Death of a Naturalist

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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.

#### DEATH OF A NATURALIST

The death referred to in this poem is metaphorical and refers to the loss of innocent enthusiasm of a child as the realities of life begin to be sensed but not quite understood. A naturalist is, of course, someone who spends time enthusiastically studying nature. The idea of collecting and observing natural things and, notably, frogspawn is an almost universal activity in primary schools.

This poem is partly about the transition from innocence to experience and the fact that, as we grow up, we must come to terms with what might be unpalatable realities. In this poem, it is the reality of sexuality that “invades” the child’s consciousness. He is terrified at the end of the poem, being convinced that the “angry frogs” will seek vengeance for his having taken their spawn. And here is another facet of experience explored by Heaney in a more direct manner than in ‘Blackberry Picking’; it is that of punishment for deeds done. The fact that the child believed the frogs “Were gathered there for vengeance” and that he “knew” the spawn would “clutch” his hand suggests that he felt, in part at least, that he deserved their “vengeance”. This clearly shows that the child’s relationship with nature is sometimes a problematic one. The metamorphosis of the tadpoles into frogs corresponds in the poem to the change in the child’s perceptions as he sees the site of generation.

Despite the secure and untroubled presentation of the child’s primary school experience, there is an undertone of threat in the first six lines of the poem that pave the way for the much more openly aggressive aspects of the second section. The verbs “festered”, “rotted” and “sweltered” convey very effectively the effect of the “punishing sun”. It is the imagined punitive aspect of nature that scares the child at the end of the poem. Lines 5 and 6 foreground details that would surely be fascinating to the young naturalist. Not only does Heaney give precise visual images, he creates a very accurate soundscape. The plosive alliterated b’s that link “Bubbles” and “bluebottles” is joined by the throaty “gargled” which is leavened by the adjective “delicately”. Line 6 employs the technique of synaesthesia (literally “senses together”) in order to make the atmosphere tangible so that we are given a simultaneous visual and aural experience of the flies that “Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell”.

The idea that underpins the poem is encapsulated in Wordsworth’s famous couplet from The Prelude (Book 1) in which he says:

Fair seed time had my soul and I grew up  
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear.

Wordsworth presents, in natural terms, the idea of a plant being nurtured from a seed and links this to his personal growth through childhood and beyond. He carefully signals, though, that he experienced both “beauty” and “fear”. In the same way, Heaney writes about being entranced by the variegated beauty of nature as well as its frightening dimension.

In the first section of the poem, the young child’s sense of wonder and beauty is focused upon. He is nurtured in the context of innocence in an environment that is presided over by the protective presence of Miss Walls who preserves the children’s’ innocence by telling them that the way frogs reproduce simply involves a male frog croaking and the female laying eggs. No mention of the sexual reality is mentioned. The naïve view of the child is further emphasised in the fact that he attaches no more significance to the frogs’ reproductive process than to the idea that they might signal the weather: “For they were yellow in the sun and brown / In rain.”

The rhythm of the verse in lines 7-10 reflects the breathless enthusiasm of the child recounting the details of his naturalist’s investigations. There is real relish in the sense data of experience. Heaney marshals the noise of consonant and vowel to great effect in lines 8-9: “But best of all was the warm thick slobber / Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water…” The assonantal associations of sound capture the globular shape of the spawn as well as its tactile quality that is like mucus. Of course, that which is perceived as best becomes worst as the “great slime kings…gathered…for vengeance”.

The emergence of tadpoles form the spawn is conveyed in precise terms, too. The child would:

“wait and watch until  
The fattening dots burst into nimble-  
Swimming tadpoles.”

**(LINES 13-15)**

The alliterated w’s and b’s capture first the sense of protracted anticipation and then the eruption of the egg sacs as the tadpoles “burst” into their motile life. The short “i” sound in “nimble” and “swimming” reinforce the sense of freed action as the next stage in metamorphosis is effected.

There is a definite break between the two verse paragraphs beyond the obvious typographical division. The word “Then” signals a change and the adjectives “hot”, “rank”, “angry” and  “coarse” communicate the effect on the child who had previously been innocently engaged with nature. There is also a shift form a female to a male imperative as the sounds we hear are prefaced as a “bass chorus”. A clear sense of male threat is evident here. There is an ominous atmosphere created and the sinister undertones detectable in the first paragraph become a more palpable threat through the imagery of potential violence and destruction. The frogs are described as being “cocked / On sods” (lines ) as if they are guns ready to be discharged. The sense of disgust and fear encapsulated in the sentence, “I sickened, turned and ran.” Is prepared for in Heaney’s lexical choices. The frogs are “gross-bellied” and an almost saurian impression is conveyed in “their loose necks pulsed like sails”. The words “hopped”, “slap” and “plop” suggest something of a drain or cistern where waste is egested. This idea is clinched in the shocking image of the frogs’ mouths being seen by the child as anuses discharging a foul afflatus with “their blunt heads farting”. The frogs are now seen as “The great slime kings” who “Were gathered there for vengeance”. There is no doubt in the child’s mind that he will be punished for taking spawn to out on the windowsill at school: “I knew / That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.”

