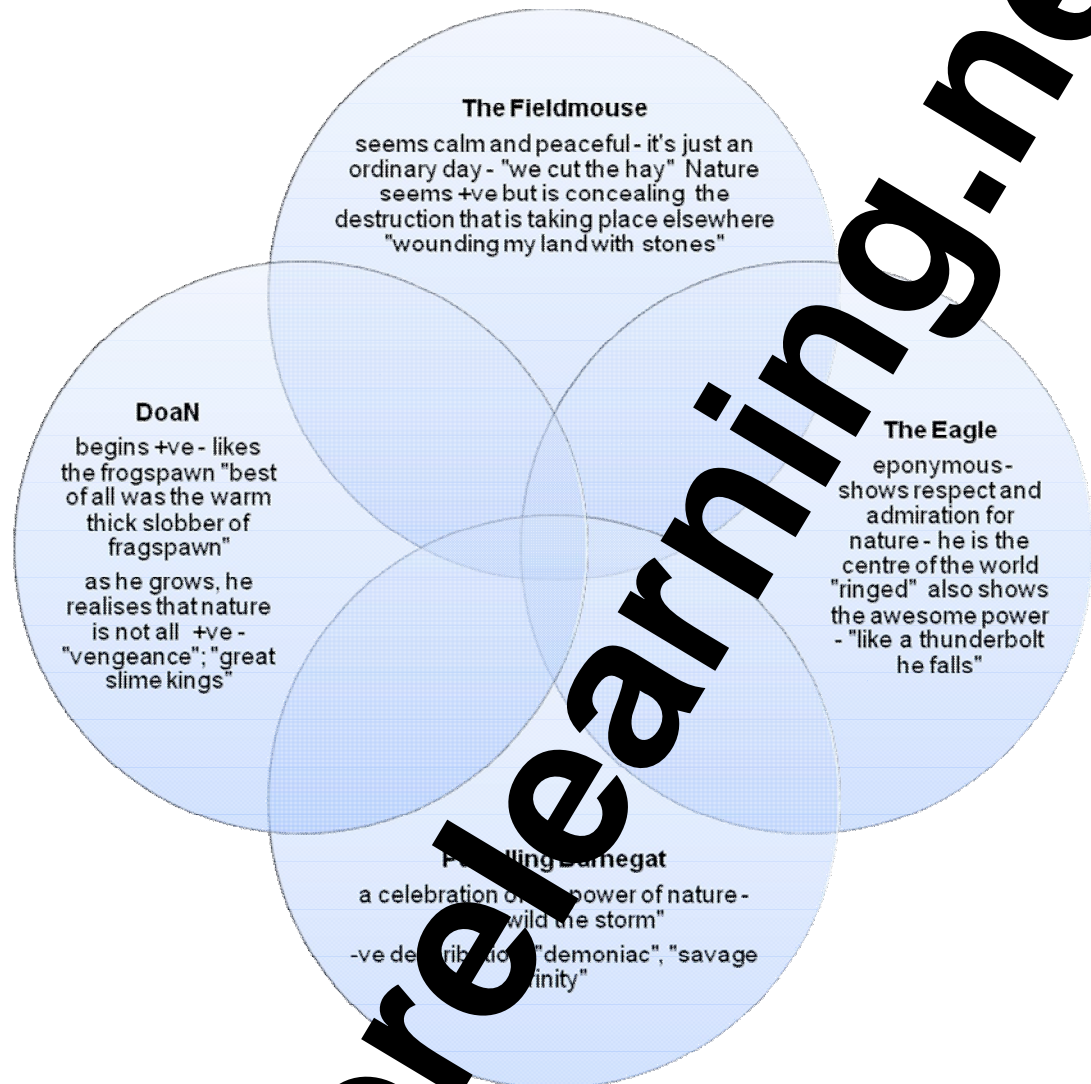


Compare how nature is presented in 'Death of a Naturalist' by Seamus Heaney, one poem by Gillian Clarke, and two pre-1914 poems.



In *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney presents the reader with a view of nature which changes over time. He shows us that as a child, he was taught by "Miss Walls" to love and appreciate the natural world even when it "festered". The choice of this word, and the fact that he juxtaposes it with "bubbles [which] gargled delicately" suggests that, even at an early age, he was aware that not all things in nature are beautiful. His main love, though, was the "warm, thick slobber of frogspawn". Described in a very childish manner, this suggests that he took pleasure in it and enjoyed interacting with it, in this case probably by touching it. The onomatopoeia in the word "slobber" helps to convey an image of the young Heaney playing with the frogspawn and enjoying the way that it felt to have it run through his fingers.

Clarke, on the other hand, describes a slightly different view of nature in *The Field Mouse*. In this case, it is not her in the poem but another child; this time with “a nest of quail and mouse” in his hands. This is a much less positive image of nature than Heaney’s. We are told that our interactions with the natural world can cause nature to suffer, even to “lie bleeding”. Her description of the “chance gift of sweetness” reminds us that we sometimes only see what we want to see; lime may be good for farmland, but it is also used in mass graves such as those in Bosnia. She also reminds us that neighbour can “turn stranger” in an instant; although the poem is set in Wales, where we “can’t face the newspapers”, it is a reflection of a much bigger picture.

Whereas Heaney takes us on a chronological journey from innocence, where he would hatch the tadpoles on the “window-sills”, to fear of nature when he meets the “great slime kings.... there for vengeance” for the first time, via the life cycle of the frog, Clarke shows us that what we do to nature is the same as what we do to one another, albeit on a smaller scale. In both cases, the poets show us that nature is not something we can merely look at; we are part of it and have to interact with it, whether we want to or not.

In both of these poems, the poets have described, on a personal level, their experiences of nature. Tennyson, in *The Eagle*, also takes a personal approach. In this poem, he sums up his admiration and respect for the bird in merely 6 lines. This suggests to me that the structure of the poem reflects the power of the bird. Like Clarke’s poem, *The Eagle* is eponymous; it is a celebration of this bird and the fact that, to Tennyson at least, it is the centre of the world – he is “ring’d with a azure world.” I think though, that unlike the other two poets, Tennyson’s focus is not on life in general, but on the eagle in particular. Tennyson does not seem afraid of the bird, despite the fact that it is described as dominating even the “wrinkled sea [which] beneath him crawls”; in fact, he celebrates the awesome power of the bird, describing him as being “close to the sun” which suggests power and majesty, and ends the poem with “and like a thunderbolt he falls.” This simile suggests that he is immensely powerful and possibly destructive. This links with the idea of the frog in *Death of a Naturalist* being the “king”; an all powerful creature.

Another poem which celebrates the power of nature is *Patrolling Barnegat*. Again, this is a poem which suggests that nature is all-powerful; the sea is described as “wild and potentially destructive, like the eagle. Whitman has chosen language which emphasises the brutal nature of the weather – it has a “roar”, it “lashes” and is described as a “death-wind”. Through the use of personification and the lists of verbs and adjectives, Whitman conveys a dangerous and mighty storm which cannot be controlled. The fact that the poem contains enjambement on every line helps to emphasise the power and continual movement of the storm. Although there is a sense, as in *The Eagle*, of admiration for this power, his choice of the words “demoniac” and “savegest trinity” suggest that, whilst he is in awe of the storm, he also feels that it is a negative thing, through the association with Hell.

In conclusion, all four poems show that nature is a powerful and changeable beast which can offer us both pleasure and pain. The poets have done this through the choices of words and the structures of their poems; although all writing about different times, places and events, they have all shown a respect and regard for the natural world.