

One of the motifs that Heaney returns to time and again, is the pastoral lifestyle - however, the dry realism that he brings to his descriptions means that he could not properly be described as a Romantic. He does not write lyric odes that idealise farming and its proponents, but uses it - in a workmanlike manner - as a metaphor for the other elements of life. In particular, working the land is compared (sometimes incongruously) with his own writing; instead of digging the earth, however, he is digging for a poetic truth. He is also acutely conscious of both the destructive forces of nature and its ability to restore, these ideas are present in many of his poems and he often writes of the importance of harnessing nature to deal with the grieving process, as death is an integral part of life.

Heaney returns time and again to the masculine-feminine dichotomy; he represents women as a marginalised but vital part of history. In order to create a sense both of the failures of men and of their desire to create equality, he draws upon his own experiences. In this way, he is propagating and questioning his own role in the general sexism against women, but also in his own personal experience of having children with his wife; he imagines women as both goddess figures and victims of men - a contradiction that he portrays but never quite resolves.

This ambivalence also permeates his writing about the 'Troubles' in Ireland - although he identifies strongly as an Irish-

Catholic Republican, he also notes the damage that the generations of violence have wrought upon the land that he lives in. He often represents Ireland as a female character and compares the violence wrought upon Ireland to the ways in which men treat women. An understanding of the political history of Ireland is important to a thorough understanding of Heaney's poems and the following websites may be helpful to students:

<http://www.history.com/topics/british-history/easter-rising>

Interactive site about 'The Troubles'

http://www.theguardian.com/Northern_Ireland/flash/o,6189.344683,00.html

<http://www.historyonthenet.com/Chronology/timelinenorthernireland.htm>

Heaney's writing is vigorous in style, his use of verbs is imaginative and precise, often invoking the rhythm or speed of the action he is describing. Frequently, he writes in present tense, building a sense of immediacy and involvement with the reader. His poems are therefore as much about actions as

about reflections. What we do and how we do it is as important as what we think and reflect upon. In fact, it is perhaps as though Heaney is suggesting that our actions are *far more* important than our thoughts - these are the only things that we will be remembered for and against which we can be measured. It is another important characteristic of Heaney's poems that the reader may be, at times, directly involved as one of the characters in his poems; he recurrently uses the second person pronoun, blurring the lines between the imagined person and the reader. More frequently first person pronouns are used as the poet puts his own self - real, imagined or past self - directly into the action or reflection of the poem. In this way, the poet makes it clear that he is not an historian, but that every observation is personal and the result of his own, particular life experiences and cultural background. For this reason, Heaney's poems can seem honest and transparent - he comments upon his own life with the same critical candour he uses for historical figures.

with the bubbles as 'bluebottles'), weaving an ethereal pattern of 'sound around the smell'. There are other delicate and beautiful insects - dragonflies and butterflies - for the boy to admire. The sensory relish the boy takes in this atmosphere is palpable with these sounds, sights and smells; even the frog-spawn that he collects evokes the sense of taste - it is 'warm thick slobber', instead of clotted cream it is 'clotted water'. The boy's joy is tangible with the repeated 'j' sound in the line 'I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied'. Heaney then describes his boyhood self taking the poem home to observe in quasi-scientific interest: he will watch and wait. The movement of the hatching tadpoles is described aptly with short vowel sounds of the phrase 'nimble-/swimming'. The caesura in the fifteenth line indicates a shift in time and place and the boy's homemade experiments are now apparently endorsed by the words of the sympathetic teacher who describes the breeding process of frogs in unsophisticated and child-like terms. Frog-spawn, the most interesting part of the process to the boy, is given its own capital letter and further underscored in importance by the poet with the caesura. For good (if childish) measure, a final and important fact about frogs is provided at the end of this stanza.

There is an abrupt change in tone in the second stanza; while the first has lines ending in soft consonants, this second stanza has lines ending repeatedly with harsher sounds: 'rank', 'chorus', 'cocked', 'sat', 'kings' and 'clutch it'. Although the flax-dam itself 'sweltered' in the first stanza, the boy himself works 'In the shade of the banks'; however, in the second

stanza, the day is definitively 'hot' for everyone, and there is the 'rank' smell of 'cowdung'. Instead of delicate and beautiful insects, there are 'angry frogs'. While these animals may seem comical, they are given a frightening and bellicose significance by the poet, who suggests that they have 'Invaded'. The boy is alarmed and hides in the bushes, where he can hear the onomatopoeically described 'coarse croaking' of the frogs. The unfamiliarity of the landscape is emphasised by the word 'Before' which is given its own capital letter and following caesura, and which alludes to the familiar and friendly times of the previous stanza. Gone is the appealing and sensory frog-spawn, it has been replaced by the loathsome and large frogs who are unappealingly and unavoidably sexual - they are 'gross-bellied' in their obesity and 'cocked'. Even worse in their physical repugnance is their necks which 'pulsed like sails'. The repeated 's' sounds in these lines is the repulsed whisper of a boy describing these repellant creatures. Against this susurration, the sound of 'hopped' and 'plop' jars and abrades the senses. The sense of threat these creatures pose is reiterated in the ninth line of this stanza, when they are described as 'mud grenades'. Once again the physical repugnance of the creatures is invoked with 'their blunt heads farting'. Inevitably, the boy feels sick and knows that the spawn he once gathered with delight would now turn against him. He does the only sensible thing, and runs.

