

Seamus Heaney: Ireland's Laureate

A lecture series given by Bruce Stewart
(University of Ulster, emeritus)
at UFRN, Brazil, 20 March – 4 April 2014.



SEAMUS HEANEY

1939 - 2013

Lecture I: “A Sense of Place”

The first lecture will cover:

1. The works and life of Seamus Heaney
2. The Irish cultural and historical background
3. The poet’s early life and influence
4. Some examples of his early work
5. His use of Irish landscape and tradition in the early poetry ...
6. A close reading of some early poems

Northern Ireland ...

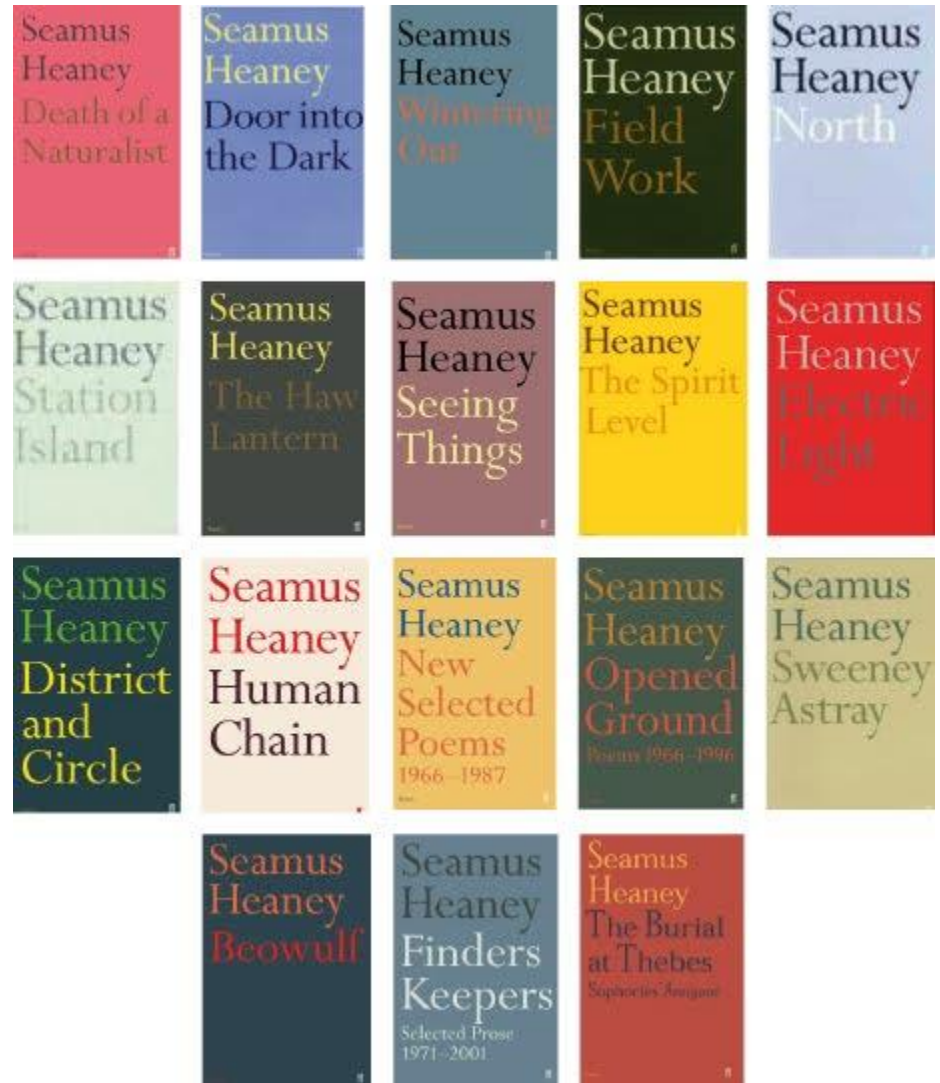


.. Republic of Ireland



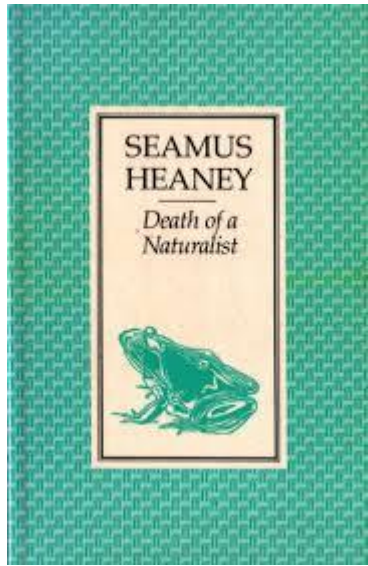
“The British Isles”

Works of Seamus Heaney

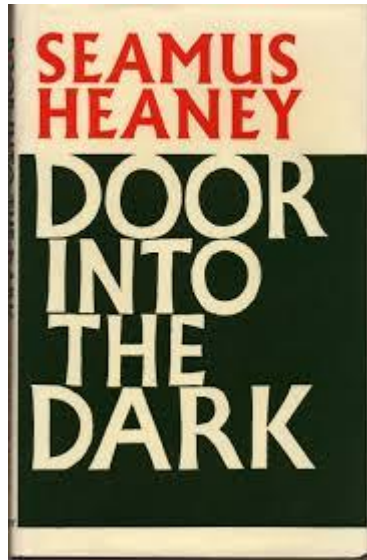


Faber & Faber of London issued all of the poet's collections in a uniform box-set after his death in 2013.

