

Seamus Heaney, 'Out of the Bag'

Biography

Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) rose from humble beginnings as a County Derry farm boy to become one of the giants of 20th-century poetry. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, his work is known and loved around the world.

The eldest child of nine, Heaney grew up in County Derry, Northern Ireland. The memories, people and landscapes of his early years were an inspiration he returned to time and again in his poems. His academic career began with a scholarship to St Columb's College, Derry, and led him to Queen's University, Belfast and then on to distinguished posts at Harvard and Oxford, where he was Professor of Poetry.

Heaney wrote over 20 books of poetry and criticism. Key early collections include his first, *Death of a Naturalist* (Faber and Faber, 1966), *Door into the Dark* (Faber and Faber, 1969) and *North* (Faber and Faber, 1975). Of his later collections, *Electric Light* (Faber and Faber, 2001) and *District and Circle* (Faber and Faber, 2006) were both shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, as was his final collection *Human Chain* (Faber and Faber, 2010) which also won the Forward Prize for Best Collection. He was also a celebrated translator whose version of *Beowulf* (Faber and Faber, 1999) became an unlikely bestseller, winning the Whitbread Book of the Year Award.

His poetry is informed by his wide learning and knowledge of literature, but never overwhelmed by it. Rather, he roots his work in the specific, alert to the miracles of ordinary happenings. Allied to a rich music of consonant and rhythm influenced by the cadences of his native Northern Irish accent, these qualities mean his poetry appeals as much to the ear and the heart as to the mind. It's perhaps these aspects of his work which have made him a genuinely popular poet, one of the few that people beyond the poetry world have heard of.

The contentious history of Northern Ireland and its eruption into 'The Troubles' also influenced his work, though he refused a simple stance of pro-Republican propaganda, his poetry insisting on the complex realities of the situation. This refusal to become a cheerleader for the Catholic cause drew criticism from some quarters at the time, and partly prompted his later move over the border to the Republic of Ireland. Gradually, however, the integrity of his vision won recognition, culminating in his Nobel citation which praised his work for its 'lyrical beauty and ethical depth'.

When Seamus Heaney died in 2013, tributes flooded in from around the world. The UK Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, spoke for many when she said that for his 'brothers and sisters in poetry, he came to be the poet we all measured ourselves against and he demonstrated the true vocational nature of his art for every moment of his life. He is irreplaceable.'

Seamus Heaney, "Out of the Bag"

All of us came in Doctor Kerlin's bag.
He'd arrive with it, disappear to the room
And by the time he'd reappear to wash

Those nosy, rosy, big soft hands of his
In the scullery basin, its lined insides
(The colour of a spaniel's inside lug)

Were empty for all to see, the trap-sprung mouth
Unsnibbed and gaping wide. Then like a hypnotist
Unwinding us, he'd wind the instruments

Back into their lining, tie the cloth
Like an apron round itself,
Darken the door and leave

With the bag in his hand, a plump ark by the keel...
Until the next time came and in he'd come
In his fur-lined leather collar which was also spaniel coloured

And go stooping up to the room again, a whiff
Of disinfectant, a Dutch interior gleam
Of waistcoat satin and highlights on the forceps.

Getting the water ready, that was next -
Not plumping hot, and not lukewarm, but soft,
Sud-luscious, saved for him from the rain-butt

And savoured by him afterwards, all thanks
Denied as he towelled hard and fast,
Then held his arms out suddenly behind him

To be squired and silk-lined into the camel coat.
At which point once he turned his eyes upon me,
Hyperborean, beyond-the-north wind blue,

Two peepholes to the locked room I saw into
Every time his name was mentioned, skimmed
Milk and ice, swabbed porcelain, the white

And chill of tiles, steel hooks, chrome surgery tools
And blood dreeps in the sawdust where it thickened

At the foot of each cold wall. And overhead

The little, pendent, teat-hued infant parts
Strung neatly from a line up near the ceiling –
A toe, a foot and shin, an arm, a cock

A bit like the rosebud in his buttonhole.

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Poeta doctus Peter Levi says
Sanctuaries of Asclepius (called asclepions)
Wee the equivalent of hospitals

In ancient Greece. Or of shrines like Lourdes,
Says Poeta doctus Graves. Or of the cure
By poetry that cannot be coerced,

Say I, who realised at Epidauros
That the whole place was a sanatorium
With theatre and baths,

A site of incubation, where “incubation”
Was technical and ritual, meaning sleep
When epiphany occurred and you met the god.

Hatless, groggy, shadowing myself
As the thurifer I was in an open-air procession
In Lourdes in ‘56

When I nearly fainted from the heat and fumes,
Again I nearly fainted as I bent
To pull a bunch of grass and hallucinated

Doctor Kerlin at the steamed-up glass
Of the scullery window, starting in to draw
With his large pink index finger dot-faced men

With button-spots in a straight line down their fronts
And women with dot breasts, giving them all
A set of droopy sausage-arms and legs

That soon began to run. And then as he dipped and laved
In the generous suds again, miraculum:
The baby bits all came together swimming

Into his soapy big hygienic hands
And I myself came to, blinded with sweat,
Blinking and shaky in the windless light.

3

Bits of the glass I pulled I posted off
To one going in to chemotherapy
And one who had come through. I didn't want

To leave the place or link up with the others.
It was midday, mid-May, pre-tourist sunlight
In the precincts of the god,

The very site of the temple of Asclepius.
I wanted nothing more than to lie down
Under hogweed, under seeded grass

And to be visited in the very eye of the day
By Hygeia, his daughter, her name still clarifying
The haven of light she was, the undarkening door.

4

The room I came from and the rest of us all came from
Stays pure reality where I stand alone,
Standing the passage of time, and she's asleep

In sheets put on for the doctor, wedding presents
That showed up again and again, bridal
And usual and useful at births and at deaths.

Me at the bedside, incubating for real,
Peering, appearing to her as she closes
And opens her eyes, then lapses back

Into a faraway smile whose precinct of vision
I would enter every time, to assist and be asked
In that hoarsened whisper of triumph,

'And what do you think
Of the new wee baby the doctor brought for us all
When I was asleep?'