



Unit AS 1: Section A

The Study of Poetry 1900-Present

Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A04.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of poetry.

This AO involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the poems, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Specialist vocabulary should be used where necessary and appropriate. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

A02: Poetic methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyse the poet's use of such poetic methods as form, structure, language and tone. This AO is the driver of Unit AS 1: Section A and is of primary importance.

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in poems. This means identifying poetic methods such as form, structure and particular uses of language, and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing poetic methods - advice to students:

1. The poetic method should be:

identified, using appropriate terminology if possible. (It should not be necessary for the student to learn or research recondite terms; the more well-known terms should be sufficient at this stage, provided they are used accurately)



illustrated, as this is an “open book” section, quotation will be expected and this should be relevant and sufficient to illustrate the feature in full. It should observe the layout of the original text, and should follow the conventions with regard to smooth and syntactically appropriate combining of the quotation with the student’s own words

analysed so as to show that the student understands its operation and effect

related to the key term of the question.

2. Use of the terms “image” and “imagery”

For our purposes in this section “images” and “imagery” are to be sought and found in the language of the poems, and not in the mind of the reader. The student should be discouraged from such formulations as “In this poem the reader has the image of nature as a destroying force” where “image” is really being used to mean impression. For the purpose of A02 analysis in this section, what we mean by “image” is a figure of speech, where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as detailing.

3. Use of the term “tone”

Tone is usually understood as the poet’s words in combination with his or her attitude towards subject or reader. It may be considered both in the light of a poetic method and as an effect of other methods e.g. diction, syntax. This feature, if it is to be handled productively, requires careful treatment. As with all methods, the tone must be:

identified - here no specialist vocabulary is needed, merely a precisely chosen adjective or adjective phrase (e.g. acerbic, admiring, mocking);

illustrated - a full and apt quotation should be selected;

analysed – the quotation should be analysed so as to demonstrate that the student understands how the tone is achieved; and

related to the key term of the question.

The importance of shifts of tone as a structural device (in e.g. contrast, characterization or development) should be understood by students.



A03: Contexts

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which poetry is written and received. In this section, the stipulated context will be biographical, and the student should demonstrate how this has influenced the poet's work by drawing on relevant information from outside the poem. Contextual information which is made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

A04: Connections

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections between two named poems.

The student should explore connections between two named poems, discussing similarities and differences in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in contexts. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney

Introduction

Teachers and students should be cautioned that this chapter does not contain “model answers”. The main concern has been with content, to give an introduction to some of the themes which are shared by these poets and are to be found in this Anthology. Some care has been taken with the discussion and exemplification of two areas of poetic method identified above as problematic i.e. imagery and tone. No claim is made that the discussion for any one poem is comprehensive. It is hoped that the comparative and contextual material offered here will re-assure teachers and students about the nature and amount of what is expected. It should of course be clear that other poems might have been chosen for each of these themes and that the pairings offered here are in no sense “official”. It should also be clear that the list of themes which concludes this section might be added to. It has not been thought necessary to expand the A02 or A03 sections beyond bullet-point format, but a short glossary is appended. The following is therefore neither prescriptive nor exhaustive (for example not all the poems in the Anthology are dealt with, and doubtless some teachers and students will feel that a more thorough and consistent comparative approach is achievable), but it is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore their pair of poets. It reflects some of the stylistic, thematic and contextual issues which may be explored and developed further both in the classroom and through teachers' and students' own independent research. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realizing for example that a particular poem is likely to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.



Childhood experience

Frost: *Birches*

Heaney: *Personal Helicon*

Birches

Almost half of this poem can be seen as the speaker introducing himself. Frost characterizes this speaker as a thoughtful observer, occasionally fanciful as in the imagery of the dome of heaven shattered to heaps of broken glass or the simile comparing the broken trees to girls throwing their hair forward to dry in the sun. He may be fanciful, but he is also knowledgeable, with years of experience. He knows that the damage done to the trees by the ice is irreparable. He is humorous, too, pretending to mislead his audience with a dead-pan claim that what he has been saying is “all... matter of fact”.

“But I was going to say...” introduces the speaker’s moralizing reflection on childhood experience. To discover what the moral is we must wait until the end of the poem. The phrase suggests that the description of the birches being bent under ice was an unintentional digression, and that the speaker has not been able to keep to the subject, which was the boy swinging on them (line 3).