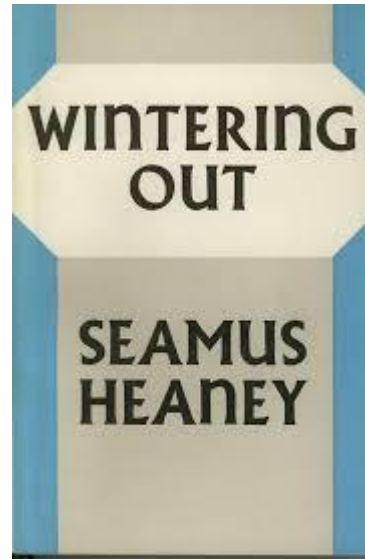
(Selected poems and prose were not included.)



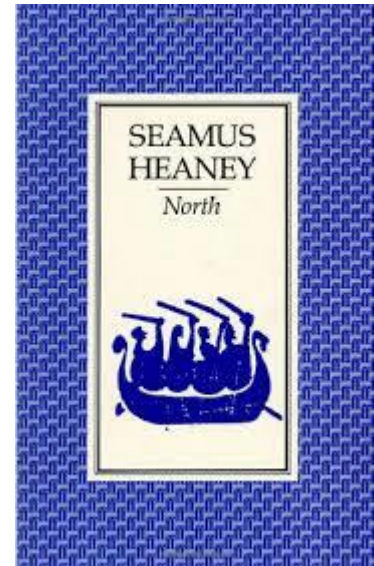
1966



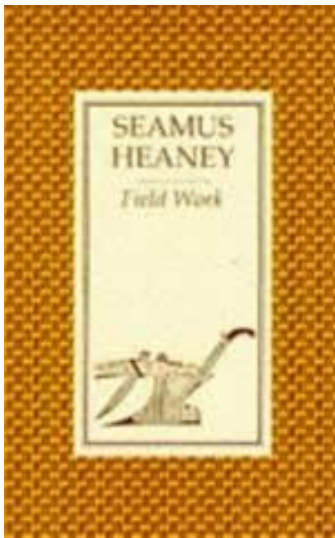
1969



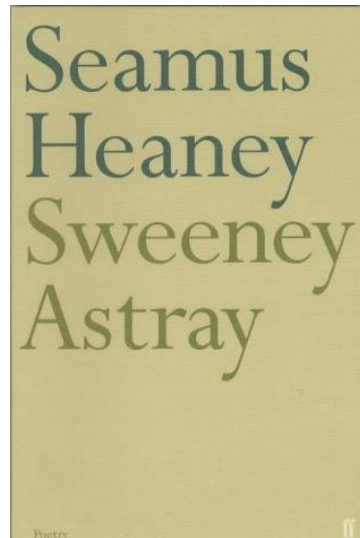
1972



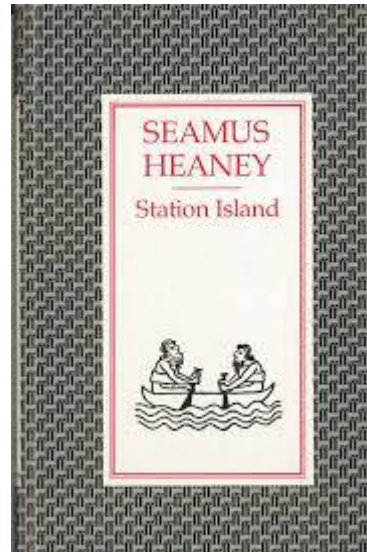
1975



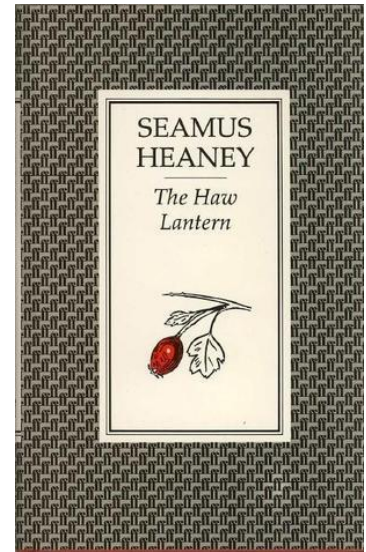
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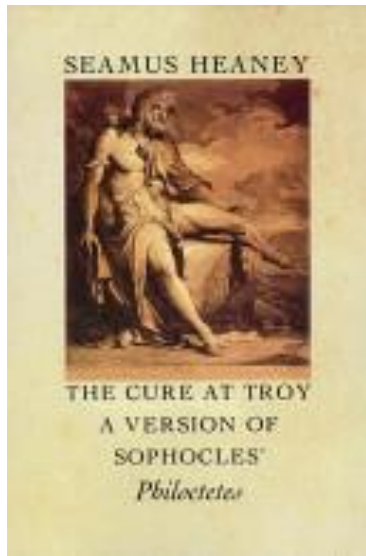
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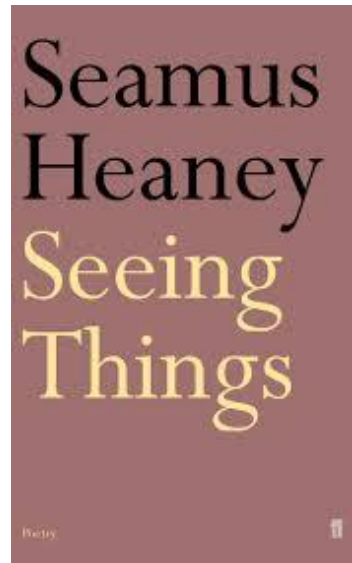
1984



