

## Death of a Naturalist by Seamus Heaney

### The one with the frogs

The poem opens with some rich description of a swampy area where flax (a kind of plant) grows. Heaney describes the flies buzzing, and how the sun beats down on the mucky soil. He pays particular attention to the slimy frogspawn (what eventually becomes tadpoles, then frogs). This sparks a memory for the speaker, and he begins to talk about how in school, his teacher had students collect the gooey frogspawn in jars to watch it turn to tadpoles as part of a science lesson about frogs.

Then we're snapped into the present. One hot, steamy and stinky day, the speaker follows the sound of croaking frogs to its source. He sees more frogs than he's ever seen amongst the frogspawn (no, this is not a scene from a horror movie). They're croaking and slapping in the flax dam. Not surprisingly, he gets grossed out—so much so that he freaks out and runs away.

#### Key Quotes:

- The title is metaphorical - the "death" symbolises the speaker's loss of innocence as he grows up.
- The tone of the poem at the beginning is almost enthusiastic - the verbs "sweltered", "festered" and "gargled" suggest the speaker is almost relishing the vile smells of the dam.
- Language such as "jampotfuls", "fattening dots" and "mammy frog" suggest childhood innocence.
- The tone changes on " Then one hot day" and the tone becomes more aware of the dangers - "angry frogs".
- Final words - "spawn would clutch it" shows the contrast with when he would collect the "jellied specks" - he has grown up and no longer wants to play the games of his childhood.

#### Context:

- Seamus Heaney's four year old brother died in a car accident when Heaney was a young boy. The death affected him badly and many of his poems are about loss of innocence.
- Heaney grew up on a farm and many of his poems reflect his upbringing.

#### Structure:

- In the first stanza, the speaker in the poem is full of enthusiasm and enjoys nature.
- In the last stanza, this changes as he becomes more aware of the dangers.

#### Possible Themes and Links:

- Loss of innocence - Afternoons
- Childhood memories - Excerpt from The Prelude
- Passing of time - As Imperceptibly as Grief, Excerpt from The Prelude and To Autumn

Heaney uses the word 'Death' to suggest a metaphorical death of the speaker's innocence. This could also represent that it is lost forever and they cannot get it back.

'Flax' is a type of plant that grows annually.

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The word 'heart' suggests that it is a central place in the 'townland' and shows the importance of the flax-dam to the speaker.

The verbs 'festered' and 'rotted' could suggest that it is rotting/decaying just like his innocence.

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.

Heaney uses personification of the sun by using the word 'punishing'. This could suggest that summer is relentless and harsh.

The adverb 'delicately' is a strange word to use to describe this disgusting scene. This shows the speaker's appreciation for the flax-dam. 'Best of all' also emphasises the fascination he has.

Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.  
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles  
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.

The words 'slobber' and 'Jampotfuls' suggests that the speaker in the poem is young.

There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,  
But best of all was the warm thick slobber  
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water

This vivid memory suggests that he is enthusiastic about the lesson regarding the frogs.

In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring  
I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied  
Specks to range on window-sills at home,

The verbs 'wait' and 'watch' suggests that the speaker is excited and impatient.

On shelves at school, and wait and watch until  
The fattening dots burst into nimble-  
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how

The speaker in the poem has learnt facts about the frogs.

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.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza has a change in tone. The word 'Then' suggests that the speaker in the poem changes his views.

The adjective 'angry' to describe the frogs suggests that the speaker in the poem is aware of the dangers.

Then one hot day when fields were rank  
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs  
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges

The words such as 'invaded', 'cocked' and 'grenades' suggest a war between the speaker in the poem and the frogs.

The noun 'king' implies that the frogs now rule the flax-dam and that he is not wanted there. The adjective 'great' suggests that they hold all the power.

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

This is a direct contrast to his enthusiasm and passion in the beginning. Metaphorically, he has now lost his innocence and can see the dangers in the world.

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.

The verb 'clutch' suggests that he is now afraid and scared of the frogs. He believes he will not be able to escape from the knowledge of how he views the 'angry frogs.' Again, this is a metaphor for his loss of innocence.

Seamus Heaney