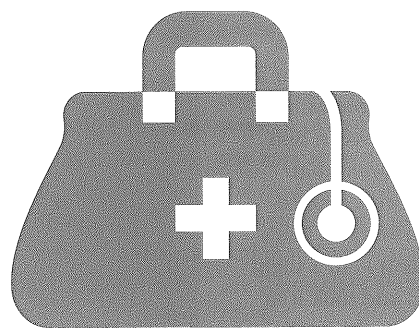


Poetry Isn't Meant to Be Easy



'Out of The Bag'
by Seamus Heaney

In this piece, *emagazine* editor Barbara Bleiman offers ways of thinking about a difficult poem, and routes into greater understanding, using this Edexcel anthology poem as her example.

This is a poem that, for me, demonstrates everything that poetry is and should be. It cannot be easily summed up, or explained. It reverberates with different ideas, feelings and thoughts. It leaps over time and space in ways that are complex and uncertain, making links that aren't always entirely logical, are often highly personal and yet manage to speak to readers who have not lived through the experiences described. It's a poem that, like many others, references other works and cultural artefacts or events, whether that's the interiors of Dutch oil paintings, or Asclepius, the ancient god of medicine. It suggests rather than states, it contains echoes from one word or phrase to another, it works on our associative memories, allowing us to make links and have thoughts that are personal to us, as well as part of our common inheritance. Very importantly, it uses sound to affect us in an emotional and physical way, so that we take pleasure in the repeated patterns and rhythms even before we start using our intellects to work out our thoughts.

That does not make it an easy read, but then poetry isn't meant to be easy. It's not meant to be 'understood' in its entirety and summarised. It's not meant to be read only to be understood. As the poet Mark Yakich has said

A poem can feel like a locked safe in which the combination is hidden inside. In other words, it's okay if you don't understand a poem. Sometimes it takes dozens of readings to come to the slightest understanding. And sometimes understanding never comes. It's the same with being alive: Wonder and confusion mostly prevail.

Having said that, some poems allow you in more quickly than others. The numbers are on the outside of the locked safe, and you know the combination. Others take longer for wonder to win out over confusion. 'Out of the Bag' seems to me to be a poem which might, at least for some of us, take longer.

So how do you find your way into this poem, to experience the wonder rather than the confusion?

Here are a few ideas.

1. Put 'Understanding' to One Side Initially

Don't worry about 'understanding' at first. Read it several times, section by section. Draw from it what you can. Think about what you find pleasurable. Concentrate on what you feel and what you understand, rather than what you don't.

So here's an example of me starting to thinking about the first section:

I love the way we're plunged straight into the scene, with the doctor (named so we have a sense of this as an actual memory, coming with his bag, washing his hands and leaving it open for the narrator to look at, and then closing it and leaving. Early on, I'm not aware why he's there but then the word 'forceps' the heating of water makes me think of birth. The repeated arrivals and departures suggest the birth of several children and this is confirmed by the description of the 'teat-hued infant parts'. But this description of babies isn't straightforward. I'm still puzzling that out. Are these parts in the child's imagination, the idea that he's seeing this whole world of babies and surgical instruments behind the eyes of the doctor, not in reality? I love that sense of a child's rather confused and complicated thoughts about the births of his brothers or sisters, and his sense of something both reassuring about the doctor and the bag and a bit chilling and frightening – his 'beyond-the-north-wind blue' eyes holding lots of rather threatening images of surgical tools and body parts, as if he is taking life rather than helping to bring it into the world. Does he wonder whether the birth happens in the bag, that the doctor is opening his bag and bringing out the baby from it? This is just the kind of mixed-up thinking and fantasy that children are perfectly capable of. It's only much later that adults discover their misunderstandings.

First thoughts but I'll come back to this later to think and feel again, especially in the light of what comes next.

