

Leaving Certificate English

Seamus Heaney Notes

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Key bullet points from his biography to take note of for your essay:

- 1) His childhood in Derry deeply influenced him.
- 2) Growing up in the North and the Troubles, influenced his perception of violence and Irish identity.
- 3) The natural world features in his poetry.
- 4) His relationships with his wife and father are important sources of creativity.
- 5) He writes about the creative process.

Key stylistic features that reoccur throughout Heaney's work:

- Heaney favours a four line stanza and you'll see this form repeated in his poems.
- He uses classical allusion/mythology in his poems.
- In terms of language, Heaney often favours compound adjectives, lending a unique richness to his imagery.
- Many of his poems feel like you entering half way through a conversation, there is a lovely intimacy to them as a result.

The Forge

'The Forge' is a Petrarchan sonnet, a 14 line poem with a set rhyming scheme yet it is loosely in iambic pentameter which is associated with Shakespearean sonnets. Iambic pentameter is a line with 10 syllables, 5 stressed and 5 unstressed, which lends the poem a rhythmic beat. What makes it a Petrarchan sonnet is that it is divided into an octave, the first 8 lines, and a sestet, the final 6 lines. Between the octave and the sestet there is a volta, which means a turn or a change in focus of the poem. You will not need to explain all this in the exam but if you are aiming for a H1 it's crucial that you can confidently use the words; sonnet, octave, sestet, volta and iambic pentameter, throughout your analysis of this poem.

On the surface the poem is about a forge and the blacksmith who works within it, but as with most poems there are layers of meaning to be unravelled by the listener. In this case the deeper meanings in poem concern creativity, craftsmanship and how certain arts are dying in the face of encroaching modernity. The craftsmanship of the

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blacksmith, which Heaney so admires, is an extended metaphor for the craftsmanship of the poet himself, his ability to walk through the 'door into the dark'. The alliterative opening image captures how poetry is a journey into the recesses of a poet's mind and imagination.

The whole poem is littered with sound; 'ring', 'hiss', 'clatter', 'grunts', 'slam', onomatopoeia bringing to life the work of the smith and noisy forge. A H1 tip is that any technique that is reoccurs throughout a poem, such as the onomatopoeia in this poem, must be mentioned in your analysis of the poem.

So let's first look at the octave which focuses on the workings within the forge and then move to the sestet, where, after the volta, the poem switches focus to the blacksmith himself. The 'door into the dark' immediately lends a sense of mystery to the poem; this mystery is continued with the alchemical work of the blacksmith:

The unpredictable fantail of sparks
Or hiss when a shoe toughens in water.

The unpredictability of the creative process and its transformative nature are captured in this vivid image. The magical and spiritual essence of creativity is illustrated when Heaney compares the anvil to 'an alter'; his tone is one of reverence and awe.

When the poem switches focus to the smith in the sestet, it celebrates the mastery of the man who 'expends himself in shape and music', his job is physical but not without a beauty of its own. The tone changes sharply here, to one of nostalgia for times gone by as he 'recalls a clatter/of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows'. The blacksmith and his work appear anachronistic in this modern world. An anachronism is something that belongs to another era or is perceived as old fashioned. These skilled trades are becoming defunct with increasing improvements in technology and automation. The poem comes from a collection published in 1969 but this anxiety still exists today, if not even more so. The skilled trade of the smith as I've mentioned before is comparable to the work of the poet, and the poem contains Heaney's anxiety that his work may too be undervalued. But this anxiety is discarded in the final lines of the poem as the poet asserts that the smith:

...grunts and goes in, with a slam and a flick,
To beat real iron out, to work the bellows.

This idea of beating 'real iron' is a very masculine image; Heaney surmises that the work has intrinsic value and will continue on.

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So to recap:

- **Themes:** the creative process, lost arts.
- **Key images:** The octave; the door into the dark, the fantail of sparks, the anvil as the altar. The sestet: shape and music, the traffic where hooves were, real iron.
- **Stylistic features:** sounds permeate the poem, onomatopoeia
- **Tone:** mystery, awe, nostalgia.

Bogland

‘Bogland’ is a poem about the natural world but on a deeper level it is a commentary about Irish identity. We see this subtle shift in perspective from the individual ‘I’ to the collective pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ used throughout the poem. There is a comparison at play in the imagery here between America and Ireland; the vastness of the former is contrasted with the depth of the latter. The American landscape may be big but our bogs hold the secrets of millennia. This is perfectly captured in the imagery of the opening stanza;

‘We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening -
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon’

The use of the dash here cleverly slicing the line, mirroring the language.

These lines continue with the vivid image of how the eye is ‘wooded into the cyclops’ eye of a tarn’, meaning the sun disappears into a mountain lake. The words ‘cyclops’ and ‘tarn’ lend a mythical aspect to the poem and this is continued in the unearthing of artefacts from the bog. Artefacts from previous era’s ‘the skeleton/Of the Great Irish Elk’ and the ‘butter sunk under/More than a hundred years’.