The use of the indeterminate adjective in “some boy” generalizes what the speaker says of this childhood experience of play. He imagines his generalized boy - almost an employee on the farm like the child in *Out, out* - snatching odd moments of play. There is a localizing touch in “too far from town to learn baseball”, suggesting an American environment where childhood experience is shaped by isolation. Then in line 41 he moves back to the use of first person: “So was I once myself a swinger of birches.” The care taken with the punctuation, with the commas and their abandonment in the final line quoted here and the deliberate line-straddling rhyme demonstrates the careful final stages of the climbing and then the rush of the descending operations:

“He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.”

This offers a convincing aural and proprioceptive re-creation of the experience and a convincing introduction to the two admissions that this has been the speaker’s personal experience, and that he dreams of rediscovering it.

The simile “when life is too much like a pathless wood” is developed as both the cause of his wishing to rediscover the childhood experience, and because with the cobwebs and the lashing twigs it is appropriate to the setting. This extended simile allows Frost to filter the theme of childhood experience through an older speaker who is weary and burdened with problems and who dreams of his childhood experience as a time of freedom. The characterization of the speaker is consistent in the fanciful superstition



that a “wilful” fate may punish such escapism. The defensive tone of

“May no fate wilfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return”

conveyed by the use of the modal verb “may” to express a prayerful wish shows that the speaker knows that for an adult, childhood experience is not regainable though it may be temporarily enjoyed in memory. The symbol of escape from earth’s problems which the speaker is making out of the child’s experience of climbing is treated carefully

“And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven....”

with the emphasis of italicization keeping the speaker ‘grounded’, knowing that coming back to earth is inevitable, and not really to be regretted. Earth is, after all, “the right place for love”.

Structurally, the important point to note about the treatment of childhood experience in *Birches* is that the climbing of birches is seen retrospectively by an adult speaker who endows it with a symbolic value and makes it relevant to adult life.

Personal Helicon

The allusion in the title to Mount Helicon and to the group of ancient Greek myths associated with it is only gradually revealed as relevant to the theme of childhood experience. Mount Helicon was the site of the stream called Hippocrene, sacred to the Muses (the deities which presided over the arts, including poetry). This stream was said to have broken out of a hoof-print made by Pegasus, the winged horse of poetry, and Pegasus was engendered from the spilt blood of the monstrous Gorgon Medusa. The dark origins of poetry are suggested through this part of the myth and the poem ends with Heaney rhyming “to set the darkness echoing”. Helicon was also associated with the myth of Narcissus, the beautiful boy who, gazing into a spring, became enamoured with his own reflection. This story too has some dark undertones, for example of a destructive self-absorption. Heaney, beginning with a description of particular childhood experiences, uses these myths to say something about the writing of poetry, the art to which he will devote his life. There is plenty to enjoy in *Personal Helicon* without a detailed knowledge of the Greek myths, but such a knowledge can only enrich the enjoyment of any reader.

The structure of *Personal Helicon* is governed by the use of two phrases. The phrase “As a child” governs verses 1-4. These verses deal with the childhood experience of the speaker as he explores and investigates the local wells and springs which so fascinated him. The last verse is introduced by “Now...” and the speaker states an attitude to his former activities – “beneath all adult dignity”- but relates them to his present occupation of “rhyming”. The poem is a memory poem in a more explicit way than *Birches*, where the speaker only gradually revealed that the childhood experiences related were his own.

The first four verses are memorable for their detailing of the investigations of the



young well-enthusiast. A ‘them and me’ opposition is hinted by the vague use of the pronoun “they”, for those who might have kept him from wells if they could. And then the vividness of the childhood experience is suggested by the delighted listing of equipment, plants, and sense impressions of many kinds – olfactory, tactile and auditory as well as visual. The recollection of childhood experience is sensuous in a more varied way than in *Birches*. “I loved”, “I savoured”, he tells us about the past, but this is to be set against the present: “I rhyme”. Like Frost, Heaney occasionally slips from “I” to “you” to universalize the childhood experience and to invite the reader closer.

“So deep you saw no reflection in it.”

