How Does Seamus Heaney Use Language, Imagery and Poetic Form to Convey the Speaker’s Feelings of Fear in ‘The Barn’?

“The Barn” is a five-stanza twenty-line poem, which utilises an ‘ababcdcdefefghghijij’ half-rhyme scheme written by Seamus Heaney and uses mainly iambic pentameter. This piece of poetry is about Seamus Heaney’s childhood fear of the family barn. The poem is in the past tense, so we can assume it is a flashback to his memories as a child.

The poem starts by describing the two lugged sacks which are lying on the barn floor “like the grit of ivory”, ivory is often associated with elephant tusk hunting, first starting the theme of fear and discomfort. “Ivory” rhymes with “armoury”, usually linked with war too. In line 2 there is alliteration of sibilant sounds in the phrase “as solid as cement” - “s” often are associated with snakes, this conveys the author’s fright of the barn as a child to the audience. Heaney combines senses by describing the darkness as “musty”; then he personifies it - the “dark hoarded an armoury”. The author describes the place as “mouse-grey” - animal imagery and a theme of rodents, although seemingly neutral. Throughout the poem, the writer uses mainly iambic pentameter and an ababcdcdefefghghijij half-rhyme scheme, although the awkward lineation and half-rhyme create an uncomfortable feeling for the reader just like what the author must have felt as a child whenever he walked in there. Heaney shows his slightly panicking feeling of no escape and even perhaps claustrophobia due to only “the one door.” Overall, the beginning of this piece seems relatively neutral, but it starts some themes that continue through the rest of this piece of poetry.

During the third and fourth stanzas of the poem, Heaney uses letter sounds and lineation to start to build up a stronger sense of fear. For example, the repeated ‘c/k’ sound in ‘cobwebs clogging’ (Line 12) is a plosive noise which carries connotations of coughing, most probably due to the smell in the barn, aiding to create a sense of fear and the desire to escape from there. The author also uses plosive sounds in ‘Pitchfork’s prongs’ (Line 10), the repeated ‘p’ creating connotations of stabbing and attacking. Lineation is also used to heighten the effects of fear, for example, ‘Then you felt cobwebs clogging up your lungs / And scuttled fast into the sunlit yard’ (Lines 12-13). This creates surprise and fear because of the sudden movement conveyed by the line break, and the enjambment between these two lines conveys a lack of control and a panicked feeling. Furthermore, Heaney uses similes and irregular rhythm to express fear, for example ‘when the zinc burned like an oven.’ (Line 9). Despite being a cliché, this simile still instils fear in the reader because we hate to picture a young child burning in his surroundings. Finally, in lines 15 and 16 there is irregular rhythm: ‘and into nights when bats were on the wing [iambic pentameter] / Over the rafters of sleep [dactylic dimeter], where bright eyes stared [iambic dimeter]’. The irregular rhythm at the start of line 16 creates a rushed anticipation of what will come next, and clearly emphasises the transition from being awake and indeed experiencing the nightmares of the barn, to falling asleep and having nightmares about them, and the final stanza vividly explores these fantasies.

In the final stanza, Heaney uses metaphor followed by enjambment: “I was chaff / to be pecked up.’’ (Line 17-18) Chaff is the inedible part of corn, and in this sense, it implies that he is just as little and insignificant as bird food. This enjambment creates a sense of anxiety and alarm, indicating his state of panic. In the last line, he uses simile to conclude and evolves on the rodent theme in a much scarier way: ‘The two lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats.’ (Line 20). Throughout this poem the mood and tone progress from neutral to a real-life fear – such an ending finishes this poetry in a moment of real terror.

To conclude, the poem moves from going in and seeing inside this huge building in a rather neutral fashion to an incredibly striking fear of the unknown things in it, the rodent theme, in my opinion, the most effective. Seamus Heaney uses various techniques such as word choice, alliteration, layout and lineation to give the same feelings to the audience that he experienced as a little boy going into the large unknown space of “The Barn.”