The bog itself is compared to the butter preserved within it, ‘The ground itself is kind, black butter’. Its porous nature means that it lacks definition, both physically and ideologically; ‘Missing its last definition/By millions of years’. It is yielding, with a hint that one could be ensnared in it, ‘Melting and opening underfoot’.

A key image in the poem is that of the pioneers, the Irish pioneers, digging down, as opposed to the American pioneers who journeyed West.

‘Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards’

But as always there are layers of metaphorical meaning below the surface, just like the ‘layers’ of the bog. The pioneers may be the Irish artist digging deep in search of inspiration or some definition of identity;

‘Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before’

The sense here is of the deep historical and cultural significance of our island, encapsulated in the bog.

The poem closes with the ambiguous image; ‘The wet centre is bottomless.’ This can be interpreted that the Irish landscape and cultural heritage are a bottomless well of both inspiration and pride for the Irish people.

Like all of Heaney’s poems the language is infused with a musicality, we see sibilance, assonance and alliteration throughout. The tone is very self-assured and authoritative to an extent, Heaney assumes the voice of the Irish people. This is very much a universal poem as opposed to a personal one.

So to recap:

- **Themes: the natural landscape, Irish identity, poetry as a way of searching for a collective identity.**
- **Key images: the bog, the elk, the butter, the pioneers digging down, the ‘layers’ of the bog, the bottomless centre.**
- **Stylistic features: contrast, mystery and mythology. The collective pronoun ‘we’.**
- **Tone: self-assured.**

The Tollund Man

‘The Tollund Man’ should be read in conjunction with ‘Bogland’. ‘Bogland’, as we’ve just seen, deals with Irish bogs, but ‘The Tollund Man’ refers to a bog body found in the Jutland region of Denmark in the 1950’s. The bog man died around the 5th Century BC in what is presumed was some sort of ritual human sacrifice. If you have not done so, you should google the images of the Tollund Man now; the way the bog preserved the man is

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absolutely fascinating and it will bring the imagery of the poem vividly to life. The themes of the poem are violence, death and rebirth.

First let's look at a brief overview of the form and content of the poem; it has eleven stanzas divided into three distinct sections. In the first section Heaney imagines a trip Aarhus to see where the bog body 'reposes'. In the second section the poet links the bog and its powers to preserve a body, to the victims of the War of Independence and the Troubles in Northern Ireland. And in the third section he imagines the bog man on his way to his ceremonial death and describes how the poet would feel oddly at home in that foreign place. *Why* Heaney would feel a familiarity with the place is the crux of the poem and we will get to it a bit later.

The poem opens with the wistful 'Some day I will go to Aarhus', immediately there a sense of something desired but is not yet a reality, and this is important in relation to the Northern Irish context in section two. The opening stanzas are extremely vivid as Heaney gives us a detailed description of the bog body, an image full of alliteration;

'his peat brown head,
the mild pods of his eye lids,
his pointed skin cap.'

The man was thought to be a sacrifice to the goddess Nerthus, goddess of fertility and the language of sex and fertility can be seen throughout, 'naked' he is her 'Bridegroom' and the she 'opened her fen,/ those dark juices working/Him to a saint's kept body'. The bog has a transformative effect on the man's corpse.

Heaney wonders could he 'risk blasphemy' by asking the Tollund man 'to make germinate' to regrow, the bodies of those lost to violence in Ireland. The imagery here becomes violent and the tone becomes menacing; victims of Ireland's bloody history are remember in graphic terms. His first image of violence is in reference to the War of Independence;

'The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards'

The language used, 'scattered...flesh' evokes total revulsion in the reader. This brutalisation of the bodies of victims into parts, is continued in the imagery of the next stanza. Heaney references the sectarian murder of four brothers, whose bodies were mutilated by dragging them along railway tracks; 'Tell-tale skin and teeth/Flecking the

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sleepers'. We feel disgust, mirrored in the harsh alliterative 't' in this stanza. The bodies in fragments are sharply contrasted with the perfectly preserved body of the Tollund Man we see earlier in the poem. The land in Denmark preserving its men, the land of Ireland destroying them.

Section three returns us to Heaney's imagination as he visualises himself journeying through the land where the Tollund man made his final journey on the 'tumbrel'. Heaney describes how he will feel alien the strange place names and foreign language 'not knowing their tongue' contributing to his feeling 'lost'. However, the final statement is the crux of the poem I referred to earlier;

'I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.'

Heaney equates being lost and unhappy in the 'man-killing parishes' with being in Ireland; this is an a particularly cutting compound adjective in this final stanza. The poem is a scathing commentary on our violent past.