Heaney handles the theme of childhood experience in language which is concrete and factual. Things are named for what they are – pumps, buckets, windlasses, rotted boards, and there is little of Frost’s playfulness. However, there is strangeness, and even fear in the experience of the investigating child. The word “scare” (perhaps a child’s coinage) is used when “a rat slapped across my reflection”, and we remember the rat phobia which afflicted the young Heaney and which emerges memorably in several other poems. And the echoes from some wells (Echo was the nymph who fell in love with Narcissus on Helicon) “gave you back your own call/ With a clean new music in it”. We saw in *Birches* that Frost’s treatment of the theme of childhood experience led towards a moral wisdom. Like Frost, Heaney charges his childhood experience with more than literal meaning. Something which may be dark and frightening but which is also fresh and new is perceived in the wells, and in the final verse Heaney makes the connection between his childhood experience and his present decision to become a poet. Although he seems to reject his past experiences as “beneath all adult dignity”, he will write (“rhyme”) to discover who and what he is, and “to set the darkness echoing”, whether this darkness is outside him or inside.



Reactions to death or loss

Frost: “*Out, Out –*”

Heaney: “*The Summer of Lost Rachel*”

“Out, Out –”

“*Out, Out –*” tells the story of a farmyard accident in which a young boy working with a mechanical saw loses a hand and later dies. The poem shows four differing reactions – the immediate reaction of the boy himself to the incident, the reaction of one of the people taking care of the injured boy, the reaction of the farm people generally, and the reaction of the speaker in the poem. Frost is said to have been reluctant to read this poem in public, feeling that it was too cruel, so we may smuggle in a fifth reaction from the contextual area. (The poem was based on an incident which saw the death of the son of a friend and neighbour.)

Frost’s allusion to *Macbeth* in the title suggests despair as a reaction to death and loss. The poem, however, opens descriptively, emphasising the pleasant elements in the scene: the clarity of the view of the far sunset and the sweetness of the scented air caused by the wood-cutting. The tranquillity of this scene is however undermined, at first unobtrusively by the connotations of the phrase “made dust” (a muted reminder of the significance of the title) and then by the prominent repetition of the onomatopoeic verbs “snarled and rattled” to present the saw as both animalistic and mechanical – and certainly dangerous. The detailing which Frost gives in the opening lines of the poem is also significant as it quietly creates a scene where we can imagine such an accident taking place. For the death of the boy when it comes is both shockingly sudden and explicable. The fading light, the beauty of the sunset tempting eyes to lift, the sudden appearance of the sister at the edge of vision and the welcomeness of her long-awaited words combine as a set of dangerous distractions from a task which needs full concentration.

The reactions of the actors in this tragedy follow. The boy’s reactions to the loss of his hand go through several stages.

“The boy’s first outcry was a rueful laugh”

“Rueful” means expressive of regret or sorrow. The problem is – it is not a problem at all of course, for Frost knows exactly what he is doing – that the word is usually employed to express a humorous or affected regret. This careful piece of understatement (effected through word-choice) is the method used by Frost to convey in an absolutely convincing way the reaction of shock: the boy sees but does not yet understand. The “laugh” betrays that. The detailing of the boy’s movements, and the simile (if it is a simile) used to convey his purpose, are found shocking by many readers and remind us of the poet’s unease about reading the poem in public:

“... he swung towards them holding up the hand,
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling.”

“Life” as a metonym for blood – but almost literal. “Then” Frost moves to the final stage of the boy’s reaction to the loss of his hand. This is full understanding, conveyed



by the repetition of “the boy saw all....He saw all spoiled.” The repeated phrases are separated by the interposition of the speaker’s rather confused reaction which can be considered later. The fullness of the understanding, however, is at once called into question by the use of the word “spoiled”, another telling understatement. Does the boy see his death, or is it some lesser evil he fears? For example, a farming ambition thwarted? After all a one-handed boy is of no use on a farm. His tone of anguished appeal, heard in the repetition and interruption of the sentence

“Don’t let him cut my hand off –
The doctor, when he comes. Don’t let him, sister!”

indicates the final stage of the boy’s reaction to the loss of his hand (unless we include the physical reaction to the ether).

