

## Seamus Heaney: A Critical Introduction

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Heaney was born on April 13, 1939, the eldest of nine children, to Margaret and Patrick Heaney, at the family farm, Mossbawn, about 30 miles northwest of Belfast in County Derry. He attended the local school at Anahorish until 1957, when he enrolled at Queen's College, Belfast and took a first in English there in 1961. The next school year he took a teacher's certificate in English at St. Joseph's College in Belfast. In 1963 he took a position as a lecturer in English at the same school.

While at St. Joseph's he began to write, publishing work in the university magazines under the pseudonym *Incertus*. During that time, along with Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, and others, he joined a poetry workshop under the guidance of Philip Hobsbaum. In 1965, in connection with the Belfast Festival, he published *Eleven Poems*. In August of 1965 he married Marie Devlin. The following year he became a lecturer in modern English literature at Queen's College, Belfast, his first son Michael was born, and Faber and Faber published *Death of a Naturalist*. This volume earned him the E.C. Gregory Award, the Cholmondeley Award in 1967, the Somerset Maugham Award in 1968, and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, also in 1968. Christopher, his second son, was born in 1968.

His second volume, *Door into the Dark*, was published in 1969 and became the Poetry Book Society Choice for the year. In 1970-71 he was a guest lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. He returned to Northern Ireland in 1971, and in 1972 he resigned his lectureship at Queens College, moved his family to Glanmore, in County Wicklow, and published *Wintering Out*. In 1973 his daughter, Catherine Ann, was born. During this year he also received the Denis Devlin Award and the Writer

in Residence Award from the American Irish Foundation. In 1975 *North* was published, winning the E.M. Forster Award and the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize. During these years at Glanmore, Heaney also gave many readings in the United States and England and edited two poetry anthologies.

In 1975 Heaney began teaching at Carysfort College in Dublin. In 1976 the family moved to Sandymount, in Dublin, and Heaney became Department Head at Carysfort. In 1979 he published *Field Work*, and in 1980, *Selected Poems* and *Preoccupations: Selected Prose*. In 1981 he gave up his post at Carysfort to become a visiting professor at Harvard. In 1982 he won the Bennett Award, and Queen's University in Belfast conferred on him an honorary Doctor of Letters degree. He cofounded Field Day Publishing with Brian Friel and others in 1983. *Station Island*, his first collection in five years, was published in 1984. During that year he was elected the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, and Open University awarded him an honorary degree. Also in 1984 his mother, Margaret Kathleen, died. *The Haw Lantern*, published in 1987, contains a brilliant sonnet sequence memorializing her. Heaney's father, Patrick, died after this, and Heaney's latest collection, *Seeing Things*, published in 1991, contains many poems for his father.

Robert Lowell has deemed Heaney "the most important Irish poet since Yeats." Critics have been largely positive about his verse, and he is undoubtedly the most popular poet writing in English today. His books sell by the tens of thousands, and hundreds of "Heaneyboppers" attend his readings. His earliest influences, Robert Frost and Ted Hughes, can be seen throughout his work, but most especially in his first two volumes, where he recollects images of his childhood at Mossbawn. Other poets, especially Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, and even Dante have played important roles in his development.

The first poem in this archive, “Personal Helicon,” introduces an abiding interest, a concern for that which lies deep within the earth. It is dedicated to Michael Longley, another member of Hobsbaum’s group. Mount Helicon is a mountain in Greece, that was, in classical mythology, sacred to Apollo and the Muses. From it flowed two fountains of poetic inspiration. Heaney is here presenting his own source of inspiration, the “dark drop” into personal and cultural memory, made present by the depths of the wells of his childhood. Now, as a man, he is too mature to scramble about on hands and knees, looking into the deep places of the earth, but he has his poetry. This serves as his glimpse into places where “there is no reflection,” but only the sound of a rhyme, like a bucket, setting “the darkness echoing.” This is the final poem in his first volume, and, together with his first poem in that volume, “Digging,” acts as a bookend to the collection, utilizing this successful metaphor.

“Bogland,” the final poem in his second volume, presents once again his fascination with things buried. He acknowledges an attachment to the soil that is the source and subject of his poetry. The catalog of objects, buried in bogs for years, sometimes centuries, and dug up in remarkable condition, encompasses the vegetable world (“waterlogged trunks / of great firs”), the animal world (“the skeleton / of the Great Irish Elk”), and the human world (“Butter sunk under / More than a hundred years”). Perhaps with hindsight we see a progression toward the bog’s most important preservation, a human being.

