A Drink of Water Study Guide

A Drink of Water by Seamus Heaney

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Introduction

"A Drink of Water," collected in the 1979 volume *Field Work,* is part of a series of elegies, or poems composed to lament the dead, that comprise much of the first part of the book. In it, the speaker reveals through images and sounds the character of an old woman, presumably a neighbor, who used to come to his well each morning to fill her water bucket. The descriptions in the first eight lines are ones of old age and decrepitude, foreshadowing the woman's death: she is "like an old bat staggering up the field," the pump's sound is a "whooping cough," the woman wears a "gray apron." In the last six lines, she has vanished from the poem physically, but while in life she depended on the favors of the speaker, in death she has become the "Giver," providing the poet with inspiration and perhaps representing to him the maturing process of poetry itself□the aging of his muse. Filled with careful rhythms and intricately patterned sonic elements, the poem is a good example of the sonnet in contemporary poetry□a form Heaney explores extensively in *Field Work.*

Author Biography

Heaney is generally regarded as one of Ireland's preeminent poets of the late twentieth century. His verse frequently centers on the role poets play in society, with poems addressing issues of politics and culture, as well as inner-directed themes of self-discovery and spiritual growth.

These topics are unified by Heaney's Irish sensibilities and his interest in preserving his country's history. Using language that ranges from, and often mixes, sexual metaphor and natural imagery, Heaney examines Irish life as it relates to the past and, also, as it ties into the larger context of human existence. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995 for, as theSwedish Academy noted in its press release, "works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past."

Heaney was born in 1939 in Mossbawn, County Deny, Ireland. The eldest of nine children, he was raised as a Roman Catholic and grew up in the rural environment of his father's farm. Upon receipt of a scholarship, he began studies at Saint Columb's College in Northern Ireland and subsequently attended Queen's University in Belfast. It was at Queen's University that he became familiar with various forms of Irish, English, and American literature, most notably the work of poets such as Ted Hughes, Patrick Kavanagh, and Robert Frost. Like these poets, Heaney would draw upon childhood memories and past experience in his works. Using the pseudonym Incertus, Heaney began contributing poetry to university literary magazines. Upon graduating, he directed his energies toward both his writing and a career in education. He assumed a post at a secondary school and later served as a lecturer at Queen's University. As a poet, he published his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966; the volume quickly established him as a writer of significance.

As Heaney's stature increased, he was able to use his literary works to give voice to his social conscience. Of particular concern to him was the 1969 conflict between Catholic and Protestant factions over religion and national autonomy. Living in Belfast, the epicenter of the fighting, Heaney had a front-row seat for much of the ensuing violence, and his poetry of this period reflects his feelings on the causes and effects of the upheaval. Although he moved out of Belfast in 1972, his work continued to address themes directly relevant to the conflict. After a brief period in the early 1970s during which he wrote full-time, Heaney returned to teaching in 1975 as head of the English department atCaryfort College in Dublin. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, he divided his time between writing, teaching, and reading tours. His subsequent academic posts have included professor of poetry at Oxford University and Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory atHarvard University.

Poem Text

She came every morning to draw water

Like an old bat staggering up the field:

The pump's whooping cough, the bucket's clatter

And slow diminuendo as it filled,

Announced her. I recall

Her gray apron, the pocked white enamel

Of the brimming bucket, and the treble

Creak of her voice like the pump's handle.

Nights when a full moon lifted past her gable

It fell back through her window and would lie

Into the water set out on the table.

Where I have dipped to drink again, to be

Faithful to the admonishment on her cup,

Remember the Giver fading off the lip.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

While certain specifics of the sonnet's situation are never revealed□the identity of the woman, for instance, and the precise nature of her relationship with the speaker□the first lines' implications establish nearly all we need to know in the poem. The verb "came" in line 1 suggests two important possibilities. First, since it is in the past tense, we infer that the action described no longer takes place□she no longer comes to the well. Combined with the images of old age and decrepitude that follow in the first quatrain □"old bat," "staggering," "whooping cough," "slow diminuendo"□this past-tense description suggests that the old woman has died. Second, the use of "came" instead of "went" implies that the speaker is already at the well when the woman arrives. From this, it is possible that the speaker owns the well and allows the woman to draw from it: that, at the beginning of the poem at least, he is the "Giver."

