



Lightenings viii

Seamus Heaney

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'

The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

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Vocabulary

- **Annals** - written histories created by monks
- **Clonmacnoise** - the site of a major Celtic Christian monastery
- **Oratory** - a small church or chapel
- **Hull** - the underside of a boat
- **Abbot** - the leader of a monastery

Questions

1. How does the opening stanza of the poem capture the reader's attention?
2. 'Once upon a time' is a traditional opening for a fairy tale. How does it compare with the phrase - 'The annals say'?
3. The language used in the opening stanzas has been described as 'matter of fact'.
Do you agree with this description? What effect do you think it has on the reader?
4. Is this the type of apparition you might expect to happen in a Christian church? Do you think it has any religious significance?
5. Comment on the use of the verbs 'shinned', 'grappled' and 'struggled' in the third stanza.
6. Comment on the use of reported speech in the last two stanzas.
7. Is the abbot's response to the situation practical, spiritual or a mixture of both?
8. What does the line 'Out of the marvellous as he had known it' mean to you?

Overview

The poet describes a miraculous event recorded in the histories of the Christian monastery at Clonmacnoise. He describes a ship appearing in the air as the monks prayed in their chapel. In very concrete terms he describes the physical predicament the ship is in as it its anchor has fastened to the altar rails of the church. In a matter-of-fact way he describes a crewman of the ship attempting to free it. The abbot of the monastery takes pity on the crewman, realising that the ship is out of its natural environment and instructs his monks to help free the ship. Their efforts are successful, and the crewman returns to his ship - 'Out of the marvellous as he had known it'. The poet is perhaps reminding us that reality depends on perspective.

Key Points

- Vivid Imagery
- Mystical
- Narrative
- Transcendent
- Playful

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.

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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.

Mind Map

