
UNIT 25 SEAMUS HEANEY

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25.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have read this unit, you will be able to:

- Critically respond to Seamus Heaney's life and works
- Understand the Irish contexts of his poetry
- Examine the poem 'Death of a Naturalist' - its artistic blending of form and theme, word/sound and meaning.
- Write about blank verse
- Appreciate poetic devices such as personification, pathetic fallacy, assonance, oxymoron alliteration, onomatopoeia etc.

25.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will read about the life and works of Seamus Heaney. Heaney's reputation as a contemporary poet far exceeds any other poet. As an Irish poet, he is regarded as the most able inheritor of W.B. Yeats. Reading about his life and works, you would be able to appreciate his growth as a poet.

The poem we are reading in this unit is the title poem from Heaney's first collection called *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). The poet expresses a disillusionment with nature felt by a young school boy, who had a scientific interest in nature prior to the experience described in the poem.

Read the poem carefully, and then read the other sections.

25.2 SEAMUS HEANEY (13 APRIL 1939- 30 AUGUST 2013)

Seamus Heaney was a translator, academician and a prose writer of great merit, but he is chiefly known for his poetry, which ranks among the best in the contemporary era. Heaney was born in 1939 into a Roman Catholic farming

family in Mossbawn, County Derry in Northern Ireland. Being a Roman Catholic in Northern Ireland meant living on the wrong side of the political divide. Ireland had been colonized since the 12th century by Britain. However, in 1800 by the Act of Union passed by the parliament in Westminster, Ireland was legally annexed by Britain and made a part of the United Kingdom. This resulted into a series of anti-colonial struggles mostly violent such as the one commemorated by W.B. Yeats in his poem “Easter Rising” (1916). Ireland got independence in 1922, but, like India, it was partitioned on religious grounds. Northern Ireland, which consisted of the province of Ulster, had a majority Protestant population, and chose to remain with the United Kingdom, because historically the Protestants descended from the Nobility, who were planted from Britain to control the Irish land and trade. Religiously, they had affinity with Britain, and therefore, they were not in favour of an independent Ireland fearing the dominance of the Catholic population, who were the majority people taken as a whole. The Republic of Ireland which was dominated by the Catholics attained freedom.

Born in a Catholic family in Northern Ireland made Heaney a member of the minority community, a fact that molded his poetic sensibility to a great extent. Though he came from a peasant’s family, Heaney was bright in studies from childhood and was destined for intellectual and creative vocation. However, his rural roots shaped his poetry with as much intensity as his Catholic faith. In his poem ‘Digging,’ the first poem in his first collection *Death of a Naturalist* he recollects his father digging potatoes, and his grandfather cutting “more turf in a day,” and then says

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.

Having won a scholarship to Queen’s University, Belfast, Heaney left Derry for higher studies. He pursued degree in English language and literature, and graduated with a First class in 1961. Philip Hobsbaum, one of the teachers at the university arranged regular workshops for poets and critics. Some of the students who came to participate in these workshops were those who later became leading Irish poets such as Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and Heaney himself. These poets were casually referred to as the Group, and wrote poetry generally in imitation of the Movement poets of England like Philip Larkin, though Heaney would admit other influences as well such as those of Yeats, Hopkins, and Hughes. Like the poems of the Movement group, their poetry also followed the traditional forms and modes, and depicted usual and routine events in casual, matter-of-fact manner. Heaney’s first collection of verse was published in 1966, and it was called *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). The poems in this collection bear the imprint of the Group, and are composed in the traditional modes.

Death of a Naturalist (1966), as well as his second volume of poetry *Door into the Dark* (1969), consists of poems that present Heaney’s childhood experiences in his village, those related to the life of the farmers. The poem resounds with sensitive and colorful images of the nature blended with poet’s narrative about certain experiences. It is his vivid and sensuous description of nature that got Heaney the title of a “bucolic poet” in the early part of his career. However, nature and natural objects in these poems appear more like they do in the poetry

of Ted Hughes, whose influence is clearly evident. Nature comes in these poems as the objective other, often a stranger, though with a powerful presence, often targeted as also targeting the human observer.