1987



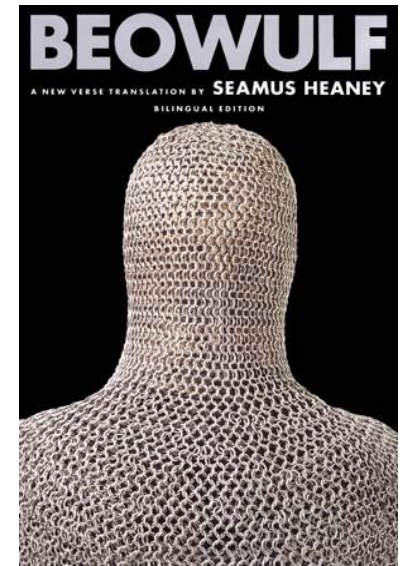
1990



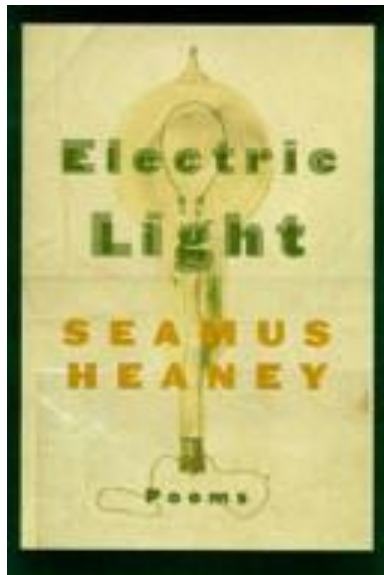
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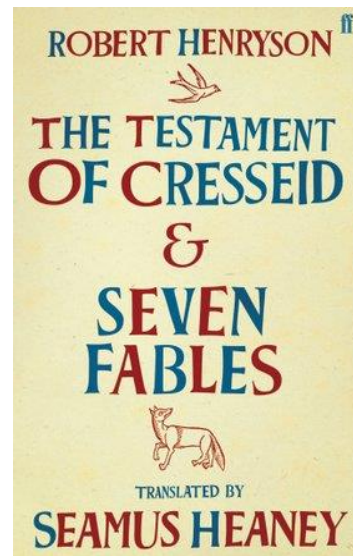
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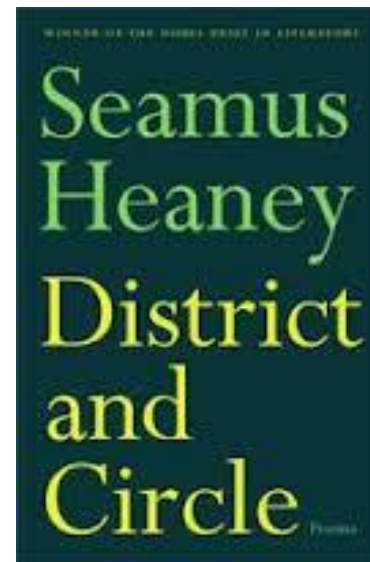
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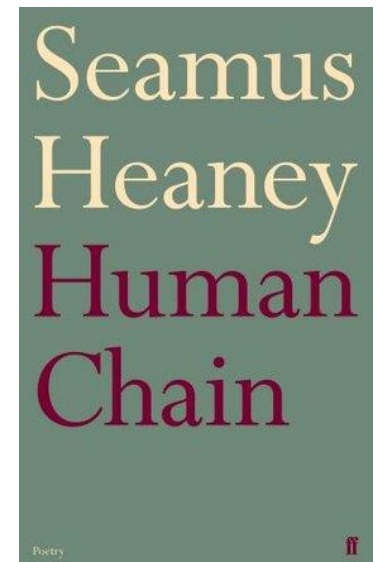
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2005

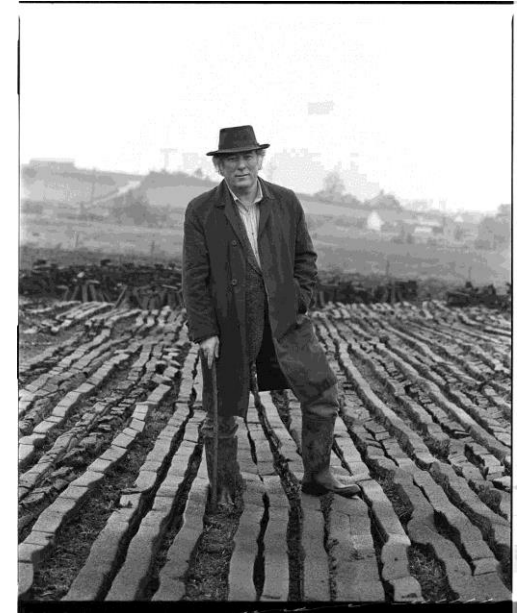


2006



2010

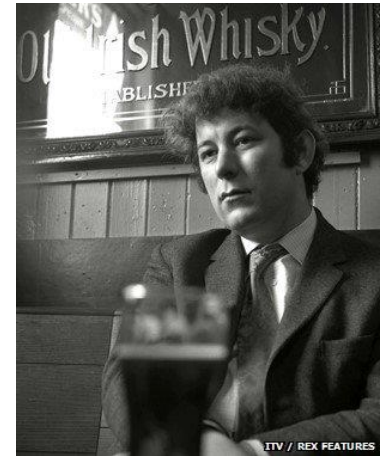
A Poet's Life



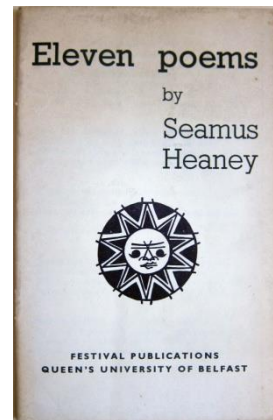
A Poet's Life [cont.]



