

The Singer's House Study Guide

The Singer's House by Seamus Heaney

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Introduction

Seamus Heaney's poem, "The Singer's House" was first published in his 1979 volume of poetry, *Field Work*, which was published in both England and America that year. The volume marked a departure from Heaney's earlier poetry volumes, most of which had addressed the modern conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland—often referred to as the Troubles—in an indirect way. However, many of the poems in the new volume, which were written during a period of self-exile from Northern Ireland, demonstrated Heaney's more concentrated attempts to define his role in the Irish conflict. For this reason, many critics singled out *Field Work* as the transitional point in Heaney's poetry career.

In "The Singer's House," Heaney uses his poetic abilities to appeal to another artist—his singer friend, David Hammond. The poem was written after Hammond canceled a recording session, following a terrorist bombing. Heaney wanted to encourage Hammond that his voice counts, and that it was important for Hammond to inspire his fellow Irish countrymen and -women with his songs. Heaney was hoping to inspire a revival in Irish language and literature, which had been largely replaced over the centuries by the language and culture of British colonizers. A current copy of the poem can be found in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996*, which was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1999. This collection also includes the lecture that Heaney gave after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.



Author Biography

Seamus Heaney was born in Mossbawn, in County Derry, in Northern Ireland on April 13, 1939, the same year that Irish poet William Butler Yeats died. This coincidence has been noted by many critics, who often compare Heaney's poetry with that of Yeats. Although he was born Catholic in predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland, the 1947 Education Act gave Heaney—along with other Northern Catholics—the opportunity to pursue secondary education that had been previously closed to them. When he was eleven years old, Heaney received a scholarship to study at Saint Columb's College in Derry (also known as Londonderry). In 1957, Heaney attended Queen's University in Belfast, where he received a bachelor of arts degree in 1961—with First Class Honors in English. The following year, after a year of postgraduate study, Heaney was awarded his teaching certificate from the St. Joseph's College of Education in Belfast.

While he was in college, Heaney contributed his first poems to his university literary magazines, under a pseudonym. Later, during his first years of teaching at St. Thomas's Secondary School in Ballymurphy, Belfast (1962-1963) and St. Joseph's College (1963-1966), Heaney had a number of his poems published in various periodicals. His poetry attracted the attention of Faber and Faber, a British publisher, and the one who would end up producing many of Heaney's volumes. Heaney's first major volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, was published in 1966, and received overall good reviews. In 1969, two months after his second volume of poetry, *Door Into the Dark*, was published, fighting erupted between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. The increasing strife affected Heaney's writing, and subsequent volumes, such as 1972's *Wintering Out*, began to address the situation. In 1972, Heaney moved from his home in Belfast to a cottage in Glanmore, outside of Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland.

The move was seen by some as a betrayal of Heaney's Northern Irish heritage, and Heaney himself struggled with his self-imposed exile. However, the distance from the strife in Northern Ireland gave him the clarity he needed to write about it. Heaney produced two volumes of poetry while at Glanmore—*North* (1975) and *Field Work* (1979), the latter of which contained the poem, "The Singer's House." Since then, Heaney has produced several other volumes of poetry, including 1996's *The Spirit Level* and 2001's *Electric Light*. Heaney has also been involved in the translation of classic stories, including a best-selling translation of the epic poem, *Beowulf* (2000). The translation also won Heaney Britain's prestigious Whitbread Award for poetry as well as book of the year. Heaney has won numerous other awards for his poetry, including Whitbread Awards in 1987 for *The Haw Lantern* and in 1997 for *The Spirit Level*. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.



Poem Text

When they said *Carrickfergus* I could hear
the frosty echo of saltminers' picks.
I imagined it, chambered and glinting,
a township built of light.

What do we say any more
to conjure the salt of our earth?
So much comes and is gone
that should be crystal and kept,

and amicable weathers
that bring up the grain of things,
their tang of season and store,
are all the packing we'll get.

So I say to myself *Gweebarra*
and its music hits off the place
like water hitting off granite.
I see the glittering sound

framed in your window,
knives and forks set on oilcloth,
and the seals' heads, suddenly outlined,
scanning everything.

People here used to believe
that drowned souls lived in the seals.
At spring tides they might change shape.
They loved music and swam in for a singer

who might stand at the end of summer
in the mouth of a whitewashed turf-shed,
his shoulder to the jamb, his song
a rowboat far out in evening.

When I came here first you were always singing,
a hint of the clip of the pick
in your winnowing climb and attack.
Raise it again, man. We still believe what we hear.



Plot Summary

Stanza One

"The Singer's House" starts out with the reaction of the speaker, Heaney, to the reference of an outside group—the unidentified, "they." This group has spoken of Carrickfergus, a medieval city in County Antrim, on the eastern coast of Northern Ireland. Carrickfergus is known for its rich deposit of rock salt that was mined extensively from the 1850s until the early part of this century. When Heaney was writing the poem in the 1970s, many of the salt mines in Carrickfergus had already been abandoned. However, in one of his explanatory footnotes to the poem in the 1991 reprint of *Field Work*, Heaney makes no mention of this, saying only that: "There are salt-mines at the town of Carrickfergus in Co. Antrim." Instead, the reader must infer from the poem that the salt mines are mainly an item from the past.

This idea is emphasized by "the frosty echo of saltminers' picks," a phrase that hearkens back to a time in Ireland's history when the salt mines were active. Heaney may be considering this echo "frosty" for a couple of reasons. As part of Northern Ireland, Carrickfergus is subject to the same winter climate as the rest of northern Europe. Also, because the echo is from the past, it is only a memory of a heritage that has grown cold. In any case, Heaney continues his reconstruction of this past, giving the sound of the saltminers' picks a physical form in his imagination, as it becomes "chambered and glinting," a reference to the crystalline nature of rock salt. The poet continues sketching out the image in his mind, and the sound becomes "a township built of light." The image of light in poetry is often used to denote goodness or happiness. Collectively, this stanza invokes a nostalgic image of a mystical, happy society.

Stanza Two

In this stanza, Heaney's pleasant memory of the saltminers is abruptly terminated, as he comes back into the present, the 1970s, when he is writing the poem during his self-imposed exile from Northern Ireland. Heaney uses the idea of salt mining as a transition between the past and the present, asking: "What do we say any more / to conjure the salt of our earth?" This sentence works on two levels. Literally, the sentence laments the loss of the salt mines in Carrickfergus. However, the subtext—or hidden meaning—of the sentence offers a lament for the increasing loss of Irish language and culture as a result of England's colonization of Ireland. Up until this point, the use of Irish Gaelic had been preserved mainly by "the salt of our earth." The salt of the earth is a common phrase used to indicate the working classes that help to provide an economic and cultural foundation in a society. As Heaney notes in the next two lines, "So much comes and is gone / that should be crystal and kept." The rate of deterioration of Irish language and culture is rapid. Once again, there is a double meaning on the word, "crystal," which invokes the image of the rock salt once again, but which also implies something valuable—Irish traditions—that should be saved.



