

The Early Purges

I was six when I first saw kittens drown.
Dan Taggart pitched them, 'the scraggy wee shits',
Into a bucket; a frail metal sound,

Soft paws scraping like mad. But their tiny din
Was soon soused. They were slung on the snout
Of the pump and the water pumped in.

'Sure, isn't it better for them now?' Dan said.
Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone till he sluiced
Them out on the dunghill, glossy and dead.

Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung
Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains
Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung

Until I forgot them. But the fear came back
When Dan trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows
Or, with a sickening tug, pulled old hens' necks.

Still, living displaces false sentiments
And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown
I just shrug, 'Bloody pups'. It makes sense:

'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town
Where they consider death unnatural
But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.



Analysis:

'Early Purges' is a difficult poem to read, but its powerful imagery means that it is a poem which stays with the reader even though, or because, the subject matter is so upsetting.

'Early Purges' tells us of the young Heaney's first experience of the killing of unwanted baby animals on his family's farm. A litter of kittens is placed in a metal bucket and drowned.

The title of the poem captures our attention immediately. To 'purge' something is to get rid of it because it is unwanted and the word 'early' suggests that this purge is taking place sooner than it should. It could also be a way of saying that this event happened early in the poet's life and that it was the first step in his being purged of sentimental feelings which have no place on a farm.

The opening line of the poem is deliberately shocking yet compelling. We are told that not only was the poet merely six years of age when he saw kittens drowned, but that this was only the 'first' time. The implication is that this was just one in a long list of purges he witnessed on the farm.

The description of the drowning is very upsetting. Dan Taggart's language when he refers to the kittens as 'scragg wee shits' is callous and unpleasant and shows his lack of any sentiment towards creatures that would widely be regarded as rather sweet. That he should use such language in front of a little boy again shows us how harsh life on the farm is. There is no room for consideration of finer feelings. The fact that the farm hand is named and his words given to us as direct speech adds to the reality of the scene and also shows us how much of an impact it had on the little boy as he remembers every detail even after all these years. The other possible effect of putting Dan Taggart's words in inverted commas is to distance the boy from the older man's opinion. These are his words, not the young Heaney's.

What makes the description of death in 'Early Purges' most distressing is that, unlike 'Mid-Term Break', this is no accident. The suffering is deliberately caused by adults. Dan Taggart is merely a representative of those who believe that 'on well-run farms pests have to be kept down'. The verbs 'pitched', 'slung' and 'pumped' show us the deliberate

nature of the act and the lack of care with which the kittens are handled from start to finish. The description of the kittens' 'soft paws scraping like mad' to escape the bucket, and their 'tiny din' which is 'soon soused' by the flow of water is very upsetting but also very haunting. The kittens' helplessness is emphasised by the word 'frail' when describing the sound they made as they hit the metal bucket.

In the third stanza, Dan Taggart speaks again, this time making the extraordinary claim that it is 'better' for the kittens to have been killed so young. This once again draws our attention to the harsh realities of life on the farm: the kittens are not likely to be fed or cared for when they leave their mother and have to fend for themselves as adult cats, so Dan Taggart believes that he has spared them greater suffering down the line.

The kittens' bodies are thrown on the dungheap, showing that in death – as in life – they are treated with no respect whatsoever. They are merely waste matter. The little animals are both 'glossy' and 'dead' as they lie on the heap. This juxtaposition of words is interesting: normally when we think of an animal being glossy it is because its coat is shining with health but in this case the kittens are only glossy because their fur is soaked through.

In the fourth and fifth stanza, we learn of the emotional impact this killing has had on the young boy. He is frightened because he realises now how quickly life can be extinguished and how helpless young creatures are in the face of casual and callous violence



from the adult world. He is only six, so he is likely to feel vulnerable and scared on facing such an unpleasant truth. He watches the kittens' bodies in the days that follow until they dry up and blend in with the rest of the manure on the heap. However, his fear returns each time Dan Taggart disposes of other 'pests' on the farm. He sees now that anything that does not serve a useful purpose is killed off quickly and brutally. Even the

old hens who are no longer laying have their necks pulled with 'a sickening tug'. Life on the farm is harsh.

The sixth stanza begins with the word 'still', which indicates a change of mood. The poet is a grown man now and he has come to understand that 'false sentiments' are replaced



by the no-nonsense approach to the running of a farm. Now he seems to share Dan Taggart's views and is unmoved by the drowning of puppies. His description of them as 'Bloody pups' echoes Dan Taggart's coarse language in the opening stanza. Death, the poet says, is a natural part of life and his scorn for those who talk about 'Prevention of cruelty' is shown in his putting that phrase inside inverted commas.

However, although the poet may claim to now ally himself with those who think sentiment has no place on a farm, there is something about the language in the final stanzas that says this is not really how he feels. His use of clichéd phrases such as 'cuts ice' and 'pests have to be kept down' seems to be more like a repetition of stock phrases he has learned from others over the years rather than his own views. These lines lack the power and emotion of those in the earlier stanzas when the poet describes the fear he felt at the drowning of the kittens and the disposal of the other 'pests'. Also, the fact that he wrote this poem so many years after the event and was able to recall the details with such clarity proves that it had a lasting impact on him.

Themes:

Childhood

Loss of Innocence

Death

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Death
- ✓ Childhood
- ✓ Growing up
- ✓ An experience which had a lasting effect on the poet