So to recap:

- **Themes: violence, sectarian violence, death, rebirth.**
- **Key images: the Tollund man, the goddess, the bog, the body parts of the victims of violence**
- **Stylistic features: the personification of the bog as the goddess Nerthus.**
- **Tone: wistful, revulsion, unhappy, critical.**

Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication

1 Sunlight

Mossbawn was the farm where Heaney spent his early years and the woman in the poem is his aunt Mary. Sunlight is a beautifully simple poem; it has the painterly quality of a Vermeer, look up the painting 'The Milkmaid' and you will see what I mean. The poem captures a moment of simple domesticity, full of comfort and love. His aunt is baking scones, the kitchen is quiet; this act of baking is an act of love. The poem is divided into seven four line stanzas but a key stylistic feature is the enjambment that gives the poem a laconic flow, mirroring the slow pace of the scene depicted. This effect is also created by the assonance, the long 'oo' sounds we see throughout.

The opening image, as with all poems, is important, he begins 'There was a sunlit absence.', part of the farmyard is in shadow and yet 'water honeyed' in the heat and the sibilant simile, 'the sun stood/like a griddle cooling/against the wall', playfully

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contradicts his earlier assertion. This poem is about light and shadow, illuminating the love in the scene but the words are never spoken aloud between Heaney and his aunt.

Stanzas 3, 4 and 5 concern the act of baking ‘her hands scuffled/over the bakeboard’. Then the focus slowly turns towards his aunt ‘broad lapped’ with ‘whitening nails’ and ‘measling shins’, the realism of the imagery here is refreshing in our world of edited perfection.

One of the most significant lines in the poem is the simple statement ‘here is space/again’. Time is suspended and the moment is reflective and meditative. The ‘tick of two clocks’ lends no urgency, only a rhythm to the scene. The final stanza contains the crux of the poem ‘And here is love’, Heaney finishes with a clever simile:

And here is love
Like a tinsmith’s scoop
Sunk past its gleam
In the meal bin.

So much of the affection between the aunt and nephew is unsaid, ‘sunk’ like the scoop, but there nonetheless.

So to recap:

- **Themes:** domesticity in all its simple beauty, love.
- **Key images:** the sunlight and heat, the images of the aunt baking and sitting, the tick of two clocks, here is space, love like sunk scoop.
- **Stylistic features:** painterly quality of the imagery, light and shadow.
- **Tone:** meditative, appreciative, loving.

A Constable Calls

It is interesting to analyse ‘A Constable Calls’ alongside ‘Mossbawn: 1 Sunlight’ because both deal with encounters in the family home. Yet, while one is familiar and full of love, the other is chilling and full of threat. Remember, that linking your poems like this throughout your Leaving Cert essay is important in creating a cohesion. As discussed earlier Heaney was a Catholic growing up in Northern Ireland at a time when Catholics were marginalised and largely underrepresented in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). The Constable has called to do a tax return on Heaney’s father’s crops from the farm, and seen through the eyes of the child, it is an ominous visit.

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An interesting technique used in the poem, to dehumanise the Constable, is synecdoche. Synecdoche is when a part is used to represent the whole, in this case 'the boot of the law'. The constable is representative of the law and justice, but he represents the violence and oppression of it, as seen in the word 'boot'. The constable is continuously fragmented, young Heaney sees only the accoutrements of his position; 'the cap', the 'polished holster', 'revolver butt', 'the heavy ledger' and the 'Domesday Book', he cannot see beyond these symbols of power and violence, to see the man as whole person.

The voice in the poem, the power of language also belongs to the Constable, save for a terse 'No' from Heaney's father, the Constable is the interrogator and person in control.

'Any other root crops?
Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?'

In fact the young boy is so intimidated by the visit he questions the veracity of his father's statement; 'was there not a line of turnips where the seed ran out/in the potato field?' His uncertainty and naivety means he 'assumes small guilts and sat/imagining the black hole in the barracks'. The 'black hole' here is important for the sheer terror it represents, an annihilation at the hands of the law and the tone created by the forceful alliteration in these lines is oppressive.

Because we share young Heaney's fearful perspective of the visit, the effect on the reader is one feeling disconcerted. The anticipation of the ticking bomb cleverly alluded to in the onomatopoeic final line 'And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked' creates an unbearable tension, especially because as readers we know the tragedy of the Troubles lies ahead for Northern Ireland. The final line is in this way devastatingly premonitory.

So to recap:

- **Themes: power and power structures, violence, oppression.**
- **Key images: all the images associated with the constable, his bike, the Domesday book.**
- **Stylistic features: synecdoche, the onomatopoeia, the direct speech of the Constable.**
- **Tone: threatening, fearful, ominous.**

A Call

A call is another memory of Heaney's father and the themes are love and mortality. It describes a phone call he makes to his parents and while his mother goes to call his

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father in from the garden to talk to him, Heaney pictures his father in his mind's eye. Suddenly, he is struck by the mortality of his aging parent and deep sense of love for him.

The poem opens with the voice of Heaney's mother, the use of direct speech gives the poem a sense of immediacy and a casualness to begin with. She goes out to get Heaney's father who is 'weeding'. Her reference to the fact that 'The weather *here's* (my emphasis) so good' creates a sense of physical distance between the son and his parents, a distance that the phone call is trying to diminish.

