Death of a Naturalist

SUMMARY

All year, the swamp near the town decomposed. Flax was rotting there, the heavy head of the plant still green, weighed down by huge balls of dirt. Every day it moldered under the hot sun. Delicate bubbles came up from the swamp and flies buzzed around, mixing sound and smell. There were dragonflies and butterflies, but my favorite thing was the warm, thick coat of frog eggs that lay in the shadow of the banks like clumpy water. Every spring, I'd fill jam jars with the eggs and leave them on the windowsills at home and at school, waiting and watching until they became quick, swimming tadpoles. My teacher, Miss Walls, told us how the male frog was called a bullfrog, how he croaked. And she told us that the mother frog laid hundred of eggs—and that's called "frogspawn." And you could even predict the weather from watching the frogs, because they turn yellow in the sun and brown in the rain.

Then one day when the fields stank of cow droppings in the grass, the angry frogs invaded the swamp. I came running there through the hedges and heard a loud, raw croaking I hadn't heard before. The air resounded with their deep voices. All the way down the banks, the frogs were sitting on lumps of earth. Their expanding necks were like sails filling with the breeze. Some of them hopped into the water. To me, the sound of their bodies slapping against the water was like a disgusting threat. Others stayed on the bank, sitting there like grenades made of mud, their square heads burping and burbling. I grew queasy. I turned and ran away. These kings of slime were gathered there for revenge and I knew that if I put my hand into the water, the frog eggs wouldn't let me pull it out.

THEMES

INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

"Death of a Naturalist" is a poem about growing up—specifically, the fraught transition between childhood and adolescence. It describes childhood as a state of innocence and curiosity: the speaker gleefully explores the swampy "flax-dam" and thrills in the creatures that live there—butterflies, dragonflies, and tadpoles. But, in the second stanza, the speaker's relationship to the "flax-dam" and its creatures changes. They stop being enthralling and delightful, and instead become disgusting and frightening. This transformation serves as a metaphor for the transition from the innocent and unthreatening world of childhood to the disturbing, threatening world of adolescent sexuality.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker reflects on what it was like to be a child. The speaker felt joy exploring the swampy "flax-dam" at the heart of town. A flax-dam is an artificial pond used to store and ferment flax. It's potentially a disgusting place: full of rotten, stinky flax. But the speaker doesn't seem bothered by the smell of the "fester[ing]" flax-dam. Instead, the speaker loves to explore the pond and study all the different insects and reptiles that make it their home: "dragonflies, spotted butterflies," and "the warm thick slobber / Of frogspawn." The speaker takes real pleasure in the clouds of fertilized frog eggs that hatch in the pond—capturing and studying them, watching them "burst, into nimble / Swimming tadpoles."

In other words, the speaker is fascinated with life itself: the natural rhythms of birth and growth. And that fascination includes—up to a certain point—sex. The speaker calmly repeats the teacher's explanation of frog reproduction, apparently undisturbed by it—though, of course, the teacher uses simple, childlike language to explain the sex lives of frogs. For instance, she calls them "mammy" and "daddy." The speaker isn't threatened by sex for a simple reason: it's so foreign that the speaker doesn't really understand it.

But, in the second stanza, the speaker's attitude toward the dam, and the animals in it, changes. Indeed, the dam itself has changed in important ways: there are more frogs, and they're louder and more aggressive. In this way, the poem suggests that time has passed—and in that time, the speaker has undergone an important transformation. Where the speaker once took pleasure in the frogs, now they're described as disgusting, foul-smelling, offensive. They are "obscene threats," and the speaker emphasizes their capacity for violence: they are like "mud grenades."

As a result, the speaker, "sickened," runs away from the flax-dam. The speaker can no longer tolerate the smell of the place and the mess of the frogs who live there. Indeed, the speaker fears that "if I dipped my hand" into the pond—as the speaker did without hesitation in the first stanza—"the spawn would clutch it." This line is key to understanding the poem. The speaker is afraid of coming in contact with the "frogspawn" and being tainted, or contaminated, by it.

In this sense, the poem tracks a change in the speaker's relationship to sex, which is represented by the frogs. In the first stanza, the speaker regards sex with the innocent curiosity of a child. In the second, the speaker's attitude changes: sex becomes gross and threatening. But the speaker can't go back and restore the uncomplicated joy of the first stanza. As the poem ends, the speaker is trapped in the world of adolescent sexuality with no clear way out.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

HUMAN BEINGS AND NATURE

"Death of a Naturalist" is, in part, about the relationship between people and the natural world. As the title suggests, the speaker starts off the poem (at least metaphorically) as a "naturalist"—a kind of scientist who closely studies nature. The speaker thus feels separate from the natural world: it's something the speaker *observes*, not something the speaker participates in. But, as the speaker grows up—becoming an adolescent and learning more about human sexuality—it becomes clear that the speaker *isn't* actually separate from nature. The speaker participates in the same natural cycles that the frogs do. This realization is part of what causes the speaker's fright and disgust in the second stanza: the speaker wants to flee from the nature, to cease to participate in it.

At the start of the poem, the speaker is someone who observe nature's rhythms and cycles with a clinical, scientific interest—or so the speaker *thinks*. The speaker describes studying the life cycle of the "frogspawn" in the pond, the way they move from egg to tadpole to frog. The speaker enjoys learning the details of this cycle, but doesn't feel particularly threatened or upset by them. This is partially due to the speaker's scientific attitude. The speaker is, metaphorically, a "naturalist," someone who studies nature for scientific inquiry. This creates a certain hierarchy: the speaker is a scientist, and nature is the thing that speaker studies. They are separate from each other.

That separation collapses in the second stanza. The speaker starts to personify the natural world more regularly. The frogs seem "angry," seeking "vengeance" against the speaker for stealing their frogspawn. It's as if the natural world and the human world are blending into each other. Furthermore, instead of simply studying and observing the natural world, the speaker reacts to it viscerally and emotionally. It makes the speaker "sickened," and the speaker runs away from the flax-dam in horror. The speaker has ceased to be a "naturalist." Indeed, the distinctions between the speaker and the natural world have broken down.

This change is related to the broader transformation the poem describes: from childhood to adolescence, and from innocence to experience. As the speaker learns about sex, the natural world—with its cycles of birth, growth, and death—ceases to seem so distant, so separate. Instead, the speaker recognizes the way in which human life is also wrapped up in those cycles. Learning about sex doesn't just change the speaker—it also radically alters the relationship between the speaker and the natural world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

All year the ...
... around the smell.

The first six lines of "Death of a Naturalist" establish the poem's setting and begin to hint at its themes. The speaker spends these lines describing a "flax-dam." A "flax-dam" is a small pond or swamp that farmers use to soften flax, weighing them down with "huge sods"—heavy lumps of dirt. They leave the flax in the swamp for several weeks, during which time it starts to rot or "fester" (and some of the flax gets left behind and rots there all year). As a result, the "flax-dam" is a stinky and vibrant natural space.