Hard on the publication of P.V. Glob’s *The Bog People*, detailing the discovery of a series of bodies over 2000 years old in the bogs of Denmark, Heaney’s metaphor, begun in “Bogland,” reaches its ultimate fruition. In Glob’s book, Heaney found the consummation of his descent into the earth. His series of “Bog Poems” (including “The Tollund Man”) address, through a study of these victims of tribal sacrifice and punishment, the political and social situation in his native Northern Ireland. Heaney’s fascination with the past allows him to comment on the

present in an oblique yet forceful way. Perhaps the most striking of these poems is “Punishment,” where he sees in the corpse of a ritually sacrificed woman an echo of the Catholic women in Northern Ireland who are tarred and chained to their front porches for dating British soldiers. He acknowledges his guilt for implicit participation in such terrible deeds, because he “would have cast, I know / the stones of silence.” He recognizes his own conflicting feelings, this man

who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Some critics have placed Heaney in a no-win situation; he is condemned either for confronting too strongly the situation in his homeland, or taken to task for remaining aloof from it. Nevertheless, some of his most convincing elegies deal with friends and family he has lost to the Troubles. “Casualty,” a poem about a Catholic friend murdered by a bomb set by the Provisional Irish Republican Army in a Protestant pub, gives us another look at the tribal warfare in Northern Ireland. His questioning of his friend’s responsibility for his own death realizes the ambiguous nature, the muddling of right and wrong, that grips Northern Ireland today. And yet, what is important is not placing blame, but the recognition of what remains to those who live, memories and sadness.

It is easy to get the impression that Heaney is a provincial poet, concerned only with the happenings of his island and his memory. That conclusion, however, would be misleading. He is not merely a one-note minstrel; his birthplace does not completely occupy his mind. “Song” demonstrates his exploration of the poetic process. Like “Digging” and “Personal Helicon,” this short lyric attends to his own imagination. His descriptive powers are akin to Wordsworth’s, and his attention to the

world around him and the details of language make this poem a small success.

“Harvest Bow,” a touching look at his father’s creative impulse, also addresses Heaney’s own art. The poem rests on the recognition that there are more important creations than the ordering of words. Rather than being merely a recollection of childhood, this poem takes on universal weight in the intertwining of the artistic forces in father and son. Heaney presents the mature relationship of a child with his or her parents, the unspoken joy of a shared experience. His recognition of his father’s different talents leads to a consideration of his own work, like his father’s a “frail device.” Be it a harvest bow or a formal elegy, “The end of art is peace.” Further explorations of Heaney’s thoughts on his own poetry can be found in his two collections of essays, the previously mentioned *Preoccupations* and *The Government of the Tongue*. He is an insightful critic of both the Romantic tradition and the poetry of the twentieth century.

Perhaps his most moving works are the series of sonnets called “Clearances,” written as a memorial to his mother. The two poems we have here, the third and fifth of the sequence, show him taking firm hold of the sonnet form and bending it to his own interpretation of the elegaic tradition. These poems possess a soft power that bathes all in the golden haze of memory while presenting stark images of the spaces that death leaves between us. In “When all the others were away at Mass” Heaney moves from the distant past of the first two quatrains, through a telling break in lines, then into a place nearer the present in the final quatrain. But this present reality is too much to bear, and he retreats again to the past in the final couplet. In this way memory serves as a shield to protect him from his mother’s death. “The cool that came off sheets just off the line” takes place entirely in the past, as he recalls the intricate dance he and his mother performed in folding bed linens. His comment on their

relationship, “Coming close while again holding back,” speaks to a lifetime of memories, and the space that her absence leaves in his life.

His final poems here, from “Lightenings,” take up again thoughts of death, the afterlife, and other planes of existence. The structure of these poems, with their three-line stanzas, recalls Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, where the poet as pilgrim is guided through the afterlife. Heaney has remarked that, since the death of his parents, he feels as if “the roof has blown off” his life. We are all inevitably released from both the weight and the shield of our ancestors. This lightning, when we are finally exposed to the elements, to the cosmos, is both freeing and frightening. The first poem acknowledges the transience of life, framing death in the religious terms of the particular and universal judgements that come at the end of an individual life and the end of the world. Recognition of the fact that “there is no next-time-round” carries with it a mixture of fear and freedom.

Heaney discusses that mixture again in the Hardy lyrics, and explores the questions that the nearness of death brings. Hardy pretends to be dead in “vi,” and, being dead, “He experimented with infinity.” He claims that the recognition of death is a necessary act for a poet, for it alone opens the poet up to what the universe has to say. In “vii” Heaney admits to the frailty of memory, a fragility that makes what is remembered all the more dear. Hardy’s communion with the frightened sheep holds the anticipated sorrow that would later fill his poetry at bay for a moment. Again, the nearness of death, or, for Hardy, the pretending to be dead, is an essential component, if not the ultimate font, of poetry. The final poem here ends on a life-affirming note, for Heaney recognizes the beauty of earthly existence, placing that beauty in a religious context that not only enhances it, but holds out hope for more wonders to come after death.

Heaney's work is filled with images of death and dying, and yet it is also firmly rooted in the life of this world. His tender elegies about friends and family members who have died serve many purposes: they mourn great losses, celebrate those who have gone before us, and recall the solace that remains to us, our memories. When asked recently about his abiding interest in memorializing the people of his life, he replied, "The elegaic Heaney? There's nothing else."