Heaney pictures his father gardening, a man of action, emphasised by the use of the verbs 'Touching, inspecting, separating...pulling'. He is gently extracting the 'frail and leafless' stalks, a subtle metaphor for the aging process and death. He is satisfied in his work but an undercurrent of sadness is alluded to;

'Pleased to feel each little weed-root break,
But rueful also...'

We are left wondering what has caused his melancholy.

Heaney's visual is interrupted by the aural image of the clocks ticking in the silence of his parent's far away hall.

'Then found myself listening to
The amplified grave ticking of hall clocks'

'Grave' here means serious, but it is also an allusion to death, and a few lines later Heaney describes the 'sunstruck pendulums...', pendulums were often stopped when someone in a house died. This gives rise to a philosophical thought; the poet repurposes the Medieval morality plays which feature the characters 'Everyman' and the personification of Death, and imagines that nowadays Death would merely make a phone call to their victim to summon them to the afterlife.

'...if it were nowadays
This is how Death would summon Everyman.'

It is a morbid thought and one that overwhelms Heaney because when he is interrupted by the voice of his father he proclaims, 'I nearly said I loved him'.

It is the word 'nearly' that makes this concluding line so poignant, Heaney feels deep love for his father but is unable to express it out loud.

The form of this poem differs from many of the others, there are irregular stanzas and the use of ellipses, give it a slow, meandering feel that is then sharply interrupted by his musings on mortality and his undeclared filial love. It is an ordinary moment suffused with the extraordinary acknowledgement of our most human conditions, our ability to love and our mortality.

So to recap;

- **Themes: a son's love, mortality.**
- **Key images: the father gardening, the clocks in the hall, the morality play and the characters of Everyman and Death.**
- **Stylistic features: direct speech of Heaney's mother.**
- **Tone: loving, poignant, undercurrent of melancholy.**

The Harvest Bow

A harvest bow was a bow made of straw worn on a the lapel of a jacket in celebration of the end of harvest, they were also given as small love tokens. In the poem, Heaney is speaking to his father, remembering a Harvest Bow that he made when Heaney was a child and the poem moves between past and present. Adult Heaney has that same bow on his dresser now and it creates a makes him nostalgic. The poem is in praise of his father's craftsmanship and character.

In the first stanza Heaney addresses his father directly and recalls him plaiting the harvest bow, seemingly infusing the wheat with the his own 'mellowed silence'. The image of the father here is a calm person, a person who does not talk unnecessarily perhaps, someone who takes pride in their work. The bow is outwardly described as 'a throwaway love-knot', yet Heaney has kept it, and in the final stanza we see how he cherishes it's symbolism.

The second stanza focuses on the father's work worn hands, hands that have 'aged', hands involved in manual labour and yet hands that could do delicate creative work too as seen in the image:

'Hands...harked to their gift and worked with fine intent
Until your fingers moved somnambulant'

It is done with such skill it is almost as if he is doing it in his sleep, Heaney the master crafter of words is admiring his father's 'gift', his craftsmanship and skill.

The end of the second stanza moves back to the present with Heaney holding the bow in his hands 'Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable'. I love this image it's so evocative. 'Palpable' means something you can touch and feel but it also means *a feeling* that is so strong that you can touch it. The 'unsaid' could mean a few things here, so there's a lovely ambiguity at play; ultimately I read it that Heaney feels his father's love when he holds the bow.

When he looks through the bow in the third stanza 'spy into its golden loops', he is again brought back to his childhood. This time he is on an evening walk with his father in the fields of Mossbawn, the farm he grew up on but was subsequently sold as referenced by the 'auction notice on the outhouse wall'. Heaney describes how he was 'already homesick/for the big lift of these evenings', perhaps meaning he was anticipating the families imminent departure from Mossbawn, but also acknowledging the transience of that special time with his father, 'the big lift' being how he was emotionally buoyed by such intimate evenings.

In the final stanza Heaney quotes a poem saying 'the motto of this frail device', the bow, could be 'The end of art is peace' and again this line defies a single interpretation. It could mean when an artist finishes his work, he finally gets peace. Or more probably that the end goal of any artistic endeavour is political, its aim is for peace. These peaceful pastoral images of father and son stand in sharp contrast with the violence associated with the North in Irish consciousness, is Heaney offering an alternative image, a peaceful image, as a representation of his homeland? Or is it a utopian, idealistic image that he craves returns to the North?

The final simile of the bow, 'like a drawn snare' who the spirit of the corn has managed to escape from the trap. Is this a reference to Heaney's move out of Northern Ireland during the Troubles, has he managed to slip out of danger?

Ultimately, the poem is an intimate portrait of a father and his admiring son. In terms of form, it has a steady aabbcc rhyming pattern throughout and it gives it a lovely steady rhythm, a pattern, just like the pattern his father followed in making the bow. The enjambment contributes to the flow of the poem, mirroring the meandering walk of father and son through 'the long grass and midges'.