Apart from “Death of a Naturalist” that you will read in detail later, another poem from his first collection which became very popular was “Mid-Term Break,” a poem he wrote remembering the death of his four year old brother. The title derives from the fact that he was called back home in the middle of the term from his school to be present at the funeral of his brother:

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

The year 1966 was remarkable in Heaney’s life for another reason. He accepted a teaching position at the School of English at Queen’s University, and remained there till 1972.

In late 1960s violence erupted in Northern Ireland, which was to last for three decades, the 1970s being most violent. In 1972 came his third collection of poetry called *Wintering Out* (1972), which expressed his calm and considered response to the conflict between the Protestants and the Catholics in Northern Ireland. He dealt with the subject from a distance, often suggesting that animosity and violence was pointless, no matter which faction one belonged to.

The Troubles, as the ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland came to be called, made the life of the Catholic minority extremely oppressive. Heaney and his family decided to move to the Republic of Ireland, when an offer came their way of a house in County Wicklow. His next volume of poetry called *North* (1975) was published in 1975, which chose for its subject the countless people murdered in Ireland over the ages as a result of the colonial invasion of Britain. In poems such as “The Tollund Man,” with brilliant imagination he envisions bodies taken out of the bogs, bodies that were murdered, their throat slit or strangulated. He had read in a book called *Bog People* (1969) by P.V.Glob about the archaeological finding of the Iron Age bodies in Denmark, which were subsequently preserved. Heaney associates the ancient ritual sacrifices of the Iron Age with the political murder and martyrdom of the Irish people for centuries. In another poem from this collection, “Act of Union” Heaney does a brilliant interlocking of the geographical and political positions of England and Ireland through a narrative of sexual invasion and control. He presents Ireland as feminine, and England as masculine, and shows how the masculine England had encircled and sexually invaded and assaulted the feminine Ireland.

Over the decades, Heaney continued to publish numerous collections of poetry including *Field Work* (1979), *Sweeny Astray* (1984), *Station Island* (1985), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010). Each of his collections received great acclaim and appreciation from contemporary writers and critics.

In 1981, Heaney was invited by the English department of Harvard University, and he remained associated with the university till 1996, spending his time

between Boston and Dublin. He was elected the Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1989, and in 1995 he was conferred the Noble Prize for literature. These awards and recognitions suggest the towering influence of Heaney as a poet in the second half of the twentieth century. He has wielded a great influence among the public, and his opinion on the political events in Ireland has been constantly sought by both national and international media. His status as a public poet had considerably influenced his poetry. There is always a consciousness running through his poems that they might be taken as statements on the political developments in Ireland, especially the factional strife and the violent struggle between the British forces and the Irish revolutionaries. However, for Heaney, a poem is not a political propaganda; it uses the political experiences to perfect the artistic purpose rather than being exploited by a particular ideology. It is for this reason that the Irish nationalists nursed a grudge against him for not directly voicing the atrocities committed by the British forces on the Catholic minority of Northern Ireland.

Seamus Heaney died at the age of 74 on 30 August 2013.

As you have read this note on the life and works of Seamus Heaney, evaluate your understanding of the poet by answering the questions given below as part of the first exercise of this unit.

Self-check Exercise I

1) Where was Seamus Heaney born, and to which nationality did he belong?

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2) What did his father and grandfather do for living? How did it shape Heaney’s poetic sensibility?

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3) When Ireland was made a part of the United Kingdom? How did Ireland’s colonization by England affect Heaney as a person and as a poet?

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4) Why did Seamus Heaney move from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland?

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5) What came to be called Troubles about Northern Ireland?

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6) How did Heaney respond in his poetry to the violence in Northern Ireland?

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7) When Heaney was awarded the Noble Prize for literature?

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8) Who were the poets who influenced Seamus Heaney?

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25.3 DEATH OF A NATURALIST

25.3.1 Introduction

A naturalist is a person who studies nature, especially plants and animals in the natural surroundings. The poem that you are about to read is about the metaphorical death of the naturalist in the young speaker of the poem, a school boy, presumably the poet himself in his young age. The poem presents in two stanzas an experience on a particular hot day with the frogspawn, tadpoles, and the frogs at a flax-dam, which resulted into the death of the naturalist in him. However, the poem also recollects that phase of innocent naturalist in him, which made him perceive, collect, and observe the frogspawn break into tadpoles in the jar at home and school. The poem explores an event and young naturalist's response to it that changed him from being a naturalist to somebody who developed revulsion towards naturalism. The poem also connotes a trespass committed by the innocent boy by taking away the frogspawn from the male frogs. In the second stanza, you will get a sense of impending punishment coming the young poet's way. The atmospheres of "the flax-dam" gets threatening as the male frogs become warring contingents, and make the place noisy with their angry croaking; the spawn seem to be preparing to clutch his hands, as the poet escapes.