The speaker uses imagery to convey the smell and sound of the place. The rotting flax "swelter[s]" in the sun every day; it releases "Bubbles" that burble up from the depths of the swamp. And bluebottle flies constantly buzz around it. The "bluebottles" hint at some of the complicated dynamics that will unfold over the course of the poem. They are carrion flies that feast on dead and decaying animals and plants. Thus, they are symbols of death. Their presence here suggests how complicated life is: even as the "flax-dam" is a space of incredibly vibrant life, it is also haunted by death.

Further, the "bluebottles" are hard to ignore. They create a sound so loud that it seems to the speaker to be a "strong gauze of sound" in line 6. In other words, this metaphor suggests their buzzing is so powerful that it seems to be a material, physical thing. And the alliterative /s/ sound in the line—"strong gauze of sound around the smell"—is itself powerful, almost physical. It gives the reader a hint of what the "flax-dam" sounds like. Similarly, in line 2, the speaker uses a sharp, queasy assonant /ee/ sound—in "green" and "heavy"—to capture the rank smell of the swamp.

As line 6 suggests, the poem is powerfully alliterative, full of loud, prominent alliterations. These alliterations recall the kind of poetry written in medieval times in England and Ireland—poetry that used patterns of alliteration as its central formal device. The poem is connected to this deep tradition in English-language poetry; it summons that tradition into the present.

At the same time, however, the poem is written in blank verse, meaning it uses unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. Blank verse is a distinguished, prestigious meter: it's the meter that Shakespeare and Milton used. But the poem's meter is consistently rough. Arguably, none of these lines are metrically

regular. Further, the poem's lines often end with alliterations, like "heart" and "headed" in lines 1 and 2 or "sods" and "sun" in lines 3-4. These alliterative pairs aren't strong enough to count as rhyme—but they do serve to remind the reader that the poem *could* rhyme, though it never quite makes the leap.

Finally, the poem is also highly enjambed. Only lines 4 and 6 are end-stopped here. The speaker favors enjambment for different reasons in different parts of the poem. Here it conveys the energy and enthusiasm of the speaker's curiosity about the "flax-dam." And it also suggests some of the complicated feelings that the "flax-dam" will eventually inspire in the speaker. For instance, the poem's first line, "All year the flax-dam festered in the heart" could be read as a complete sentence in itself—in which case, the state of the "flax-dam" would be a metaphor for the state of the speaker's heart. The next line makes it clear that the reader *shouldn't* take it that way—but the possibility is tantalizing, and hints at things to come in the poem.

LINES 7-10

There were dragonflies, ...
... of the banks.

In lines 7-10, the speaker continues to describe the "flax-dam," focusing on the animals and insects that make it their home. In addition to the noisy "bluebottle" flies (which the speaker describes in lines 5-6), there are also "dragonflies, spotted butterflies," and—most exciting of all for the speaker—a "thick warm slobber / Of frogspawn" on its surface. In other words, the flax-dam is covered with newly spawned frog eggs. This "frogspawn" will, eventually, become a symbol for sexuality and sexual reproduction. But it takes a while for the speaker to get there.

Here, the speaker is focused simply on describing the way the frogspawn looks and feels: it's "warm" and "thick"; it looks like "slobber." Further, using a simile, the speaker compares it to "clotted water," or stagnant water that gets scuzzy and foamy as it sits. Though these metaphors and similes make the "frogspawn" sound, frankly, pretty gross, the speaker doesn't seem grossed out. Indeed, for the speaker this slobbery, scuzzy stuff is "best of all." It's the thing the speaker is most excited to examine and play with. The speaker's mood is one of curiosity and exploration, rather than dismay or disgust.

These lines are written in blank verse: unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. Except for line 7, all of these lines are enjambed. These enjambments keep the poem feeling a little off-kilter or helter-skelter, the speaker's sentences careening across the line breaks. Here, the enjambments call to mind the wild enthusiasm of a child and reinforce the sense that the speaker's curiosity is powerful and energetic.

LINES 10-15

Here, every spring ...
... Swimming tadpoles.

In lines 7-10, the speaker described the excitement that the "frogspawn" on the surface of the "flax-dam" inspired: it was "best of all." In lines 10-15, the speaker puts the "frogspawn" to use: catching "jampotfuls" (in other words, jam jars) of the stuff and putting them on window sills at home and on shelves at school, so that they can be studied. Indeed, the speaker wants to watch the frog eggs hatch: to see the "fattening dots burst" out of the eggs. In other words, the speaker wants to see them grow into "nimble / Swimming tadpoles." Note how the speaker uses consonance here to capture the energy of the tadpoles. Line 14 is marked by a sharp /t/ sound: "fattening dots burst, into nimble…" These /t/ sounds almost sound like the frog eggs bursting and cracking as the tadpoles work their way out.

The speaker's attitude toward this natural process is one of fascination and curiosity. The speaker wants to study the life cycle of the frogs—indeed, as the title of the poem suggests, the speaker is a kind of "naturalist," a scientist who studies the natural world. The speaker's scientific interest in the frogs has some important implications. For instance, it seems like the speaker feels separate, even distant from the frogs. They are in the jars, while the speaker watches and studies them. The changes and transformations they undergo are fascinating, but they don't impinge on the speaker's life.

The form of the poem reflects this energetic curiosity. Written in blank verse—unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter—these lines are all enjambed. Indeed, after lines 12, the speaker doesn't use end-stop again until the end of the stanza, in line 21. The speaker is excited—so much so that the sentences surge past the line breaks and careen energetically down the page.

LINES 15-21

Miss Walls would ...
... In rain.

In lines 15-21, the speaker continues to focus on the frogs. Indeed, the speaker repeats the word "frog" obsessively in this part of the poem—an instance of the poetic device diacope—underlining the depth of the speaker's curiosity about these creatures and their lives.

The speaker gets some information about frogs from a teacher, "Miss Walls." She explains how frog reproduction works: the "daddy frog" or "bullfrog" finds a mate by croaking loudly, and the "mammy frog" lays hundreds of eggs, a layer of "frogspawn" that congeals on the surface of the pond. The language the teacher uses is infantilizing, childish. She personifies the frogs, calling them "daddy" and "mammy," as though they formed a human family. This personification doesn't upset the speaker's relationship with the frogs, or with nature more broadly—the speaker continues to observe the life cycle of frogs with childish innocence and curiosity. The speaker is still a "naturalist," studying the natural world with detachment and

distance.

After a caesura at the start of line 19 ("Frogspawn. You could tell the weather"), the speaker lists another—apparently unrelated—fact about frogs: their bodies change color with the weather, so one can use them to predict rain and clear skies. The speaker is jumping between unrelated facts with all the energy and enthusiasm of an excited child. The caesura at the start of line 19 emphasizes this sudden jump, the unexpected shift in the speaker's object of attention.