So to recap:

- **Themes: father son relationship, craftsmanship and skill, the political purpose of art.**
- **Key images: the bow, his father's hands, 'the big lift', the motto, simile of the snare.**

- **Stylistic features: rhyming scheme, the enjambment.**
- **Tone: nostalgic, admiration, intimate, didactic.**

The Pitchfork

‘The Pitchfork’ should be read in conjunction with ‘The Harvest Bow’, as it also celebrates Heaney’s father. In this poem the poet uses confluence to merge the imagery of the pitchfork with his father, he highlights his admiration for both the man and the tool he uses in this beautiful lyric poem. Some interpretations see the ‘he’ in the poem as young Heaney, but for this reading the ‘he’ is assumed to be Heaney’s father, as the poem comes from collection that mourned his father’s passing. The poem is also a meditation on the art of writing poetry.

In the opening lines, we once again see the stylistic technique, so often favoured by Heaney, where we feel as if we have entered mid-conversation;

‘Of all the implements, the pitchfork was the one
That come near to an imagined perfection:’

This ‘imagined perfection’ is because of the transformation the father undergoes in young Heaney’s eyes when he handles the pitchfork. He becomes a ‘warrior’, or ‘athlete’ and a worker all in one. He uses a simile to say that it ‘felt like a javelin, accurate and light’. It becomes a weapon in his father’s skilled hands and classical images of the hero are evoked here. The ‘accurate and light’ show the father’s skill and strength respectively. The tone is admiration and awe.

The language in the third stanza is unusual in that nearly the entire stanza is a list of descriptors of the pitchfork and by extension, his father. It is described as being ‘sweat-cured’, here is the compound adjective which makes Heaney’s imagery so individual, the implication is that hard work has almost curated and refined the tool, just as a writer curates and refines a poem. The ‘springiness’ is suggestive of his father’s youth and vitality. ‘Balanced’ is a testament to the calm and quiet nature we observed in the Harvest Bow. There is definitely a masculinity associated with the pitchfork through the language chosen, the instrument itself is described in quite phallic terms at times.

The poem becomes even more symbolic of the writing process in the final two stanzas. He describes his father imagining the flight of the pitchfork ‘He would see the shaft of a pitchfork sailing past’ but this flight can be seen as a metaphor for flights of imagination. The father has learned to let go of controlling the outcome of the throw. Let’s look closer at the final stanza

...has learned at last to follow that simple lead
Past it's own aim, out to an other side
Where perfection – or nearness to it – is imagined
Not in the aiming but the opening hand.

Metaphorically speaking Heaney has learned that 'perfection' in writing, or the closest thing to it, comes not from what you believe is the aim of the piece, but the vulnerability that occurs during the process 'the opening hand'. How it lands in the consciousness of the reader is out of his control, like his father before him he can only trust the process and 'follow that simple lead', his imagination. There is something almost metaphysical hinted at here in the skill of the two men. The soft sibilance of the pitchfork 'sailing past/Evenly, imperturbably through space,/Its prongs starlight and absolutely soundless –' has connotations of the transcendental quality of poetry, its ability to traverse space and time is evoked here.

So to recap:

- **Themes:** his admiration of his father's skill and masculine prowess, the art of writing as imaginative flights of fancy and vulnerability.
- **Key images:** the pitchfork and the plethora of adjectives used to describe it, the warrior and athlete, the pitchfork flying through space, the opening hand.
- **Stylistic features:** compound adjectives, feeling as we have entered a conversation that's already begun, repetition of 'perfection'.
- **Tone:** awe, admiration, pride, trust (in relation to the creative process)

The Underground

Outwardly 'The Underground' is poem about the Heaney's honeymoon in London, when he and his wife, Marie, took a tube to a concert in the Albert Hall. When reading the poem it's important to contextualise it, the Heaney's were Catholics who married in the 1960's, a time when sex outside of marriage was illicit, so often peoples' first sexual experiences happened on Honeymoon. In fact, 'The Underground' is an incredibly sexual poem, full of the heady chemistry of a newly married couple. It is poem about love and sex, tension and gratification.

The opening stanza sets the scene vividly, the couple are running through the 'vaulted tunnel' of the tube and there is an urgency to it with the continued use of the present participle, the 'ing' form, throughout; 'running, 'speeding', 'gaining'. The imagery has

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all the hallmarks of an old fashioned courtship. The idea of the ‘chase’ is evoked and ‘playing hard to get’, as his wife is ‘speeding’ ahead, out of reach. Classical allusion, of which Heaney is so fond, also features in this opening stanza and contributes to the sexual connotations. He uses a simile to compare himself to Pan who ardently pursued the virginal spirit Syrinx, who turns herself into a reed to avoid his advances.

