



The Underground

Seamus Heaney

There we were in the vaulted tunnel running,
You in your going-away coat speeding ahead
And me, me then like a fleet god gaining
Behind you before you turned to a reed

Or some new white flower japped with crimson
As the coat flapped wild and button after button
Sprang off and fell in a trail
Between the Underground and the Albert Hall.

Honeymooning, mooning around, late for the Proms,
Our echoes die in that corridor and now
I come as Hansel came on the moonlit stones
Retracing the path back, lifting the buttons

To end up in a draughty lamplit station

After the trains have gone, the wet track

Bared and tensed as I am, all attention

For your step following and damned if I look back.

Vocabulary

- **Underground** - another name for the Tube system in London.
- **Vaulted** - arched e.g. the roof of a church.
- **Going away coat** - traditionally a bride would change from her wedding dress into a 'going away' outfit before going on honeymoon.
- **Japped** - in this case stained or splattered
- **Fleet God** - refers to the Greek God Pan who was renowned for being 'fleet' (fast) and also possessing great sexual prowess.
- **The Albert Hall** - a concert hall in London
- **The Proms** - a season of classical music concerts staged in the Albert Hall every summer. The tickets are usually reasonably affordable.
- **Hansel** - the boy in the traditional Grimm's fairy tale who along with his sister Gretel is abandoned to his death in a forest by his wicked stepmother. They find their way out of the forest by following stones that Hansel has dropped along the way.
- **Damned if I look back** - refers to the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld which has been turned into a popular opera. When Eurydice dies her husband Orpheus travels to the underworld to bring her back to the land of the living. He was allowed take her on condition that he not look back until they reach the Earth. Out of love of and concern for his beloved wife Orpheus cannot stop himself from looking back. She immediately returns to the underworld and Orpheus loses her forever.

Pre-reading task

- What customs and traditions can you think of to do with weddings and honeymoons?
- What emotions would you expect a young couple to experience on honeymoon or at the start of their marriage?
- Do you think these emotions last?

Questions

1. Who is the poet addressing in the poem?
2. Do you think the events of the poem happened recently or in the past? Give a reason for your answer.
3. Why do you think the young couple were running?
4. The poet compares his young self to the 'fleet god' Pan. Do you think he means this seriously or humorously?
5. The new bride's new white coat has now been 'japped (stained) with 'crimson' (red). What could this represent?
6. As she runs the buttons fall off her coat. The poet talks about 'retracing the path back, lifting the buttons'. Do you think he means this literally?
7. The poet compares himself and his wife to 'Hansel' and Gretel. In what way are they similar?
8. The first three stanzas of the poem could be said to have a joyful mood. What kind of mood do you think the last stanza has? How has this mood been created?
9. 'All attention for your step following'. Is the poet literally trying to listen for his wife's footsteps or is he trying to recreate the memory?
10. The last line of the poem refers to someone who lost his wife because he loved her too much. What do you think this tells us about Heaney's feelings for his wife?

Overview

The poet recreates a moment from his honeymoon in London with his new bride. The young couple are late for a concert and rush through a tunnel that is part of the underground train system.

In what is the first of several references to myths and legends the poet compares his young self to the god Pan. The Underground in classical myths usually refers to hell.

As they run the buttons fall from his wife's new white coat which has been stained with red. The poet compares himself to Hansel trying to find his way back by lifting dropped buttons or pebbles. He could be saying that he is now alone in an empty train station trying to recreate the memory of his honeymoon.

Finally he describes himself listening for 'your step following', perhaps the memory is so vivid he almost expects to hear his absent wife's footsteps. 'Damned if I look back' can be seen to refer to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld.

Past Questions

Honours

2021

3. Seamus Heaney

“Seamus Heaney transforms the familiar and the mundane through his powerful use of language, thereby enabling us to learn a range of profound lessons from his poetry.”

Discuss the above statement, developing your response with reference to your experience of the poems by Seamus Heaney on your Leaving Certificate English course.

2003

4. *Dear Seamus Heaney ...*

Write a letter to Seamus Heaney telling him how you responded to some of his poems on your course. Support the points you make by detailed reference to the poems you choose to write about.

Ordinary

2014

1. (a) In your opinion, why did the poet choose an underground setting for this poem? Support your answer with reference to the poem. (10)
- (b) Why do you think the poet compares himself to Hansel from the fairytale Hansel and Gretel in the above poem? Support your answer with reference to the poem. (10)
- (c) Choose two lines or phrases from the poem that appeal to you and explain your choice. (10)

2. Answer **ONE** of the following: [Each part carries 20 marks]

- (i) Describe the relationship between the poet, Seamus Heaney, and his wife evident in this poem. Support your answer with reference to the poem.

OR

- (ii) Write a piece about this poem beginning with the following:
I think “The Underground” is a wonderful love poem because...
Support your answer with reference to the poem.

OR

- (iii) There are three poems by Seamus Heaney on your Leaving Certificate English course: “The Underground”, “A Constable Calls” and “A Call”. Which of these poems by Seamus Heaney do you most enjoy? Explain your answer by reference to at least one of these poems.

Mind Map