The stanza ends abruptly. It is the first end-stopped line since line 7 and it is only two syllables long. The poem is usually written in blank verse—unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. Although there are metrical variations throughout the poem, it generally has ten syllables per line. Line 21 thus feels abrupt—like the speaker's life has been suddenly interrupted. In the next stanza, it will become clear how transformative and important that interruption really is.

LINES 22-26

Then one ...
... Before.

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker was a curious, enthusiastic child—eagerly studying the life cycle of frogs. But the stanza ended abruptly: on a line that was just two syllables long, in a poem that is otherwise written in blank verse, and therefore generally has around ten syllables per line. It felt like something interrupted the speaker, changing the poem radically. When the second stanza starts in line 22, there is strong evidence that it's the *speaker* who's changed.

The stanza begins with the speaker heading to the "flax-dam" as always. But the speaker's focus seems to have changed. The speaker notes the "rank" smell of the "cowdung" in the fields around the flax dam. Then, the speaker focuses on the "angry" frogs who have "invaded" the dam, and their "coarse croaking." Note how the alliterative /c/ sound in "coarse" and "croaking" links the two words together, suggesting that there's something inherently coarse or disgusting about the frog's croaking.

In other words, the frogs are engaging in the mating ritual that Miss Walls describes in lines 15-19. But the speaker's attitude toward that ritual has changed: the frogs are no longer "best of all." Indeed, they seem frightening and angry—and human. The speaker personifies the frogs throughout the second stanza, giving them human motivations and emotions. With these newly human feelings, the frogs seem threatening, and they direct their new sense of rage at the speaker. The speaker is no longer a "naturalist." Instead of studying the frogs with detachment, the speaker relates to them emotionally. The distance between the natural world and the human world has broken down.

The speaker uses many of the same devices in the second stanza as in the first—but the implications and meaning of those devices has changed. For instance, the speaker uses natural imagery again here, conveying the smell and sound of the "flax-dam" to the reader. However, the connotations of that imagery have changed: the speaker is no longer willing to look past its foul smells and chaotic sounds. Now they are resolutely negative, even threatening. Similarly, the speaker continues to use enjambment regularly (indeed, all of these lines are enjambed). But the enjambments no longer feel like the expression of an excited child; here they are infused with anxious energy—energy which will continue to build over the rest of the stanza.

LINES 26-30

The air was ...
... blunt heads farting.

In lines 26-30, the speaker continues to describe the frogs, who are gathered at the "flax-dam" to mate. The speaker begins by describing the sound of their croaking: it's like a "bass chorus." The word "chorus" is linked with an assonant /o/ sound to "coarse" and "before." The sound itself is rough—it sounds like a hoarse croak. And it also builds into a "chorus" across these lines, giving the reader a sense of how dense and loud the croaking is. Further, the caesura that begins this section, separating "Before" from "The air was a thick chorus" conveys the speaker's dismay: almost as though the speaker pauses in shock at the intensity of the frogs' "chorus."

The speaker's dismay and disgust mounts in the lines that follow. The speaker focuses on the "gross bellied frogs," describing the sound they make as they jump into the pond as "obscene threats"—a metaphor that suggests the sound is both threatening and dirty. Finally, in a line rich with consonant /d/, /r/, /n/, and /t/ sounds, the speaker describes the frogs as foul, dirty weapons. They are

> Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.

The consonance makes the line sound as threatening and unpredictable as the frogs themselves. And the simile turns them into weapons—human weapons.

Because this simile compares the frogs to a human invention (grenades), it could be thought of as a warped version of personification, something that happens again and again throughout the poem's second stanza. It also shows up in the other simile in these lines, where the speaker compares the frogs' necks to "sails" flapping in the wind. These comparisons are important to the poem: they underline an important change in the speaker's relationship with the frogs. The frogs are no longer separate from human life. And the speaker is no longer a "naturalist," observing them across the divide between species. Instead, the speaker seems implicated—and threatened—by the dirty, foul world of the frogs and their mating rituals.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in blank verse—unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. Up to this point, the poem has been heavily enjambed. There are still a lot of enjambments in lines 26-30. But there are also more end-stops than the reader has seen elsewhere in the poem. These end-stops aren't necessarily moments of rest and composure in the poem's torrent of language. Instead, they feel like moments where the speaker pauses in horror, overwhelmed by the intensity of the frogs' anger and power.

LINES 31-33

The great slime ...
... would clutch it.

It's clear that something important changes in the second stanza of "Death of a Naturalist." The speaker's curiosity has disappeared. Instead of feeling pleasure studying the frogs and their life cycle, the speaker seems dismayed, disgusted, and threatened, by them. But for the most of the stanza it isn't entirely clear *why* that change has happened. Finally, the speaker offers a fairly direct set of hints in the poem's final sentence. There are two key reasons.

First, the speaker thinks that the frogs—"the great slime kings"—have come to the "flax-dam" to demand "vengeance." In other words, they're mad at the speaker for stealing so many of their eggs—and they want to get pay back. That's why they seem so "angry," so threatening, to the speaker throughout the second stanza.

Second—and more importantly—the speaker worries that "if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it." In other words, the speaker feels contaminated by the frogs—the smelly, slobbery world of their mating habits have infected the speaker. The speaker has grown up in the interval between the first and second stanzas, moved from innocence to experience. The speaker is now an adolescent and knows about human sexuality. For the speaker, the transition from childhood innocence to adolescent sexuality is dismaying, even disgusting. To the speaker, it feels like entering into the world of the "flax-dam," with its foul smells, angry frogs, and gross pools of frogspawn. And the speaker can't go back: as the poem ends, the speaker is trapped in this slobbery state.

These closing lines follow the formal pattern established earlier in the poem. They are written in blank verse, unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. And they are heavily enjambed—only line 33 is end-stopped. The sense of anxious energy that has built throughout the stanza does not find a formal outlet or relief in the poem's closing lines. Indeed, the speaker's anxiety only seems to build through these lines.

SYMBOLS

BLUEBOTTLES

Literally speaking, "bluebottles" are a species of fly. They mostly feed on animal dung and the decomposing carcasses of dead animals. As a result, they also have a subtle symbolic resonance when they appear in line 5: they symbolize death and decay. This symbol balances the poem a little bit. In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker generally focuses on the early stages of life, specifically the newly spawned frog eggs that grow into tadpoles. The speaker is fascinated by birth and growth, studying them with an almost scientific fervor. The bluebottle flies, as a symbol, serve as a subtle reminder that birth is only part of the story—death is also an important part of the cycle of life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "bluebottles"

FROGSPAWN

As the speaker explains in lines 18-19, "frogspawn" is a thick layer of frog eggs that covers the surface of the "flax-dam." In the poem, however, "frogspawn" acquires symbolic connotations alongside this literal meaning: it symbolizes human sexuality and sexual reproduction.