One of the farm people presumably is “the watcher at his pulse” whose taking fright draws strained attention from those present. The long pauses, short sentences and *diminuendo* of “Little – less – nothing!” (another echo from *Macbeth*) provide a reaction to the death that seems to have “ended it”. However, the last line and a half provides one more reaction to the death, which continues to shock readers: “And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.” This reaction, considered as the reaction of the farm people, may be interpreted as callous indifference, practicality, lack of imagination or a displacement of grief. It is the more striking as the reason for it is conveyed in an understated way (yet again) in a subordinate clause.

Finally, the reaction of the speaker to the death. The speaker in this poem is individuated. He does not restrict himself (or rather Frost does not restrict him) to a narration of the facts. This speaker comments on the story he tells and at times becomes emotionally involved. The story is told in the past tense which suggests the outcome is known to him so his sudden expression of regret, speaking for the first time in the first person, that no-one had acted to “Call it a day” may be interpreted as a reaction to the death of the boy. Similarly, his feelings burst through in the horrified exclamation “But the hand!” There are also the two lines where the speaker interrupts the account of the boy’s realization of what has happened to him with his own rather confused hesitation about whether the boy ought to have been doing the work in the first place: “old enough...big boy...man’s work...a child at heart”. The speaker’s monosyllabic “So” and the pause that ensues invite a consideration of the speaker’s reaction, but do not illuminate as to what that might be. And although the last two lines of the poem have been considered here as applying to the reactions of the farm people, they might equally be interpreted as expressing a reaction of the speaker.



The Summer of Lost Rachel

The Summer of Lost Rachel is an elegy mourning the death in a road accident of a young girl, a niece of the poet. Whereas Frost offered a range of reactions to death and loss from a range of characters in “Out Out –”, the reaction in Heaney’s poem is unitary. This is conveyed by the use of the all-inclusive pronoun “everyone”:

“...everyone is loath
To trust the soft-soaping rain...”

This later modulates to “we”, which refers primarily to the grieving members of the family, but the situation of loss and the reaction of grief are universal and the use of “we” and “our” remains inclusive. The poem begins with a description of the botanical growth during the summer when Rachel was lost, and

“...all confidence in summer’s
Unstinting largesse
Broke down...”

The unobtrusive personification of summer as a largesse-distributing deity losing the confidence of worshippers magnifies the demoralization of the family in their reaction to the death. The moment is identified (for the moment) as a terminal one – even confidence in the rhythms of nature breaks down. This reaction seems very different from the stoicism or indifference of the farm people at the end of “*Out, Out –*” who decide to carry on with their affairs.

There is a reference to the preparation and laying-out of the body, and this is followed by the image of the “merciless” setting sun, a metaphor for both the little girl’s death and, in the choice of the adjective, its finality. Imagining that things could have turned out differently – a natural reaction to loss - is allowed in the poem, but only in the “merciless” light of that setting sun. An image from cinematography is used in an attempt to create an alternative story in which Rachel is “safe and sound” and all the dreadful and distressing details are edited out:

“And every merciful
Register inside us yearned
To run the film back,”

But “every merciful register” is positioned immediately after the reference to the “merciless” sun and the attempt inevitably ends in the only possible reaction – the acceptance of death and loss. This is conveyed decisively through the brief abbreviated sentence “But no.” The poem finalizes itself in a more composed reaction. The acceptance of reality is explicitly confirmed:

“So let the downpours flood
Our memory’s riverbed...”

The might-have-beens remain, but blurred and robbed of their pain. No longer the dreadful, sharply-focused details of “twisted spokes” and “awful skid-marks”, but, in a much gentler register (“wavers”, “dreamily”, “soft-plumed waterweed”) the river image shows memory at her work of composing and preserving.

The speaker in *The Summer of Lost Rachel* can be identified with the poet with much



more confidence than is the case with *“Out, Out –”*, where a detached observer, who is however unable to maintain his detachment, is the speaker. Although contextually both poets had a connection to the events described, Heaney’s was much more intimate than Frost’s, and the theme of reactions to death and loss is treated in a gentler and more comforting way which is appropriate to both the subject matter and the context.



Work

Frost: *Gathering Leaves*

Heaney: *The Forge*

Gathering Leaves

In 1923 Frost took up a subject which his friend Edward Thomas had written about some years previously – the apparently pointless and frustrating task of gathering up the autumn leaves. Frost had written several poems about rural work. In *Mowing* for example he had reflected on the dignity of such tasks and the satisfaction to be derived from them. At the end of *Gathering Leaves* Frost refuses to accept that the work is without its point, insisting against the apparent facts that something had been achieved.

