

## Studied Poetry – Sample Answer - Theme

1. From the poetry you have studied, choose a poem that appeals to you in which the poet deals with a particular theme or message.

Plan for (a):-

*Poem is about loss of innocence – I can relate to this / harsh realities of growing up  
Recalls an incident that made profound impression on him – appears indifferent  
now to same issue – interested me to see his changing viewpoint  
I believe he is pretending to be tougher than he is – this is revealing*

Of all the poems we studied for our Junior Certificate exam, it was Seamus Heaney's 'The Early Purges' which appealed to me the most. While it made me feel uncomfortable and upset at times, it is unforgettable and provides much food for thought.

Remember, even a poem about something sad or upsetting can appeal to you. You must say why this is the case in your opening paragraph.

In 'The Early Purges' Heaney recalls an incident from his childhood in which he saw a worker on his family farm drowning unwanted kittens. The young poet is only six when the events of the poem take place, but this moment marks the beginning of his loss of innocence. He is deeply upset to see the suffering of the animals as their 'soft paws' scrape like mad on the bucket until water is pumped in and their 'tiny din' is ended. Although it is difficult to read of the little boy's sorrow, growing up and realizing the world is not perfect is something all of us must go through and for that reason the theme resonated with me.

Each paragraph should answer the question. The first or last sentence in the paragraph can be a good place to do this.

Another aspect of the poem which interested me was the message that although the poet was deeply affected by

the incident and felt that 'fear come back' when Dan Taggart disposed of other unwanted animals, in time he came to share Dan's view that such killings were necessary. I was intrigued to

Notice the way I have used phrases like '...resonated with me', 'I was intrigued to think...' and 'what fascinated me the most was...' All of these are ways of saying that the poem appealed to me. By using a variety of phrases, I show the examiner that I have sufficient vocabulary to avoid repeating myself.

think that the little boy who 'sadly hung' around the kittens' decomposing bodies for days could grow into a man who would 'just shrug' when 'shrill pups are prodded to drown'. It made me wonder if as I grow up, I will change my viewpoint to fit in with the harsh realities of life.

Ultimately, though, what fascinated me the most about 'The Early Purges' was the possibility that Heaney is not as tough as he might appear and that adults may sometimes force themselves to go along with viewpoints they don't necessarily agree with. Heaney may claim to have nothing in common with the 'false sentiments' of city people who decry animal cruelty, but his writing of this poem so long after the event proves that it had an emotional impact on him.

**(b)** What techniques did the poet use to enhance the appeal of what he/she has to say in the poem? Support your answer with reference to the poem.

*Plan for (b):-*

*Horror of kittens' death vividly described – boy's youth highlighted*

*Dan Taggart's cursing and false consolation – poet distances himself from it and is still upset*

*Adult Heaney now sounds like Dan – cursing and clichés do not ring true - very interesting to observe this*

The language in this poem adds greatly to its appeal as it shows us the way the poet changes from a frightened young boy to a man who knows he must appear tough.

One of the reasons I find this poem so memorable is that the death of the kittens is described so vividly. The verbs used to describe the way Dan Taggart handles the kittens show his casual cruelty: they are 'pitched' into the bucket which is in turn 'slung' on the pump and once they are dead they are afforded no dignity but are 'sluiced' out onto the dunghill. The words used to describe the kittens highlight their vulnerability; there is a 'frail' sound when they are thrown into the bucket, their 'soft paws' scrape the bucket and their cries are a 'tiny din'.

Another way Heaney draws us into this experience from his past is by bringing the figure of Dan Taggart to life. He is not just a faceless farm hand; we know his name and that

If you have time to write one, a brief introduction can help to show the examiner the direction your answer will take.

makes him appear more real to us. Heaney also gives Dan a voice: he calls the kittens 'scraggy wee shits' and tries to console the boy by saying 'Sure, isn't it better for them now?' The direct speech here serves another purpose; it shows that the sentiments expressed are Taggart's alone. The young boy cannot share the man's views and is 'Suddenly frightened' by this insight into the cruelty and unfairness of the world.

The language in the last two stanzas is very interesting indeed. Now Heaney sounds just like Dan Taggart; when 'shrill pups are prodded to drown' he just shrugs and curses, 'Bloody pups'. However, I don't believe he really thinks this way. The cursing and the clichéd expressions like 'cuts ice' and 'on well-run farms pests have to be kept down' don't sound at all like the language in the rest of the poem. I think this shows Heaney is merely repeating words he has heard others use over the years and I do not believe he agrees with them.

Your opinion is as valid as anyone else's provided you can support it with evidence from the poem.

I believe that Heaney's clever use of language ensures that the poem is as hauntingly memorable for us as the original 'Early Purges' were for him.

