# Seamus Heaney

Seamus Heaney was born on 13 April 1939, the eldest of nine children. He grew up on the family farm, Mossbawn, near Castledawson in Co. Derry. His father, Patrick, worked as a cattle dealer as well as a farmer. Patrick was a man of few words, whereas Heaney's mother, Margaret, was articulate and outspoken. Heaney inherited both of these traits, and believed this to be fundamental to the 'quarrel with himself' from which his poetry arises.

At age twelve, Heaney won a scholarship to St Columb's College, a Catholic boarding school in Derry city. Heaney's family, meanwhile, moved from Mossbawn to the nearby village of Bellaghy. Though they left the farm where Heaney was reared in 1953, Mossbawn looms large in his work, and rural County Derry is the 'country of the mind' where much of his poetry is grounded.

In 1957, Heaney left school and began studying English literature at Queen's University Belfast. He developed an interest in poetry during his college years, particularly that of Ted Hughes. He graduated in 1961 with a first class honours degree and went on to teacher training college at St Joseph's in Belfast. After graduating from St Joseph's, Heaney became a lecturer there in 1963. Under the guidance of the poet Philip Hobsbaum, he joined a writing workshop with Derek Mahon, Michael Longley and others.

In 1965, Heaney married Marie Devlin, a teacher from Co. Tyrone. The following year, just before Marie gave birth to Michael, the first of their three children, Heaney's first collection of poetry was published. *Death of a Naturalist* dealt primarily with Heaney's childhood experiences of growing up in rural Co. Derry. It won several awards, including the Geoffrey Faber Prize. Heaney's reputation grew, and he was appointed a lecturer in Modern English Literature at Queen's that same year.

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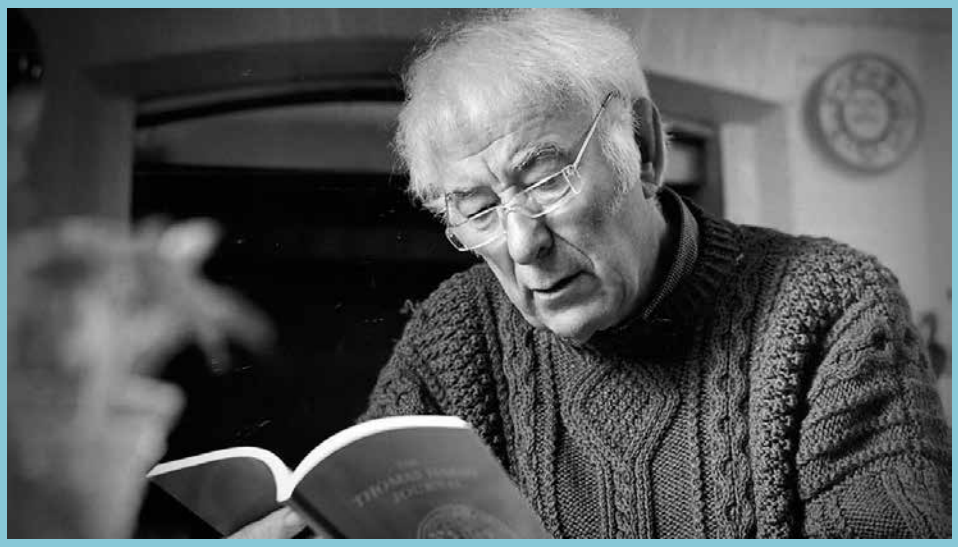

**Another son, Christopher, was born in 1968. Heaney's second collection, *Door into the Dark*, was published in 1969. In 1970, he taught for a year at the University of California, Berkeley, before returning to Belfast. In 1972, he published *Wintering Out*, in which he continued his exploration of landscape, and in particular boglands. He resigned his lectureship at Queen's University and moved his family to Glanmore, Co. Wicklow. For the next three years, Heaney made his living as a full-time writer. Then, in 1975, he resumed lecturing at Carysfort, a teacher-training college in Dublin. Heaney moved to Sandymount, Dublin shortly afterwards, and it remained his home for the rest of his life.**

**When Aosdána, the association of Irish artists, was formed in 1981, Heaney was one of the first artists to be made a member. That same year, Heaney left his lectureship at Carysfort to become a visiting professor at Harvard University. In 1984, he was elected Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard. In 1989, Heaney was elected professor of poetry at Oxford, a position which he held for a five-year term until 1994. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 for what the Nobel committee described as 'works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.' He was the fourth Irishman to receive the honour, after William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett.**

**Heaney suffered a stroke in August 2006, from which he recovered. In 2010, Heaney published his twelfth and final collection, *Human Chain*. It was inspired in part by his stroke and was critically acclaimed, winning the Forward Poetry Prize. In 2011, Heaney donated his personal literary papers to the National Library of Ireland.**