25.3.2 The Text

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.

Glossary

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| flax | : a plant having blue flowers. |
| flax-dam | : not a dam, but a pool or natural pond in Northern Ireland. In order to extract fiber out of flax to be used in cloth making, bunches of flax are kept for a few weeks so that their stems become soft. As they gradually decompose, the flax give a very unpleasant smell as is evident in the poem. |
| fester | : to become decay or rot. |
| townland | : a small administrative region in Ireland. |
| sod | : turf or grassy ground. |
| swelter | : to sweat or suffer from extreme heat. |
| slobber | : to drop saliva from the mouth |
| frogspawn | : frog egg covered by translucent jelly |
| plop | : to drop with a sound similarly produced when an object falls into water |

25.3.3 Analysis

The title of the poem is an ironic exaggeration. As a scientist, a naturalist would not be bothered about the “coarse croaking” of the “angry frogs.” But it provides the much needed humour to the poem; the young poet’s initial fascination with the frogspawn and the frogs is described as that of a naturalist. However, he does collect and observe the frogspawn in a jar; so the poet would like to make us believe that the boy was a naturalist in the making, and the incident on “one hot day,” which holds the key to the thematic and tonal transformation of the poem results in the death of the naturalist in him.

The poem is composed in a blank verse. A blank verse consists of unrhymed iambic pentameter lines. An *iambic* is an arrangement of sound in poetry, in which an unaccented or unstressed syllable is followed by an accented or stressed one. The word *pentameter* suggests a rhythmic pattern in poetry in which there are five stressed syllables in a line. So, in other words, the poem is composed in unrhymed lines that create a certain rhythm due to having five unstressed syllable each followed by five stressed syllables. The following extract from the poem illustrates the blank verse:

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

The poem is arranged into two stanzas of unequal length. The first stanza consists of 21 lines, whereas the second stanza has only 12 lines. The first stanza takes a much longer space, because it has to develop the setting, mood, atmosphere, and set the tone of the poem. It has also to introduce the speaking voice of the poem, a young boy, still innocent, but eager to know the natural phenomenon, who regularly visits “the flax-dam” with inquisitive amusement, and a genuine interest bordering on pleasure and knowledge about the natural objects, especially frogspawn, and frogs in this case.

The setting of the poem is “the flax-dam.” Since it constitutes the defining experience of the poem, its setting is developed elaborately till the 10th line of the poem. The young poet understandably visits this place quite often, and “every spring” he “would fill jam-potfuls” of the frogspawn to keep at home and school. The poem adopts a neutral tone even though a sense of decaying atmosphere of “flax-dam” is being conveyed, which is appropriate of course considering the fact that the young poet is a naturalist, a biologist, a detached observer till the first stanza of the poem. Yet this neutrality is not an absolute one, as that of an adult but is interspersed with the inquisitiveness of a child.

As the poem concentrates on the setting, Heaney’s talent with creating sensuous description becomes evident. The poem is descriptive no doubt in this part, but words and sounds are so chosen to lend music to the description of the pool, the natural beings and objects living in and around it. The first line itself presents an interlocking of assonance and alliteration in the phrase “the flax-dam festered in the heart:” and so does the second line: “green and heavy-headed.” It is an excellent demonstration of how alliterative and assonant sound patterns are used to suggest the decaying state of the place. It takes only three words, all verbs, in a space of three lines, to suggest decay and decomposition. The words “festered” and “rotted,” and “weighted produce an alliterative resonance to suggest this decaying atmosphere:

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there,

Bunches of flax are traditionally kept in a pool in Northern Ireland to soften their stems so that fiber could be extracted from them. The young poet visits this pool all through the year, and observes the decaying flax under the weight of the “huge sods.” It rots and “festers” in the water of the pool, and then becomes hot in the extreme heat of the sun. The poet uses personification and pathetic fallacy, as he gives human attributes to both the flax as well as the sun:

Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun

Another poetic device that blends sound and sense in the poem is onomatopoeia. Among the developments in the pool, including the presence and the sounds of various kinds of flies such as “bluebottles,” “dragon-flies,” and “spotted butterflies,” the one that catches the attention of the young poet most is the drooling saliva of the frogspawn:

But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks.