Lines 5-8:

Throughout the first eight lines, the reader should note the poem's use of the sense of sound to convey the emotional appeal of an elegy. First, consider how the poet plays upon the traditional rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet. According to that form, the first and third as well as the second and forth lines of each quatrain must be set in end rhyme□that is, the lines' final vowel and consonant sounds must agree exactly. Here, however, Heaney sets his lines in half rhyme, the vowel sounds suggesting one another but not agreeing exactly: "field" (line 2) and "filled" (line 4) as opposed to, for instance, "field" and "wield." This technique allows the poet to achieve the musical sound of a sonnet without sacrificing word-choice or falling into the type of overt lyricism that would be inappropriate to the mood of the poem. The reader should also note the sound elements that work within lines. One of these is assonance , the internal repetition of many vowel sounds in words close to one another: "draw" and "water," "bat," "staggering" and "clattered," "gray" and "apron," and so on. Another sonic device is the consonance, the internal repetition of certain consonant sounds: the p's in "pump" and "whooping;" the l's in "field," "filled," "recall" and other line-ending words; the b's in "brimming bucket" and "treble." These sonic devices reflect the speaker's sound-oriented memory of the woman: she is revealed in the octave through "the pump's whooping cough," the "bucket's clatter," the sound of running water's "slow diminuendo," or decrease in sound, and the "creak" of the pump's handle that sounds like her "treble" voice.

Lines 9-14:

In the sestet, the situation shifts from morning to night and from the well to the woman's house, but the woman herself, who predominates the sonnet 's first eight lines, has

vanished physically from the poem. Further, while the speaker is clearly present at the well in the octave, the relationship between him and the scene in lines 9 through 11 becomes a matter of interpretation. In line 9, the perspective seems to be from outside the woman's house: the full moon lifts "past her gable." Yet in lines 10 and 11, the perspective seems to move inside: the speaker observes (or imagines) the way the moonlight appears to "lie / Into the water set on the table." Whatever the speaker's point of view, the verb "would lie" suggests a continuity in time from the first eight lines to the next three. Yet in line 12, the verb "have dipped" marks a transition to the present perfect tense, suggesting a change in both the time and focus of the poem. With the time-shift and the woman's sudden physical absence, the implication is that she has died.

The reader may consider a number of possibilities when interpreting the last lines. First, the personification of moonlight lying "into the water" might suggest a religious connotation□that of baptism, which marks a person's entry into the Christian faith. This suggestion coincides with the speaker's intent to be "faithful" to the phrase on the woman's cup, itself a religious saying: "Remember the Giver." But while the woman was apparently a believer, it is clear the speaker has doubts about religion. To him, the cup's phrase is an "admonition"□implying that he is guilty of not remembering the "Giver" to which the saying refers□and it is "fading off the lip." That he is "faithful" to something he seems not to believe suggest an irony that might seem flippant. Yet another implication must be considered: while the speaker□the poet□once was the "Giver," allowing the woman to use his well, now her memory has become the source of his poem. She is the "Giver" because the poet remembers her. In this sense the woman takes on a symbolic value that can be traced back through the sonnet. The idea of a female muse□and indeed of a female Ireland, traced back through the ancient goddess-cult□is one Heaney returns to throughout his work. In terms of this symbolic system, the poem may address the maturing process of the poet himself, the "aging" of his muse, his "Giver," who like all things must someday fade and die.

Themes

Memory

Field Work is filled with elegies, some poignant, others gruesome, for victims of "The Troubles," the resurgent violence that swept through Northern Ireland in the 1970s. As many readers have noted, "A Drink of Water" appears a bit anomalous in this volume. Instead of contemplating the recent violence's terrible effects, the poem returns to a literally and metaphorically more peaceful time. In this childhood remembrance, the poet draws sustenance from the memory of kindness. To put this idea in slightly different terms, memory acts as refreshment in a time of violence.

The poem begins simply, with a conversational tone and a simile that establishes a high degree of familiarity and intimacy: "She came every morning to draw water / Like an old bat staggering up the field." The underlying tenderness cannot be missed; the speaker knows not only the woman's routine but also her particular gate and the various sounds the pump and the bucket make. Even the less-than-flattering comparison of the woman to "an old bat" underscores the shared intimacy. This gentle gibe does not mock her but celebrates the admirably determined way she carries out her morning chores.

The next several lines pursue a similar strategy. The speaker conjures the woman by remembering various details about her: her apron down to its color, the particular "treble / Creak of her voice." These are details stored from years of watching. The poem moves to a moment of illumination within darkness, as when "a full moon" shines upon the water. The speaker peers into the house from outside of it.