‘And me, me then like a fleet god gaining
Upon you before you turned into a reed’

The second stanza goes on to compare his wife to a ‘new white flower japed with crimson’, here Heaney uses white to represent his wife’s virginity and the ‘crimson’ to represent the loss of it. Her buttons come off her coat as she runs ahead, almost as if she is undressing before him, or he wishes it so:

‘As the coat flapped wild and button and button
Sprang off and fell in a trail’

The repetition of ‘button’ and the energetic verb ‘sprung’ adds tension here.

The pace of the third stanza slows as assonance abounds, ‘Honeymooning, moonlighting’, ‘moonlighting’ can do something illicit. The main metaphor in the third stanza is the child’s story of Hansel and Gretel, he compares himself to Hansel picking up the breadcrumbs as they retrace their steps after the concert. Yet the use of the fairy-tale imagery belies the sexuality of the lines:

‘...and now
I come as Hansel came on the moonlight stones
Retracing the path back, lifting the buttons’.

There is a shift in tone again in the final stanza and yet another classical allusion. The metaphor used here by Heaney is that of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Eurydice was stolen by Hades and brought to the Underworld, Orpheus was allowed to take her back on one condition, as she followed behind him out of the underworld, he was not allowed to look back. He looked back and lost her forever. Again while it’s important you know this story to understand the image, you do not have to explain it in the exam. .

Heaney’s sexual appetite appears not to have been quenched and he compares the empty phallic tracks to himself:

‘ ...the wet track

Bared and tensed as I am'

The final line is ambiguous, while it is a poem about love and intimacy it is also about early love, there is erotic tension but perhaps all is not perfect in the young lovers' relationship. Heaney is acutely aware of his wife's step behind him 'your step following' but he fears he will lose her if he looks back, just like Orpheus lost Eurydice. The metaphor here contains certain anxieties about trust and a wife following a husband's path. Is there a more guarded tone this final stanza than the intimacy we saw earlier in the poem? Is the idea that Heaney is 'leading' his wife from the Underworld, that he is her escape route, somewhat self-important?

So to recap:

- **Themes: love, sex, eroticism of early marriage, tension in relationships.**
- **Key images: Pan and Syrinx, white flower with crimson, Hansel and Gretel, the buttons, the wet track, Orpheus and Eurydice.**
- **Stylistic features: classical allusion, sexual language.**
- **Tone: excited, intimate, tense.**

The Skunk

It is a good idea to follow analysis of 'The Underground' with 'The Skunk', both deal with the subject of Heaney's marriage to his wife, Marie. However, as we've just seen, 'The Underground' is about the beginning of their marriage, while 'The Skunk' was written much later in their relationship and is a much more playful poem.

Heaney spent time in California working away from his wife and as the cliché goes, 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'. He wrote her love letters and everyday things such as the 'eucalyptus' and 'wine' reminded him of her absence. During this time, Heaney would see a skunk at night 'like a visitor'. Once home with his wife, he is suddenly reminded of the skunk and draws a comparison between the two, not the most flattering of comparisons perhaps! But while his desire and love for his wife are no doubt in earnest, the metaphor is meant playfully.

The poem opens with another unusual comparison, the skunk's tail is compared to the black and white garment worn by a priest at a 'funeral mass', the tail is so striking that it 'paraded the skunk', there is a sense of the skunk flaunting herself here. The poem has from the outset a sense of voyeurism or scopophilia, the poet himself proclaiming in the third stanza 'I began to be tense as a voyeur' as he watches first the skunk and in the final stanza, his wife.

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The poem is an extremely sensuous poem, appealing to all five senses, and immersing us in the poet's experience. We see vivid visual imagery in the skunk herself. Aural imagery lends an immediacy to the scene; 'The refrigerator whinnied into silence', the skunk 'snuffing the boards'. Olfactory imagery, which appeals to our sense of smell, occurs when Heaney imagines 'inhaling' the scent of his wife 'off a cold pillow'. The sense of taste is evoked in gustatory imagery with the 'tang of the eucalyptus' and the 'mouthful of wine'. Even tactile imagery appears in the composition of the love letters to his absent wife. The poem truly is a riot for the senses.

An important element in the poem that you must mention, apart from its sensuous nature is the idea of a marriage transforming over time. We see this when Heaney talks about the word "wife"....had mutated', their relationship has shifted, we see this later in the succinct 'Mythologized, demythologized', although he is referring to the skunk here the skunk is a metaphor for his wife. Perhaps at the beginning of romantic relationships there is a certain mystery but as time progressed the myth of romance becomes the reality of marriage 'demythologized'.

This is not to say that the chemistry between husband and wife has diminished we see in the final lines a sexual suggestiveness.

Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer
For the black plunge-line nightdress.

The poem is about love and absence, but also a celebration of his wife who ignites all his senses.

So to recap:

- **Themes:** love, desire, the unfolding of relationships over time.
- **Key images:** the skunk, the final two lines of the wife searching for the nightdress.
- **Stylistic features:** metaphor, abundance of sensuous imagery.
- **Tone:** playful, longing, loving.