Stanza Three

In this stanza, Heaney builds on the theme of change. The first two lines—"and amicable weathers / that bring up the grain of things"—offer a contrast to the "frosty echo" from the first stanza. Amicable, or friendly, weather usually implies sunny days, which in this case helps to raise grains. However, the words "bring up," an odd choice for talking about the growth of crops, serve a deeper meaning. They invoke an image of bringing up, or raising, a family—the "grain" of society. But this is not a positive connotation, as the next two lines indicate: "their tang of season and store, / are all the packing we'll get." The way these two lines are written, it produces an image of monotony. In British-controlled Northern Ireland, where Irish language and culture have been continuously suppressed, the years go by blandly, the only "tang," or spice, being the passing seasons—as marked by the crops that are continually grown and stored. These things "are all" that Heaney and others who are living in Northern Ireland have for "packing," a word that is in itself very telling. Grain and other crops are usually stored in tightly packed containers such as silos. The word's inclusion in the last line of this stanza gives it a greater meaning. Packing also denotes travel, underscoring the fact that many Irish nationalists, especially Catholics, have left Northern Ireland, like Heaney has done.

Stanza Four

At the beginning of this stanza, Heaney has moved, and more importantly, is resolving to move on. Since the northern city of Carrickfergus is no longer a possible home for many Irish nationalists, Heaney says to himself, "Gweebarra." In the same footnote mentioned above in the 1991 reprint edition of *Field Work*, Heaney notes that "Gweebarra is the name of a river and a bay in Co. Donegal." Once again, Heaney offers little explanation as to why he contrasts "Carrickfergus" with "Gweebarra" in the poem, but his intentions can be inferred by geographical divisions in the northern half of Ireland. County Donegal is one of three counties in the northern portion of Ireland that is not included in the official, British province of Northern Ireland. Just as Heaney is in a self-imposed physical exile in a cottage in the Republic of Ireland, many other Irish nationalists have experienced a similar physical, and cultural, exile. But if he is going to leave his home, Heaney will try to find a way to recreate the Irish culture in his new home.

Heaney notes that when he says "Gweebarra," "its music hits off the place / like water hitting off granite." Gweebarra has a beauty of its own, and in his mind, he once again reconstructs an image, like the "township built of light" from the first stanza. Instead of a saltminer's pick hitting salt, however, the image is one more suited to Gweebarra Bay, which features a number of granite cliffs. Nevertheless, the "glittering sound" created from the sea spray hitting the cliffs in this new location, mimics the "chambered and glinting" sound from the first stanza. In the process, Heaney shows that the Irish people can begin to reclaim their lost heritage, by letting memories of Northern Ireland fade, while accepting the lands that they have in the Republic and re-creating their heritage there.



Stanza Five

In this stanza, Heaney carries over the "glittering sound" from the last stanza, saying that he can see it "framed in your window." The "your" who Heaney refers to is his friend, David Hammond, a singer. Heaney wrote this poem for Hammond, following an incident one night. The two were setting up to record some songs and poems for a radio show, when they were interrupted by the sound of a number of explosions, followed by sirens—signs of the ongoing sectarian, or politically extreme, violence in Northern Ireland. Hammond felt that his songs were powerless against this type of violence and that it was offensive to the victims, and canceled the recording session as a result. At this point in the poem, Heaney is drawing Hammond into his image of a healed society that hearkens back to the past. He imagines himself at Hammond's house, looking out the window. The poet describes "knives and forks set on oilcloth," a highly civilized picture that contrasts sharply with the other earthy images of salt, grain, and sea spray. This noticeable difference once again points to the loss of traditional Irish culture for the more "civilized" English culture. However, Heaney quickly draws Hammond, and his readers, outside once again, into nature, where "the seals' heads, suddenly outlined," are "scanning everything."

Stanza Six

Heaney now begins to speak in nostalgic terms once more, as he did in the beginning, saying that: "People here used to believe / that drowned souls lived in the seals." Heaney's use of seals references the Celtic legend of the Selchies, gray Atlantic seals who could turn into humans—and vice versa. This legend was particularly popular in Gweedbarra and other coastal areas of County Donegal, where people's lives were tied to the sea. However, this myth, like many Irish myths, began to die out in the twentieth century when the educational system in Ireland pressured children to speak in English. At the same time, many of the younger generations had no desire to adhere to old traditions, preferring more modern radio broadcasts. These combined circumstances helped to supplant the traditional storytelling that had been used to pass the Selchie stories from generation to generation.

The legend of the Selchies is further examined by Heaney's next line: "At spring tides they might change shape." Here, Heaney is using his ability as a poet and storyteller to try to invoke the legend once again. The use of the word "spring" is particularly noticeable, since poets often use spring and springtime as a symbol for a rebirth. In the natural cycle, spring is the season of growth that follows the cold death of winter. In the poem, "the frosty echo" of the saltminers' picks, words that invoke an image of winter, is dead. However, in the rebirth of spring, things have the potential to change. Just as the Selchies have the ability to change shape, Hammond has the ability to take up his traditional songs once again for the cause of renewing Irish language and culture. The final line in the stanza emphasizes this, saying of the seals that "They loved music and swam in for a singer." The drowned souls of the Irish, who have been flooded by the



massive assimilation of English language and culture, can be recovered if an Irish singer □ Hammond □ will sing his songs to them once again.

Stanza Seven

This possibility for change is emphasized in the next line, when Heaney says the singer "might stand at the end of summer." The "might" implies that Hammond has the option to take a "stand," by singing his songs once again. Heaney also changes the season from spring in the last sentence to summer in this sentence. This is telling, since summer symbolizes the natural progression of growth that happens after the rebirth of spring. Heaney is saying that if Hammond takes a stand and raises his voice in song once again, Irish culture will one day grow strong again. The next image, Hammond standing "in the mouth of a whitewashed turfshed," invokes the image of a clean, "whitewashed," start that is based on Irish traditions. In America, turf generally refers to grass. However, Heaney's use of the word, "turf," refers to peat □ a spongy energy source that is found in the many bogs in Ireland. The harvesting of peat into blocks that can be dried out and burned is an established tradition in Ireland. Heaney uses this earthy and recognizable image to contrast with the British modern convenience of "knives and forks set on oilcloth" in the fifth stanza. The poet continues the transformation of Hammond in his poem, as he places the singer with "his shoulder to the jamb, his song / a rowboat far out in evening." The image of the singer is one of support, helping to shoulder the load of reviving Irish culture. Hammond does this by sending his song out on a journey, a cultural rowboat that will presumably help to spread the influence of traditional Irish culture.