Ultimately, the poem argues that to remember is to remain faithful. Honoring the woman's care-taking, the poet fulfills the injunction etched upon her cup, "Remember the Giver." Memory also acts as a kind of sacramental renewal, returning the speaker to his boyhood days. He drinks from the water of memory and, by doing so, lets memory refresh his spirit.

Typically for a Heaney poem, nature furthers this process of renewal. Raised on a family farm, Heaney, like his poetic model William Wordsworth, often depicts nature as a force for regeneration from the miseries of modern life. The woman draws water by hand from deep within the earth; the moon illuminates it so the young boy can catch a glimpse of the pail. The intervening years place a considerable distance between the poet's boyhood state of what one might call "innocence" and his more mature understanding of life's difficulties and frustrations. When the poet casts back to the family farm, though, he dips again into its reservoir of comfort and safety.

Love

"A Drink of Water" is a sonnet, the most distinguished and popular metrical form in English-language verse. A sonnet consists of fourteen-lines; it may, or may not, adhere

to traditional rhyme schemes. From the sonnet's origins in Renaissance Italy to its recent revisions by modern poets, one of the major themes that poems in this form express is love.

In "A Drink of Water," the depicted love is familial, not amorous as in many other sonnets. Perhaps the best analogy is one that "A Drink of Water" implicitly draws: the poem as a toast. A toast is an act of love: one only toasts those of whom one feels fondly. Yet, if shared affection inspires a toast, it also requires a certain level of formality. As wedding attendees know only too well, the best man usually begins his required duty with a amiable joke about the groom, moves to a more tender illustration of the bride and groom's compatibility, then concludes with a wish for their continued happiness. In "A Drink of Water," the sonnet form also gives a certain degree of formality to the proceedings; the depicted love follows a well-established tradition of poems in this form about this subject. Just as the memory refreshes the speaker, the sonnet form inspires the poet, guiding his thoughts into a fully formed poem.

Style

"A Drink of Water" is a sonnet, a traditional poetic form characterized by its fourteen-line length and its use of a set rhyme scheme. Although there are many variations on the sonnet form, most are based on the two major types: Petrarchan (Italian) and Shakespearean (English). In different ways, "A Drink of Water" resembles both. While its rhyme scheme is that of the Shakespearean form□three quatrains rhyming or half-rhyming *abab cdcd efef,* followed by a couplet rhyming *gg*□its thematic division most closely follows the Petrarchan model. In this type of sonnet, the first eight lines, or the octave, generally present some kind of question, doubt, desire, or vision of the ideal. The last six lines, or the sestet, generally answer the question, ease the doubt, satisfy the desire, or fulfill the vision. In Heaney's poem, the first eight lines examine the image of the old woman who comes to the speaker's well to collect water. The octave's images are filled with reminders of old age and death. In the sestet, the sonnet shifts to night, focusing on the image of the woman's moonlit water-bucket and her cup that bears the inscription "Remember the Giver." Now the woman is dead, and while the speaker once was the "giver," allowing the woman to draw from his well, now it is he that remembers and she that gives□in the form of memories and poetic inspiration.

Historical Context

In *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987,* Heaney describes the contrary demands that "Song and Suffering" place upon a poet. In a question that has long puzzled poets, he wonders if his primary allegiance as an artist is to beauty or to truth. Especially when read outside its political context, "A Drink of Water" may seem to be a rather nostalgic, overly dreamy poem, too much "Song" and "beauty" and too little "Suffering" and "truth." Yet, it is important to keep in mind the campaigns of violence that form the poem's backdrop in order to see how the poem's peaceful evocations of childhood stand in contrast to contemporary realities.

Among the landmark moments in the violence that has plagued Northern Ireland was "Bloody Sunday," January 30, 1972. In November, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a Catholic terrorist organization dedicated to independence for Northern Ireland, killed eleven unarmed soldiers. On "Bloody Sunday," British paratroopers killed thirteen unarmed civil rights marchers in Deny. The world viewed these murders with outrage. In addition to Heaney's own poems on the subject, other artistic responses include the Irish band U2's song "Sunday Bloody Sunday."

In his poetry and essays, Heaney is always quick to point out the various absurdities of violence. For example, in "Casualty," a poem that appears with "A Drink of Water" in *Field Work,* Heaney elegizes a fellow Catholic who was murdered by Catholics. On the day of the funeral for those killed on January 30, the Irish Republican Army sets a curfew. However, the victim in Heaney's poem decides to go to the bar only to be killed by another Catholic's bomb.

