

WHEN ALL THE OTHERS
WERE AWAY AT MASS

BY SEAMUS HEANEY

ABOUT THE POEM

- This is a sonnet from the collection 'The Haw Lantern' published in 1987.
- It is third in a series of eight sonnets Heaney wrote in memory of his mother, Margaret Kathleen Heaney.
- The series of sonnets is called 'Clearances in memoriam M.K.H., 1911 - 1984'



SEAMUS
HEANEY

*The Haw
Lantern*



ANALYSIS - THE OCTET

- The octet (eight lines) describes Heaney's childhood.
- It opens in a comfortable, familiar domestic setting.
- The mother and son are engaged in the routine task of peeling potatoes.

- There is nothing very sentimental about the imagery in the octet. It is realistic, but none the less powerful for that.
- Mother and son work in a silence broken only by the splashing of peeled potatoes as they fall into the bucket of water.
- The potatoes falling are like molten metal falling from a soldering iron. A soldering iron joins things together, much as the mother and son are joined by their work.

- The simile which compares the falling potatoes to 'solder weeping off the soldering iron' foreshadows the weeping that will take place around the poet's mother's deathbed.
- There is no need for talk because mother and son are lost in a companionable silence which is interrupted only by the 'Little pleasant splashes' of the potatoes falling into the bucket. The word 'pleasant' expresses the sense of contentment without being overly sentimental.



THE SESTET

- The companionable silence of the octet is gone.
- Now there is noise as the priest goes ‘hammer and tongs’ at the prayers for the dying, while some respond to the prayers and others cry.

- Heaney distances himself from those around the deathbed and remembers a time in the past when he was closest to his mother.
- The word 'our' was used in the last line of the octet and it is used twice in the final lines of the sestet, emphasising the bond between the poet and his mother.
- It is as if the only two people who matter are the poet and his mother. The rest of the family are 'the others' or the 'some' who cry and pray at the bedside. At the moment of his mother's death, the poet's grief brings him to a time and a place when he and she were alone together and were never closer.