It takes a while, though, for the speaker to fully develop this symbolic meaning. In the first stanza, the speaker approaches the "frogspawn" with the scientific detachment of a naturalist. Then, in the second stanza—when the speaker becomes an adolescent—the speaker no longer sees sexuality as something distant and separate. When the speaker considers dipping a hand in the frogspawn in line 33, the speaker worries "the spawn would clutch it," and the speaker will be trapped, tainted by it. As the speaker's relationship to sexuality changes, the "frogspawn" takes on symbolic components, becoming a symbol for human sexuality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "frogspawn"
- **Line 19:** "Frogspawn"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

"Death of a Naturalist" is a heavily enjambed poem. Most of its lines are enjambed, in fact, and in the rare moments that end-stops do occur—especially in the second stanza—they don't

necessarily feel like moments of rest and relief. Instead, it feels like the speaker is just pausing, in horror, to contemplate the "bass chorus" of the frogs (as in line 26: "Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.").

All this enjambment has a powerful effect on the reader's experience of the poem. The poem feels off-kilter, out-of-whack—like it's almost out of control. In different parts of the poem, the enjambments have different specific effects. In the first stanza, for example, they convey the breathless excitement of a curious child. The reader gets a sense of this in the first three lines of the poem:

> 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.

The first two lines are enjambed. That might be surprising: after all, they're just descriptions; the speaker is setting the scene, explaining to the reader what the "flax-dam" is. But these lines don't have the measured, careful quality of description. Instead, they feel breathless and excited because of the way they keep sliding across the line breaks. The enjambments convey the energy and excitement the speaker feels just thinking about the "flax-dam."

And the enjambments also open up possibilities for interpretation. The first line of the poem, for instance, is grammatically complete in itself. The reader could take it as a complete statement—"All year the flax-dam festered in the heart"—in which case, the flax-dam would be a metaphor for what's going on in the speaker's heart. The enjambment into the next line makes it clear that the reader *shouldn't* read the first line as a complete statement. But, in the brief moment that the reader considers the possibility, the poem prepares the reader to see the "flax-dam" not just as a natural space, but as a metaphor for the speaker's relationship with sexuality.

In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker's attitude toward the natural world changes: anxiety and dismay replace curiosity and joy. The reader feels the speaker's anxiety and confusion in the way the lines careen down the page, breathlessly, breaking in the middle of sentences. In lines 24-26, for example, the enjambments convey the urgency the speaker feels running toward the flax-dam:

> ... I ducked through hedges
> To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
> Before. ...

One almost feels the speaker's stomach dropping in these lines: their restlessness and energy conveys the speaker's mounting anxiety.

Enjambment thus represents the speaker's relationship with nature throughout the poem. In the first stanza, it embodies the speaker's innocence and curiosity; in the second, the speaker's anxiety and dismay.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "heart / Of"
- **Lines 2-3:** "headed / Flax"
- **Lines 5-6:** "bluebottles / Wove"
- **Lines 8-9:** "slobber / Of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "water / In"
- **Lines 10-11:** "spring / I"
- **Lines 11-12:** "jellied / Specks"
- **Lines 12-13:** "home, / On"
- **Lines 13-14:** "until / The"
- **Lines 14-15:** "nimble / Swimming"
- **Lines 15-16:** "how / The"
- **Lines 16-17:** "bullfrog / And"
- **Lines 17-18:** "frog / Laid"
- **Lines 18-19:** "was / Frogspawn."
- **Lines 19-20:** "too / For"
- **Lines 20-21:** "brown / In"
- **Lines 22-23:** "rank / With"
- **Lines 23-24:** "frogs / Invaded"
- **Lines 24-25:** "hedges / To"
- **Lines 25-26:** "heard / Before."
- **Lines 27-28:** "cocked / On"
- **Lines 29-30:** "sat / Poised"
- **Lines 31-32:** "kings / Were"
- **Lines 32-33:** "knew / That"

CAESURA

Because "Death of a Naturalist" is so heavily enjambed, it also uses a lot of caesuras. The speaker's sentences and phrases generally don't end at the end of a line. Instead, they end in the middle of lines, creating pauses. These caesuras affect the rhythm of the poem—contributing to its sense of energy and anxiety.

In the first stanza, the caesuras and enjambments give the speaker a sense of childlike energy. The poem has the feel of a child rambling, expostulating on some subject of fascination, as in lines 18-19:

> ... and this was
> Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too

The speaker suddenly abandons one thought and jumps to another, following the excited logic of a child.

In the second stanza, the caesuras start to feel different: more anxious, less joyful. The speaker charges across the line breaks, but then gets caught up in the middle of the line, as in lines 25-26:

> To a coarse croaking that I had not heard

Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.

The speaker stops abruptly two syllables into line 26, astonished and unnerved by the "bass chorus" of the frogs. That feeling is captured by the awkward, unexpected caesura right at the start of the line. Working with the poem's enjambments, the caesuras thus help to convey the speaker's enthusiastic curiosity, as well as the speaker's anxiety.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "townland; green"
- **Line 3:** "there, weighted"
- **Line 5:** "delicately, bluebottles"
- **Line 7:** "dragonflies, spotted"
- **Line 10:** "banks. Here"
- **Line 13:** "school, and"
- **Line 14:** "burst, into"
- **Line 15:** "tadpoles. Miss"
- **Line 19:** "Frogspawn. You"
- **Line 24:** "flax-dam; I"
- **Line 26:** "Before. The"
- **Line 28:** "sails. Some"
- **Line 29:** "threats. Some"
- **Line 30:** "grenades, their"
- **Line 31:** "sickened, turned, and," "ran. The"

ALLITERATION

"Death of a Naturalist" is a heavily alliterative poem. Almost every line in the poem contains some alliteration—and these alliterations are usually prominent and powerful. They help the speaker paint a vivid picture of the "flax-dam"—with its crowded, smelly natural life—and of the speaker's changing relationship to it.

For example, listen to the alliterative /s/ sounds in line 6:

Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.

The speaker is describing the sounds that flies make buzzing around the swamp—so loud that it seems like a "strong gauze of sound." In other words, the sound is so powerful that it feels like a physical thing, a piece of cloth that surrounds the swamp. The /s/ sounds give the reader a sense of what that sounds like: it echoes the buzzing of the flies.

Later in the poem, as the speaker's relationship with the swamp turns from delight to disgust, alliteration registers that disgust. Note, for instance, the alliterative /k/ sound in line 25:

To a coarse croaking that I had not heard

The alliteration links "coarse" and "croaking" together—suggesting that there's something inherently coarse in the frogs' croaks. The alliteration thus highlights the speaker's new relationship with the "flax-dam," the way that the speaker finds it disgusting and threatening.