The safe and enclosed world presided over by Miss Walls has become a dangerous place of exposure for the developing child. Security changes to threat just as the tadpoles metamorphose into frogs.

This poem signals a clear acknowledgement of the complexities of the awakening of sexual awareness and the simultaneous sense of loss and revulsion that is also linked to initiation in some way. The child will somehow have to negotiate a pathway through the kingdom of slime that leaves behind the classroom vision of nature that concentrates on the appeal of “dragonflies and spotted butterflies”.  The young naturalist is annihilated by the real imperatives of life that show themselves to him somewhat prematurely. This rings true as there is a universal identification with the idea that childhood is raided too soon by the knowledge of the adult.

## Symbol Analysis – gross is good!

Some little kids can really get down with gross. Why do you think Gak and Slime were so money for Nickelodeon? There's just something appealing and intriguing about stinky and slimy stuff. Maybe it's because our parents spend so much time trying to keep us clean as kids that when life presents us with some high-quality gnarly nature we can't help but be psyched. That's precisely the state we find out speaker in as we enter this poem. The flax dam is rotting and gurgling and the slimy frogspawn is the prized bounty of this stinkpot, and Heaney uses his most strikingly vivid [imagery](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/imagery.html" \t "_blank)to convey the gleefully gross stuff.

* Line 5: The gurgling mud and muck is described as something pleasant! You can tell the speaker is enjoying the strange sounds of the rotting flax dam, otherwise Heaney wouldn't have chosen the word "delicately." It's kind of like saying, "the mud was farting pleasantly." It's almost humorous.
* Lines 8–9: Heaney describes the frogspawn in a perfectly disgusting way. "Warm thick slobber" and "clotted" make you think of dog slobber or mucus, or any myriad of nastiness. The twist is that in front of this disgusting image he says, "Best of all" to let us know that our speaker is totally into the muck that mother nature has provided.
* Lines 11–12: "Jampotfuls of jellied specks"—doesn't that sound lovely! Kind of reminds us of tapioca pudding, or some other sundry delight. Until you think about what exactly it is that's in those cute little jars chilling on his windowsill: frogspawn—slimy, green-gray frog goop.
* Lines 14–15: Again, something nimble-swimming sounds so graceful and lovely, like synchronized swimmers, or leaping dolphins. But here, Heaney's describing the little slimy tadpoles this way. The image is vivid and unexpected. Our speaker clearly sees the gross natural phenomenon that is frog reproduction as something exciting and pleasant.

## Symbol Analysis – gross is threatening!

At some point in the poem, things turn sour (with all that rotting and festering, how could it not?). A little more insight and a little more experience, and all of a sudden all that was pleasantly putrid is now revolting and scary. Maybe too much of a good (gross) thing really isn't a good thing, after all. Or maybe understanding that harmless, slimy frogspawn blast into beastly bullfrogs that look like grenades is a little intimidating. Either way, this poem turns from celebrating the icky in nature, to exposing its frightening and ugly side. Heaney's weapons of choice to get this idea of across are [imagery](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/imagery.html) (an old stand-by), and some wild wordplay using [consonance](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/consonance.html).