Stanza Eight

In the last stanza, Heaney sums up his appeal to Hammond by referencing how Hammond used to sing □ "When I came here first you were always singing," implying that he does not sing any longer. Heaney says that Hammond's Irish songs, sung in the harsh sounds of Gaelic, echo the "clip of the pick" from the first stanza. Heaney uses the style of Hammond's singing, "your winnowing climb and attack," as a means for telling him that he needs to fight for Irish language and culture. This will be a difficult "climb," and the use of the word "attack" suggests that it could be dangerous. Irish nationalists who were vocal during the Troubles often got threatened or killed. Heaney asks Hammond to "Raise it again, man," signifying that Hammond should use his "pick," his singing voice, again, in the old style. Heaney's last sentence, "We still believe what we hear," implies that if Hammond will sing his Irish music again, he can help to resurrect Irish beliefs, which are not dead yet. "The singer's house" referred to by the title is ultimately the one that Hammond can help provide for his Irish people, who have been physically and culturally displaced from their traditional homes by the influence of English language and culture. Through the healing and reviving powers of poetry and song, however, Heaney and Hammond can help to revive the lost Irish traditions, a loss that has been magnified by the strife in Northern Ireland.



Themes

Irish Culture and Mythology

Heaney's primary goal in the poem is to inspire a rebirth in the native culture of Ireland. Heaney laments the loss of old traditions such as the salt mining in Carrickfergus, noting that this way of life is nothing but a "frosty echo." Using Carrickfergus as a springboard, Heaney illustrates that the salt mines are not the only abandoned tradition. Many Irish nationalists lack a cultural identity. Some of them, having been driven out of Northern Ireland, either by force or by choice, as in the case of Heaney's own self-exile, do not have anywhere to call their cultural home. Much of the Irish way of life throughout the island has been transformed. Like the "drowned souls" that live in the seals, many Irish men and women have had their identities drowned by the influence of English language and tradition. These influences have transformed Irish life into a routine, much like that of the farming seasons, which lack the "tang," or spice of the old Irish ways. Heaney invokes one Irish legend in particular, the legend of the Selchies, when he notes that "People here used to believe / that drowned souls lived in the seals."

Artistic Responsibility

With this poem, Heaney is acknowledging the artist's responsibility to help resurrect and maintain a national identity. Heaney issues a challenge to Hammond, and to himself, in the second stanza, asking "What do we say any more / to conjure the salt of our earth?" This poem is Heaney's response for himself. He is using his poetic abilities to address the issue, and enlist help, mainly from Hammond. Heaney details the situation in detail for Hammond, explaining that if they are not careful, the Irish identity could slip away forever, instead of being "crystal and kept." The displaced Irish men and women, symbolized in the seals, need Hammond's help. In the last stanza, Heaney is more direct with this request, saying that "When I came here first you were always singing." In other words, Heaney is trying to remind Hammond that he has a duty to do, as he has done in the past. However, now the situation is more dangerous, and music has become an "attack," a fight to save the last remnant of Irish identity and build it up again. As Heaney notes in the last line, "We still believe what we hear." If Hammond follows his artistic responsibility and sings his Irish songs once again, Heaney tells him he will help to inspire a movement among the culturally displaced Irish citizens.

Cultural Healing

Although Heaney ends the poem with some combative language, emphasizing the "attack," the poem is for the most part a peaceful attempt at resurrecting and rebuilding the national Irish identity. Heaney does not want to fight in the literal sense, as there has been enough violence in Northern Ireland already. In fact, it was this violence that caused Hammond to put down his guitar and stop singing, so Heaney takes a different

approach with this plea to pick it up again. He recognizes that what Ireland needs is healing, not more fighting. As a result, even though he is nostalgic about Carrickfergus, he puts aside these memories from his life in Northern Ireland and sets about trying to affect a change where he can—by rescuing the language and culture.



Style

Setting

As in most of Heaney's poetry, and Irish culture for that matter, setting is an important issue. In this poem, setting becomes an equally important technique. Although Heaney takes the reader on a journey through his mind, offering imagery of different places from the past, present, and potential future, he anchors the poem with the discussion of two cities, *Carrickfergus* and *Gweebarra*. The italics help denote that somebody is speaking these two words, but they also serve to underscore the stability of these two places as the actual settings of the poem. Heaney uses Carrickfergus to represent a nostalgic view of Ireland's past, incorporating the salt mines—formerly one of Carrickfergus's booming industries—to bring the past back to life in his mind. Heaney uses Gweebarra, on the other hand, to discuss Ireland's future. While he is wistful in the beginning about losing the salt mines and other memories about former ways of Irish life, Heaney pushes these issues aside three stanzas into the poem to focus on Gweebarra. Carrickfergus is dead, a lost cause, while Gweebarra represents an opportunity. It is here, in one of the areas of the Republic of Ireland, that Heaney stages his appeal to Hammond to send out his song once more, and help Heaney to revive Ireland's cultural identity.

Symbol

"The Singer's House" is saturated with symbolism. From the very beginning of the poem, the reader is let inside Heaney's mind, and shown images that often exist on two levels—the literal and the symbolic. When Heaney poses the question, "What do we say any more / to conjure the salt of our earth?" he could be talking about actual salt, especially since he has mentioned saltminers in the previous stanza. However, given the context of the poem, it is obvious that Heaney is referring to the working classes of Ireland for centuries, the salt of the earth folk who have provided a foundation for the island. Heaney implies that he does not know what to say to "conjure," or summon, these people. In other words, he wants to wake his people up and get them to embrace a unified Irish identity, but they are lost, unable to be enchanted—another meaning of the word, "conjure." The symbolism throughout the rest of the poem supports this idea. The Irish identity that "comes and is gone" is equated to a "crystal," which should be saved. In the fourth stanza, Heaney works on doing this, as he begins building up his argument to Hammond. The "knives and forks set on oilcloth" symbolize civilization, especially British sensibilities, an idea that is contrasted sharply with the symbol of the Irish masses, the "seals' heads." These masses, the "salt of our earth" referenced in the second stanza, "might change shape," back into their native Irish form, if Hammond will sing to them in his Irish voice.



