

Seamus Heaney – Sample Answer

The Question: Dublin Exam Board Pre-Leaving Cert Exam 2014.

‘Heaney uses evocative language and imagery to lend universal significance to his personal experiences of life’.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Seamus Heaney on your course.

Planning your answer:

The first thing you must do is ‘unpack’ (I hate the expression, but it works here) the title.

The key phrases are ‘evocative language and imagery’, ‘universal significance’, and ‘personal experiences’.

Start with personal experiences. Then ask yourself what is universal about these. Finally, ask yourself how the language and imagery contribute to making the personal universal. Breaking it down like this can make a question far more approachable.

If you cannot make a link at the planning stage, forget that poem and move on to another one. This is the benefit of plans. If you just launch into your essay without a clear idea of where each poem is taking you, you will get a low grade.

A poem-by-poem approach can make a daunting essay title seem quite manageable. Remember, you are aiming to write two strong paragraphs on each poem, as well as an introduction and conclusion.

You should aim to write on four to five poems in your exam answer.

Plan:

A Constable Calls

PERSONAL

Childhood memories

Specifics beautifully and evocatively described

UNIVERSAL

Child's fear of authority /

unknown. Child's feeling of helplessness – common theme

Ref. to violence in N.I.

LANGUAGE

Language hints at oppression. Pressure of foot on bicycle pedal, negative imagery connected to bicycle and constable, pressure of hat on head, revolver on belt, unfriendly exchange between father and constable; final, ominous 'tick, tick, tick' of bike reminiscent of bomb

Harvest Bow

PERSONAL

Again, very specific memories of personal time with his father

UNIVERSAL

Idea of father son love / inability of father to express same.

Growing up vs. longing to remain in security of home place

LANGUAGE

Cinematic language – looking through loops of harvest bow as if it were a screen. Sensual and realistic description of home place. Evocative. Draws us into his world and allows us to share nostalgia etc.

What other poems could you use in this essay? If you go through those you have studied, you will see that they can all be applied to this title.

Sample Introduction and First Poem

When the shocking and sad news of Seamus Heaney's death broke in August of last year, tributes poured in from around the world. All spoke of the enormous contribution he had made, not just to literature, but to what the actor Liam Neeson called our understanding of 'who we are as a species'. Tániste at the time, Eamonn Gilmore explained it thus: 'In his work, the dignity and honour of the everyday lives of people came to life. Yet his poetry was also universal in nature, as can be seen by the wonderful tributes being paid to him by people across the globe today and by his incredible achievement in winning the Nobel Prize for Literature.' This, I believe, is a large part of what makes Heaney one of our nation's most beloved and sorely missed poets. He can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and show us, through beautifully crafted examples from his personal life, how we may come to a greater and deeper understanding of universal truths.

'A Constable Calls' is a perfect example of Heaney's ability to lend universal significance to personal experiences. On the surface, this is the simple retelling of an event from the poet's childhood during which he watched in fear as a constable questioned his father about the crops being grown on their land so he could record them for tax purposes. However on closer examination and reflection, the themes of childish perspectives on an adult world and conflict are integral to the poem and, viewed this way, the poem takes on a new meaning and relevance. To a small child, the lie about the turnips seems enormous and, unable to distinguish between serious crimes and minor tax avoidance, he assumes 'small guilts'. In his horrified imagination he sees his father – and maybe even himself – being taken to the barracks and thrown in a cell. The harsh 'ck' sounds in 'the black hole in the barracks' add to the sense of terror as the young boy allows his fear to run away with him. This inability to gauge the seriousness or otherwise of events in the strangeness of the adult world is something to which we can all relate and Heaney's vivid and evocative description of the child's anxiety brings us back to times in our own childhood when we struggled in this way.

Even though it might be read on one level as a small boy's naïve fear, the fact that the young Heaney is terrified of the consequences of his father's neglecting to mention the line of turnips is significant. It indicates that the law is viewed as a hostile force which exists only to punish or catch you out in some way. The whole incident not just personal to the Heaney family but is symbolic of the tension between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. The language and imagery in the poem is that of oppression: the constable's pedals are 'relieved of the boot of the law', his dynamo is 'cocked back', reminding us of the trigger of a gun, and even his hat has left 'the line of its pressure' in his hair. It is interesting that the

constable's face is never described. He is an anonymous, faceless figure of authority and an unwelcome representative of a government that Heaney's father resents and distrusts. Even in his departure, the constable is an image of menace. His bicycle ticks and ticks, which evokes the idea of a ticking time bomb that is waiting to go off. This links the constable's visit to Heaney's farm to the mounting tension in Northern Ireland at the time and the inevitability of this hostility exploding into violence. What I found particularly interesting about this poem is the way in which the child picked up on the tension between the constable and his father, conveyed through the father's terse replies to the other's questions and even his neglecting to hang the constable's hat as he would for a welcome visitor. It made me realise that conflict can be passed on through the generations in the subtlest of ways.

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