This violence in Northern Ireland continued throughout the 1970s in spurts and even during more hopeful periods of relative calm. In his book, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of a Poet,* the scholar Michael Parker cites some illustratively grim statistics. In 1975 and 1976, while Heaney wrote many of the poems that would comprise *Field Work,* sectarian violence in Northern Ireland killed more than 545 people and inflicted major injuries upon more than 5,000 people. Among those killed were cousins of Heaney's.

In 1980, one year after *Field Work* was published, the strife in Northern Ireland again received worldwide attention, as several prisoners in favor of independence from England went on a hunger strike, demanding the status of political prisoners. The American press tended to report the situation as a kind "war of wills" between the hunger strikers and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Eventually ten hunger strikers died. In Section IX of Heaney's "Station Island," one of the deceased describes the agony of his death: "My brain dried like spread turf, my stomach / Shrank to a cinder and tightened and cracked."

Critical Overview

In his 1988 book *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney,* critic Elmer Andrews explores the development of

Heaney's vision in *Field Work.* In poems like "A Drink of Water," Andrews writes, "Heaney's muse is no longer the mythological goddess of Irish history, the implacable 'black mother.' Instead he develops the image of the domestic muse or sibyl." "A Drink of Water" is a "haunting little poem," Andrews writes, and an example of Heaney's re-dedication to "the life-giving sources, to his role as diviner through whom the water used to broadcast its secrets." Here, the female figure present throughout Heaney's poetry has grown old, and as a result "the imagery suggests difficulty, noisy effort, disease and decline." But ultimately, Andrews argues, the poem centers on the notion of faith: "Despite the poet's faithlessness, the old woman still provides a drink of water. At the end the poet has 'dipped to drink again to be / Faithful.'" Robert Fitzgerald similarly observes in a 1976 *New Republic* article that the poem demonstrates "Heaney's piety toward the life of his boyhood" and calls "A Drink of Water" an "excellent" poem. The critic adds that "Heaney's best poems in their purity are certainly fresh esthetic objects; at the same time his manner is large and open, his intent a publicly conducted meditation among the living and the dead."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Aviya Kushner, the poetry editor for Neworld Renaissance Magazine, *earned an MA. in creative writing fromBoston University. In the following essay, Kushner discusses Heaney's portrayal of the turmoils in Irish history against the beautiful backdrop of Ireland in his writings. She also presents the argument that "A Drink of Water " is actually alluding to the struggles of an Irish poet writing in the poetical form and language of his enemy.*

"The Irish thing," as Nobel Prize-winner Heaney calls it in one of his poems, never seems to go away, both in Heaney's poetry and in his personal life. In stanza after stanza, Heaney addresses the political and religious conflicts of his birthplace□the blood, the gore, and the deep divisions between neighbors.

Heaney's poetry and prose also reveal a strong need to depict a personal heritage. He must write about the land, the heritage of the farm, and his father's spade. He must make poems out of the numerous wells, hills, and schoolrooms of his childhood. As a poet of the land and a poet of the nation, Heaney has a double mission, and this tension of being pulled in different directions may partially explain Heaney's power as a writer.

None of this is lost on Heaney. In his writing and conversation, Heaney frequently describes the pull of Ireland's beauty and the pain of her troubled history as he ponders his role as a poet. In everything from a Nobel acceptance speech to newspaper reviews of others' poetry books, he asks himself: Is the poet obligated to take a stand? What is poetry's "job," anyway? Sometimes, it seems that Heaney is clawing for a poet's right to simply sing, to spend a page praising a tiny white cup. Sometimes, as in the poem "Act of Union," everything from a woman's body to the countryside's rolling hills seems doused in imperialism and political strife.

In "A Drink of Water," written when Heaney was already an established poet and an established destination for journalists looking for views on "the Irish thing," there are several signs of a man caught between two competing forces. The first sign is form. The fourteen lines are in English sonnet form, clearly not an Irish form, though the subject is a seemingly Irish woman. Heaney is using the oppressor's language and the oppressor's form to depict an Irish scene. While this paradox might seem subtle at the beginning of the poem, it will get more and more obvious as the poem goes on.

One of Heaney's trademarks is the use of agricultural, natural images that allude to larger issues. Here, he begins a poem that takes place in the outdoors with a simply worded title that doubles as a request□"a drink of water." The opening two lines are similarly low-key, describing a daily scene in a country location:

She came every morning to draw water Like an old bat staggering up the field

The words "every morning" indicate routine, something done over and over□like the sonnet form itself. The title reinforces that sense of routine, since "a drink of water" is

something to be had over and over. However, the second line gives much more information and changes the tone completely. Heaney is expanding the vista, as he often does. "Like an old bat staggering up the field" reveals the woman is probably old and that whatever she is doing is labor for her. It is difficult, and so the poem will to some extent address difficulty.