The sounds produced by “warm thick slobber” suggests repulsive feel of the object if touched, so does the sound “clotted water,” the bed of the frogspawn. The fact such a sight only increases the curiosity of the young poet for “jellied specks” confirms his claim to the status of a budding naturalist.

Another figure of speech which suggests the sense of repulsion and decay about the place is oxymoron, which occurs in the phrase “Bubbles gargles delicately.” The gargling of the festering bubbles cannot be “delicate” in a normal perception; its use here again connotes the curiosity and inquisitiveness of the young naturalist. The young poet watches with curiosity jellied frogspawn develop into “fattening dots” in the jar, and then into “swimming tadpoles.” The structure of the last 7 lines of the poem conveys the innocence of the young boy, especially in the use of “and” to relate every fact about “the daddy frog” and the “mammy frog.” The tone of the poem becomes mild, suggestive of the innocent curiosity of the poet. The teacher at school uses the language of the children:

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.

The fact that one could forecast the weather by looking whether the frogs were yellow or brown is also related to suggest the innocence as well as the confident curiosity of the young boy.

The first phrase of the second stanza introduces an abrupt break in thought with the expression “The one hot day,” suggesting a radical reversal of the condition. Hereafter, the poem follows an entirely different movement. The frogs in the pool gear for revenge against the young poet for intrusion and forceful evacuation of the frogspawn.

The young naturalist, by filling “jampotfuls of the jellied/Specks to range of window-sills at home, /On shelves at school” intruded in the territory of the frogs, and forced a separation of the frogspawn from the frogs. The setting in the second stanza has transformed into that of a battlefield:

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam;

The frogs assume a menacing posture with their “coarse croaking” which the poet had not been used to. As an inferior enemy, the poet “ducked through the hedges.” The place smelled unpleasant, of the cow dung, and the croaking sounded coarse as well. The poet uses the language of metaphor followed by a simile to suggest the sense of disgusting sound, and sight of the place as well as the frogs.

The air was thick with a bass chorus
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...; their loose necks pulsed like sails.

The poet again uses onomatopoeia to communicate the young boy’s perception of the immediate threat from the frogs. The sounds ‘slap’ and ‘plop’ in the 8th line of

the second stanza suggest a sense of assault from the frogs. The poet experiences fear as well as repulsion. His observation of the “gross-bellied frogs” whose “loose necks pulsed like sails” do not suggest the objective response of a naturalist but the disgust experienced by a fearful boy. The frogs pose threats as they “sat/Poised like mud grenades,” but they also fill him with loathing, as he sees “their blunt heads farting.” The poet is overcome by a sense of nausea; he turns away from “the fax-dam” and runs knowing that the frogs, “the great slime kings” had invaded the place, and wanted revenge for his intrusion. The same spawn that he so earnestly held up in his hand to put into his jar seem to be ready to “clutch” his hand if he “dipped” it in the spawn.

The poem is so typical of the early poems of Seamus Heaney, as it vividly captures an experience of the natural world with immediacy of sounds, sights, and smells. One of the greatest qualities of the poet has been his ability to let meaning emerge from sounds, and he has successfully demonstrated that in this poem, as in all of his poems.

Glossary

- assonance** : repetition of similar vowel sounds in adjacent words.
- alliteration** : repetition of similar sounds, especially consonantal, at the beginning of the words or in a pattern of stressed syllables.
- personification** : a figure of speech wherein inanimate objects or abstractions are addressed as human beings.
- pathetic fallacy** : a literary device whereby human feelings are attributed to inanimate objects or nature.
- onomatopoeia** : words so formed or used that their sounds relate to the object or meaning they refer to.
- oxymoron** : a figure of speech in which obviously contradictory terms appear together.

Self-check Exercise II

- 1) Who is the speaker of the poem? How does his voice change through the poem?
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- 2) With reference to an image each from the first and the second stanza describe Heaney’s style as a nature poet. How different is he from William Wordsworth?
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3) What does the title “Death of a Naturalist” imply?

