



A Constable Calls

Seamus Heaney

His bicycle stood at the window-sill,
The rubber cowl of a mud-splasher
Skirting the front mudguard,
Its fat black handlegrips

Heating in sunlight, the 'spud'
Of the dynamo gleaming and cocked back,
The pedal treads hanging relieved
Of the boot of the law.

His cap was upside down
On the floor, next his chair.
The line of its pressure ran like a bevel
In his slightly sweating hair.

He had unstrapped
The heavy ledger, and my father
Was making tillage returns
In acres, roods, and perches.

Arithmetic and fear.
I sat staring at the polished holster
With its buttoned flap, the braid cord
Looped into the revolver butt.

'Any other root crops?
Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?'
'No.' But was there not a line
Of turnips where the seed ran out

In the potato field? I assumed
Small guilts and sat
Imagining the black hole in the barracks.
He stood up, shifted the baton-case

Farther round on his belt,
Closed the domesday book,
Fitted his cap back with two hands,
And looked at me as he said goodbye.

A shadow bobbed in the window.
He was snapping the carrier spring
Over the ledger. His boot pushed off
And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked.

Vocabulary

- **Cowl of a mudguard** - a covering on the end of a bicycle mudguard.
- **Spud of a dynamo** - a device attached to the front wheel of a traditional bicycle that powered its lights.
- **Bevel** - the weight (or possibly the tightness) of the constables uniform cap has left a straight line mark on his head.
- **Heavy ledger** - a large, heavy hardbacked book for keeping accounts.
- **Making tillage returns** - farmers had to tell the police how much of each crop they were growing on their land.
- **Acres, roods and perches** - traditional units of measurement of land.
- **Mangolds, Marrowstems** - types of crop
- **The barracks** - the police station
- **Domesday book** - a medieval book which was used by order of William the Conqueror to survey all the lands of England for taxes.

Pre-reading task

- What kind of emotions would the visit of an armed and uniformed policeman to their house evoke in a small child?
- What kind of relationship do you think existed between Catholic farmers and Protestant policemen in Northern Ireland in the 1940's and '50's?

Questions

1. Why do you think the poet as a child was so fascinated with the constable's bicycle?
2. Why has the constable called to the house?
3. What features of the policeman's uniform and equipment does the child focus on?
4. Does this tell us something about how he regarded the presence of the constable?
5. Is this a routine visit or something out of the ordinary?
6. Are there any indications that his visit is not welcomed?
7. The child's father has not mentioned a line of turnips that have been planted in the potato field. Do you think that this is a serious omission?
8. What does the child think will happen to his father if the constable finds out about the turnips? Chose a line from the poem to illustrate your answer.
9. How do you think the child feels when the constable looked at him as he said goodbye?
10. There is an atmosphere of tension in the first eight stanzas of the poem. Does this atmosphere change in the final stanza?

Overview

The poet remembers a minor event from his childhood. A constable from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) visits the Heaney farm to take record an account of the various crops being grown.

The child Heaney is both afraid of and fascinated by this strange presence in his family home. The first two stanzas describe in detail the bicycle the policeman arrived on. Perhaps the child was too scared at first to enter the house and so lingered outside taking in lots of detail.

The description of the constable is very impersonal and focusses on his uniform, truncheon and gun, symbols of his power and perhaps the power of the RUC in general.

The conversation between the policeman and Heaney's father seems somewhat tense and formal as the constable makes a record of the crops in his official account book.

The child Heaney realises that his father has not mentioned a line of turnips that were sown in the potato field and is fearful of what will happen to his father if the police find out about this minor omission.

This fear peaks when the policeman looks at the child as he says goodbye. Although there is no suggestion that the man intended to intimidate the child there is a sense of relief in the final stanza as the constable departs.

Key Points

- Deeply Personal
- Vivid Imagery
- Moment of revelation
- Father/son relationship
- The passing of time
- Love
- Ordinary/Everyday
- Memory
- Childhood

Word Bank

- Create a bank of words you might use when writing about the poet's work.
- Some are provided for you.
- Add your own.
- You can write definitions of words you don't know.
- You can pick out suitable quotes to go with the words.

[illegible]

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

2021

1. (a) Based on your reading of this poem, what impression do you form of the constable? Support your answer with reference to the poem. (15)
- (b) Do you find this poem disturbing? Explain your answer with reference to the poem. (15)

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

- (i) You have been asked to produce a dramatic scene or short film based on one of the poems on your Leaving Certificate English course. Explain why you would or would not choose the poem, *A Constable Calls*, for this purpose. Your answer should demonstrate your understanding of the poem.

OR

- (ii) Do you think the poet makes effective use of language to vividly convey the impact the constable's visit made on him as a child in the above poem? Support your response with reference to the poet's use of language for this purpose in the poem, *A Constable Calls*.

OR

- (iii) Explain why you would or would not include the poem, *A Constable Calls*, in a collection of poetry about memories. Support your answer with reference to the poem.

1. (a) From your reading of this poem, explain why the constable called to the Heaney home. Support your answer with reference to the poem. (10)
- (b) The poet as a young boy observes many details about the constable in the poem. Identify the detail that you find most striking and explain why you find it to be so. (10)
- (c)

...I assumed
Small guilts and sat
Imagining the black hole in the barracks.

Explain what you think the poet means by these lines. (10)

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

- (i) What do you learn about the world of Seamus Heaney's childhood by studying this poem? Support your answer with reference to the poem.

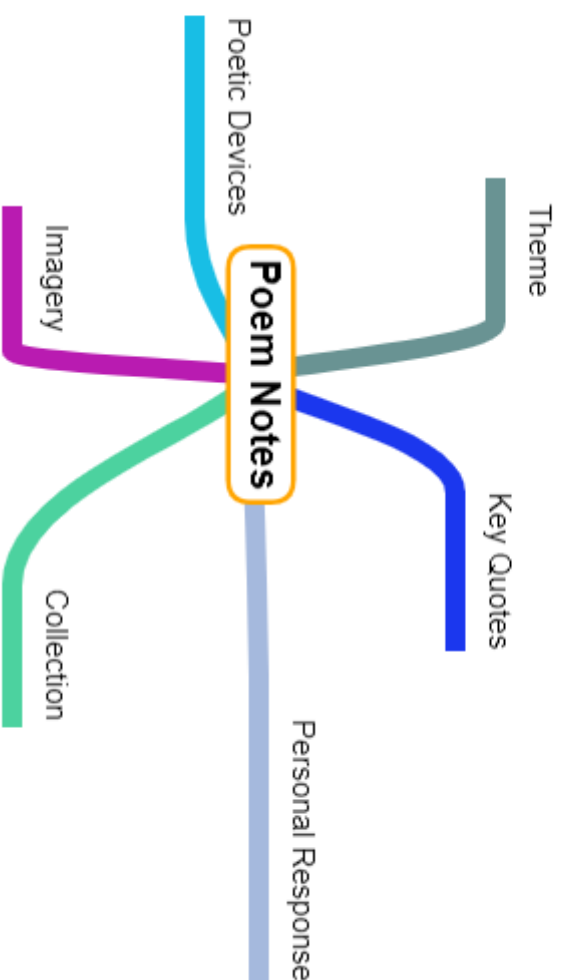
OR

- (ii) In which one of the following collections of poetry do you feel this poem best belongs?
 - A collection of poems about rural life.
 - A collection of poems about the past.
 - A collection of poems about childhood.

Give reasons for your choice with reference to the poem.

OR

- (iii) Imagine you are the young Seamus Heaney. Write a diary entry about the day the constable called. Your diary entry should be based on your reading of the poem.



Mind Map