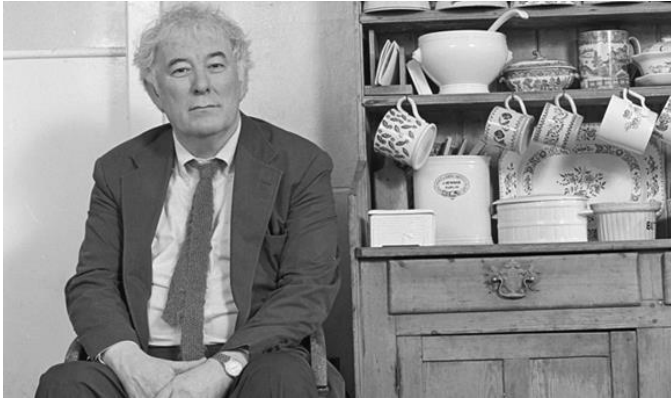
SH enters Queen's University, Belfast, Sept. 1957.



The Belfast Poets – John Hewitt, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney



A Poet's Life [cont.]



Irishman, countryman,
son, husband

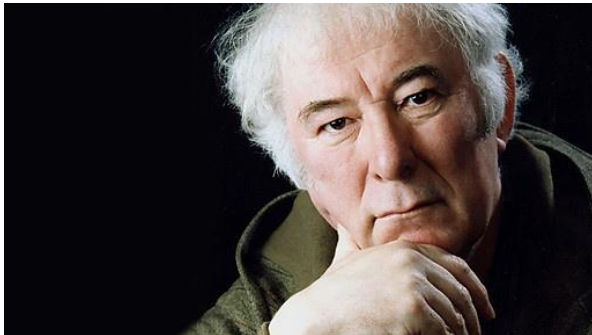
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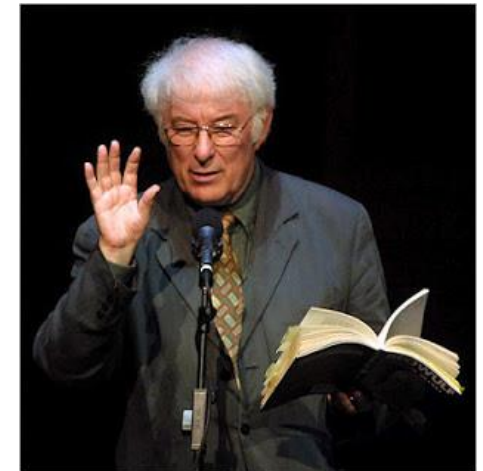
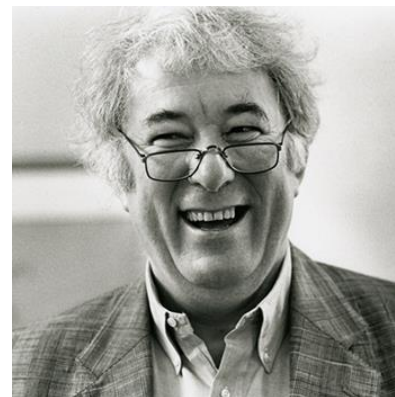
Ambassador, scholar



Poet, teacher ...



lecturer, critic,
reader ..

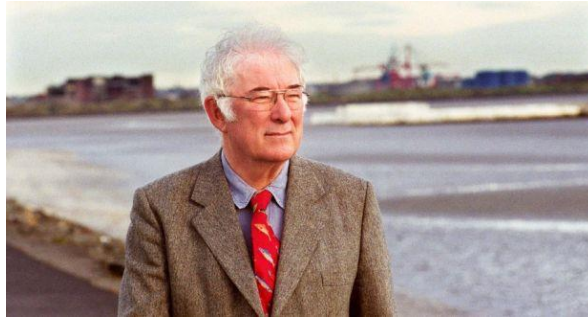


.. "national poet"

A Poet's Life [cont.]



Heaney with his wife
Marie (née Devlin)



Sandymount, Dublin



Ted Hughes Address,
Westminster Abbey, 2011



Winner of The Nobel Award
for Literature, 1995



State dinner for Queen Elizabeth II, Dublin,
May 2011 (with President Mary McAleese)

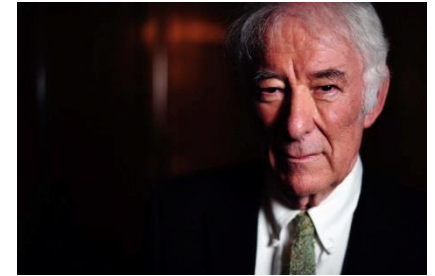
A Poet's Life [cont.]



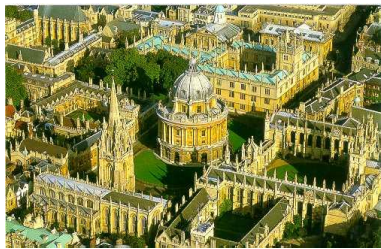
Roulston Chair (Harvard)



Acclaimed translation of Beowulf



"Heaney at 70" (RTE 2009)



Oxford Poetry Chair, 1989



Ulysses Medal, UCD, 2011



Donates his manuscripts to National Library of Ireland



Cohen Lifetime Achievement Award, 2013



Funeral in Dublin and burial in Bellaghy, Co. Derry, 2 Sept 2013

Modern Ireland: A Brief History of “The Troubles”

The Northern Ireland “Troubles” of 1969-1998 provided the immediate background of much of Heaney’s early poetry and, in an oblique way, its inspiration and the chief determinant of its themes; but he was not a political poet in any overt way. Instead, he drew on the energy of the troubles to construct a mythic explanation of violence which – inevitably – worried and appalled some while it thrilled and satisfied many others.

After his “Bogland” series of poems, however, he turned to more pacific themes and contributed significantly to the peace process through his articulation of the juncture between “hope and history” and the increasing internationalism of his work.