Themes and Motifs

natural world

the poet as a boy

similar manner, England has left behind the region of Northern Ireland, which is now irrevocably linked with its coloniser. The shorter meter of the final line leaves behind a space - a space where the growth of the foetus may symbolically begin.

The second sonnet is linked to the first by the rhyming of its first line with the final line of the first; the male kingdom, may have withdrawn, but is still 'imperial' within the borders of the female. By his very gender, he has claimed dominance - this dominance highlighted by the enjambment which leads to the capitalised 'Male', further emphasised by the caesura which separates it and gives it strength within the second line. The woman, impregnated, is now beginning to grow - although this is described as 'rending', in anticipation of the birth process. The violence of this colonisation is further accentuated by the repeated stopped consonant of the 'b' sound in the fourth line. In the fifth line, the gender of the foetus becomes clear with the 'obstinate fifth column' - the male figure has impregnated the woman with another male; in such a way does Britain continue to colonise Ireland. The growth happens, naturally, in one direction, but the use of the word 'unilateral' sound like the bullets from a gun, rather than an organic and smooth growth. Rather than the beating heart of a baby, his is a 'wardrum', promising further violence upon this woman, and his growth is additionally described as 'Mustering force' - the child does grow stronger, but only to a bellicose end. The dependent nature of the foetus becomes sinister - 'parasitical', he feeds upon the strength of the mother. Although, he does not know the father - he is 'ignorant' - he is born to fight; the

kicking of the baby within the womb is a beating at the boarders. Interestingly, the baby's fists are raised against both the father and the mother, they are 'cocked/ At me across the water'; the child is angry with both the father and the mother. Looking at this with a colonial perspective, it is clear that the young men of Ireland are furious with England, and that the effects of colonisation have raised a generation of angry young men - railing against both Ireland and England, and there can be 'No treaty' that will solve this generational problem. Just as there is no solution to conception, but a bloody birth that will leave the woman with a 'tracked/ And stretchmarked body' which is 'raw, like opened ground', there is no easy solution to the problems within Ireland, which leave the landscape scarred with the evidence of violence. The final word, makes it clear that this is a violence that women, that Ireland, have to endure again and 'again'. Men and women, England and Ireland are trapped in this cycle of violence.

Themes and Motifs

cycles of life

Ireland's violent past with England

the relationship between men and women

ening and they are creatures who roam the countryside before it is 'rising time'. Heaney imagines the boy as 'scared to find the spent cartridges'; he infers that a boy would be fascinated to hunt these bellicose objects down, but frightened of them at the same time. The fifth line is broken by several caesuras that separate the words into bullet-like pellets and the fifth foot of the line is missing, the meter is finished by silence, as the silence of death. The harsh consonants of the adjectives here further emphasize the violence of the pellets, just as the words themselves describe their appearance and smell: 'Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected'. The precision of the repeated two-syllable rhythm beats like a military march. This line is a parenthesis that interrupts the lines 'But still were scared to find spent cartridges,...../On your way across the strand to fetch the cows.' It is clear that the poet is again juxtaposing violence with a pastoral image. The repetition of 'you and yours and yours' in the following line is expansive, and seems to almost include the imagined reader further into connecting with the victim; following this the poet includes himself into the inclusive community, a community of pastoral Irishmen who only speak of action, but do not so much as 'crack a whip' in violence. Heaney suggests that these farmers are from peasant stock (and certainly not the English aristocracy) of 'scullions' and 'herders'. He links further softens the plotting these farmers do by rhyming 'conspirators' with 'talkers in byres' - it is clear that these are not men who discuss the downfall of their oppressors in a meaningful way, but gossiping around their animals. Furthermore, their only dealings with death are in arbitrating 'the burial ground' - they do not act to cause death,

but only deal compassionately with it when it arrives. This stanza firmly places McCartney into this soft, sympathetic pastoral idyll, leaving no doubt in the readers' mind that his violent death was unwarranted and undeserved.

In the final stanza, the cattle link us gently to the 'present', and the reader's imagined eye is drawn, with the cattle's 'unbewildered gaze', back to the death of McCartney. In the fourth line, the hard 'k' contrasts with the soft consonants and images of the previous three lines, and it grates upon us, echoing the irritation of a sound like 'squeaking sedge'. Contrasting with the squeaking, in the following line, there is the repetitious thudding sound of the 'd' which thuds five times 'Drowning in dew. Like a dull blade with its edge'. These sounds increase our feeling of dread and premonition, and the softness of the 'early mist' begins to fall away, the water is gradually revealed to be shining like a knife. Finally, in the seventh line of this final stanza, the poet reveals his imagined self to be there, as a witness, and he turns his gaze from the pastoral beauty he has been contemplating to find the reader/McCartney a filthy, bloody mess behind him. The poet then kneels to the level of the victim and uses the countryside to cleanse him. As he washes the body, the poet claims kinship with him. Eschewing the man-made ritual objects of death, the poet uses found, natural objects to create his own burial, shrouding the reader/cousin back into the natural world he came from.

Themes and Motifs