**‘The Early Purges’**

Seamus Heaney

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.

**What is the Poem about?**   
  
This Poem, told mainly from the point of view of Heaney, the author, shows what life was like for Heaney as a child. Heaney recounts an incident when he was six, and he watched ‘kittens drown’. After his first encounter with death, Heaney is shocked by the cruelty shown to them by Dan Taggart, ‘scraggy wee shits’, and does not understand this event.   
However, as the poem progresses, Heaney accepts this as part of life on a farm, and is no longer shocked by the cruelty of the events, thinking them necessary and practical. Finally, Heaney reflects upon the differences between rural and urban life and the Hypocrisy of townsfolk.

**What are Heaney’s thoughts, feelings and ideas?**

Originally, Heaney feels sympathy for the kittens, and develops a sense of pathos not only towards the kittens but also towards the six-year-old boy witnessing this. However, ‘living displaces false sentiments’ and as Heaney matures he begins to fear and then finally understand the deaths, believing his former beliefs to be ‘false’. The sense of pathos towards the kittens is replaced by a sense of indifference, as if Heaney does not care what happens. At the end of the poem, Heaney begins to dislike the townsfolk due to their beliefs on cruelty towards animals, which he originally shared to some extent.

**Is there a distinctive poetic voice?**

Yes. In 'The Early Purges' we see three poetic voices. In the opening stanzas, this poem is recited by Heaney as a six year old, who is deeply emotionally wounded by what he has seen. However, along with the poem's progression we see Heaney's poetic voice mature into an adult, who is a symbol of the right behaviour and who understands and is ready to carry out the necessary duties of a farmer to put down pests. This is shown by the continuous use of ‘I’ and his use of personal experience as well as hints of Heaney's Irish background, for instance with the dialect, 'Sure isn't it better' and the traditional Irish surname Taggart. The third distinctive poetic voice is of Dan Taggart, probably a neighbouring farmer, who instilled fear into Heaney as a young boy through his 'cruelty.'

**How does the poet use the structure of the poem to explore his ideas?**

The structure of the poem is used to explore Heaney’s ideas because the poem progresses through Heaney’s life in a linear format, clearly showing his maturation as he gets older. The breakup of sentences using paragraphs breaks up the poem and emphasizes some parts, encouraging the reader to focus on important aspects of the poem.  
  
For Example.’Until I forgot them’ indicating a different stage in Heaney's life represented by a new paragraph.

**How does the poet use poetic devices to explore feelings, attitudes and ideas?**

The Main poetic device Heaney uses are:

Similes  
Alliteration  
Metaphors  
Oxymoron  
Poetic Structure, Rhyme and Rhythm

**How does 'The Early Purges' relate to us in 2018?**

Stanza In 2018, as a result of rapid urbanisation, fewer people in developed countries such as Britain and Ireland undergo the experiences that Seamus Heaney encountered on a farm and as such the poem holds less relevance to us in 2018. However, in various ways this poem is still relevant to the modern world, as it emphasises the importance of nature in an increasingly industrial world and highlights the differences between life in cities and life on a farm. Furthermore, it has relevance in 2018 because it teaches one to accept death as a part of life which is important in our somewhat hedonistic and shallow society and is a lesson that we believe everyone can benefit