2. Decide On What It's Essential to Find Out

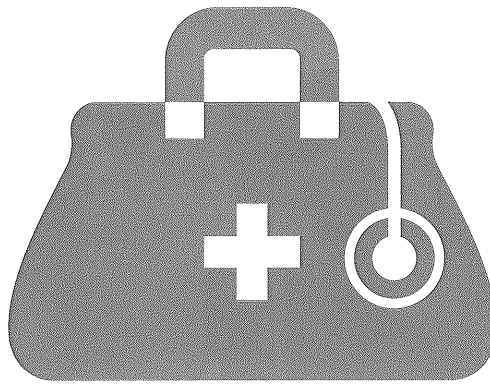
Look up or find out things that you really think you need to know, to get more out of the poem. That doesn't mean every word or every reference. But some really do help to know about. One obvious thing is who Asclepius is or was, and what is meant by 'poeta doctus'. To know that Asclepius was the ancient god of medicine, and that Peter Levi was both a poet and a medical doctor, are helpful, as is the fact that Epidaurus is a site of ancient Greek ruins that Heaney visited. Once you know this you can start to see if you can make connections between Part 1 and Part 2. It seems that as the speaker nearly fainted from the heat at the ruins, the memory of Dr Kerlin suddenly came back to him. Here he is, thinking about the god of medicine and remembering this much earlier experience of an actual doctor, someone who, in his own way seemed to be a bit like a god, who could conjure babies out of his bag. Perhaps it might also suddenly dawn, as it did for me, that 'Out of the Bag' is not just about the doctor's medical implements being brought out (or the babies of the boy's imagination), but also Heaney's own memories appearing in a similarly mysterious and dramatic way.

3. Read Multiple Times and in Multiple Ways

Read aloud. Read the beginning, then jump to the end. Read with one aspect in mind, and then with another. Read with a pen to look for connections and repeated phrases, or patterns. If you find a repetition ask yourself why. Why did the poet think it was worth doing this?

Here's an example of this and how it worked for me.

I noticed the words 'disappear' and 'reappear' in the first section and also frequent mentions of other words associated with coming and going – 'arrive', 'leave', 'come'. On a third or fourth reading, I noticed in the second section that there was a kind of disappearance and re-appearance too, as the poet faints (disappears) and comes to (reappears). In the final section there's another 'appearance', his own at his mother's bed, appearing to her as she herself drifts in and out of sleep and wakefulness after the exhaustions of a baby's birth. Appearing, of course, has a different meaning too, of what appears to be true. In the child's understanding, what appears to be true is not necessarily so. And the memories of this appear and disappear, coming back to him when he's an adult, in Lourdes and at Epidaurus. One even wonders if the scene at the bedside in the fourth section is actually conjuring up the



death of his elderly mother rather than the birth of another child, the two kinds of bedside scenes being interconnected. Conjuring up sparks a new thought. The conjuror makes things appear and disappear. He takes things out of a bag and the bag is empty. He fills it again as if by magic. The doctor, helping deliver the babies, for the boy is like a magician. Heaney actually uses the word 'hypnotist' for the doctor and this confirms my thinking that the poem is about an act that seems like magic to the child. It then allows me to connect this to the magic he hopes can be done by grasping a piece of grass at Epidaurus to send to his friend with cancer, in hopes of miraculously making a cure appear. As I think this thought the word 'miraculum' leaps out at me.

Now clearly, this exploration doesn't give me a clear-cut answer to what the poem is about, or a fully worked up critical view, but it does give me lots of useful ways in, and begins to help me shape a set of thoughts about a poem exploring the mystery of birth for a small child, the disappearance and reappearance of memories, the magic and mystery of birth (and death) and the miraculous powers of medicine.

4. Ask the Why Question, Repeatedly, in Different Ways

'Why?' takes you a long way with poetry, where there are often multiple possible answers and thinking about these can develop and enrich your interpretation. Here are a few 'why?' questions I would ask about this poem, though there are plenty more:

- Why are there four different sections?
- Why connect the births, the experience at Epidaurus and Lourdes?
- Why are some words or ideas or grammatical patterns repeated (see above)?
- Why end with the mother's words, directly spoken, after the birth of another baby?
- Why does Heaney describe himself as a boy, as 'incubating for real'? What is he incubating?
- Why is there so much detail about the doctor, his handwashing, how he looked and so on?