As it reinforces the speaker's descriptions and anxieties, alliteration also plays a few more important roles in the poem. It often appears at the end of lines, like "heart" and "headed" in lines 1 and 2 or "sods" and "sun" in lines 3-4. These alliterations aren't strong enough or close enough to count as rhymes. But they do remind the reader that these lines *could* rhyme with each other. In other words, by basically *flirting* with rhyme, they call attention to the poem's *failure* to rhyme—and thus highlight the energy, passion, and anxiety that runs through the poem and keeps it feeling off-kilter, out-of-whack.

Finally, alliteration was a key component of medieval poetry in English. Rather than a strict meter (like the iambic pentameter that this poem uses), medieval poems had to follow certain patterns of alliteration. So, the poem's heavy, omnipresent alliterations connect it to this deep tradition in English poetry—suggesting that the poem engages with a long history of English writing.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "flax," "festered," "heart"
- **Line 2:** "heavy," "headed"
- **Line 3:** "Flax," "had," "huge," "sods"
- **Line 4:** "sweltered," "sun"
- **Line 5:** "Bubbles," "gargled," "bluebottles"
- **Line 6:** "strong," "gauze," "sound," "smell"
- **Line 7:** "spotted," "butterflies"
- **Line 8:** "But," "best," "was," "warm," "slobber"
- **Line 11:** "jampotfuls," "jellied"
- **Line 12:** "Specks," "sills"
- **Line 13:** "at," "and," "wait," "and," "watch"
- **Line 15:** "tadpoles," "Walls," "would," "tell"
- **Line 17:** "how," "he," "how"
- **Line 18:** "Laid," "hundreds," "little"
- **Line 19:** "Frogspawn," "tell," "frogs," "too"
- **Line 20:** "For"
- **Line 21:** "rain"
- **Line 22:** "one," "when," "fields," "were," "rank"
- **Line 23:** "With," "frogs"
- **Line 24:** "flax," "dam," "ducked," "hedges"
- **Line 25:** "coarse," "croaking," "had," "heard"
- **Line 26:** "Before," "bass," "chorus"
- **Line 27:** "down," "dam," "cocked"
- **Line 28:** "sods," "sails," "Some"
- **Line 29:** "slap," "Some," "sat"
- **Line 31:** "sickened," "great," "slime"
- **Line 32:** "gathered"

ASSONANCE

"Death of a Naturalist" tends to avoid using assonance—at least

when compared to its overwhelming alliteration and consonance. It's easy to see why: the world of the "flax-dam" is stinky and loud, chaotic and clashing. It doesn't fit with the soft sound of assonant vowels. Indeed, when the poem uses assonance, it generally avoids soothing, smooth vowel sounds. It favors sharp, harsh vowels—sounds that help it portray the "flax-dam" and the speaker's anxieties about it.

For example, there's an assonant long /ee/ sound in line 2:

> Of the townland; green and heavy headed

Here, the /ee/ sounds a little sickly, a little nauseating. It captures the rank atmosphere of the swamp, conveying it to the reader through sound.

Later, the poem uses assonance to convey the speaker's new sense of anxiety and dismay, confronting the gross world of the "flax-dam" as an adolescent. For example, listen to the assonant /o/ sound in lines 25-26:

> To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
> Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.

The /o/ sound (working with a consonant /r/ sound which appears in all three words), helps communicate the speaker's sudden disdain for the croaking frogs. The sound itself is rough and raw. And it amplifies across the passage: the "croaking" is building into an overwhelming "chorus" that the speaker cannot escape or ignore. Assonance thus is not soothing or gentle in "Death of a Naturalist": instead it underlines the chaotic and, eventually, frightening character of the "flax-dam."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "green," "heavy"
- **Line 3:** "rotted," "sods"
- **Line 4:** "punishing," "sun"
- **Line 7:** "dragonflies," "butterflies"
- **Line 10:** "every"
- **Line 11:** "fill," "jellied"
- **Line 12:** "sills"
- **Line 14:** "nimble"
- **Line 15:** "Swimming"
- **Line 17:** "he," "mammy"
- **Line 19:** "Frogspawn," "frogs"
- **Line 23:** "grass," "angry"
- **Line 24:** "flax"
- **Line 25:** "coarse"
- **Line 26:** "Before," "chorus"
- **Line 27:** "cocked"
- **Line 28:** "sods," "hopped"
- **Line 29:** "plop," "sat"
- **Line 31:** "ran"
- **Line 33:** "if," "it"

CONSONANCE

"Death of a Naturalist" contains a lot of consonance—indeed, every line in the poem contains some consonance. All those consonant sounds give the poem a tough, chewy feeling. In turn, this helps the speaker convey the chaotic, vibrant world of the "flax-dam" with its overwhelming sights, smells, and sounds.

For instance, listen to the consonant /t/ sounds in line 14:

> The fattening dots burst, into nimble

Here, the speaker is describing watching the frog eggs split apart, tadpoles bursting from them. In the sharp /t/ sounds, the reader can almost hear the eggs breaking apart, splitting open, releasing these lively little creatures. The use of consonance conveys the energy of the tadpoles.

Later in the poem, the speaker conveys a new sense of anxiety and dismay when confronted with the noisy, smelly world of the "flax-dam" and the frogs that live in it. In line 30, the speaker describes them

> Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.

The line contains a series of tough, hard consonant sounds: most prominently, /d/, /r/, /n/, and /t/. That makes the line sound as threatening and unpredictable as the frogs themselves, waiting to take their vengeance on the poem's speaker. Consonance thus conveys the energy and dynamism of the natural world—and, as the speaker begins to fear nature, it also conveys the potential violence.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21

- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Line 27
- Line 28
- Line 29
- Line 30
- Line 31
- Line 32
- Line 33

METAPHOR

"Death of a Naturalist" uses metaphor often. It relies on the device to help describe the smelly, stinky world of the "flax-dam"—and to characterize the speaker's shifting relationship with it.

In the first stanza of the poem, metaphor captures the speaker's innocent relationship with the natural world, a relationship characterized by scientific curiosity. For instance, in lines 5-6, the speaker uses metaphor to describe the sound of flies buzzing around the swamp:

> ... bluebottles
> Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.

The flies are buzzing so loudly and intensely that it feels like the sound is a physical thing: a sheet of gauze (a thin cloth) wrapped around the swamp. The metaphor gives the reader a strong sense of what it's like to be at the flax-dam, the way its natural sounds overwhelm the senses. For that reason, this metaphor can also be characterized as imagery.

As the speaker's relationship with the flax-dam shifts, so too the poem's use of metaphor shifts. The metaphors in the second stanza of the poem register the anxiety and dismay that the speaker suddenly feels, having learned about the adult world of sex. For instance, in line 29, the speaker describes how the frogs jump into the swamp:

> The slap and plop were obscene threats.

