

A Constable Calls

His bicycle stood at the window-sill,
The rubber cowl of a mud-splasher
Skirting the front mudguard,
Its fat black handlegrips

Heating in sunlight, the "spud"
Of the dynamo gleaming and cocked back,
The pedal treads hanging relieved
Of the boot of the law.

His cap was upside down
On the floor, next his chair.
The line of its pressure ran like a bevel
In his slightly sweating hair.

He had unstrapped
The heavy ledger, and my father
Was making tillage returns
In acres, roods, and perches.

Arithmetic and fear.
I sat staring at the polished holster
With its buttoned flap, the braid cord
Looped into the revolver butt.

"Any other root crops?
Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?"
"No." But was there not a line
Of turnips where the seed ran out

In the potato field? I assumed
Small guilts and sat
Imagining the black hole in the barracks.
He stood up, shifted the baton-case

Further round on his belt,
Closed the domesday book,
Fitted his cap back with two hands,
And looked at me as he said goodbye.

A shadow bobbed in the window.
He was snapping the carrier spring
Over the ledger. His boot pushed off
And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked.

Glossary:

Dynamo: a device which changes energy of movement into electrical energy.

A dynamo on a bicycle will power a pair of lights while the wheels are going round.

When it is not needed to power the lights, the dynamo can be pulled back from the wheel of the bicycle.

Bevel: a slanting, angled line. In the poem, this happens when the pressure of the rim of the policeman's hat creates a line in his hair.

Roods and perches are measurements of land.

Mangolds and marrowstems are crops.

Domesday book: This was a record of all the land and livestock in England in the 11th century. The king ordered that a record be taken so that each landowner could be taxed accordingly. It was called the domesday book because it was like the book of Judgement in the bible. That is to say, those who tried to cheat on their taxes by not declaring all they owned would be severely punished, in the same way that sinners would be punished on the last day of the world – or the day of doom.

Summary and Analysis:

Seamus Heaney tells us about a memory from his childhood. A policeman visits his family farm to take a record of the crops that Heaney's father is growing.

The description of the bicycle is our first indication that the policeman is not welcomed and that he is seen - by Heaney at least – as an intimidating, unpleasant figure. Everything in the description of the bike hints at this. The 'fat black handlegrrips' sound ugly and unpleasant, and seem to suggest that the bicycle's owner might be similarly unappealing. The dynamo is 'cocked back', reminding us of the trigger of a gun. The pedals are 'relieved / Of the boot of the law', implying that the constable is a man whose presence causes pressure and discomfort. He represents 'the law'

and is therefore disliked. At that time in Northern Ireland, most Catholics would have viewed the police as an oppressive force. The descriptions of the constable reinforce that idea. The harsh 'k' and 'g' sounds in the opening stanzas emphasise the harshness of the authority the constable represents and they also create a sense of tension.

It is clear that the constable is not welcome in the Heaney home. His hat is on the floor: nobody has taken it from him or offered him a place to put it. Again, the physical description of the constable focuses on unattractive aspects of his appearance. His hair is 'slightly sweating' and marked by the cap he has been wearing. The idea of his oppressive presence is again picked up by the reference to the ledger (record book) being 'heavy'.

The young Heaney is filled with fear as he watches the constable. He stares at his gun and remembers every detail of it in its holster. The tone of the poem is one of fear.

Meanwhile, the constable continues to record the family's crops. Heaney's father answers the constable's questions with curt, one word replies, showing how unwelcome both he and his interrogation are. The young boy is terrified to hear his father lying about the crops. He knows that there is a line of turnips which his father has not admitted to, and in his horrified imagination, he sees his father – and maybe even himself – being taken to the barracks and thrown in a cell.

The constable takes his leave, putting the ledger away. Heaney refers to it as the 'domesday book' because he is so terrified that his father will be judged and punished for his little lie about the turnips. This name for the ledger also reinforces the idea of the constable belonging to an oppressive force which holds the threat of violence over people like Heaney's father. Of course, the young boy is grossly exaggerating the policeman's power in this instance. To a small child, the lie about the turnips seems enormous, but in reality, nobody would be thrown in jail for such a minor offence, even if it were to be discovered. However, young Heaney's emotions towards the constable reflect his father's dislike and resentment of being held to account for his crops. The constable looks at the young boy and says 'goodbye'. This reminds us that the constable is, in reality, just a man. This is the only instance of his humanity. It is not likely that he wishes to appear threatening or intimidating, but that is how he is viewed by the Catholic community. He is seen as a representative of an unwelcome, despised, oppressive authority.

