demise (death) of the Nature- Lover within him, or perhaps temporarily.

- {\*\*\*NOTE: In a sonnet, the **volta** is the turn of thought or argument: in Petrarchan or Italian sonnets it occurs between the octave and the sestet, and in Shakespearean or English before the final couplet.}

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