Imagery

In addition to relying on symbols to point out the subtext of the poem, Heaney also creates a number of images, most of which are generated in his mind. The reader follows Heaney on this journey through his memory and thoughts of the present and future, starting with the first reference to "*Carrickfergus*." Heaney tells the reader that a past conversation involving the city made him imagine the "frosty echo of saltminers' picks." During this first stanza, Heaney gives the sound of these picks a physical form, shaping it into an image of "a township built of light," words that are meant to evoke a positive image in the reader's mind. Heaney's mental images reach a higher level of detail after he says "*Gweebarra*." In this new place, in the present, he formulates his argument to Hammond to sing again. Heaney pulls Hammond and the reader into an increasingly complex image, each line adding another detail. Like the first stanza, it starts with a sound, "water hitting off granite." From there, Heaney follows the physical manifestation of this "glittering sound" as it travels to a window, then down to the beach where the "seals' heads, suddenly outlined" are "scanning everything." Finally, in the future that Heaney imagines could take place if Hammond sings again, the singer stands "in the mouth of a whitewashed turfshed," sending his song out like "a rowboat far out in evening," two vivid images.



Historical Context

Establishment of the Irish Free State

Although the poem takes place in the 1970s, Heaney refers either directly or indirectly to a number of other items of historical interest from Ireland's past. The most notable of these is the ongoing conflict between Britain and certain groups in Northern Ireland who are opposed to Britain's control—a situation that is present in some form in most of Heaney's poetry. While England has been involved in the colonization of many of the world's lands, the struggle in Ireland—one of its closest neighbors—has been particularly bitter. The issue of Britain's domination of Ireland is a centuries-old conflict, dating back to the first English invasion of Ireland in the twelfth century. An uneasy peace was eventually reached in 1922, with the establishment of the Irish Free State, known today as the Republic of Ireland. The Republic of Ireland consists of twenty-six of Ireland's thirty-two counties. The remaining six counties, situated on the northeastern portion of Ireland, were named Northern Ireland—with the capital city of Belfast—and were put under the auspices of the United Kingdom.

Conflicts among Catholics, Protestants, and Other Groups

However, the geographic division of Ireland did not solve the conflict. In the new province of Northern Ireland, also known as Ulster, people who followed the Protestant, English faith were the majority, and the division suited them, since they preferred to be ruled by England. But in Northern Ireland, there was a strong minority of Irish Catholics, who maintained the belief that the entire island of Ireland should be a unified, self-governing state. Unionist (meaning loyal to the English crown) Protestants often discriminated against Irish nationalist Catholics, refusing to hire them or provide them with necessary educational or social services. While some Catholics emigrated to the Republic of Ireland or to other countries to avoid this treatment, others did not want to leave their homes, or the good economy, in Northern Ireland. Catholics in Northern Ireland fought back against the discrimination by forming groups such as the Irish Republican Army (formed in 1919), or IRA, a militant guerilla group that devoted itself to unifying all of Ireland as a free state. Meanwhile, Protestants formed corresponding paramilitary groups, which were often aided by British forces. In this highly sectarian climate, violence was a way of life, although it reached a head in the mid-1960s, with the outbreak of a particularly violent bout of sectarian violence dubbed the Troubles. On January 30, 1972, in an event known worldwide as Bloody Sunday, British forces in Northern Ireland massacred thirteen civil-rights demonstrators in Derry (called Londonderry by the British), prompting the IRA to escalate its terrorist campaign of violence—adding targets in England.



The British Influence on Ireland's Language and Culture

Over the many centuries of English colonization in Ireland, English language and culture slowly began to replace much of the Irish language and culture—a common effect of colonization. By the end of the nineteenth century, Gaelic was almost a dead language. However, in 1891, William Butler Yeats, an Irish poet, founded the Irish Literary Society. Along with his friend, Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats helped to inspire a movement in Irish literature. In his own poetry and prose writings, Yeats helped to resurrect old Celtic myths and present them to the world again. Despite these and other efforts—including the establishment of Gaelic as the official language of the Republic of Ireland in 1937—throughout the twentieth century, Irish culture and language were steadily replaced by British culture and language. As a result of this loss, writer David Thomson set out in the late 1940s to document and preserve one aspect of Irish mythology in particular, the legend of the Selchies—seals who can change into human form and vice versa. Other writers, including Heaney, also lamented the loss of Irish culture, mythology, and language, and expressed a desire to both recapture lost heritage and remain distinct from Britain.

The Field Day Theatre Company

In 1980, one year after Heaney published *Field Work*, the Irish playwright, Brian Friel, and the Irish actor, Stephen Rea, formed the Field Day Theatre Company. The same year, with their first production of Friel's play, *Translations*, in Derry, they offered an artistic, peaceful arena that they hoped would transcend the violence in Northern Ireland. Heaney, Hammond, Seamus Deane, and Tom Paulin—all prominent Irish artists—quickly joined Field Day as members of the Board of Directors. The success of their plays propelled Field Day's board into politically motivated publishing in 1983, with the publication of essays by Paulin, Heaney, and Deane. These essays were printed in individual pamphlets, all of which addressed the issues of Irish language and culture, especially as it had been affected by British colonization and influence. In Heaney's essay, "An open letter," he objected to his 1982 inclusion in the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, on the grounds that he was Irish, not British. Heaney's essay illuminated the greater issue, that Ireland did not have a national identity, much less a body of literature that it could call its own. As a result, Field Day's Board of Directors set about compiling a massive and definitive anthology of Irish writing. The three-volume collection, edited by Deane, was published in 1990.



Critical Overview

Although Heaney's reputation was already strong by the time *Field Work* was published in 1979, the new volume was hailed by most critics as a powerful and impressive departure from his first four volumes of poetry. Says Ian Hamilton, in a 1987 review of Heaney's *The Haw Lantern* for the *London Review of Books*: "It was with his fifth book, *Field Work*, that Heaney found a voice that is neither bleakly antiquarian nor awkwardly portentous." Still, not everybody liked *Field Work*, or Heaney, for that matter. In his 1979 review for *Parnassus*, critic Calvin Bedient notes that Heaney's strong reputation "is astonishing in view of his modest ambition and tone." This negative view of Heaney is by far the minority opinion. In fact, as Helen Vendler says in her 2000 book, *Seamus Heaney*, much of the negative criticism of Heaney is politically motivated: "Heaney's adversary critics read the poems as statements of a political position, with which they quarrel."

Several critics have commented on the structure of *Field Work*. Says Daniel Tobin in his 1999 book, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*: "Unlike *North* and *Wintering Out*, *Field Work* composes a seamless structure." Tobin further notes that this structure is "symmetrical. It forms a whole that integrates the subject matter of the earlier volumes." Several critics have also commented on the influence that the American poet, Robert Lowell, has had on *Field Work*. While some see the influence as good, many others, such as Andrew Waterman, do not. In Waterman's 1992 essay, "'The Best Way Out Is Always Through,'" he notes that "it is worrying to see a poet of Heaney's maturity as overwhelmed by another's influence as is pervasively apparent in *Field Work*." For "The Singer's House" in particular, Waterman notes that the sentence "What do we say any more / to conjure the salt of our earth?" is an example of the types of tones that Lowell uses.