Heaney tends to use certain words, such as "north," "digging," and "union"; "field" is another word that appears often. Here, "field" provides the first sense of place in the poem, and it establishes a rural feeling□a country ode. "Up the field" means the woman is walking uphill. The first two lines are all visual, but by the third line, sound□ what is heard□is introduced.

The pump's whooping cough, the bucket's clatter And slow diminuendo as it filled, Announced her.

"Whooping cough" is a fabulous example of the power of personification when it is combined with an element of surprise. "Whooping cough" is a loud, distinctive noise. In addition, "whooping cough" implies severe illness or poverty and fits with "staggering," "old," and the general sense of struggle. The third line makes it clear that for this woman, the seemingly simple task of procuring a drink of water is in fact a difficult task.

What's "coughing" here, though, is not the old woman, but the pump itself, perhaps in sympathy. The speaker must know that particular pump intimately well to use a phrase as specific as "whooping cough." Of course, the downward motion required to pump water matches the swooping undertones of a distinctive word like "whooping."

The focus on sound continues with "the bucket's clatter" and the "slow diminuendo." The struggle is unfolding into a scene of calm, as the bucket fills with water. This mix of brash "whooping" and slow, soothing "diminuendo" is what "announced her." What the woman looks like remains a mystery, but the shorter line indicates that the poem is about to change. The fourth line is also split by a caesura□a pause, in this case a period, that heralds a switch. The phrase "I recall" signals a further change, as the poem moves from describing a routine into a riff on the specifics of the past.

Sight and sound begin to blend in this section. "I recall / Her gray apron, the pocked white enamel / Of the brimming bucket, and the treble / Creak of her voice like the pump's handle." Interestingly, two musical terms have now appeared□"diminuendo" and "treble." Both are Italian words, showing a willingness and perhaps a need to use non-Irish words to describe an Irish scene.

Like many sonnets, "A Drink of Water" turns in the last six lines. Instead of describing a morning, it switches to evening. The profound meaning for the speaker of this individual woman and her daily routine has not been explained yet, and so in this brief poem the pressure is on at the end.

Nights when a full moon lifted past her gable It fell back through her window and would lie Into the water set out on the table.

When the full moon is out, the speaker thinks of this particular woman. Something about her haunts him, and something about her makes him remember her:

Where I have dipped to drink again, to be Faithful to the admonishment on her cup, Remember the Giver fading off the lip.

In the last three lines, the latent power of water as an image becomes obvious. Water carries religious overtones, with immersion rituals in particular, as the verb "dipped" suggests. Water is frequently associated with purification, and something about this woman's water ritual offers the speaker both "admonishment" and purification. Something about her reminds him of sin and the need to erase it. However, the meaning of the old woman is still ambiguous.

In the last line, the power of this lone old woman getting her water is finally explained. Her cup had a phrase on it□"Remember the Giver." Who the Giver is, of course, is the immediate question. Who gives water, who gives life? These questions might refer to God. However, in Heaney's unique context of an Irish poet writing in English, it is possible that the "Giver" is England, the source of the words he uses as tools to create a self. Like a man dependent on God's water for survival, for the gift of life, this is the tale of a poet dependent on a ruler for the gift of language and the sustenance of words.

Finally, what is most fascinating is that the motto is fading. As Heaney the poet grows in fame and in control over the English language, the fact of ownership□of who actually "gave" him that language□may fade. But wherever he "dips to drink again," whenever he sets pen to paper and starts sipping at the English language, he is nevertheless forced to remember the giver, to think about ownership, nationhood, and what "the Irish thing" means to him as both person and poet.

Source: Aviya Kushner, in an essay for *P'oetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Carolyn Meyer holds a Ph.D. in modern British and Irish literature and has taught contemporary literature at several Canadian universities, including the University ofToronto. In the following essay, Meyer expounds on the symbolism of the pump and the old woman that draws the water in Heaney's "A Drink of Water" as well as the writer's use of the sonnet form for the poem. She also describes the elegiac nature of the verse.