The speaker interprets the "slap and plop" as something threatening, inappropriate, dirty. Of course, the frogs don't intend to threaten the speaker—they're just living their frog lives, as they've always done. But the speaker has changed, has grown up and learned about sex.

With that growth, the distinction between human beings and the natural world has fallen away. Both humans and frogs, for instance, have sex. So the speaker interprets the sound of the frogs jumping into the "flax-dam" as a threatening reminder of this disturbing new knowledge. Metaphor itself has thus transformed: no longer simply describing the sights and smells of the flax-dam, it serves now to express the speaker's sense of anxiety and dismay.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "in the heart / Of the townland"
- **Line 5:** "Bubbles gargled delicately"
- **Lines 5-6:** "bluebottles / Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell."
- **Lines 8-9:** "But best of all was the warm thick slobber / Of frogspawn"
- **Lines 11-12:** "jellied / Specks"
- **Line 14:** "The fattening dots burst"
- **Line 26:** "The air was thick with a bass chorus"
- **Line 29:** "The slap and plop were obscene threats"
- **Line 30:** "their blunt heads farting"
- **Lines 31-32:** "The great slime kings / Were gathered there for vengeance"

SIMILE

"Death of a Naturalist" contains three similes. The first simile appears in line 9. The speaker compares the "frogspawn"—the cloud of frog eggs on the surface of the "flax-dam"—to "clotted water." The speaker is thinking about still water: water that doesn't move or circulate and therefore gets scuzzy, full of dense, white foam. The simile does two things. First, it gives the reader a sense of what the "frogspawn" actually looks like. And, second, it suggests that the "frogspawn" doesn't seem quite alive. By comparing it to an inert, inanimate thing, the speaker suggests that, at this early stage in their life cycle, the frog eggs aren't yet fully alive. Only when the "fattening dots burst" do they acquire the vivacity and dynamism that characterize living things.

The second simile appears in line 28, around the middle of the second stanza. The speaker compares the frogs' "loose necks" to "sails." "Their loosen necks pulsed like sails," says the speaker. The speaker is thinking about the way that frogs' necks inflate as they breathe: it seems like a sail filling with wind. The simile is important to the poem because it's almost a kind of personification, linking the frogs to something that human beings make—sails. In this way, the simile subtly suggests that people and frogs are not so far apart—and the frogs' gross, stinky world reflects human sexuality, a conclusion the speaker finds both inescapable and deeply disturbing.

The final simile appears shortly after, and compares the sitting frogs to human weaponry: "Some sat / Poised like mud grenades." Comparing the frogs to a fanciful and gross weapon—"mud grenades"—ties together several of the poem's threads. It emphasizes how gross the frogs seem to the speaker; it links the frogs to the human world; and it emphasizes the transition between childhood and adulthood,

by imagining an adult item (a grenade) composed of a childish material (mud).

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "frogspawn that grew like clotted water / In the shade of the banks"
- **Line 28:** "their loose necks pulsed like sails"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Some sat / Poised like mud grenades"

IMAGERY

"Death of a Naturalist" uses imagery throughout to paint a vivid picture of the "flax-dam": the way it smells, sounds, and looks,

For instance, in lines 5 and 6:

> Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
> Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.

The speaker focuses here on the way the "flax-dam" smells, describing the bubbles of gas that burble on its surface and the way it sounds, with bluebottle flies buzzing around it.

The speaker's diction gives the reader a sense of how stinky and noisy it is. A word like "gargled," for instance, is pretty gross: it suggests that the swamp is bubbling fiercely, releasing waves of smelly gas from the rotting flax inside it. And the speaker's description of the bluebottles' sound is even more evocative. Using a metaphor, the speaker describes them weaving "a strong gauze of sound." The noise of the flies as they buzz around the swamp is like a piece of "gauze" (a thin fabric) that wraps around the swamp. The speaker's use of imagery here thus powerfully conveys the way the swamp smells and sounds.

In the first stanza, the speaker doesn't seem to mind how loud and gross the swamp is. But that changes in the second stanza: the speaker begins to find it disturbing and confusing. That's reflected in the poem's use of imagery. The speaker continues to use imagery to characterize the sounds and smells of the swamp, but now gives those sounds and smells an overtly negative connotation. Whereas in line 5, the speaker described the gargling of the bubbles as "delicate," in line 25 the speaker describes the frogs' croaking as "coarse." The sound of them jumping into the pond becomes an "obscene threat." So, the speaker continues to use imagery to convey the sounds and smells of the flax-dam, only now the speaker focuses on how gross and threatening it is.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 11-13
- Lines 14-15
- Lines 22-26
- Lines 27-30
- Lines 31-33

PERSONIFICATION

"Death of a Naturalist" mostly uses personification in its second stanza. There is some personification in the first stanza—for example, Miss Walls refers to "mammy" and "daddy" frogs, as though frogs formed human families. But these moments of personification are minor and far apart. The absence of personification in the first stanza reflects the speaker's state of mind: the speaker still feels like a naturalist, someone who stands apart from nature and studies it. Indeed, the speaker thinks nature can be separated from human beings—that the foul smells and gross biological cycles of life and death don't really apply to human life.

That shifts in the second stanza. The speaker begins to personify the frogs much more intensely: they are "angry," their movements turn into "obscene threats," and they are out for "vengeance." The speaker even begins to think of them in terms of human-made objects, comparing them to "sails" and "mud grenades." The frogs no longer seem so different from human beings. Indeed, they begin to take on human characteristics. They have human motivations, like rage and vengeance; their bodies are like man-made objects, like sails.

Learning about the details of human sexuality, the speaker realizes, with horror, that the icky, mucky world of the frogs is not something separate or distant: it reflects human sexuality. The sudden surge of personification in the poem's final stanza thus reflects the speaker's changed relationship with sexuality and nature: no longer observing such things from a safe, scientific distance, the speaker participates in both.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Bubbles gargled delicately"
- **Line 16:** "The daddy frog"
- **Line 17:** "the mammy frog"
- **Lines 23-24:** "the angry frogs / Invaded the flax-dam"
- **Line 26:** "The air was thick with a bass chorus"
- **Lines 27-28:** "Right down the dam gross bellied frogs were cocked / On sods"
- **Line 28:** " their loose necks pulsed like sails"
- **Line 29:** "The slap and plop were obscene threats"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Some sat / Poised like mud grenades"
- **Lines 31-33:** "The great slime kings / Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew / That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it."

DIACOPE

There are a couple of key words that repeat throughout "Death of a Naturalist," such as "flax," "frogspawn," and "frog."

Sometimes they are quite far apart. But they are unusual words, and they repeat with enough force that they attract the reader's attention despite the distance between them—becoming, in this way, instances of diacope.