5. Tread Carefully with Whole Commentaries, Online or Elsewhere

Be very cautious about reading or taking on wholesale other people's critical commentaries, especially if they are simply telling you what you should notice, or should think. Don't turn to them too quickly, to answer your questions. If they can answer all your questions simply, they're probably the most 'dangerous'. As I said earlier, poems don't have easy answers. There are many online blogs which can shape your thinking, in more or less helpful ways. Sometimes they can state things that may be true but aren't necessarily so; some may be just plain wrong.

Here are just a few short examples of things I read online:

- One blog suggests that the free verse structure places an emphasis on the free-flowing nature of memories, and the lack of a rhyme scheme lets the images and ideas 'speak for themselves', allied to the use of enjambment and a few end-stopped lines, which make the poem 'confusing for the reader'.

What is this telling you? That free verse is associated with free-flowing memories, which is highly debatable. Many poets only write in free verse and do not always have 'free-flowing' ideas. The comment on rhyme and enjambment is empty of analysis or insight.

- Another online piece tells us that 'the use of enjambment within this regular rhythm maintains the flow between lines, creating a conversational tone.'

Again, this is so general as to be hardly worth saying, and doesn't take us to the heart of the poem and what's at stake, the significant ideas and feelings that are being developed and how.

- One online piece comments that the words 'spaniel-coloured' suggest the

child didn't have the knowledge to name the colour specifically. Yet the description is elaborate and detailed – an example of highly poetic language. Personally, I'd be attempted to attribute this more to the adult poet than the child's perspective, especially when it's also used to describe the inside of the bag, and described as 'the colour of a spaniel's inside lug.' That's a point to debate.

- One blog starts by telling us that themes that are explored include childhood, memory, the creative process. We are then told immediately afterwards that the poem is in iambic pentameter.

The first of these comments is too big and broad to be helpful. Thousands of poems deal with these themes and this tells us very little about Heaney's poem. What's important is being able to capture what Heaney is doing with these. And the leap to iambic pentameter, for no obvious reason, is an example of poor practice in writing about poetry. 'So what?' is the question that immediately springs to mind.

By contrast, once you're well into your own thinking, sometimes a comment from an established critic or reputable source, can really help to spark your own ideas or clarify your thinking. Here's an example that I enjoyed reading. The start is not generalised but gets straight into the texture of the poem itself. The ideas jump out of the bag, in the same way as the babies do. 'Epiphanies' are moments where something is suddenly revealed to you and the writer suggests that Heaney has these moments of memory that suddenly come together to offer revelations about the past, about how a child understands birth (both misunderstanding it and yet understanding its magic, mystery and wonder) and how this connects to adult experiences of healing. Interestingly, this commentary is from LitMed, a collection of literature and the arts associated with medicine and 'the medical humanities'.

This is a poem of epiphanies, which, like the wee babies of the poet's childhood, jump out of a bag. In this case the bag is Seamus Heaney's memory. As in ancient times, Asclepius reveals himself through images and memories. The myths of childhood live on. Though Heaney is a man of the modern world who sees beyond (or behind) the myth of healing, still, the epiphany reveals its truth, a truth he wishes to share with his friends by sending them a token of grass from the god's precinct.

<http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/view/11867>

6. Lastly, and Very Importantly, Talk

Talk with other students, talk with your teacher and put your ideas to the test. Try them out on other people and see whether they hold up. Listen to theirs and see if any change your own thinking and take your reading in a new direction. Be prepared to let an idea go if it doesn't seem to hold up to serious scrutiny.

At the end of this process, you should feel much more confident that you have plenty to say about this complex and fascinating poem, and the kind of intimate knowledge of it that will allow you to explore its ambiguities and complexities without feeling that you have to 'understand' and 'explain' everything, as if it could all be neatly packaged and summarised.

Barbara Bleiman is co-editor of *emagazine*.

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