1913 – Ulster Covenant and formation of Ulster Volunteers (North)

1914 – Home Rule Bill and formation of Irish Volunteers (South)

1916 – Nationalist Rising in Dublin

1921 – Independent Irish State (South)

Independent British State (North)

1939-45 – Irish Neutrality in World War II

1947 – Butler Act brings free secondary education to Northern Ireland

1963 – Lord Robbins’ Free University Education Bill

1969 – Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland

1972 – “Bloody Sunday” in Derry City (Paratroopers kill 13 peaceful marchers)

1975, 1994

1998 – Northern Ireland Peace Agreement

“Everyone held his breath, and trembled ..”: The Ulster Troubles



Northern Ireland Civil Rights March, 1969

1969-1998



“Free Derry”



History says: *Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*
—Heaney, *The Cure of Troy* (1990)



Orange Order annual marches



Heaney's Philotectes
(*Cure of Troy*, 1996)



“Bloody Sunday”: British Army shoots
13 marchers, Derry Jan. 1972



Belfast “Peace” Agreement, 1998

Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland

Heaney was born into the family of Catholic farmers in Ballaghy, , in rural County Londonderry. The Northern Ireland state had been established in 1919-21 with a decisive Protestant/Unionist majority over Catholics as an alternative to joining the rest of the country in a Home Rule (i.e., “devolved”) government or a Republic. Although protected by law and the British democratic process, Catholics were treated as enemies of the state by the authorities. Until the Civil Rights Movement of 1969, only Republican extremists voiced their objections to this state of affairs publicly, while the increasingly accessible educational opportunities after 1944 were skillfully exploited by many upwardly-mobile Catholics to advance themselves.

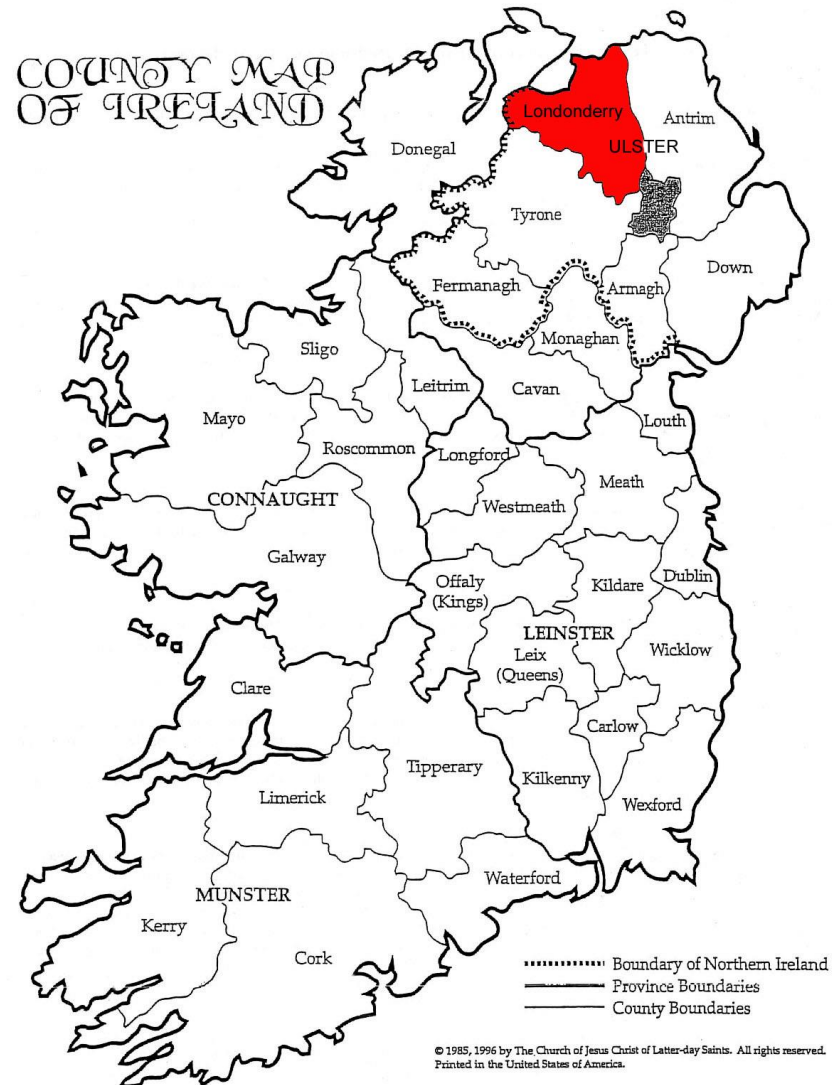
**“Well, as Kavanagh said, we have lived
In important places.***

[...]

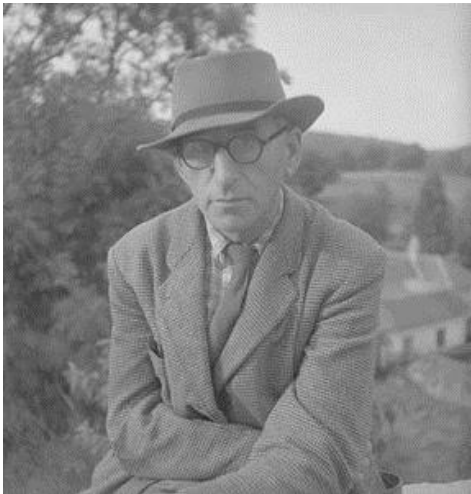
**Ulster was British, but with no rights on
The English lyric: all around us, though
We hadn’t named it, the ministry of fear.”**

- “The Ministry of Fear”, in *North* (1979)

*The reference here is to “Epic” by Patrick Kavanagh, Heaney’s great precursor among Irish poets from a rural background.



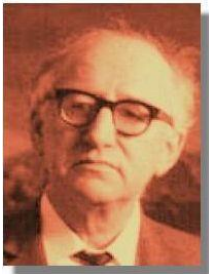
Patrick Kavanagh 1904-67



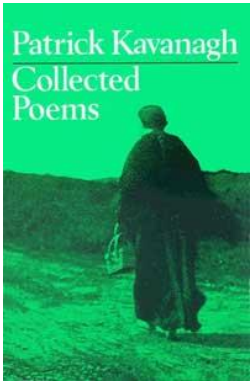
Peasant poet?