* Lines 22–24: This is the turning point in the poem where things start to turn sour. No longer is nature all rad, it's sickening and threatening. Heaney's imagery here engages three of our five senses to make this menacing introduction. The field is hot (sense 1: touch) and the fields absolutely stink of cow poop (sense 2: smell). The speaker sees the masses of frogs flooding the dam (sense 3: sight). Gone are the delicate descriptors Heaney uses in the first part of the poem to make the gross scene seem somehow charming. It's turning to a darker side.
* Lines 25–27: Now we get an idea of what it sounds like. We can of course imagine what croaking frogs sounds like, but Heaney does one better: he uses consonance, in this case the repetition of the hard Csound to make the lines sound rough and threatening. Imagine, for contrast, the soft repetition of vowels and how they might seem soothing. For example: "Over the ocean and along the coast the herons roamed." You hear the pleasant repetition of the O sound (this is called [assonance](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/assonance.html)).  
  Heaney's going for the exact opposite effect with those hard C sounds. He chooses "coarse croaking," "thick," "chorus," and "cocked" to create almost violent-sounding lines.
* Lines 28–30: Here's a subtler example of consonance, but it's there nonetheless. This time Heaney uses the repetition of P sounds in "pulsed," "hopped," "slap," "plop" and "poised" to make the lines sound threatening. The imagery here is pretty wild too. Here are these frogs, cocked on sods—like a gun?—and they're huge necks are pulsing like sails. They're all over the place, launching from here to there, all the while making nasty fart noises with their croaking. Clearly the speaker is no longer charmed. (We really can't blame him, either. Can you?)
* Lines 31–33: Not only is the speaker no longer charmed, he's horrified. Heaney creates this image of the frogs as "great slime kings" gathered for vengeance—it seems like the speaker thinks these frogs could do him actual harm. He's afraid if he goes in for his regular dose of frogspawn that they big frogs will snatch it. That's something straight out of a horror movie: Revenge of the Slime Kings.

## Symbol Analysis - innocence

Our young speaker is alive with curiosity and amazement. He's super-stoked about what nature dishes out to him, particularly the gooey bits gurgling away in the flax dam. He listens with awe as his teacher explains what the deal is with frogspawn, and becomes a collector and connoisseur of the jellied globs. He's not only excited to witness the cool stuff that's happening in nature, but to partake in it, too. Who knows, maybe he'll be the next Jane Goodall or Steve Irwin.

* Lines 7–8: Heaney uses [imagery](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/imagery.html) to paint a pleasant picture of buzzing, pretty things. He then, oddly, follows with the image of warm thick slobber. However, it's still seen through the speaker's innocent and rose-colored glasses. This kiddo loves everything about this spot, even if it seems gross to us.
* Lines 10–11: Spring is typically [symbolic](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/symbol.html) of newness and rebirth. In this case, the newness could relate to the young speaker's enthusiasm toward nature. He's still young and learning about it. The symbolic nature of spring could also have to do with the birth of the frogs. The speaker is collecting frogspawn, which is essentially just a heapin' helpin' of baby frogs.   
  The words Heaney chooses, his [diction](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/diction.html), also contributes to a sense of innocence. "Jampotfuls of the jellied" sounds sweet. It kind of reminds us of ["My Favorite Things"](http://youtu.be/33o32C0ogVM), just in a totally gross way.
* Lines 15–19: This is probably the best evidence of the speaker's innocence. In school he's learning about the reproductive habits of frogs, yet it doesn't seem like he's able to equate that the "daddy" and "mammy" frog have to actually have sex to create frogspawn. It still seems like a magical process to him and Heaney tells it in a very childlike and innocent [tone](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/tone.html).
* Lines 19–21: More fun facts! The speaker is curious, innocent, and wanting to learn. He knows the frogs interest him, but that doesn't mean he fully understands them yet.

## Symbol Analysis – loss of innocence

Scratch that. It looks like the speaker will not be the next Jane Goodall or Steve Irwin. Our little speaker has lost some of that innocence and as a result, the naturalist in him has died. RIP. Sometimes growing up is like that. You start to find out more about life, and nature, and then the gross things aren't awesome anymore; they're just plain… gross.

* Lines 15–19: While this is probably the best example of the speaker's innocence, it also [foreshadows](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/foreshadowing.html) the loss of it. He is learning about the reproduction of frogs and, the more he knows, the less innocent and oblivious he'll be—about the frogs, and perhaps about sex in general.
* Line 22: Simply using the transitional word, "then" Heaney marks the transition in the speaker from innocence to maturity. Heaney's pointing out that something's about to change.
* Lines 24–26: The speaker is making his way through the thick hedges could be a [metaphor](http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/metaphor.html) for discovery. He's working his way through the brush, and he's about to see something that will change him. He hears something that he's never heard before. This "first" is the beginning of his loss of innocence. Simply gaining experience and knowledge changes how he relates to nature.
* Line 29: He's no longer a happy-go-lucky kid romping around nature's playground. The metaphorical "death of a naturalist" Heaney is talking about happens when he sees that nature can be gross, threatening, and even frightening.
* Line 31: Even though the speaker tries to make a break for it, it's too late. He's already seen all that he needs to see to spoil his innocent relationship with the frogspawn. How much you want to bet that he never brings jars of frogspawn home again?