Tate's Avenue

'Tate's Avenue' is the third poem on the course that deals with Heaney's relationship with Marie. In this poem he uses three different rugs to illustrate three different periods in their romance.

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In the first stanza, Heaney is recalling a specific rug, rooting a time in his relationship in a memory associated with a physical object. He dismisses the 'first rug'; 'Not the brown and fawn car rug'. This was a rug used perhaps a little while into their courtship, when they were in a 'comfort zone', but before their marriage, before sex. We see this in the image of the rug, 'It's vestal folds unfolded'. Vestal here is a classical allusion to the Vestal virgins, the relationship is comfortable but there's a neutrality, even the colours of the rug are neutral; 'brown', 'fawn', 'sepia-coloured'. The rug is 'spread on the sand by the sea but breathing land-breaths', this image is full of beautiful soft sibilance and alliteration, adding to the comfortable tone of this stanza.

He also dismisses the second rug, which is contrasted to the first, this one is 'scraggy' and bears the marks of reckless abandon; it is covered in 'crusts and eggshells/and olive stones and cheese and salami rinds'. The use of polysyndeton, the repetition of 'and', adding to the idea of excess and indulgence. This rug was in Spain, beside the 'torrents' where they got 'drunk' before a bullfight. It is depicted as a time of heady excitement, and passion.

It is the third rug, the one they sat on earliest in their relationship that he wishes to recall. A rug they sat on in a Belfast back yard and this is where the title of the poem comes from, Tate's Avenue is a street in Belfast. The description of this rug is of a 'locked-park Sunday Belfast' rug, alluding to the puritanical nature of Belfast at that time when the parks would've been locked to observe the Sabbath. The character of this rug is not remembered in as much detail, instead it is the interplay between the two characters resting on it. There is a silence as one reads 'a page is turned', itself a metaphor for a new chapter of their lives beginning. Heaney's senses are heightened as he is acutely aware of Marie's movements 'a finger twirls warm hair', and the feeling of the ground underneath the rug

'I lay at my length and felt the lumpy earth,
Keen sensed more than ever through discomfort'.

Here Heaney is describing both his stubborn nature, and his ability to sit with discomfort. The outwardly ordinary moment was significant for them in that they came to an understanding of each other's personalities;

'When we moved I had your measure and you had mine.'

The tone here is sort of mutual admiration felt between the couple.

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Something to note in the poem is Heaney's use of compound adjectives 'land-breaths', 'locked-park' and 'keen-sensed', as mentioned in the introduction to the podcast, these unique adjectives lend a liveliness but also an individuality to Heaney's imagery.

So to recap:

- **Themes: love, stages in a relationship.**
- **Key images: metaphor of the three rugs, the brown one on the beach, the scraggy one in Spain, the Belfast rug at the beginning of their relationship.**
- **Stylistic features: compound adjectives**
- **Tone: reminiscent, nostalgic, content, admiration.**

Postscript

Postscript is where the term 'P.S' from written letters comes from, it means 'written after'. So the whole poem is like an afterthought, and it reads almost like a stream of consciousness. This is accentuated by the enjambment, there are only two full stops, and by the fact the poem begins with the conjunction 'And', as if part of the sentence has already been said.

It is a beautiful nature poem, praising the rugged natural beauty of the County Clare coastline and the impact that the natural world can have on a human heart at unexpected moments. To go beyond the superficial, the poem is also about aging as well as transience, trying to capture a moment and the uselessness of the endeavour.

The opening line reads like one friend offering friendly advice to another, the tone is warm and inviting;

'And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore'

This repetition of 'time' is subtle yet significant; it hints at the relentlessness of the passage of time, and the poet is warning us to take leisure time, to observe what is around us. The poet advises the listener to go in September or October, and months of the year representing the seasons, are important. These are months of change, a transition towards winter, the weather is wild and the comfort of summer is gone. Heaney wrote the poem in his later years his 'September or October' and this again alludes to the theme of the passage of time which is captured later in the line 'You are neither here nor there / A hurry through with known and strange things pass'. The

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ambiguity in this line is wonderful as the reader tries to find their own definition of what the 'known' and 'strange' things might be.

The key imagery of the poem is the natural world, the elements of the landscape that impacted the poet on his journey; the sea, the 'stones' of the Burren, the lake and the swans alighting on it. Let's look first at the alliterative image 'when the wind/And the light are working off each other', there is a lovely playfulness in this image, it is one of harmony among the natural elements. The wildness of the ocean is mirrored when a flock of swans disturb the surface of the 'slate-grey lake'. The metaphor used here is a particularly vivid one, the flock of swans are compared to a bolt of lightning striking the earth as they reach the lake.

The surface of the slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of flock of swans

The swans themselves are described with soft alliteration and vivid repetition of their colour

'The feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white'.