Inishkeen Post Office



.. About town



Potato Digging



McDaid's Pub



"Commemorate me ..."

The importance of Kavanagh's example as a rural Irish poet who claimed the dignity of a European classic by comparing his material with Homer's was immense. Heaney wrote of Kavanagh: 'Much of his authority and oddity derive from the fact that he wrested his idiom bare-handed out of a literary nowhere. At its most expressive, his voice has the air of bursting a long battened-down silence.' (p.116.) Here is his most influential poem:

"Epic", by Patrick Kavanagh

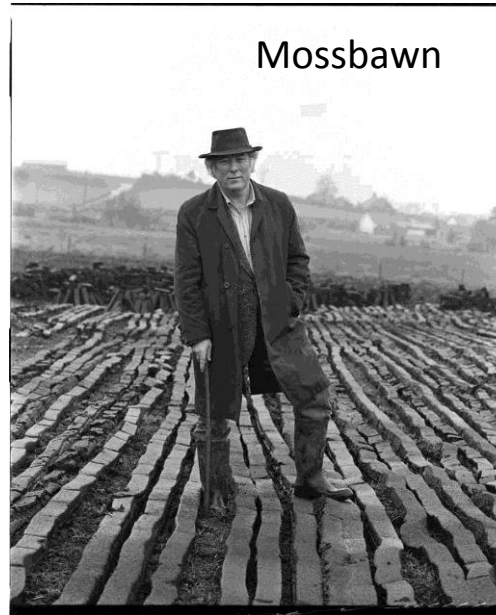
I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided, who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
Surrounded by our **pitchfork armed claims**.
I heard the Duffys shouting "Damn your soul!"
And old MacCabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue-cast steel -
"Here is the march along these stones"
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
was more important? I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
Till **Homer's ghost** came whispering to my mind
He **said, I made the Iliad from such a local row**.
Gods make their own importance.

Collected Poems (London: MacGibbon & Kee 1964, 1968), p.136.

“A Sense of Place”



Traditional Irish small farm preserved in the Ulster Folk Museum



Heaney wearing his father's hat and coat for a photo-shoot



Ulster's changeless landscape



The bogs of Ireland. The bogs form 27% of total area and are used for fuel.



Ballaghly Bawn – now the Heaney Museum



School days in (London)Derry – the last fortified city to be built in Europe

“A Sense of Place” (Ulster Museum, Belfast, 1977)

‘The landscape was **sacramental**, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities. Only thirties years ago, and thirty miles from Belfast, I think I experienced this kind of world vestigially and as a result may have retained some **vestigial sense of place** as it was experience in the older dispensation.’

‘It is this feeling, assenting, **equable marriage** between the **geographical country** and the **country of the mind**, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared **oral inherited culture**, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes **the sense of place** in its richest possible manifestation’ (p.132.)

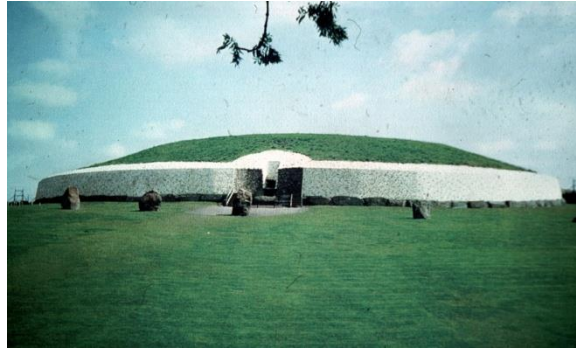
We are dwellers we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and **search for our histories**. And when we look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced [...] that it is to the **stable** element, **the land itself**, that we must look for **continuity**.’

Seamus Heaney, “A Sense of Place” [1977], in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose* (London: Faber & Faber 1980), pp.131-49.

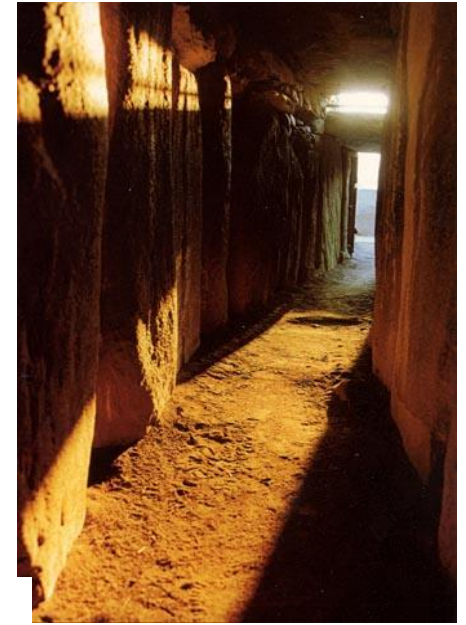
Ancient Ireland



Dolmen (portal grave)



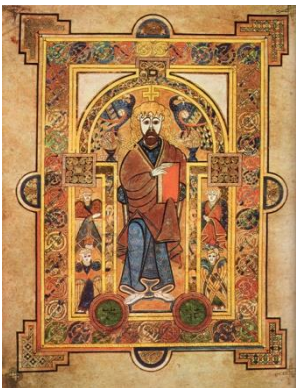
Newgrange Passage Tomb (4000 bc)



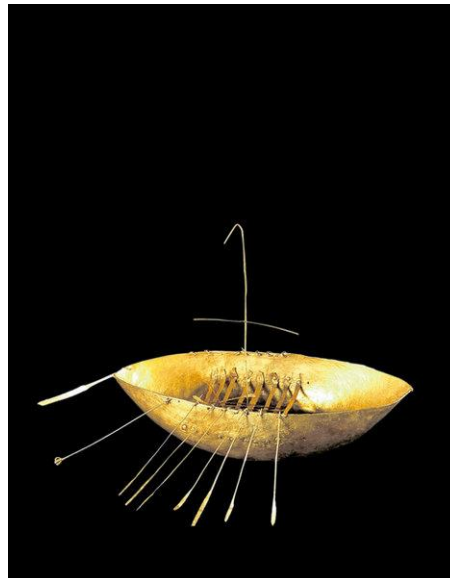
Passage tomb (inside)



Ardagh Chalice (13th c.)