In this poem we see or rather hear what Frost meant when he said that in his poetry he was aiming for “the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre”, which would enable the poem to say more than the words. Lines such as “But a crop is a crop” appear to be purposeless tautology, but such phrases turn up in our everyday speech when we wish to make an insistence against the facts. Such a line, and the repeated phrasing of “Next to nothing for...” seem to catch the cadences of everyday speech in what they say about work.

The poem develops a tone of humorous complaint, conveyed by a series of similes where the elements of comparison are so inappropriate that all sense of seriousness or productivity is lost from the work. So, his spade is no better than a spoon; the products of his labour, the sacks of leaves, are feather-light, “light as balloons”. Although his work is accompanied by much noise – the onomatopoeic “rustling” – the comparison veers away from the work into the pattering feet of wildlife making itself scarce. The imagery of the third verse hints at ambiguities in what the speaker is saying about work. The metaphorical use of mountains (for the leaf piles) seems to imply solidity, but this is countered by the liquidity suggested in “flowing over my arms/ And into my face”. A second ambiguity – and this one applies more deeply to what Frost is saying about work - centres on the “embrace/ face” rhyme. Frost seems to be saying that the work is uncongenial and frustrating to him. It “eludes [his] embrace”, or as we might say, it gives him nothing back. Yet, what is suggested by the image of the leaves flowing over his arms and into his face if not an embrace? An idea of the pleasurable benefit of work is lightly hinted.

The laboriousness and tedium of the work re-merges immediately after this hint, an effective use of contrast in this poem which although short is pleasingly varied. This laboriousness is conveyed through the multiple repetitions of the following verses:

“I may load and unload
Again and again
Till I fill the whole shed.
And what have I then?”

Next to nothing for weight;
And since they grew duller
From contact with earth,



Next to nothing for color.

Next to nothing for use.
But a crop is a crop.”

The final repetition reverses the implications of futility and pointlessness in the previous ones by assertion that there has been a crop, whatever the value of that crop may have been. Frost uses two rhetorical questions towards the end of the poem, which balance each other structurally and thematically. “And what have I then?” The question is rhetorical because the answer has already been supplied, repeatedly, in the preceding lines. The second of these questions,

“And who’s to say where
The harvest shall stop?”

is rhetorical because it asks for information which cannot be supplied. These questions reinforce the dual view of work which emerges in *Gathering Leaves*: on the one hand the experience of work as an unsatisfactory expenditure of energy for “next to nothing”, and on the other the dogged insistence that there is a harvest and a reward and a product in it. (It may be over-reading, but the avoidance of the more customary “will” and its replacement by an almost legal-sounding “shall” might be said to carry an implication that this is more than a simple future tense – and that a promise or guarantee of veracity is being made. The “sound of sense” of the last two lines indicates that the gathering in of this harvest may be prolonged.)



The Forge

In his first collection Heaney had written

“I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.”

Heaney’s conception of himself as a poet seems to be re-considered in *The Forge* where the poet/speaker is again looking into the darkness, not this time the darkness of a well, but the darkness of a workshop.

The workshop was a real workshop, well known to the young Heaney and in *The Forge* he imagines the smith, the skilled master of a traditional craft, as a symbol of the ideal poet, for whom the darkness “rings”. Even seventy years ago the blacksmith’s trade was old-fashioned and in the poem there is a distance between his traditional craft-work and the “flashing” shiny modern world. Neither the smith of the mid-twentieth century nor the universal figure of the ideal poet is entirely at home in his surroundings.

As in “*Gathering Leaves*”, there is a first-person speaker, but while Frost’s speaker maintains his presence in the poem, reflecting on his work, Heaney’s speaker effaces himself after the decisive statement of his knowledge and ignorance in the opening line:

“All I know is a door into the dark”

and in the darkness the work proceeds, largely unseen but detected by its sound. The poem follows the sonnet form. The stringent demands of this traditional form are themselves emblematic of the application needed for skilled work. Like most modern poets Heaney varies some of the features of the sonnet, lessening the insistency of the rhymes and providing a one-line introduction. However he retains the two-part structure of the sonnet – the first part about the observer and what he perceives or imagines about the work, the second about the workman. Lines 2 and 3 are balanced by the antithetical adverbs “Outside/inside”. Outside, where the speaker stands is a shabby reality of “old hoops and iron rusting”. Inside, the fabulous work takes place in the darkness, apprehended only by an “unpredictable fantail of sparks”, or by its sounds, conveyed onomatopoeically:

“the hammered anvil’s short-pitched ring,...
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.”

