Death of a Naturalist

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 dragon-flies, 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.

How does our attitude change as we grow up?

- Make a list of things you may have done/played with, when you were a child, but would not enjoy now.

  E.g. jumping in puddles with your wellies on

  What made your enjoyment of these things change?
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Underline the **positive** images or words in this section in red
(or using a dashed line)

Underline the **negative** images or words in black
(or using a solid line)

Comment on the effectiveness of the use of

1. an oxymoron
2. a metaphor
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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.

1. Which phrase sounds like a child describing the scene?
2. Identify an ugly image that would be appealing to a child.
3. Where has onomatopoeia been used?
4. Where has a simile been used to describe the frog spawn?
5. Why are these techniques effective?
6. Underline other phrases that have been used to describe the frogspawn.
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.

How do we know the boy’s interest was created
by a nature lesson at school?

What is the tone of this first section of the poem?
At which stage did Heaney’s interest in the life cycle of the frog change?

Why would the image on the right NOT have been chosen by Heaney?
Then one hot day when fields were rank
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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.

How do we know that this section of the poem describes an experience later in the summer? Is it a pleasing image of the season? (-----)

How are the developed frogs made to sound ugly and threatening? (___)

What is Heaney saying about man and nature in this poem? How do the use of positive and negative images reflect his ideas?

How is the tone of this section of the poem different from the first stanza?

Why does this experience cause the ‘death’ of the naturalist? (______)

‘Death of a Naturalist’ 10
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Why does this experience cause the ‘death’ of the naturalist? (____)
Is this poem just about frogs?

- Why is it significant that this poem is written from an adult perspective, looking back on a childhood experience?
- What is being said about growing up?
- Which other poem in the anthology has a similar theme?
- Heaney often represents aspects of nature as basic, ugly and threatening. Which poems in this selection show this? Choose some quotations to demonstrate this.
- Does this mean that he doesn’t like nature?
- Heaney loves to use the sound of words in his poems, to describe natural things very vividly. Find some good examples from the selection. He often invents words or changes their usual context to do this.
- Find a poem in this selection which shows a contrast with Heaney’s way of representing nature.