Book of Kells (9th c.)



Broighter Boat (1st century b.c.)



Tara Brooch, 700 ad.



Glenisheen Gorget

Literary Ireland

The tradition in English

Jonathan Swift

William Congreve

Oliver Goldsmith

Edmund Burke

Maria Edgeworth

William Carleton

R. B. Sheridan

Lady Morgan

Sheridan Le Fanu

Bram Stoker

George Bernard Shaw

W. B. Yeats

J. M. Synge

Lady Gregory

Sean O'Casey

James Joyce

Samuel Beckett

Seamus Heaney

John Banville

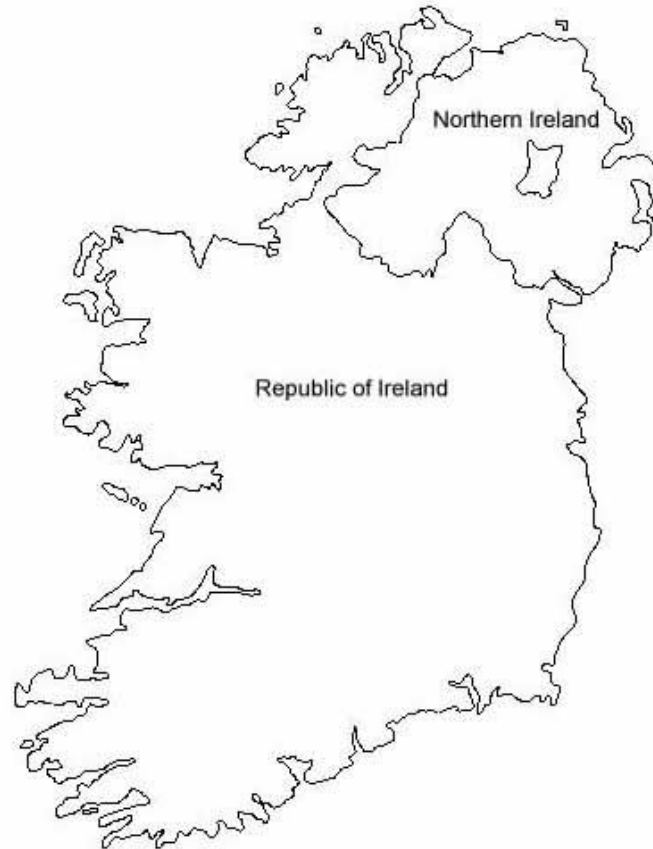
Colm Toibin

Sebastian Barry

Anne Enright

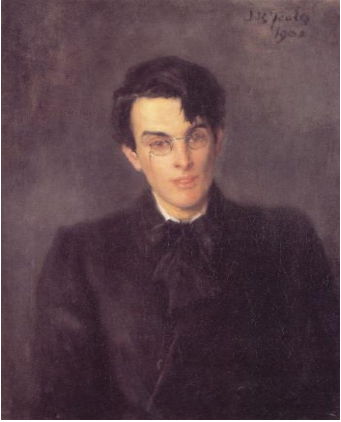
...

Outline Map of Ireland



W. B. Yeats (1865-1939)

Founder of the Irish Literary Revival



The Stolen Child

Away with us he's going,
The solemn-eyed:
He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal-chest.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you
can understand.

(1886)

Philosophical Songs: XII - Meru

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality:
Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!
Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
That day brings round the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone.
(1934)

Yeats created a national literature based on Irish folklore, but also an arcane, intellectual modernism which has little to do with nation. For Patrick Kavanagh, Yeats's Irish Literary Revival was "a thorough-bred English lie."



Early poems – laying the foundations

Note: A recording of Heaney reading this poem is available on internet at <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-23900998> and many other websites.

"Digging"

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests: snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.



Peasant poet? After the phenomenal success of his first collection, Heaney obliged photographers by appearing in his home fields wearing clothes very like those of his father – or Patrick Kavanagh. In reality, he was a university-educated teacher of English Literature who, in other circumstances, might have “escaped” from his rural background without looking back ...

“Personal Helicon”

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
Fructified like any aquarium.
When you dragged out long roots from the soft
mulch
A white face hovered over the bottom.

“Bogland” (for T. P. Flanagan)

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

Is wooed into the cyclops’ eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They’ve taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

—from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966)

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They’ll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic
seepage.

The wet centre is bottomless.



Great Irish Elk

—from *Door into the Dark* (1969)

The inspiration of “Bogland”



“Irish Bogland (I)”
by T. P. Flanagan



“Carrickrea Quarry” by T. P. Flanagan

Heaney has said that he wrote “Bogland” returning from the studio of his friend T. P. Flanagan whose haunting images of Irish bogland suggested to him “the afterlife of experience”:

“They advance and retire along the brink of the actual, sometimes close enough to be tinged with the bolder presences of colour, sometimes haunting the canvas like luminous mists.” (quoted in Brian O’Doherty, ed., *The Irish Imagination 1959-1971*, 1971, p.58.)

Flanagan (1929-2011) was born in Co. Fermanagh, near Heaney’s place of birth in N. Ireland and – though a good figurist - concentrated on landscape painting throughout his career.



