



The Harvest Bow

Seamus Heaney

As you plaited the harvest bow
You implicated the mellowed silence in you
In wheat that does not rust
But brightens as it tightens twist by twist
Into a knowable corona,
A throwaway love-knot of straw.

Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks
And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks
Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent
Until your fingers moved somnambulant:
I tell and finger it like braille,
Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable,

And if I spy into its golden loops
I see us walk between the railway slopes
Into an evening of long grass and midges,
Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges,
An auction notice on an outhouse wall—

You with a harvest bow in your lapel,

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick
For the big lift of these evenings, as your stick
Whacking the tips off weeds and bushes
Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes
Nothing: that original townland
Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.

The end of art is peace
Could be the motto of this frail device
That I have pinned up on our deal dresser—
Like a drawn snare
Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.

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Vocabulary

- **plaited** - twisted or knotted
- **harvest bow** - a knot woven from straw or cornstalks, traditionally given as love-tokens
- **corona** - halo or crown of light around the sun
- **somnambulant** - without waking, unconsciously
- **tell** - can be used to describe the action of counting beads on a rosary
- **braille** - a form of raised writing for the blind
- **Gleaning** - traditional used to describe gathering remains of grain left behind by the reapers or harvesters, can also mean to gather information bit by bit
- **Palpable** - tangible, can be touched
- **deal dresser** - a traditional kitchen cupboard or press
- **burnished** - polished

Pre-reading task

- Have you ever been given a gift that someone has made for you rather than bought? Is there a difference?
- How do fathers show their love for their sons?

Questions

1. Who is the poet addressing at the start of the poem?
2. Comment on the use of the word 'throwaway' in last line of the first stanza.
3. Is there a reference to the word later on in the poem?
4. What impression do we gain of the poet's father in the second stanza?
5. How does the poet handle or touch the harvest bow?
6. What impression do you gain of the relationship between the poet as a child and his father?
7. Comment on the use of the word 'tongue-tied' in the last line of the fourth stanza/
8. Why do you think the poet kept the harvest bow?
9. How do you think his father would react if he knew the poet had kept the bow?
10. Compare this poem with 'The Call', another poem by Heaney on your course.

Overview

The poet recalls his father weaving a harvest bow, a traditional love token made by hand. He describes his father's hands in terms of their skill at traditional, rural manual labour. When the poet handles the harvest bow himself he is attempting to read its meaning, to interpret its creation as an act of unspoken love - 'Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable'. He recalls his childhood evening walks with his father as a time of closeness. The poem returns to the present, the poet has kept the 'throwaway love-not' as a talisman or sorts, a reminder of the unsaid.

Key Points

- Deeply Personal
- Vivid Imagery
- Nature
- Father/son relationship
- Ordinary/Everyday
- Memory
- Love

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.

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Past Questions

Honours

2021

3. Seamus Heaney

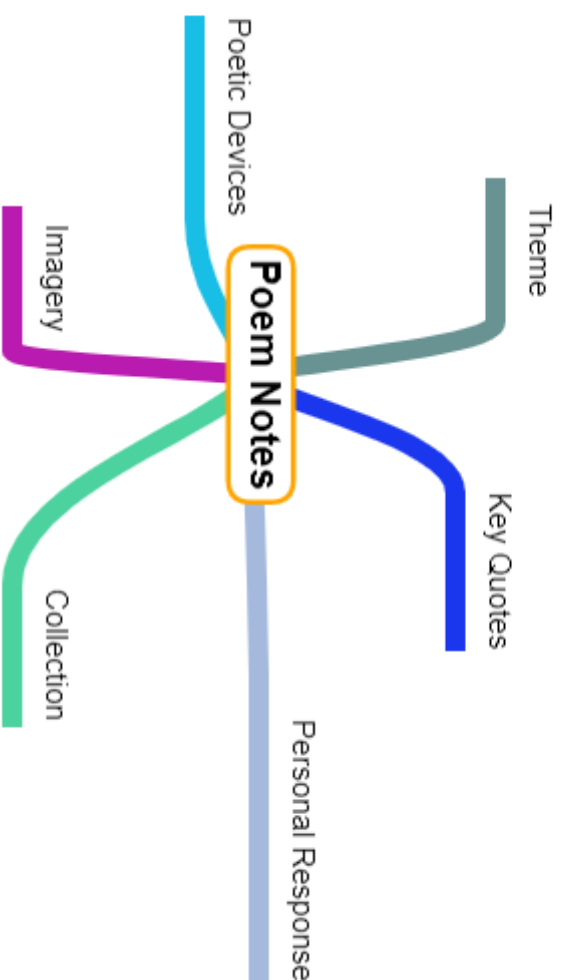
“Seamus Heaney transforms the familiar and the mundane through his powerful use of language, thereby enabling us to learn a range of profound lessons from his poetry.”

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