The poet changes from observer documenting what he sees, to thinker analysing the impact of it:

Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly.

This line is interesting because although he doesn't try to capture it at that exact moment, the very act of writing the poem is an attempt to do so in retrospect. Is Heaney making a commentary on how arts attempt to capture the beauty of the natural world in fact pales in comparison to the experience of the real thing? A top tip for the exam is that it is ok to ask one or two rhetorical questions such as this as part of your analysis, it acknowledges that when it comes to poetry, we don't have all the answers.

The final lines of the poem focus on the impact the experience had on Heaney;

As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

I love the vulnerability of these lines, the poet has been moved by this scene of natural beauty and it shows how our sense of wonder and awe need not deteriorate with age.

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So to recap:

- **Themes:** the beauty and impact of nature, transience and aging, trying to capture a moment and the uselessness of the endeavour, our sense of awe.
- **Key images:** time, the journey motif; September/October, the sea, the 'stones' of the Burren, the lake and the swans alighting on it, the heart.
- **Stylistic features:** soft alliteration,
- **Tone:** conversational, intimate, awe.

Lightenings, viii: 'The Annals Say'

'Lightenings, viii: 'The Annals Say' is probably the poem that coheres the least with the other poems on the course. My advice would be that if you covered it in class use it as one of the poems you refer to briefly, as opposed to analysing it in depth in your essay.

The poem is about a story that survives in the records from Clonmacnoise Monastery. It is a fantastical story about the how a 'ship appeared' to the monks while they 'were all at prayers inside the oratory'. The ship's anchor gets stuck on the 'alter rails' in the second stanza. In the third stanza 'a crewman shinned and grappled down the rope/ And struggled to release it'. Upon seeing this the abbot exclaims;

'This man can't bear our life here and will drown
...unless we help him'.

They free the ship and the man climbs back into the ship. The poem finishes with the cryptic line:

...the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it'.

The poem is an exploration of the mystical or supernatural, and in this final line Heaney changes the perspective, saying that the sailor also saw the monks as supernatural beings.

One of the themes of the poem is about offering help, even to those you don't understand, a metaphor for the relations between the two communities in Northern Ireland. The poem is also about heaviness and lightness, the massive ship is floating and yet in the second stanza we see the harsh, alliterative image halting its course 'the anchor dragged along behind so deep/it hooked itself into the alter rails'. Finally, the ship is 'freed' again. We see an undercurrent here of imagery about being captured or caught and freedom.

So to recap,

- **Themes: the mystical or supernatural, understanding and helping those we may not understand.**
- **Key images: the ship, the monks, the anchor, the crewman.**
- **Stylistic features: the voice of the Abbott. Metaphor for the differing communities in the North.**
- **Tone: wonder.**

Preparing an Essay

Remember the PCLM marking scheme at all times. P is for purpose – am I answering the question asked? C is for coherence – am I linking my responses coherently. L is the marks awarded for language, ‘lively phrasing’, vocabulary, syntax etc. and M is for mechanics, spelling and grammar. Purpose, coherence and Language are all 30% of the essays marks and the remaining 10% is for mechanics.

In terms of revision firstly, you must practice *planning* sample exam questions, look at past exam papers, mock papers and your textbook for the type of questions that come up about Heaney. Often the questions can centre on the idea that in Heaney’s work he manages to convey the universal in the ordinary. If we look at the 2021 question it is a version of this idea; it states on Heaney ‘*transforms the familiar and mundane through his powerful use of language, thereby enabling us to learn a range of profound lessons from his poetry*’. This is essentially asking you to outline all the ordinary things Heaney writes about but then examine the greater themes he extracts from these familiar things. Go through your poems and do a very quick one line per poem plan. This will prepare you to adjust your studied notes to suit the question on the day of the Leaving Cert. One of the biggest mistakes students make is just writing down all the notes they can remember without properly referencing the question asked. Here are some examples of how to plan the 2021 answer very quickly so it’s focused on the question:

‘The Forge’ – the familiar is the blacksmith and forge, the ‘lesson’ is about valuing artistic creativity.

‘A Constable Calls’ – the familiar is the Constable doing his job, the lesson is about oppression and division in the North from a child’s perspective.

‘A Call’ – the familiar is making a phone call to his father, the lesson or theme is the realisation of our parent’s mortality, our love for them.

‘Postscript’ – the familiar, a beautiful landscape, the lesson or theme is the transience of life, and artistic inspiration.

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‘Tate’s Avenue’ – the familiar, sitting on a rug with his wife, the theme – the different the stages of romantic love.

And so on.

Secondly, when you have practiced gearing your notes towards sample questions write a sample essay and go over the essay with a highlighter. Any time you see a word of poetic terminology or a quote from the poet, highlight it. By poetic terminology I mean; theme, image, simile, metaphor, personification, all the sound techniques; alliteration, assonance, sibilance, onomatopoeia, or words like hyperbole, contrast etc. If your essay is covered in highlighter you are on track for a H1!