Still, most critics have had positive things to say about the volume. Although "The Singer's House" is rarely singled out for critical attention, the critics who have written about it have praised it. In his 1980 article for the *Times Literary Supplement*, "The Voice of Kinship," critic Harold Bloom names the poem as one of the most moving, saying that it practices "a rich negation, an art of excluded meanings, vowels of earth almost lost between guttural consonants of history." In *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (1998), editor and critic, Elmer Andrews, notes that "The Singer's House" is one of the poems in *Field Work* that celebrates "the kind of poetic 'release' Heaney writes about in *The Government of the Tongue*." Andrews quotes Heaney from "Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker," a section of *The Government of the Tongue* that illustrates what Andrews means:

The achievement of the poem is an experience of release
. . . The tongue, governed for so long in the social
sphere by considerations of tact and fidelity, by
nice obeisances to one's origin within the minority
or the majority. This tongue is suddenly ungoverned.
It gains access to a condition that is unconstrained.



In his essay, "A More Social Voice: 'Field Work,'" published in the 1994 book, *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, critic Tony Curtis notes of the poem that: "The belief that imagery and story can sway the imagination and alter the world is what drives every writer." Citing the final three stanzas, Curtis also remarks on the danger of raising one's voice in Northern Ireland: "But to sing you have to rise to your feet and getting noticed in Ulster may not be prudent." Similarly, in his 1994 book, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, critic Michael R. Molino notes the theme of artistic responsibility, saying that "even though the beliefs that once bonded the community have faded, the speaker senses something of value in the singer's raised voice." In his 1996 essay, "Seamus Heaney's Anti-Transcendental Corncrake," Jonathan Allison gives an interesting observation about the singer's voice itself. Allison notes that the harsh-sounding corncrake, a bird employed by many Irish poets, including Heaney, seems to be present in "The Singer's House." Says Allison, there is "something of the broken voice of the crake in Heaney's depiction of the voice of David Hammond."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Heaney's emphasis on sounds to underscore the power of David Hammond's songs in Heaney's poem.

When one first looks at Heaney's poem, "The Singer's House," it may not appear to have a planned structure, other than the anchoring of the two place names, "Carrickfergus" and "Gweebarra." The poem references a number of separate ideas and creates images that may not make sense at first. However, upon further inspection, the poem is revealed to be a carefully designed effort to underscore the power of and need for David Hammond's contributions as a singer. This planning starts with the poem's overall structure, the organization of the stanzas. The poem is divided into eight stanzas, and both the first and the last stanza are self-contained units, which talk about "saltminers' picks" and "the pick" of Hammond's singing voice, respectively.

The use of the word, "pick," in both of these stanzas links them together and creates a circular effect—the last stanza brings the poem around full circle. The "picks" in the first stanza represent the tools that the saltminers used to mine the salt in Carrickfergus. However, the word also represents the picking sound that these tools make. When a word or phrase imitates the sound that it makes, it is known as onomatopoeia. Poets often use this technique when they want to achieve a special effect. In this case, Heaney is using sounds to emphasize the importance of sound. In the first line, after "they said *Carrickfergus*," the name of the place sparks an elaborate vision in Heaney's mind. Heaney's imagination goes back into his heritage and recreates the sound of the "saltminers' picks." This imaginary sound in turn leads Heaney to envision "a township built of light"—Carrickfergus, and Ireland, in its cultural heyday. Within the context of the poem, sound becomes a powerful force, an idea that is established in this first stanza.

Following the first stanza, the next six stanzas are organized into blocks of two stanzas each, all of which end with a period—just like the first and last stanzas end with periods. In this way, the eight stanzas of the poem are broken down into five definitive blocks—the first stanza, the three two-stanza blocks in the middle, and the final stanza. While the first stanza of the poem invokes the past life of Carrickfergus, the next block (stanzas two and three) jumps to the present and talks about the current crisis in Ireland. In the first line of this block, the use of the words, "we say," mimics the use of the words, "they said," from the first line of the first stanza. This pattern is repeated in the first lines of the other blocks in the poem. For example, in the first line of the next block (stanzas four and five), Heaney uses the words "I say."

In the next block (stanzas six and seven), it would seem that Heaney breaks this pattern by saying, "People here used to believe," as opposed to saying "used to say." However, this is not the case. The traditional belief systems of Irish people, like many older cultures, have in the past been based on an oral tradition. Crucial cultural beliefs were passed on to the successive generations through stories and songs. Heaney knows this fact, as would Hammond, a singer himself. The use of the word "believe," which sticks



out when compared to the other uses of the words "say" or "said," is therefore very telling. Finally, the first line in the last block (the final stanza), underscores this fact. "When I came here first you were always singing," Heaney says to Hammond, invoking both Hammond's status as singer—another reference to sound—and Hammond's responsibility to uphold the oral tradition of Ireland.

Given this obvious structural emphasis on sound, it becomes easier to see the other ways in which Heaney uses sounds within the poem. After Heaney has invoked the past life of Ireland in the first stanza, he changes his tactics somewhat in the next three blocks. In stanzas two and three, Heaney moves to the present, where Ireland is having problems maintaining its identity. Says Heaney: "What do we say any more / to conjure the salt of our earth?" The Irish masses who have formed the basis of the island's culture for hundreds of years are being changed by English influence and by the changing society. As Ireland enters the modern world, which is dominated by mass media, the oral tradition is falling off even more, and Heaney makes it seem like there is not much that anybody can "say" to stop it. Heaney laments this loss, saying that so much of the Irish identity, which "comes and is gone," is priceless. Once it is gone, there is no recovering it. As a result, it should be treated like "crystal and kept." The descriptions of a rural life that seems to lack "tang," or spice, without the Irish identity, underscore this devastating idea.

In stanzas five and six, Heaney moves on from the sorrow in the previous block, resolving not to dwell on Carrickfergus and the problems in Northern Ireland, but instead to try to get a fresh start. "So I say to myself *Gweebarra*" Heaney starts, indicating that he is ready to do his part. As in the first stanza, when the sound of the word, "*Carrickfergus*," inspired a vision from Heaney's Irish heritage, the sound of the word, "*Gweebarra*," inspires a new vision in Heaney's mind. This second vision also contains a number of distinct sounds, including the first reference to "music," which "hits off the place / like water hitting off granite." The music reference begins Heaney's attempt to inspire Hammond to sing again. The music, like the picks of the saltminers from the first stanza, inspires a greater vision, one with physical form—at least in Heaney's mind. The sea spray that hits off the granite cliffs of Gweebarra gives the image a sound and a presence. This presence is developed even more, as Heaney, and the reader, follow the music. As Heaney notes in the last line of stanza four, "I see the glittering sound," an idea that he carries over into stanza five with the words, "framed in your window," where he pulls Hammond into the poem. Heaney notes the "knives and forks set on oilcloth" in Hammond's house, a reference to the type of civilized domestic products that English society introduced to Ireland and its people. Since this type of change has often come at the expense of old traditions, Heaney wants to get Hammond to focus on old Ireland, which he does by pointing out the seals—powerful figures in Ireland's legends.