The speaker remains outside and the process of work remains in part a mystery to him, something to be guessed at. The “fantail of sparks” may be an image of sudden achievement – in the smith’s work or in the poet’s – but it emerges from darkness and is unexplained. The description of the anvil, the heart of the workshop and of the work, is spread over four lines. The speaker seems never to have seen it; its location is guessed at, but is believed to be central, and it is immovable, permanent:

“The anvil must be somewhere at the centre.”

The simile, “horned as a unicorn” turns the anvil into something fabulous or legendary, and yet the squared end suggests the bare functionality of this piece of equipment. These elements combine mystery and practicality in an imaginative description of

**Not in this Anthology.*



the work, which is conceived of as both the smith's and the poet's. The metaphor that concludes the description of the anvil

“...an altar

Where he expends himself in shape and music”

acknowledges a very ancient concept of the poet as one in the service of a divine inspiration. Like the smith's, the poet's work is imagined as exhausting – “he expends himself” – but it too produces “shape and music”, that is to say formally beautiful products.

The final part of the poem contrasts markedly from what has preceded it. After the lofty conception of the work being undertaken, we end with the reality of the all-too-human agents who effect it – a reality which applies of course to both smith and poet. Though the work may be fabulous, the workman is not. He has “hairs in his nose”, is decidedly unimpressed by what he sees of the modern world, and shows it, perhaps a little grumpily when he “grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick”. There is a deliberate change of tone from exalted to realistic, effected by the disappearance of the imagery of legend and religion in favour of a factual detailing of the scene: “... leather aproned, hairs in his nose,/He leans out on the jamb...”. Having taken his look at the modern world, he disappears back inside to get on with some real work:

“To beat real iron out, to work the bellows”.

This characterization is great fun, but it also works to keep the poem grounded and to help us to distinguish between the dignity of the work and the necessarily flawed workman.

*

“All I know is a door into the dark”:

Heaney began with an image of himself as a small boy looking into the mysterious darkness of a local work-place. (The blacksmith in question reported that at the time the poem was written, Heaney had never been in the forge.) The image functions to provide a concept of the poet and his work. It comes from “the dark”, not from occult or forbidden depths, but from the darkness of the personal or collective unconscious, the poetry emerging in a “fantail of sparks” as “shape and music”.

Neither Frost nor Heaney restrict themselves to a mere description of the work that is their theme. Frost sees work as having its own value, or as having a value which may only be disclosed much later; Heaney takes one particular craft, which had fascinated him as a child, and creates a symbol of the ideal practitioner of the craft to which he was dedicating himself.



The night

Frost: *Acquainted with the Night*

Heaney: *'Had I not been Awake'*

Acquainted with the Night

In form Frost's poem is a terza rima sonnet. The interlocking nature of the terza rima rhyme scheme generates a propulsion from tercet to tercet which is halted by the final couplet. In Frost's poem the fourteenth and final line merely repeats the first, with the ending re-stating the beginning. This provides a perfectly designed vehicle for Frost's subject matter – a solitary nocturnal walker with no destination in view and no apparent purpose to his walking.

The city nightscape provides a suitable setting for Frost's exploration of his theme, which may be regarded as loneliness, or depression, or the experience of the outsider.

Each of the seven sentences begins with the pronoun "I". (Only one of these sentences extends beyond two lines, so only one is bound together by a rhyme, which may suggest an inability on the part of the speaker to integrate the total experience.) This repetition of the pronoun emphasises the aloneness of the speaker in the night. The only other character encountered, the city watchman receives no greeting, only silence and a dropped gaze. Not even the communication of eye-contact takes place. The use of the dash in the punctuation of the second sentence

"I have walked out in the rain – and back in rain"

indicates a break in the sentence, but also a strong resumption which cancels the movement out, suggesting the lack of purpose.