Outside the window, the constable is for a moment just a shadow. There is something shadowy about the descriptions of him throughout the poem. We never learn any details about him as a person: what we learn of him is based on the images of menace and threat.

The constable cycles off, and the sound it makes is reminiscent of a clock, or of the timer of a bomb. It ticks and ticks, which evokes the idea of a ticking timebomb that is waiting to go off. This could be a reference to the mounting tension in Northern Ireland at the time and the inevitability of this hostility eventually exploding into violence.

Theme:

Conflict: The poem describes a rather minor incident, but one which is symbolic of the tension between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. The constable is a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and as such is seen as in an enemy camp. The RUC were not seen as impartial and were viewed by most Catholics as a Protestant police force which acted in the interest of their own people rather than in the interests of everyone, equally.

A Call

'Hold on,' she said, 'I'll just run out and get him.

The weather here's so good he took the chance

To do a bit of weeding'.

So I saw him

Down on his hands and knees beside the leek rig,

Touching, inspecting, separating one

Stalk from the other, gently pulling up

Everything not tapered, frail and leafless,

Pleased to feel each little weed-root break,

But rueful also...

Then found myself listening to

The amplified grave ticking of hall clocks

Where the phone lay unattended in a calm

Of mirror glass and sunstruck pendulums...

And found myself then thinking: if it were nowadays,

This is how Death would summon Everyman.

Next thing he spoke and I nearly said I loved him.

Glossary:

Everyman: A late fifteenth century morality play, in which allegorical characters are used to examine the question of Christian salvation. When the character of Everyman, who represents all mankind, is summoned by death, he tries to convince the other characters to accompany him. In the end, only the character Good Deeds accompanies him.

Summary and analysis:

The poet is phoning his father. His mother answers and tells him that his father is out in the garden. She goes out to get him, leaving the poet holding the line. As he does so, he imagines his father kneeling beside a bed of leeks. He sees him pulling out the tiny weeds and feeling mixed emotions as he does so. His father would be happy to have removed the weeds, but might feel a little bit of sadness for having to kill them. The weeds are vulnerable, and perhaps Heaney is suggesting that we are equally vulnerable to death. Life is fragile. The father's movements are gentle as he works, suggesting that he takes is a careful, sensitive, kindly man. The long vowel sounds in this section of the poem slow down the action and accurately reflect the slow pace of the

elderly man as he carefully removes the sprouting weeds from amongst his vegetables.

The direct speech in the poem adds to the ordinariness of the events being described. There is nothing particularly striking about this phone call.

As Heaney holds the line, he hears the clocks in his parents' hall ticking. He can visualise the quiet hall with its mirrors and glass on the clock cases. He imagines sunlight shining in and striking the glass. The hall is a calm, peaceful place. However, there is a hint of death, even in this description. The ticking of the clocks is 'grave' – a word which means serious or solemn, but also makes us think of death and graveyards. Perhaps the poet is reflecting on how quiet the house will be when his father is dead. Again, the long vowel sounds slow down the pace of the poem, which is appropriate for the poet's reflective mood.

The poet is struck by an odd thought. He imagines that if the play 'Everyman' were written nowadays, this is how Death would summon Everyman. In the original play, Death called to the door, but now he would probably phone. Death is not frightening in this vision. Rather, he is ordinary and gentle. He takes life in the same calm, quiet way that the poet's father takes the weeds from the earth. If Death is like a phone call from a loved one, then it is even less frightening. This is quite a reassuring image of death. The tone is a mixture of celebration and sadness. Heaney loves his father dearly, but is aware that he is aging and that his death is inevitable.

At that moment, his father comes to the phone and the poet is filled with a sudden surge of emotion. He very nearly tells his father that he loves him, but checks himself and does not. He and his father do not have the kind of relationship in which such things are said. This is fairly typical of many father-son relationships.

Themes:

The relationship between fathers and sons: The poem suggests that, even though fathers and sons may love one another, this is not a love that is openly expressed. His father is a farmer at heart and is probably more comfortable working on the land than talking on the phone.