“Irish Bogland (II)”
by T. P. Flanagan

“Feeling into Words”: Heaney explains “Boglands”

‘I had been vaguely wishing to write a poem about bogland, chiefly because it is a landscape that has a strange assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood. We used to hear about bog-butter, butter kept fresh for a great number of years under the peat. Then when I was at school the skeleton of an elk had been taken out of a bog nearby and a few of our neighbours had got their photographs in the paper, peering out of its antlers.

So I began to get an idea of the bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. In fact, if you go round the National Museum in Dublin, you will realise that a great proportion of the most cherished material heritage of Ireland was “found in a bog” .

Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative unrealised need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness. And it all released itself after “We have no prairies [...]” - but we have bogs. (pp.54-55.)

“Feeling into Words”, in Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London: Faber & Faber 1980), pp.41-60; pp.54-55).

The Bogland Poems

This remarkable series of poems, all dealing with Irish bog considered as the geographical *locus* of national memory and hence a symbolic explanation of the long history of violence and victimhood in Ireland, preoccupied Heaney mainly in two collections, *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975). The poem “Bogland” – heralding that theme – was the last in the preceding collection, *Door into the Dark* (1969).

“The Tollund Man”

I

Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country near by
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body,

Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus.

II

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog

Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate

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

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines.

III

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbrel
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,
Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

Bog Bodies

Heaney was much affected by P. V. Glob's study of *The Bog People* (1969)



P. V. Glob, *Mosefolket* (1965) ,
trans. into English by Robert
Bruce-Mitford (Faber 1969).



Grabaulle Man (Denmark)

Great Irish Elk



Oldcroghan Man: one of
the few known Irish examples.

Heaney's critics

Edna Longley: “if the bog becomes a symbol of national consciousness, it is not in the manner of an insular, self-righteous nationalism. Heaney is mindful of the fact that the lost homeland is less a territorial locality than an ontological locus whose universal dimensions forever elude the boundaries of a particular nation. [...] The bogholes or receding memory lead back to a fathomless ocean flow which transcends our contemporary grasp.’ (p.106.) In commenting on the phrase ‘images and symbols adequate to our predicament [... &c.]”.

Longley, ‘Heaney and Homecoming’, in Richard Kearney, ed., *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Dublin: Wolfhound 1988), pp.101-22:

Blake Morrison, ‘It would be going too far to suggest that ‘Punishment’ in particular and the Bog poems generally offer a defence of Republicanism; but they are a form of ‘explanation’. Indeed the whole procedure of *North* is such as to give sectarian killing in Ulster a historical respectability which it is not usually given in day-to-day journalism.’

(*British Poetry Since 1970*, [n.d.; poss. in Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry, 1982], pp.109-10.)

In 1972 – the year when *North* appeared – Heaney moved to cottage in Glanmore, near Ashford, Co Wicklow, which he bought from Prof. Ann Saddlemeyer, have previously occupied it on loan. About this time was portrayed by Edward Maguire.



Seamus Heaney
by Edward McGuire

Glanmore would be for Heaney a place of quiet retreat and healing throughout the rest of his life and ultimately the setting of one of his most moving late poems, "The Blackbird of Glanmore". It was here that he discovered the upper atmosphere of the imagination and took flight in it – forsaking the gravity of Irish history and its sorrows for a newly metaphysical vision.

"The Skylight" [vii], from "Glanmore Revisited" in *Seeing Things* (1991).

You were the one for skylights. I opposed
Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,
Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof
Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,
The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.
Under there, it was all hutch and hatch.
The blue slates kept the heat like midnight thatch.

But when the slates came off, extravagant
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
For days I felt like an inhabitant
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.

—*Opened Ground* (1998), p.350.

“The Skylight” - “Glanmore Revisited (vii).

You were the one for skylights. I opposed
Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
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(1998), p.350.



A poem for reading practice

This poem from *North* (1975) is greatly admired for its expression of familial love – in this case, the love of a recently-lost aunt who was a constant presence in Heaney’s childhood. It is set in the kitchen of the farmyard home where he grew up and which he revisits in imagination after her death, with his memories of her in his mind. Now read Part I: Sunlight.

“Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication for Mary Heaney”

I - Sunlight

There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed

in the slung bucket
and the sun stood
like a griddle cooling
against the wall

of each long afternoon.
So, her hand scuffled
over the bakeboard,
the reddening stove

sent its plaque of heat
against her where she stood
in a floury apron
by the window.

Now she dusts the board
with a goose’s wing,
now sits, broad-lapped,
with whitening nails

and measling shins:
here is a space
again, the scone rising
to the tick of two clocks.

And here is love
like a tinsmith’s scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.



“Ulster Farmyard” by
Frank McKelvey

Task: Form work-groups and discuss the “Sunlight” – i.e., the first part of this poem - in relation to three topics: a) The general meaning; b) the vocabulary; and c) the best way to read the last stanza.

Special question: why are there “two clocks” in the penultimate stanza?

Poems for reading with this course

You may like to read through the selection of Seamus Heaney's poems which I have placed on the Ricorso website. These are arranged chronologically and include all the poems expressly mentioned in this course, along with several others which illustrate the same themes and treatment.

RICORSO

The *Ricorso* website is a large resource of information on Irish writers. It can be found at www.ricorso.net. If you click the "I accept" button on the Terms page, you can reach to all the resources of that website.

Alternatively, you can simply type in www.ricorso.net/rx/index.htm, and then choose "Seamus Heaney" under "H" in the region of the website called "Authors A-Z". This will give you access to all the material about Heaney which I have collected for teaching, writing, and research. (Please don't get too involved with this – it's easy to get lost!)

Finally, you can go straight to the selection of Heaney's poems used for this class by clicking www.ricorso.net/rx/library/authors/classic/Heaney_S/Poems1.htm.

I really hope you enjoy your visit to *Ricorso* – and the "Seamus Heaney" experience!

—Bruce Stewart