



The Forge

Seamus Heaney

All I know is a door into the dark.
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,
The unpredictable fantail of sparks
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.
The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,
Horned as a unicorn, at one end and square,
Set there immovable: an altar
Where he expends himself in shape and music.
Sometimes, leather-aproned, hairs in his nose,
He leans out on the jamb, recalls a clatter
Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows;
Then grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick
To beat real iron out, to work the bellows.

Vocabulary

- **Forge** - a blacksmith's workshop or smithy
- **Anvil** - a heavy iron block used by blacksmiths in shaping iron
- **Altar** - a table or flat block used in religious ceremonies or rites
- **Jamb** - the side post of a doorway
- **Bellows** - a device used for blowing air into a fire

Pre-reading task

- Have you ever seen a blacksmith at work in a forge? Describe what you've seen.
- Is there a difference between the work of a poet or artist and 'real' work by a craftsman?

Questions

1. Is the poet familiar with the forge? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Do you think the poet has been inside the forge?
3. Is the poet writing from the viewpoint of a child or adult or both?
4. 'For the poet the blacksmith is a place of mystery and wonder.' Do you agree with the statement? Why?
5. Can you find any examples of onomatopoeia in the poem?
6. Can you find any examples of similes?
7. Comment on the description of the anvil as 'an altar'.
8. What impression of the blacksmith do you form from reading the poem?
9. Does the poet regard the blacksmith as an artist or craftsman? What do you think is the difference?
10. Comment on the use of the word 'real' in the final line.

Overview

The poet regards the forge as a place of mystery - 'All I know is a door into the dark', he seems to imagine what the inside is actually like. The everyday workplace is also a place of creation and mysticism highlighted by the poet's evocative language - 'anvil's short-pitched ring', 'fantail of sparks'. The blacksmith's anvil is 'an altar' - the centre of a religious or spiritual space. Heaney describes the blacksmith's physical labour in terms usually used for an artist or performer - 'expends himself in shape and music'. His portrayal of the smith himself is more prosaic - 'leather-aproned'...'hairs in his nose'. We get the idea that his response to Heaney's musing about him would be met with a 'grunt'...'a slam and flick' as he returns to real work - 'to beat real iron out, to work the bellows'. Perhaps the poet feels that his own work of creation, his attempt to forge meaning is somehow not as 'real' as the smith's.

Key Points

- Deeply Personal
- Vivid Imagery
- Moment of revelation
- Artistry v Craft
- The passing of time
- Mystery
- Ordinary/Everyday

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