Using the seals as a transition point, Heaney moves on to the next block (stanzas six and seven), where he invokes the specific legend of the Selchies. Says Heaney: "People here used to believe / that drowned souls lived in the seals." However, Heaney does more than invoke an old legend. Given the context of the rest of the poem, the "drowned souls," become those of the Irish masses, whose Irish identity has been drowned in the ravages of English colonization and modern society. Heaney says that



these masses "loved music," again referencing Hammond's profession, and says that the seals "swam in for a singer." Although the words are in past tense, the use of the word "might" indicates that this past is possible again. Heaney now breaks once again from talk of past traditions and focuses on the future. He has already used Carrickfergus to create a vision of the past and Gweebarra to sketch out a vision of the present. Now, he paints a vision of a possible future, where Hammond, the singer, can "stand at the end of summer"□a period of growth in the national Irish identity. In this future scenario, Heaney has Hammond send out his traditional song, which becomes "a rowboat far out in evening."

The emphasis on sounds in Heaney's poem has, up until this point, provided a powerful example to Hammond. Since Heaney has been able to create entire visions of communities in the past and present□based only on the uttering of placenames□ Hammond's music will have even more power in helping to realize visions of future communities, like the one that Heaney creates in the poem. In the final stanza, Heaney emphasizes this idea even more directly, addressing a challenge to Hammond:

When I came here first you were always singing,
a hint of the clip of the pick
in your winnowing climb and attack.
Raise it again, man. We still believe what we hear.

This last stanza, the one that critics seem to comment on the most, is the culmination of Heaney's efforts in the poem to indicate the artist's responsibility for preserving his or her own culture. As Tony Curtis notes of the poem in his 1994 book, *The Art of Seamus Heaney*: "The belief that imagery and story can sway the imagination and alter the world is what drives every writer." Similarly, in his 1994 book, *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, critic Michael R. Molino notes Heaney's belief that Hammond can help to effect a change: "even though the beliefs that once bonded the community have faded, the speaker senses something of value in the singer's raised voice."

Heaney reminds Hammond of the value of his role by associating the "saltminers' picks" from the first stanza with Hammond's voice, which is "a hint of the clip of the pick." Hammond's singing voice signifies his Irish heritage, so by raising his voice he can also help to revive his heritage. The last line is particularly effective. This is the only place in the poem where Heaney includes two complete sentences in one line. These two short sentences, an abrupt departure from the flowing nature of the rest of the poem, force Hammond□ and the reader□to sit up and take notice. The people will believe in their heritage again, Heaney says, if Hammond will help give them something to believe in.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Singer's House," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.



Critical Essay #2

Pool has published poems and reviews in several journals and teaches advanced placement and international baccalaureate English. In this essay, Pool interprets Heaney's poem by close reading and by placing it in a variety of contexts.

Seamus Heaney's poem "The Singer's House" presents several problems of interpretation. Unfamiliar place names, ambiguity of language, and the juxtaposition of the poet's personal life with the political situation of his native Ireland all establish initial uncertainties that can be overcome by placing the poem in biographical, religious, and most importantly, in artistic contexts. This poem uses imagery and indirectness masterfully.

At first reading, the poem presents a contrast between two places, Carrickfergus and Gweebarra. Carrickfergus is associated with salt miners, with their picks laboring away in the earth, and Gweebarra is associated with water and the enigmatic imagery of seals. The poet could hear Carrickfergus as "the frosty echo" and "imagined it, chambered and glinting / a township built of light." The picture is one of industry, of toiling laborers in their workplace underground, yet filled with light. Consistent with a poem about a singer, the auditory imagery is in the foreground and will be sustained throughout the poem until it is reprised in the onomatopoeic "hint of the clip of the pick" in the final stanza.

Immediately afterward, the poet shifts to a rhetorical question which is "one of Heaney's saddest generalized reflections," says Neil Corcoran in *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney*. "What do we say any more / to conjure the salt of our earth? / So much comes and is gone / that should be crystal and kept, // and amicable weathers / that bring up the grain of things, / their tang of season and store, / are all the packing we'll get."

The expression "salt of the earth" is an allusion to Matthew 5:13: "Ye are the salt of the earth, but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men." There is a subtle but inescapable reference to the Irish "Troubles," which obsessed Heaney early in his career, and additionally, "salt of the earth" is a colloquial expression that refers to trustworthy and honest people. Trust and the hope of reconciliation prove to be important to this poem.

The sense of hearing dominates the imagery in the poem, an auditory motif that Heaney extends as he turns to Gweebarra, where "its music hits off the place / water hitting off granite." Music is central to the poem's theme, as indicated by the title. That image is immediately contrasted with the "glittering sound," reminiscent of Carrickfergus, which is framed in the window of the unnamed person Heaney addresses in this poem. In the window is a most commonplace sight, knives and forks on a cloth, here joined with the striking and unusual image of seals' heads, "scanning everything." Once again, the poet moves from reality into the realm of imagination, noting that people of Gweebarra once believed that "drowned souls lived in the seals." These souls might change shape, and



they would swim in to hear a singer Heaney imagines standing in the doorway of a "whitewashed turf-shed" singing a song that is "a rowboat far out in evening." There seems to be little about this imagery that is morbid or frightening; indeed, the seals that can change their shape seem somehow buoyant, and their love of music an encouraging sign.

In the last stanza, the poet addresses an unnamed person, apparently male, perhaps himself. His first three lines seem to refer to real events in his life and refer back to the salt miners of Carrickfergus. He concludes with an exhortation and a challenge for the singer to raise his voice, and he neatly concludes the motifs of hearing and singing and imagining and believing. He ends with a note of affirmation and hope. "When I came here first / you were always singing, / a hint of the clip of the pick / in your winnowing climb and attack. / Raise it again, man. We still believe what we hear."

Heaney's style is loose and informal. Meter, rhyme, and the slant rhyme so often employed by the poet are absent here. Form is subordinate to the poem's meanings and gestures; the quatrains of this poem do not correspond to sentences or complete thought. The first and last stanzas form complete units of thought; most other units are eight lines, or two quatrains in length.