"A Drink of Water," from Heaney's 1979 collection *Field Work,* is a poem about the strength to be drawn from what lies closest to home. Elsewhere in the volume Heaney mourns the friends and relatives lost to the hatreds and bloodlusts of Northern Ireland's "Troubles" and earnestly reflects on issues of the artist's social responsibility. Here, however, he finds solace and respite from that crisis in the solid traditionalism of the sonnet form and in the recollection of the family pump around which his rural childhood was centered and according to whose rhythms the life of his first community was measured out. In a discussion originally broadcast on the radio by the BBC and later published as "Mossbawn" in *Preoccuptions: Selected Prose 1968-1978,* Heaney refers to the pump as a symbol and touchstone, numbering it among his earliest memories. In its utilitarian simplicity and encapsulation of the local, the ordinary, and the immediate, it stands imperturbable and resolute against the "the great historical action" of World War II, much as the subsequent memory of it has the power to at least temporarily obscure and assuage the unconscionable barbarities of sectarian violence:

I would begin with the Greek word, omphalos, meaning navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It is Co. Deny in the early 1940s. The American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge, the American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road, but all of that great historical action does not disturb the rhythms of the yard. There the pump stands, a slender, iron idol, snouted, helmeted, dressed down with a sweeping handle, painted a dark green and set on a concrete plinth, marking the centre of another world. Five households drew water from it. Women came and went, came rattling between empty enamel buckets, went evenly away, weighed down by silent water. The horses came home to it in those first lengthening evenings of spring, and in a single draught emptied one bucket and then another as the man pumped and pumped, and the plunger slugging up and down, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos.

Heaney's poetry, much like this passage of prose, is concerned with roots, origins and well-springs□enacting quests downwards and backwards to the sources of personal, creative, and national identity. In "A Drink of Water" the poet assumes the role of diviner, as he has often done, revisiting scenes from his childhood in rural County Down, but in this case the past becomes, as critic Carlanda Green noted in *Seamus Heaney,* "the lens through which he looks at the present" to understand the steadying faithfulness and grace that revive and sustain the creative impulse. The source to which he returns, according to Michael Parker **in** *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet,* **is "life-**

giving" in both the actual and figurative sense, the communal pump offering not only physical refreshment but spiritual replenishment.

While poets of classical Greece and Rome may have looked for inspiration to the daughters of Mnemosyne who tended a sacred spring atop Mount Parnassus, Heaney, according to Elmer Andrews in **his** *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney,* **is heartened by** the memory of an aging "domestic muse," an old woman who presides over the farmyard pump and applies herself to her daily ritual of drawing water with clumsy yet unwavering devotion. Heaney's evocative description of her and her legacy brims with a joy in the phenomenal world and in the naming of its objects, lending support to his belief, which he extolled in an interview in *Viewpoints,* that "poems with rural or archaic images" can "engage with the modern world."

What the old neighbor teaches him by example and injunction ("Remember the Giver") is exactly what Heaney sets out to achieve in *Field Work* (as quoted in a *Critical Inquiry* interview): "to trust melody, to trust art as reality, to trust artfulness as an affirmation." Like a shade from Dante's *Divine Comedy,* a work Heaney was reading at the time of writing *Field Work,* she is one of his guides, allowing him to negotiate the underworld of modern-day political strife and the minefield of opinion as to what the writer's role in that conflict should be. Her salutary message makes for what critic Blake Morrison, in his book *Seamus Heaney,* called "a moment of grace that blocks out the island's 'comfortless noises.'"

As Heaney pointed out in an interview with James Randall in *Ploughshares, Field Work* marks his return to traditional verse forms and their "rhythmic contracts" after his experiments with the slender, curt and volatile half-lines of his previous collection, *North.* The thirteen sonnets of *Field Work,* "A Drink of Water" among them, accommodate Heaney's natural lyricism—his insistence that "the first person singular" should "mean me and my lifetime"—and serve as formal metaphors for control and order against a backdrop of political aggression and elegiac lament.

Heaney's recourse to the sonnet comes with recognition of the form's flexible rigidity and of the adaptability of its conventions. Given the issues of responsibility and commitment with which Heaney wrestles throughout the collection, the sonnet is in many ways an ideal vehicle for his relentless questioning since its structural division into octave and sestet, comprising statement and coun-terstatement or problem and solution, satisfies a need for resolution within its tidy span of fourteen lines. The sonnet's reputation as chiefly a love poem "historically filled" with what feminist critic Rachel Blau Du Plessis called, in an article for *(How)ever* magazine, "voiceless, beautiful females in object position" is playfully recast in Heaney's hands, for the feminine principle that assumes many guises in his poems has now grown old and artlessly wise. Closer to the Irish cailleach (hag) than to any object of erotic desire, this unlikely sibyl versed in the traditional ways of living close to the land instead instills a need for mindfulness and circumspection, together with a renewed appreciation for life-giving sources and the restorative gifts of charity, kindness, and reverence.