The use of diacope in the poem underscores the speaker's obsessive energy. For instance, the word "frog" or "frogs" appears five times in the poem, most of them in the final fifteen lines. (Seven times if the reader includes "frogspawn" in the count.) It feels like the speaker can't stop thinking about the frogs—they become a kind of obsession for the speaker.

As the poem moves from the first to the second stanza, the tenor of this obsession changes. In the first stanza, it feels like the fixation of an eager child—like being obsessed with dinosaurs. In the second stanza, it becomes darker, a way of expressing anxiety and horror about sexuality itself. By focusing the reader's attention on the speaker's obsession, the poem's use of diacope thus helps the reader track the changes in the speaker's state of mind—and the changes in the speaker's relationship with nature itself.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "flax-dam"
- **Line 3:** "Flax"
- **Line 9:** "frogspawn"
- **Line 16:** "frog," "bullfrog"
- **Line 17:** "frog"
- **Line 19:** "Frogspawn," "frogs"
- **Line 23:** "frogs"
- **Line 24:** "flax-dam"
- **Line 27:** "frogs"
- **Line 28:** "Some"
- **Line 29:** "Some"

VOCABULARY

Flax-dam (Line 1, Line 24) - A pool or small swamp where bundles of flax are submerged for a few weeks to soften their stems. Flax is a crop grown for food and its fibers: people eat its seeds and make cloth from its stalks.

Festered (Line 1) - Fermented. The stems of the flax are rotting, giving off a foul smell.

Townland (Line 2) - A small agricultural area in Ireland. Parts of Ireland and Scotland are divided up into these units, which are very old—they predate the Norman conquest of the British Isles in the 11th century.

Heavy headed (Line 2) - Top-heavy. The stems of flax are ripe; therefore their tops are thick with seeds, which weighs them down.

Sods (Line 3, Line 28) - A thick strip of grass and dirt.

Gargled (Line 5) - Bubbled and gurgled.

Bluebottles (Line 5) - Noisy flies.

Slobber (Line 8) - Froth or foam. A thick coat of frog eggs on the surface of the water.

Frogspawn (Line 9, Line 19) - Frog eggs, the earliest stage in the life cycle of frogs.

Clotted water (Line 9) - Still water. Without circulation, it becomes thick with foam—and looks like the frogspawn on the surface of the flax-dam.

Jampotfuls (Line 11) - A jam jar's worth of frogspawn. The speaker is taking empty jam jars and filling them with frog eggs from the pond.

Jellied specks (Lines 11-12) - Little dots or motes, coated in jelly. The frog is just a tiny speck; the egg around it is like a clear jelly, encasing it and giving it nutrients.

Range (Line 12) - Arrange, set out.

Fattening dots (Line 14) - Growing frog eggs. The tiny specks gradually grow in size until they break out of their eggs, becoming tadpoles.

Mammy (Line 17) - Mother, mommy.

Cowdung (Line 23) - The poop from the cows who live in the field.

Gross bellied frogs (Line 27) - Fat frogs; they have big bellies.

Cocked (Line 27) - Tilted, leaning or bent. "Cocked" can also be used in reference to a gun (one must raise the cock of a gun before firing), adding to the sense that the frogs are "gathered for vengeance."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Death of a Naturalist" is 33 lines long, divided into two uneven stanzas: the first is 21 lines long; the second just 11. The poem doesn't follow any other formal rules or schemes: it doesn't have the tight rhyme scheme of a sonnet, for example. However, its division into stanzas is important because it mirrors the transformation in the poem's speaker. The speaker starts off the poem as a child, innocent and enthralled by the natural world. In the second stanza, though, something radical changes: the speaker suddenly finds nature disgusting and threatening. That change is sudden, unexpected, and irreversible—the speaker can't go back. The break between the first and second stanzas of the poem mirrors that shocking, sudden transformation. It happens in the middle of a line: two syllables into line 21, the line suddenly ends!

This breaks the poem's meter as well: the next line, line 22 has only eight syllables (as opposed to the ten required of iambic pentameter, the poem's overarching meter). That means that

line 22 *completes* the meter of line 21—but only across a break, a rupture. This break is as unexpected and as disruptive as adolescence itself. In this way, the organization of the poem's stanzas reflects the transformation that the speaker undergoes in the poem.

METER

"Death of a Naturalist" is written in blank verse. That means each line is written in iambic pentameter, a meter with five iambs (poetic feet with a da DUM beat pattern) per line. The reader can hear this rhythm in line 13:

> On shelves | at school, | and wait | and watch | until

Blank verse has a distinguished history. It's the meter that Shakespeare uses in tragedies like *Hamlet*, that Milton uses in *Paradise Lost*; it's one of the most important and prestigious meters in English poetry. (And, important for Heaney, an Irish poet, eager to build and sustain an Irish poetic tradition, it was a favorite meter of W. B. Yeats, possibly the most important Irish poet!)

However, "Death of a Naturalist" doesn't use this meter in a smooth, polished, or masterful fashion. In fact, line 13 is arguably the first line of the poem that *doesn't* contain some serious metrical variation or blemish. That's unusual: poets usually like to *establish* the rhythm of the poem, *then* deviate from it. But already, in the poem's first line, there are some big problems in the meter:

> All year | the flax- | dam fest- | ered in | the heart

The poem starts out alright, with two iambic feet. But it's third foot, "-dam fest," is a spondee (two stressed beats in a row). The next foot is a pyrrhic (two unstressed beats in a row), followed by a closing iamb. The line still has five stresses, like an iambic line should, but the *arrangement* of those stresses is unusual. In the center of the line, there are three stressed syllables in a row. With its strong alliteration on "flax-dam" and "festered," the result feels less like the elegant patterns of an iambic line and more like a line written in alliterative meter—the meter used in medieval English poetry, before blank verse came to prominence.

This gives the poem a real sense of historical depth: it's conversant with, on the one hand, Yeats and *Hamlet*, and, on the other, Anglo-Saxon poems like "The Seafarer." In this way, the speaker suggests that the struggles it describes—growing up, coming to terms with sexuality—are part of the deep, underlying rhythm of human life: connecting people in the present to people who lived long ago.

More obviously, perhaps, the metrical awkwardness of the poem contributes to the sense that things are a bit off, that the speaker doesn't quite feel in controlled: the rhythm of the poem is hectic and unpredictable, just like adolescence itself.

However, the most important disruption of the poem's meter happens in lines 21 and 22. Line 21 ("In rain") is just 2 syllables long; line 22 is eight syllables ("Then one hot day when fields were rank"). Together they form a single, rough line of iambic pentameter. But a stanza break divides them in two. This break happens at a key moment in the poem: it separates the speaker's childhood and adolescence. The stanza break—and the disruption it introduces in the meter—thus reflects the sharp, unsettling transition from innocence to experience that the speaker endures.