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4) In the first stanza, the poet uses synesthesia, or a poetic device whereby the poet associates impressions produced by one sense with the ones produced by another sense. Discuss the lines where it occurs.

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5) How does the poem create associative patterns of sound and sense?

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25.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. You were given a brief biographical note about his life as well as his works. Thereafter, we read his poem “Death of a Naturalist,” as well as its analysis. You also answered the questions put to you in Exercise 1 and Exercise 2. Now you should be able to form a critical judgment on the Seamus Heaney and his early poetry, as well as develop a perspective on his later poetry that you may yourself like to read.

25.5 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercises I

- 1) Seamus Heaney was born in County Derry in Northern Ireland, which is a part of United Kingdom. In 1972, however, he moved Glanmore, County Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland. Heaney always maintained that he was an Irish by nationality, and not British though he was born in Northern Ireland.
- 2) Heaney’s grandfather and father were farmers. His early childhood at his farms and his experience of rural life amidst natural surroundings influenced

the poetic sensibility of the poet. It gave him themes, images, characters, situations, as well as a certain music that resulted by blending the Irish and English speech rhythms.

- 3) Ireland was forcefully made part of the United Kingdom by an act passed by the colonial parliament in Westminster in 1800 called the Act of Union. Heaney wrote his poetry with a deep sense of Irishness in him. Several of his poems such as “Act of Union” deal with Britain’s colonization of Ireland. The poems invoke the physical suffering and mutilation as well as mental trauma faced by the Irish, as well as their anti-colonial struggles.
- 4) Seamus Heaney moved from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland, because of the Troubles, the ethnic conflict which ravaged Northern Ireland from late 1960s to the 1990s.
- 5) The Troubles refers to the political conflict between the Protestant and Catholics in Northern Ireland, though it was a national conflict rather than religious. The Protestants who were the majority population in the region were called the loyalists or unionists, because they wanted Northern Ireland to be a part of the United Kingdom, whereas the Catholics demanded freedom of Northern Ireland from the British and its merger with the Republic of Ireland. This contentious issue spilled over into three decades of violence since the late 1960s.
- 6) Heaney responded to the violence in Northern in an oblique and restrained manner. Though he lamented the loss of the innocent Irish at the hands of the British colonial forces, he also avoided speaking for the violent Irish revolutionaries, the member of the IRA.
- 7) Heaney won the Noble Prize for literature in 1995.
- 8) The poets who influenced Heaney were Ted Hughes, W.B. Yeats, Robert Lowell and W.B. Yeats.

Self-check Exercises II

- 1) The speaker of the poem is a young boy. His voice in the poem undergoes a change as the poem moves from the first stanza to the second stanza. The innocent curiosity and inquisitive delight in the boy while observing “the flax-dam,” the plants, flies and frogspawn is related in a relaxed, neutral, as well positive tone. In the second stanza, however, the speaker becomes fearful, circumspect, and disgusted, as the frogs invade the pool, and threaten him with the “coarse croaking.” The tone, therefore, becomes grave and serious.
- 2) Heaney as a nature poet is different from Wordsworth in his observation of natural objects. Unlike in Wordsworth’s poetry, the speaker or poet’s inner feelings do not influence the character of the objects that are observed in their full strangeness from the speaker. The image “the flax-dam festered” in the first stanza or “the slap and plop” in the second stanza communicates almost an unemotional portrayal of nature, which, however, grows upon the minds of the readers with its alien intensity.

- 3) The title of the poem implies a radical transformation in the young speaker's attitude to natural and natural beings. From being an ardent lover and student of the nature in the first stanza, in the second stanza he undergoes a complete loss of naturalism. His intrusion and forceful removal of the frogspawn in the first stanza provoke the frogs to invade "the flax-dam" in the second and croak hoarsely in unison as if to militarily threaten the boy with punishment. This experience produces an altered perception in the boy as he now finds the pool with frogs and frogspawn sickening and repulsive. That is the death of a naturalist in him.
- 4) The lines "... bluebottles/ Wove a strong gauze of sound around smell" is an instance of synaesthesia. The poet blends the sense of sound and smell to enhance the feeling of decaying atmosphere of the pool.
- 5) The poem creates associative patterns of sound and sense by using poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia.