"A Drink of Water" reinvents the sonnet as a love poem, effectively widening its scope to express a love of this world and its possibilities as sustained by acts of fortitude and faithfulness. Writing in *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney,* Andrews observed that Heaney's bending of familiar sonnet conventions comes about in part from his effort to find what is poetic in the more unpoetic dimensions of daily and domestic experience. Half-rhymes (field/filled, lie^e, cup/lip), enjambments, and shortened lines (line 5) lend an easy naturalism to the highly wrought artifice of the Shakespearean sonnet form (rhyming ababcdcdefefgg) much as the transition from octave to sestet becomes, in Heaney's hands, as ordinary as the passage from day into night.

The first eight lines concern the water drawer herself, whose identity is inseparable from the task she performs and the place she inhabits. The opening states her business matter-of-factly□"She came every morning to draw water"□but the ensuing description, as richly evocative as it is in its detail, makes her a figure more to be pitied than revered. The imagery Heaney invokes to describe her morning ritual suggests, as Andrews noted, "difficulty, noisy effort, disease and decline," hardly foreshadowing or justifying the abiding influence for which the speaker ultimately credits her. With her drab "gray apron" and "creak" of a voice, she is likened to "an old bat staggering up the field." Her laborious effort engenders "the pump's whooping cough" and "the bucket's clatter / And slow diminuendo." The bucket itself has "pocked" enamel, as though scarred by disease. Even the moon, rising in the night sky and shining into her window, falls back and "lie[s] / Into the water." The inscription on her cup is said to be "fading off the lip," as though the vessel itself is not simply worn but the words themselves, like those spoken by the dying or by the ghosts of Dante's Purgato-rio, are being uttered in final, breathless warning or valediction.

What is easily lost in the cacophony of her exertion is the underlying harmoniousness of her undertaking. To suggest this, Heaney modulates his appropriately sturdy, homespun, and at times harshly consonantal language with terms raided from the musical lexicon□the "slow diminuendo" of the filling bucket and the "treble / Creak" of the old woman's voice that is indistinguishable from the music of the pump itself. It is this sound that makes her presence known to the speaker, whose deepening awareness of her and her craft is dramatized by the halting medial caesura of line 5□ "Announced her. I recall." This line remains two 2 feet short of its required length, as though the speaker is pausing to collect his thoughts while his distant memory of her comes into sharper focus.

What emerges is a portrait not of the woman herself, for she remains nameless and largely featureless, but of her dedicated triumph over adversity, a legacy that proves inspiringly creative.

The sestet makes it abundantly clear that the old woman, despite all appearances, is not merely an enduring presence but in fact a muse to the poet. The images associated with her□the full moon and its reflected image□are symbols long associated with feminine power and the poetic imagination. Along with similar circle images throughout *Field Work,* including everything from eyes and rings to sunflowers and vaccination marks, they embody what critic Blake Morrison cited as the notion of "artistic

perfection", not to mention the finiteness of "artistic serf-enclosure." Altogether, the monthly full-mooned nights and the endless chore-filled mornings make for a reassuring sense of continuity that anchors the poem and unifies its constituent parts.

In the sestet, the clatter of the previous eight lines subsides, replaced by a calm interiority and serene domestic orderliness that is presented with the imagistic power of a haiku. The "water set out on the table" as if in offering reflects a moon that seems meant for the old woman's circumscribed world alone, lifting "past her gable" and falling back "through her window." It is, after all, the old woman's labor that makes such poignant beauty possible. The image of the moon lying "into the water" is one akin to baptism, suggesting renewal, rebirth, and purification. For the speaker, the image is a sustaining one, a consolatory moment from which to draw and draw again. Had Heaney placed a comma or omitted the punctuation entirely at the end of line 11, instead of using a period, the syntax of the final lines would invite a far more limited reading. As it stands, the "Where" of "Where I have dipped to drink again" refers not simply to the "water set out on the table" of the previous line but to all that precedes it.