Frost's use of superlatives in his description of the nightscape suggests that his speaker has either exhausted or is untouched by the resources of the city:

"I have outwalked the furthest city light
I have looked down the saddest city lane."

If the city can be a symbol of man's ability to co-operate and live communally, this night-walker is alienated from all such human activity. His reaction to a human cry (of suffering? of appeal?) is to stop, but the reaction goes no further, certainly not as far as to establish contact with another. The cry is "interrupted", it came from "over houses", from "another street" – all phrases which distance it and lessen its immediacy to the walker, who hears but does not respond. It is not meant for him. The most striking presentation of the speaker's alienation comes towards the end of the poem in the image of the clock:

"And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary clock against the sky
Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right."

This may be a public clock with an illuminated face, or it may be the moon. The force



of the image is that it “proclaims” that time, the regulator of the city and of human affairs generally, is without meaning for the speaker.

The sonnet provides a chilling account of alienation without hope of alleviation, and it is fitting that it ends with the word “night”. It takes its place with other terrifying poems such as *Design** as indicators of the dark side of Frost’s psyche.

‘Had I not been Awake’

In this poem Heaney writes about a sudden gust of wind that “rose and whirled” and got him out of his bed in the middle of the night. This poem came from a period of convalescence in the poet’s life when he was recovering from a stroke, and in it Heaney seems to be marking the regaining of a firm grasp on life and its realities. The effect of this night-time visitation is expressed in the poem’s most memorable image, where the speaker (who can be identified with the poet rather more confidently than in the case of Frost’s poem) describes himself as getting up:

“The whole of me a-patter,
Alive and ticking like an electric fence”.

The simile, with its prompt towards the slang term for the heart (“ticker”) and its suggestion of throbbing energy successfully conveys the access of vitality. The common phrase “alive and kicking” which is varied by a single consonant in the line, actually has associations with birth – the reaction to the air of a healthy newborn baby. Heaney is taking us a long way from any impression of him as a stroke-shadowed old man. This image is allowed its due weight, being followed by a colon, after which the second tercet finishes with a repetition of the first line, which itself is a repetition of the title to reinforce the epochal importance of that night. This is in strong contrast with the meaninglessness of time to the speaker of *“Acquainted with the Night”*. The sound of the blown leaves is evoked by the onomatopoeia of “patter”. Leaves are a traditional symbol of transience or mortality, but these leaves are “quick”, meaning not only that they move rapidly on the night wind, but also that they are alive. Suggestions of life and death intermingle in the description as the speaker responds to the sound of the blown leaves. The pattering of the leaves calls forth the response: “the whole of me a-patter”.

The imagery of the last two tercets suggests the speaker’s complex reaction to what is literally a life-changing event. (Once again the contrast with Frost’s poem is marked, as there the events of the night are ignored or drained of significance.) First the wind is described in a simile as returning “like an animal to the house”. This may be the house where the speaker was sleeping – or rather not sleeping – or it may be the house of the body, revitalized by the event. (The whole nervous system now “ticking”.) However, there seems to be, mixed in with this feeling of enhanced vitality, a fearfulness, and once again the contrasting emotional deadness of the speaker in Frost’s poem may be mentioned. In “Had I not been Awake” the unexpectedness is not a matter of unmixed joy or relief. We are reminded of the words from the funeral service, “In the midst of life we are in death.” The metaphor of the “courier blast” is appropriate in an obvious way for the wind, but a courier brings a message, and this announcement is violent. Its brevity is also stressed as it “there and then/ Lapsed ordinary”. The tone in the final tercet seems dazed, as the speaker struggles with his reaction to the event of the night, conveyed by the brief, incomplete sentences introduced by conjunctions which



would normally be used to join clauses, but here are used as separators, and by the use of temporal adverbs “then”, “not ever after”, and “not now”. The “not ever after” seems to re-assert transience in the midst of the vitalizing experience, and the speaker and hence the reader faces his – and our - mortality.

The spasmodic nature of the concluding lines of *Had I not been Awake* is very different from the formal composure achieved by Frost through rhyme and reiteration in order to characterize his speaker’s lack of affect as he faces the night. For Heaney, the night is a more or less fortuitous temporal setting; for Frost, it may represent the indifferent universe in which man finds himself.

