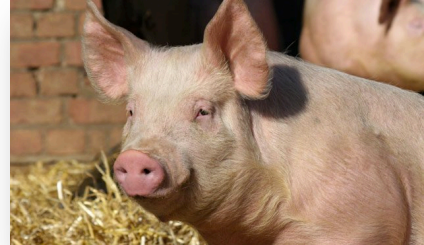


Killing the Pig

Background:

Montague has a keen interest in nature, the environment and traditional farming methods. He says that growing up in Garvaghy he was aware of 'the old pastoral rhythms' and he saw 'the earth cultivated in a natural way'. He believes modern farming methods are forcing us to lose touch with the land and with 'our brother animals' who should be looked after and treated with respect. However, even if the animals on a traditional farm are well-treated, there will come a day for most of them when they have to be slaughtered for food or because they are too old to be of value. Here, Montague remembers an incident from his childhood which had a profound impact on him.



The poem may remind some readers of Heaney's 'The Early Purges' which also deals with the casual cruelty and death dealt out on 'well-run farms' and the effect that such events can have on some of those who witness them.

Summary and analysis:

The title of the poem leaves us in no doubt what the subject matter will be. The poet does not say that 'a' pig is killed but rather 'the' pig. The use of the definite article here gives the pig an identity of sorts, something which is picked up again later in the poem when the pig is referred to as 'he' rather than 'it'.

The opening line of the poem stands alone and comprised two simple words: 'The noise.' Having read the title, we can easily put two and two together and deduce that the noise to which the poet refers is that made by the pig as it is killed. We can go a little further and imagine how horrific the noise must have been if it is the first thing the poet mentions. The full stop and the setting apart of the first line create a natural pause as we allow the thought of 'The noise' to sink in.

The description of the pig being pulled out of his pen is graphic and disturbing. An iron hook is 'sunk in the roof / of his mouth' and he squeals in pain and terror. Again, by saying 'his mouth' rather than 'its mouth', the poet adds to the sense of the pig being a

creature with its own identity and – we presume – feelings. The pig has to be ‘pulled out,’ implying that he resisted and had to be dragged to his death in fear and agony.

One of the arguments often put forward in defence of the slaughter of animals is that they are unintelligent and have no understanding of what is about to happen to them. Montague dismisses this quite vehemently in the next section of the poem. He pre-emptively states the statement and dares us to say pigs are dumb creatures. He highlights the pigs’ vulnerability and small size when he says that they dig in ‘their little trotters’. The pigs resist until the very end. Those who would like to console themselves with the thought of pigs going happily – ‘singing to the slaughter’ – are not allowed any such pretence. The repeated ‘s’ sounds here make it easy to imagine the poet hissing these words quite bitterly. At this stage, we cannot help but feel sympathy for the pig whose plight has been so eloquently described.

Now Montague returns to the opening line of the poem. The pig’s ‘final effort’ is futile and its final scream is so dreadful that no one sound could fully capture it. Therefore, the poet uses four powerful and unforgettable metaphors to bring to life the dreadful sound of death. First he compares it to the ‘roaring’ of a plane taking off. This is such a loud noise that it drowns out everything else as long as it lasts. There is no ignoring the sound. Second, Montague says that the pig’s scream is like a singer reaching the highest pitch of her song. It is significant that it is the ‘last note’, because this is the last sound the pig will ever utter. The internal rhyme in ‘roaring’ and ‘soaring’ link the two aural images and the long vowel sounds in both help us to imagine the lengthy, final wail of the terrified animal. The next images are even more disturbing. The disturbing nature of the pig’s scream is perfectly captured as it is compared to the ‘brain-chilling persistence of an electric saw’. All we want is for the noise to stop. Finally, the pig’s squealing is likened to the tortured screech of metal as scrap is crushed. The reference to scrap metal reminds us that, like scrap, the pig is of little value. The harsh ‘c’ sounds in these words add to the disturbing effect of these metaphors.

The pig’s last-ditch attempt to draw attention to its pain and terror is evoked by the adjectives ‘piercing’ and ‘absolute’. The pig has put everything he has into this final cry which has burnt itself indelibly into the poet’s mind and yet the ‘high heaven’ ignores it. Is this the poet’s way of saying that God, if there is one, is indifferent to the suffering of



his creatures? It is a sobering and bleak view of divinity.

Mercifully, for the listener at least, the sound ceases: 'Then a full stop'. The use of an actual full stop at the end of this line captures the abruptness of the ending. The scene is given added realism by the use of the name of the man who stuns the pig with 'a solid thump of the mallet'.

The action has moved slowly up until this point, reflecting the fact that the dreadfulness of the pig's tortured squeals made its final moments seem to drag on for a long time.

The repetition of the word 'swiftly' shows us that this is a job the workers have done many times before. The knife used is personified as it 'seeks the throat', almost as if it longs to kill. This is a deeply unsettling image and it replaces any graphic description of the slaughter and butchering of the pig. The pig, earlier given an identity, is now merely 'the carcass'. It is reduced to nothing more than meat and bones.

How you view the first lines of the final stanza is up to you. On the one hand, it could be seen as a moment of light relief from the tension and violence that marked the poem up to this point. Innocent children are given the pig's bladder to play with, perhaps signalling that life goes on and there is more to the farm than death. It is also a place of growth and happiness. On the other hand, these lines could be read as a rather grim comment on the callousness of farm life. The horror the poet has described is nothing special here; it is just another part of daily life.

The poet, however, will not soon forget the event and his sympathy for the pig is evident throughout the poem. He says that the 'walls of the farmyard' will contain 'that scream'. They are 'built around it', which implies that suffering and death are part of the reality of this world and there would be no farm without such slaughter.

Themes: Human indifference to the pain and suffering we cause in the natural world.

Tone: The poet is horrified by the pig's suffering and cannot forget its final tortured squeals of pain and panic. His sympathy for the creature is clear throughout. He appears angry and quite bitter about those who fool themselves by pretending that animals are too dumb to know that they are facing death. At the same time, there is an acceptance that this is an integral part of the reality of life on a farm.