Like any good parable, this brief narrative of the woman's simple life takes on metaphoric relevance and provides the standard against which the speaker measures his fidelity to life's sustaining values. When he drinks, he drinks in and is fortified by the remembrance of her example, in an act that imitates and secularizes the ritual of communion. Heaney seizes upon the problem-solving function of the sonnet's counter-statement, in this case confined to the final three lines, to suggest that the healing affirmations he seeks elsewhere *in Field Work* are to be had by "bowing down to, by offering up"□by rededicating and pledging himself to the life-giving sources according to the cup's admonishment, "Remember the Giver." This parting motto, haunting in its discernable Dantesque influence, reveals "A Drink of Water" for what it actually is□an elegy□so that the entire poem becomes what Andrews called "a formal enactment" of the old woman's warning. True to his word, Heaney pays tribute to the giver and her gift.

Source: Carolyn Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

In 1994 Faber and Faber released a cassette of Heaney reading his poems along with several other poets.

InHarvard College's 1990 recording Heaney reads not only his work but also selections from other poets, including Yeats, Shakespeare, and Wyatt.

The Lannan Foundation produced a videotape of Heaney reading from his *Selected Poems* and talking about his poems and Irish political history. The conversation took place in 1991, the year the video was also released.

Topics for Further Study

Write a descriptive essay on the old woman in "A Drink of Water." Describe her life, including major events from Irish history.

Expound on what you think the injunction in the last line, "Remember the Giver," means. Who do you think "the Giver" is?

What is the role of the moon in this poem? What does it tell you about the woman? What does it tell you about the speaker?

Examine the references in the poem to different sounds and discuss the effect each sound has on your interpretation of the poem.

Compare and Contrast

1972: Fourteen men die after British troops open fire on a civil rights demonstration in Deny. Later in the year, the IRA sets off a series of bombs in the capital of Belfast that kill 11 people.

1979: The IRA assassinates Earl Mountbatten, a World War II hero and a cousin of England's Queen Elizabeth.

1981: Ten IRA prisoners gain worldwide attention and become martyrs when they die in a hunger strike.

1985: The Anglo-Irish Agreement allows the Republic ofIreland's government a consultant's role in matters concerning Northern Ireland.

1993: The Downing Street Declaration, presented by Irish leader Albert Reynolds and British Prime Minister John Major, stipulates that the people of Northern Ireland will decide their own future. Sinn Fein, the political arm of the IRA, is promised roles in peace talks if they declare a cease-fire.

1996: Former U.S. Senator George Mitchell chairs multiparty peace talks concerning Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein joins the talks in 1997.

1998: Britain announces an independent inquiry into the "Bloody Sunday" killings of 1972. In April, Northern Ireland's political leaders negotiate a deal that includes retaining ties with Great Britain while still having self-rule in Northern Ireland. The plan is presented to voters, who overwhelmingly approve it.

What Do I Read Next?

Seamus Heaney's *New and Selected Poems 1966-1987* offers a generous selection of his poetry.

In addition to his skills as a poet, Heaney writes very lucid criticism. In *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987,* he discusses the work of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and several Eastern European poets, among others. The introductory essay, "The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac, and a Knocker," meditates upon Heaney's responsibilities as a poet and is particularly compelling.

Two good critical studies of Seamus Heaney's poetry are *Seamus Heaney,* edited and introduced by Harold Bloom, and Helen Vendler's *Seamus Heaney.* Vendler, a former colleague of Heaney's at Harvard, remains one of the most sympathetic and insightful readers of Heaney's work.

In *The Rattle Bag: An Anthology of Poems,* Seamus Heaney and fellow poet Ted Hughes offer their favorite poems. This lively anthology is a fascinating glimpse into two poets' (sometime idiosyncratic) taste.

Further Study

Andrews, Elmer, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper,* London: Macmillan Press, 1988. Andrews analyzes Heaney's poetry and identifies its primary themes through the 1985 collection*Station Island.*

Buttell, Robert, *Seamus Heaney,* Cranberry, NJ: Associated

University Presses, Inc., 1975.

Provides critical analyses of the poems included in Heaney's first three volumes and considers how Heaney's personal experience and literary education have influenced his poetry.

Hildebidle, John, "A Decade of Seamus Heaney's Poetry," *The Massachusetts Review,* Vol. 28, No. 3, autumn 1987, pp. 393-409.

Hildebidle describes Heaney's exploration of both personal experience and Irish history in his poetry.

Parker, Michael, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet,* Iowa City, IA: University ofIowa Press, 1993.

Provides historical contexts and analyzes the biographical, literary, and political influences within Heaney's poetry.

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BOOKRAGS

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David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535