Some themes

- Childhood experience
- Reactions to death or loss
- Rural life and work
- Night
- Landscapes
- Self-discovery
- Travelling and journeys
- Tradition



A02

A few general stylistic features:

Robert Frost

- Frost's view on poetic form: "Writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net"
- Frost's famous remarks on matching his verse to the sound of live speech – "the sound of sense"
- Occasional use of New England vernacular
- Frost's notion of "ulteriority"

Seamus Heaney

- Heaney's "gift of saying something extraordinary while, line by line, conveying a sense that this is something an ordinary person might say" (Brad Leithauser). True of Frost also?
- Draws upon both Irish and English literary traditions
- Willing to experiment with form and style
- Frequent attempt to unite sound and sense through for example alliteration or onomatopoeia

A03

Biographical context

This information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students.

Robert Frost

- Born in 1874 in San Francisco
- Moved to Massachusetts when his father died
- In 1900 moved with his wife and children to a farm in New Hampshire. He attempted to make a life on it for the next 12 years
- Frost and Elinor tried several endeavours including poultry-farming, all of which were fairly unsuccessful
- During this time two of Frost's children died
- Moved to England in 1912 and befriended many British poets and writers
- Upon his return to New England, Frost worked as a lecturer
- In later life Frost enjoyed popular and critical success; he won the Pulitzer Prize several times

Seamus Heaney

- Born into a farming family in rural Ulster
- Attended boarding school at St. Columb's College, Derry
- Graduated from Queen's University Belfast 1966
- Worked as a schoolteacher and college lecturer
- Married Marie Devlin, fellow writer who would feature prominently in Heaney's work
- He wrote about love, mythology, memory, particularly of his own rural upbringing, and human relationships



- He also provided commentary on the “Troubles” in his work
- Translated poetry from other languages into English
- Won the Nobel Prize for literature



Glossary of Poetic Terms

An important part of your response in the exam will be your appropriate and relevant use of literary terminology. Below is a list of terms you are likely to come across in your study of poetry.

- **alliteration:** the repetition of sounds at the beginning of two or more words in close proximity. The term is usually applied to the repetition of consonants.
- **assonance:** two or more words, which are in close proximity, repeating the same vowel sounds.
- **bathos:** a juxtaposition of the important with the insignificant or trivial – often to comment ironically on the actual insignificance of what is deemed important. This figure of speech can also be used purely humorously.
- **cadence:** inflection or emphasis, sometimes used for poetry based on a “musical phrase” of language rather than a strict metre.
- **caesura:** a significant pause within a line of poetry, generally created by the use of punctuation.
- **diction:** the language used in a work of literature particularly as regards vocabulary choices.
- **epigram:** a short, pithy saying, conveying a profound thought in an economical and arresting way.
- **hyperbole:** language that uses exaggeration for effect.
- **image:** For the purpose of AO2 analysis in this unit, what we mean by “image” is a figure of speech, where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as “detailing”.
- **imagery:** this word generally applies in a visual sense to figurative language that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects.
- **irony:** this is language and tone that implies that the intended meaning is different from the expressed meaning.
- **metaphor:** where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
- **metre:** metre is the measurement of rhythm, expressed as the number and kind of metrical feet in a line of poetry. This measurement considers the number of syllables and where the stresses fall in each foot.
- **motif:** a dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.



- **neologism:** a new word, sometimes a compound of two or more existing words, or an existing word with an unusual prefix or suffix added.
- **onomatopoeia:** when a sound is conveyed in word form; or when the sound of a word enhances its meaning.
- **oxymoron:** a figure of speech where two juxtaposed words or phrases appear to be contradictory.
- **paradox:** where two ideas, expressed in close proximity, are apparently contradictory, but on closer examination prove to be meaningfully related.
- **personification:** to attribute human characteristics to a non-human subject.
- **satire:** the use of humour – often through mimicry and exaggeration – to expose as absurd a society, a belief or ethic, or a person or class of people and thereby to ridicule it.
- **simile:** where something is explicitly compared to something else, e.g. by using “like” or “as”.
- **synaesthesia:** the expression of a deliberate confusing of the senses (e.g. describing music as a colour, or light as a liquid).
- **tone:** the emotion or attitude intended by the writer, effected through use of language, rhythm and punctuation.