All these are observations gained from close reading of the poem. Some research into geography, history, politics, culture, and, indeed, into the poet's life and career is needed here. Carrickfergus is a seaport in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. Seamus Heaney was born in 1939 in Northern Ireland. He was a Catholic in Protestant-dominated Ulster and as such was a second-class citizen in his own country. Gweebarra is a town on the bay in County Donegal, in the Republic of Ireland, or Eire. The Heaneys moved to the South in the early 1970s. This poem is from a book called *Field Work*, which was composed after Heaney and his family left the urban center of Belfast and came to live in the rural Glanmore Cottage far from the Troubles. Much of what goes on in this poem can best be understood as a contrast between life in the North, which is industriously and symbolically mining something valuable but sterile, salt, and life in the South, which is simple and rustic and contains elements of myth and metamorphosis and a vague promise of personal transformation. Heaney takes the occasion to do something that distinguishes great poets from minor ones. He changes style and subject matter; he grows as a poet by changing his style and his subject matter. Helen Vendler, in her book *Seamus Heaney*, notes this phase of his career, saying "his poetry becomes recognizably that of an individual man engaged in ordinary domestic and social relations . . . his poems visibly kept at a middle level of both genre and style."

Heaney had tried to avoid taking part in the sectarian violence of Northern Ireland, known there as the Troubles. Though unequivocally a member of the Catholic community, he had resisted the call to devote his talents to the services of Republican propaganda, and he had tried to dedicate himself to the requirements of his art, to delve deep into the history and prehistory of his country in ages long before the seventeenth-century split between Protestant and Catholic. His often-anthologized early works such as "Digging" and "The Tollund Man," the latter one of a series of poems about



twothousand year old corpses ritually murdered and preserved in the bogs of Ireland and Western Europe, demonstrate his turn away from contemporary political issues and his looking to the past for artistic and personal inspiration. Tony Curtis, in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, notes that "Heaney is fond of the metaphor which leads him to dig into the Irish earth through layers of history, language, and tradition." By the 1970s, he had realized that he could no longer be silent about the struggle for Irish unification, but he resisted demands for him to turn his pen to mere propaganda. Heaney's ambivalence, his sense of guilt, his ambivalent childhood as Irish Catholic in a Protestant British culture, all have generated creative struggles that resulted in his distinctive poetic identity. Henry Hart, in *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions*, says, "These contrary forces form the fundamental tension in *Field Work*, where marriage poems speak of tearing responsibilities toward spouse and art, and political poems speak of similar tearing responsibilities toward poetic freedom and tribal demands."

The poem still means what it meant upon its first reading, but an understanding of the contexts in which the work occurs gives evidence of what Heaney, in his Nobel Prize acceptance lecture, says is "poetry's gift for telling the truth but telling it slant." Research into place names, which the poet is fond of scattering through his works, the history of Ireland in the twentieth century, and into the poet's own career permit a deeper, fuller, more comprehensive interpretation of the poem. For example, in the "salt of our earth" passage quoted above, the poet is wistfully longing not only for personal friendship and companionship not to be trodden under the foot of men, but he is also longing for reconciliation between the religious communities in the North, where the people look alike, dress alike, speak with the same accent, but whose very names identify them. "Seamus," for instance, is a Catholic name, whereas "Shawn" is its Protestant cognate. The ferocity and futility of the violent struggles between those communities works itself into the writings of Ireland's most esteemed poet. Readers see Heaney's political commitments, not just in the lines of this one poem, but also in the context of the collection of poems which includes "The Singer's Voice," and also in the context of developing issues throughout his distinguished career. Those seals transforming themselves seem upon further investigation to be a longed-for transformation of people whose love of music may in some way bring them the personal and the political reconciliation that the poet deeply desires. He writes other poems in *Field Work* and elsewhere in which animals stand in for humans, an approach that was probably influenced by his friend and fellow poet Ted Hughes, and the American poet Robert Lowell likely showed the way to a looser and more personal means of expression.

Heaney's poem "The Singer's House" is full of imagery. Even if one does not know where Carrickfergus is, the imagery of the salt mines, the clink of the pick, the preservation and packing (one vowel away from "picking") and preservation in salt, the tang of its flavor, the strange shapechanging seals, souls of the dead, and the specific picture of the singer himself, "who might stand at the end of summer / in the mouth of a whitewashed turf-shed / his shoulder to the jamb, his song / a rowboat far out in evening" are all strongly evocative images which move his readers in ways that bald declamation does not. This is a poem about a man and his country, but it avoids the temptation, common among lesser poets, simply to get to the point and make some kind of public preachment regarding the political situation in Ulster and in Eire. Instead, the



poet is indirect, using images to carry his poem to levels where straightforward propaganda could never reach. Imagery, indirectness, personal authenticity, love of country, and the tension between domestic satisfaction and the demands of art—these are highly tuned instruments of the poet singer.

Source: Frank Pool, Critical Essay on "The Singer's House," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.



Topics for Further Study

Read one of the many stories associated with the legend of the Selchies, then read a story from the mythology of a different seafaring culture. Compare the two stories.

The Irish Republican Army (IRA) has been involved in many of the conflicts in Northern Ireland, although since 1998, they have been observing a cease-fire. Research the current state of the IRA and discuss what you think the future holds for this organization. Use details from your research to support your claims.

Pick another culture outside of the United Kingdom that has been affected by colonization. Write a profile of this culture, including a short history, the primary language spoken, and any legends or myths. Discuss any ways that this society has been changed by the colonization.

Research the life of David Hammond, the singer in the poem, and write a short biography about him. Be sure to discuss the relationship between Hammond and Heaney, and include Hammond's reaction to "The Singer's House," if any, as well as any effect the poem may have had on Hammond's life.

Research the life of William Butler Yeats, including his upbringing, writing style, and political beliefs. Imagine that Yeats has read Heaney's poetry and is time-travelling to our time to talk about it. Write a short script that describes what a potential encounter between Heaney and Yeats might be like.



Compare and Contrast

Late 1960s-Early 1970s: Although Gaelic is technically the official language of the Republic of Ireland, it is hardly used, and faces the possibility of dying out entirely, being displaced by English language and culture. This is true for other aspects of Irish culture and mythology.

Today: Irish culture, including the myths and legends of the ancient Celtic peoples, comprise a major industry worldwide. Vendors sell everything from Celtic crosses to traditional Irish folk music, and Irish movies like *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1995) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998) are two of the many recent films that explore Irish legends and culture.

Late 1960s-Early 1970s: The Troubles, the most recent wave of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, begin, and many people—Protestants, Catholics, paramilitary groups on each side, British military, and British citizens—die in a sustained campaign of violence. Bloody Sunday, the killing of thirteen unarmed Catholic protesters on January 30, 1972, inspires a backlash bombing by the Irish Republican Army and escalates the violence.

