

Heaney – Highlighted Quotes - 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?

Themes:

Love and 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.

A Sense of Place: This poem evokes both the excitement of being in London and the slight sense of dislocation and anxiety that comes from being in an unfamiliar place, far from home.