Death: Every moment that passes brings us closer to death. The ticking of the clocks in the hallway reminds the poet that time is passing. Even the weeding is a form of death, and the fragility and vulnerability of the tiny weeds reminds us of our own frailty and powerlessness in the face of death.

The Underground

There we were in the vaulted tunnel running,
You in your going-away coat speeding ahead
And me, me then like a fleet god gaining
Behind you before you turned to a reed

Or some new white flower japped with crimson
As the coat flapped wild and button after button
Sprang off and fell in a trail
Between the Underground and the Albert Hall.

Honeymooning, mooning around, late for the Proms,
Our echoes die in that corridor and now
I come as Hansel came on the moonlit stones
Retracing the path back, lifting the buttons

To end up in a draughty lamplit station
After the trains have gone, the wet track
Bared and tensed as I am, all attention
For your step following and damned if I look back.

"Marie and I were then on our honeymoon and as well as calling with my editor in Russell Square, we went to a Promenade concert in the Albert Hall, by the underground, of course, Marie in her white going away coat that had received a beetroot stain in the Museum Tavern the night before, both of us late and running down the corridor," Seamus Heaney in 'The Guardian', 2009.

Glossary:

Fleet god: The god of nature, Pan

Before you turned into a reed: In ancient mythology, Pan chased a nymph who turned into a bed of reeds in order to evade him.

Japped with crimson: the white coat was stained with beetroot

Hansel: From the story 'Hansel and Gretel'.

Damned if I look back: In the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus travelled to the Underworld to bring his wife back when she died. He succeeded, but the only condition was that he did not look back at his wife until they reached the earth. He glanced back at her just as they were leaving the Underworld, and he lost her forever.

Summary and analysis:

The poet remembers an incident from his honeymoon. He and his wife are running from a tube station in London, desperate to reach the Albert Hall in time for 'The Proms'. (This is a musical evening.) His wife is wearing her 'going-away coat', a coat bought specially for leaving the wedding party and wearing on honeymoon. The poet addresses the poem directly to his wife, and this creates a sense of intimacy and closeness between the couple. The verbs are dynamic: 'running', 'speeding', 'gaining'.

Heaney is reminded of the myth of the god Pan who chased a beautiful nymph, Syrinx. His designs on her were thwarted when she transformed herself into a bed of reeds in order to hide from him and preserve her virginity. Heaney rather playfully compares his running after his new wife to this mythological scenario. Perhaps, he thinks, she might turn into a white flower, splashed with red. This is a reference to her white coat stained with a little spilled beetroot juice, but could also refer to virginal innocence stained with the blood of a first sexual experience.

There are several references to the moon in this poem. The moon is associated with change, with the tides and with the passing of time. 'Time and tide wait for no man.'

As they run, the poet's wife's coat flaps and buttons fly off. This reinforces the idea of the speed and the energy of the chase. There is also a reference to Hansel and Gretel who, in the fairytale, found their way by following a line of dropped pebbles.

The tone of the poem changes now from one of excitement and energy to one of darkness. He sees himself and his wife returning to that tube station, following the trail of dropped buttons. The station is dark and eerie. The poet is agitated and tense, something he compared to the dangerous tension in the electrified train tracks.

How do we interpret the last lines? Is the poet talking about leading his wife to safety through the London streets and tube stations? He alludes to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and tells himself not to look back at her. Is this because he is determined to lead her to safety as quickly as possible, so will not look back, or is it because if he does look back he will be damned? Does he mean that we cannot look back at the past, at the early days of marriage?

We must examine the three myths or stories used to illustrate this poem.

1. The story of Pan and Syrinx is one of lust and passion

2. The story of Hansel and Gretel is a cautionary tale and returning home was not really an option for them.
3. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is another cautionary tale. By looking back at his wife, Orpheus lost her forever.

Is this poem then telling us not to look back?

Think of Eavan Boland's 'Love'. Interpreted in a certain way, this poem could be said to express some of the same ideas.

Theme:

Marriage: The poem could be seen to say that the early excitement of marriage dwindles and that the pursuer can become the pursued. It can also be seen to say that while the husband's role in the early days of the marriage may be that of the lustful pursuer, he moves to becoming the protector and the one who must ensure his family's safety and security.