RHYME SCHEME

"Death of a Naturalist" is written in blank verse: unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. As such, it doesn't have a rhyme scheme—and that's important for the poem. It's a highly enjambed poem—with sentences skittering over the edges of one line and careening into the next. That gives the whole poem the feeling that something's off-kilter, out-of-whack—and that the speaker isn't quite comfortable. These enjambments are thus key to the poem's energy and mood, and they are made sharper and all the more disconcerting by the *absence* of rhyme. If the lines *were* rhymed, that might give the line breaks a kind of clear justification (i.e., the lines would have to end in these random spots because that's where the rhyming word falls): they would start to feel natural and controlled. Instead, in the absence of rhyme, they feel chaotic, helter-skelter—as off-balance as the speaker.

Although the poem doesn't use rhyme, it does often end its lines with alliterative words, like "heart" and "headed" and "sods" and "sun" in lines 1-4. These alliterations fall below the level of slant-rhyme: the words in question are too far apart. Instead, they feel like *failed* rhymes—words that almost rhyme, but don't. In doing so, they remind the reader that the poem doesn't rhyme. This poem, then, doesn't just lack a rhyme scheme: it's a poem in which the absence of rhyme feels like a failure, a small catastrophe, which reflects and amplifies the larger catastrophe of growing up, becoming an adolescent.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Death of a Naturalist" is someone reminiscing about childhood and the upsetting, disruptive transition to adolescence. For the speaker, growing up was traumatic and difficult. As a child, the speaker was innocent and enthusiastic, exploring nature—even though grossest parts of the natural world—with pleasure. As an adolescent, though, the speaker finds nature threatening and disgusting. This change in the speaker's relationship with nature reflects another change: a transformation in the speaker's relationship with sexuality, as the speaker moves from innocence to experience.

Most readers assume that "Death of a Naturalist" is an autobiographical poem—and, at the very least it draws on Seamus Heaney's memories of his childhood in rural Ireland. The poem is inflected with specific details—the sights and smells of the Irish countryside, with its "flax-dam[s]," "spotted butterflies," and "bluebottles." The speaker is absorbed in these rich, immediate details. As a result, the reader never learns how old the speaker is now—how long ago the speaker made this transition from childhood to adolescence. Nor does the reader learn the speaker's gender or profession. Although the poem is rooted in Heaney's childhood memories, its speaker is potentially a universal figure. The speaker's experiences stand in for the disruption and dismay that almost everyone endures as they transition from childhood to adolescence.

SETTING

"Death of a Naturalist" is set in an unnamed rural area—likely in Ireland in the 1950s, when Seamus Heaney himself was a child living in the Irish countryside. The poem describes the environment of the countryside in vivid, specific detail. It focuses on a "flax-dam," a small pond or swamp where farmers leave their flax for several weeks to soften it up. The pond is rich with natural life, full of "dragonflies, spotted butterflies," and, most importantly for the speaker, lots and lots of frogs—and lots and lots of frogspawn, the eggs they release into the water.

It's a stinky, gassy place, full of rotting plants. But, in the early part of the poem, that doesn't bother the speaker—indeed, the speaker seems to kind of enjoy the squishy, dirty, stinky environment of the "flax-dam." In the second stanza, though, the speaker finds it disgusting, even threatening—the frogs that fascinated the speaker become weapons of war, "mud grenades." They are out "for vengeance." What was once an innocent and fascinating place, has become disgusting and threatening. The place itself hasn't changed—but the speaker has.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Death of a Naturalist" was written in Ireland during the 1960s. Seamus Heaney, the poem's author, is one of the most important Irish poets of the 20th century. Over the course of his long and distinguished career—he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996—Heaney worked to develop a distinctively Irish literature, a poetry that responds to the conditions of life in Ireland, that uses the kind of language that Irish people use, and that reflects the long tradition of Irish poetry.

This poem was first published in Heaney's collection of the same name. Many of Heaney's poems , including others in this collection, also tackle the pain of growing up and display a deep respect for and connection to the Irish countryside. "Blackberry-Picking," for example, focuses on the childhood memory of picking berries only to have them quickly fester and rot; both "Digging" and "Follower" explore Heaney's relationship with his father and to Irish farming traditions. The Scottish poet Carol Ann Duffy similarly looks at the fraught transition from childhood to adolescence, with a nod to tadpoles and frogs, "In Mrs Tilscher's Class."

"Death of a Naturalist" is specifically rooted in Irish rural life, describing the Irish countryside in vivid detail—down to the way it smells. It also revives two traditional ways of writing that have been important to Irish poetry: the use of blank verse and the use of heavy alliterations. Blank verse was key in the development of English poetry and was used extensively by Irish poets like W.B. Yeats; however, by the mid-20th century it had largely fallen out of fashion. Alliterative meters, in turn, were key to the poetry written in England and Ireland before the Norman conquest in 1066 A.D. The poem thus has unusual historical depths. Even as it describes scenes in the Irish countryside in the mid-20th century, it connects to poetic practices that stretch back into the middle ages. In this way, it suggests that the experience it describes—of growing up, becoming an adolescent—is universal, something that connects people across history.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

First published in 1966, "Death of a Naturalist" was written at a troubled time in the history of Ireland. The country was ruled by the British. It was divided between Irish Catholics, who argued vehemently and sometimes violently for independence, and Irish Protestants, who supported British rule (and who often identified as British, rather than Irish)—often using violence themselves to protect it.

Seamus Heaney was a Catholic, but grew up in County Derry, in Northern Ireland. His work often reflects on the fractured and difficult history of his country—its struggle for independence, its deep and difficult questions about its own identity. "Death of a Naturalist" doesn't allude directly to that historical context: its speaker is too absorbed in the difficulties of growing up, with all the discomfort that entails, to worry about the fate of Ireland. But the poem itself does participate in some of the struggles over Irish identity: reviving Irish literary traditions, creating an Irish way of writing poetry.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Seamus Heaney's Biography — A detailed biography of Heaney from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney)

- "Death of a Naturalist" Read Aloud — Seamus Heaney recites his poem, "Death of a Naturalist." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgsaB4NRSak)
- Heaney and Nature — This brief article discusses Seamus Heaney's relationship to nature in his poetry—touching on a range of poems from across his career. (http://theconversation.com/seamus-heaney-the-death-of-a-naturalist-17707)
- Heaney's 10 Best Poems — An introduction to Heaney's poetry from the Telegraph newspaper. (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/10276092/Seamus-Heaney-his-10-best-poems.html)
- "Death of a Naturalist" First Edition — A detailed essay on the publication of the first edition of Death of a Naturalist, including a number of photos from the book. (https://zsr.wfu.edu/2013/death-of-a-naturalist-by-seamus-heaney-1966/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SEAMUS HEANEY POEMS

- Blackberry-Picking
- Digging
- Follower
- Mid-Term Break
- Storm on the Island

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