Today: Following a cease-fire in 1998, residents in Northern Ireland observe an uneasy peace. Having belonged to divided camps for so many years, many find it hard to put aside differences, and, as a result, sectarian violence continues to flare up sporadically in Northern Ireland.

Late 1960s-Early 1970s: Northern Ireland is not the only area in the world that is torn by civil war. In Vietnam, America and other nations go to war in an effort to stop the spread of Communism in Indochina. In the long war, many Americans lose their lives as they support South Vietnam's attempt to establish democratic independence from Communist North Vietnam. The United States does not achieve its goals in the war, which was not widely supported on the American home front.

Today: Following terrorist bombings in New York and Washington, America is one of many nations that devotes itself to stopping the spread of international terrorism. The resulting military campaign in Afghanistan and other areas of the Middle East is widely supported on the American home front.

Late 1960s-Early 1970s: A new salt mine is opened at Kilroot in Northern Ireland in 1967. Northern Ireland's 1969 Mineral Development Act gives the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment responsibility for abandoned mines, including salt mines.

Today: Most salt mines in Carrickfergus and the surrounding area are abandoned. Following the collapse of an abandoned salt mine in Carrickfergus, the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment issues a press release informing the public to keep their children away from the abandoned salt mines—many of which are supported by pillars

of rock salt that can dissolve over time. The Department lists about two thousand abandoned mines in Northern Ireland, which they continue to monitor for structural problems.

What Do I Read Next?

Beowulf, an anonymous poem written in Old English, is believed to have been written sometime between the eighth and tenth centuries. It was losing favor in literary circles by the end of the twentieth century. In 2000, however, Heaney revitalized studies of the epic poem with his gritty and engaging translation. The translation, an unexpected best-seller, also caused controversy when it was awarded the Whitbread Award, one of Great Britain's top honors—normally awarded to an original work.

Heaney is not the only writer who has discussed the problems generated by colonization efforts like the one in Ireland. In 1983, the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry began publishing essays from Heaney and others, as individual pamphlets. Three of these—Terry Eagleton's "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment," Fredric Jameson's "Modernism and Imperialism," and Edward Said's "Yeats and Decolonization"—all originally published in 1988, were collected and reprinted in *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, in 1990.

The Field Day Theatre Company was originally founded to host the plays of Irish playwright Brian Friel. Their first production, Friel's *Translations*, first published in 1981, is set in 1833, when the British authorities are remapping and renaming many old Irish towns. An English Lieutenant is sent to County Donegal, where he falls in love with an Irish woman who speaks only Gaelic. Their tragic love affair emphasizes the loss of cultural traditions and the division of Ireland that was in full force at the time of the play's production.

Although Heaney is known mainly for his poetry, he has also written a variety of essays during his literary and teaching career. *The Redress of Poetry*, published in 1995, collects a number of these essays that are based on lectures Heaney gave as a professor at Oxford University. Heaney's opinions of poetry range from the work of individual poets in the literary canon to the meaning of poetry itself.

In the poem "The Singer's House," Heaney references the seal legends from Celtic mythology, stories that were largely phased out by the widespread assimilation of English language and culture in the twentieth century. In his 1954 book entitled *The People of the Sea: A Journey in Search of the Seal Legend*, David Thomson attempts to document the stories of the seal legend and the culture in which these stories were told. In 2000, two years after Thomson's death, Heaney—a friend of Thomson's—was instrumental in getting the book reprinted. Heaney also provides an introduction in this new edition.

Heaney has often been compared to an earlier Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, whose efforts in the early twentieth century helped to revive Irish legends and culture in a literary movement known as the Irish Renaissance. Yeats's poems are available in a variety of volumes, although *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, published in 1996, offers one of the most comprehensive anthologies available. The volume includes all of the poems that Yeats authorized for publication.



In addition to his poetry, Yeats's extensive research into Irish tales resulted in a number of published essays, introductions, and sketches. *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, published in 2002, collects all of these published prose works. Presented in chronological order, this diverse collection illustrates the evolving nature of Yeats's research and analysis.



Further Study

Ardagh, John, *Ireland and the Irish: Portrait of a Changing Society*, Hamish Hamilton, 1994.

In this accessible book, Ardagh examines how the Irish Republic has undergone a tremendous transformation in the last half of the twentieth century, from a mainly rural society to one that embraces the modern world. Although the writer addresses the conflict in Northern Ireland, he is not limited by it, discussing a wide variety of topics—from life in the slums of Dublin to the massive success of the Irish rock band U2.

Burris, Sydney, *The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition*, Ohio University Press, 1990.

This critical overview of Heaney's poetry examines the same issue that Heaney explores in much of his poetry—the artist's responsibility of addressing the current problems of society in his or her work.

Conroy, John, *Belfast Diary: War as a Way of Life*, Beacon Press, 1987.

Conroy, a Chicago journalist, won an award from the Alicia Patterson Foundation in 1979 to live in Belfast, documenting the effect that the violence in Northern Ireland had on residents. The resulting book offers an emotional look at what life was like for residents of Northern Ireland in the 1980s. The 1995 edition has a new afterword by the author.

Holland, Jack, *Hope against History: The Course of Conflict in Northern Ireland*, Henry Holt and Company, 1999.

Holland gives a clear, concise historical overview of the complex conflict in Northern Ireland, which is often misunderstood. The writer is a native of Belfast who has mixed Catholic and Protestant heritage, giving him a rare perspective from which to view the conflict.

O'Donoghue, Bernard, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, Prentice Hall, 1995.



O'Donoghue—a poet and critic—offers one of the first book-length, chronological studies of Heaney's exploration of language.

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

Parker's detailed biography of Heaney describes the poet's Catholic upbringing in Protestant Northern Ireland and the effects that this life had on Heaney's development as a poet.

Richtarik, Marilyn J., *Acting between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics, 1980- 1984*, Catholic University of America Press, 1994.

Heaney and singer David Hammond were two of several artists who joined the Field Day Theatre, as a means of transcending the violence in Northern Ireland through their productions. This book offers a thorough study of these individuals, as well as the circumstances that led to the founding of Field Day.



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Heaney, Seamus, "Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture," in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, p. 420.

□, "Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker," in *The Government of the Tongue*, Faber, 1988, p. xxii.

□, "Notes," in *Field Work*, The Noonday Press, 1991, p. 65.

□, "The Singer's House," in *Field Work*, The Noonday Press, 1991, p. 27.

Molino, Michael R., *Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, Catholic University of America Press, 1994, p. 135.

Tobin, Daniel, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, University Press of Kentucky, 1999, p. 146.

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□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.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

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.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

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:

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