**Heaney died on 30 August 2013 in hospital after a short illness. He was seventy-four years old. His funeral Mass was held in Donnybrook, Dublin, and was broadcast live on RTE. He was buried in his home village of Bellaghy, Co. Derry. His epitaph is taken from his poem 'The Gravel Walks' and reads 'Walk On Air Against Your Better Judgement'.**

# A Constable Calls

# 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.

[2] ***cowl:*** hood-shaped covering

[2] ***mud-splasher:*** cover draped over the mudguard

[5] ***spud:*** Heaney compares the dynamo's shape to a potato or 'spud'

[6] ***dynamo:*** a small generator attached to a bicycle to produce electricity for the lights

[7] ***treads:*** the upper surface of the pedal, on which the foot is placed

[11] ***bevel:*** the weight of the constable's helmet produces a slanted ridge in his hair

[15] ***making tillage returns:*** calculating the profits from the production of crops

[16] ***roods:*** a measurement of land equal to a quarter of an acre

[16] ***perches:*** a measurement of land

[22] ***Mangolds:*** a variety of beet

[22] ***Marrowstems:*** a root vegetable, also known as kale

[30] ***domesday book:*** Heaney compares the constable's ledger to the record of a survey of the lands of England made by order of William the Conqueror in 1086

# Get in Gear

This poem is set in Mossbawn, the Co. Derry farm where Heaney grew up during the 1940s. Do a Google image search for 'Mossbawn' and write a short paragraph describing your impressions of the poem's setting.

# Tease it Out

### The Constable's Visit

1. A police constable has come to visit the farm. How does the constable arrive?
2. The speaker says that 'my father/ Was making tillage returns'. What are tillage returns? How are these returns measured?
3. Where does the constable record this information?
4. The constable, as an agent of the state, has been sent to gather this data. Why might it be of value to the government?
5. Do you think this is a routine visit, or something out of the ordinary?

### The Constable's Bicycle

6. Where does the constable park his bicycle?
7. Break into groups of four. Each member will be assigned a role: Artist, Timekeeper, Director or Recorder.
   - Read lines 1 to 8 carefully.
   - Heaney mentions five specific features of the constable's bike. The group's Recorder will jot down these five features.
   - You will have five minutes to make a drawing of the bike that captures Heaney's wonderfully specific description.
   - The Director will serve as an advisor to the Artist and the Recorder will note down any unused ideas or problems encountered in drawing the bike. The group's Timekeeper will call time on the drawing after five minutes, whether it's finished or not!
   - The drawings will be displayed in front of the class and the group's Recorder may be called on to give a brief account of the group's work. Have fun!

### The Constable

8. The constable is associated with an almost oppressive weight. He has a heavy hat, heavy boots and a heavy book. Identify the lines or images where each of these appears.
9. Line 12: The speaker takes note of the constable's 'slightly sweating hair'. How do you visualise the constable's appearance? Is he a big man or small? Do you imagine him as friendly or reserved?
10. The constable has one item of equipment in particular that fascinates the young poet. What is it?
11. 'Arithmetic and fear'. What precise arithmetic is being conducted by the constable?
12. Line 17 describes an atmosphere of 'fear'. In your opinion, who or what is generating this fear? Consider the following possibilities and rank them in order of likelihood, giving reasons for your decisions:
    - The child is afraid.
    - The child detects fear coming from his father.
    - The constable is nervous.
    - The line refers to a broader fear in society.
13. What last question does the constable ask before he leaves? What is the father's response? According to the young poet, does his father answer truthfully? What precisely is the father concealing from the constable?
14. Which do you think is the most likely reason why the father might conceal information from the constable? As a class, discuss each of the below possibilities and then vote on the one you consider most likely.
    - He doesn't want to pay tax on this secret row of crops.
    - He resents the state poking around his farm and interfering with his business.
    - He regards the constable as representative of a hated and oppressive regime.
    - The line refers to a broader fear in society.

15. 'No' is the only word of the father quoted in the poem. What does this suggest about his attitude to the constable?
16. 'But was there not a line/ Of turnips where the seed ran out/ In the potato field?' Can you suggest a reason why the turnips might have been planted in this location on the farm?

### The Child's Reaction to the Constable

17. Lines 25 to 26: Look up the word 'assume' and write down its different meaning. Which meaning is intended here? Is it possible that more than one meaning is intended?
18. 'I assumed/ Small guilts'. The child feels guilty over the lie his father has told. In what way has he been party to this deception?
19. Consider the speaker's use of the word 'small'. Did the young poet think this was a small matter at the time, or did he consider it a big deal? Give a reason for your answer.
20. What did the young poet fear might happen to him because of his part in this minor fraud?
21. Has the young poet actually seen the barracks, or is he imagining it?
22. List the different things that the constable does as he prepares to leave the house.
23. 'And looked at me as he said goodbye.' What kind of look do you imagine the constable giving the poet as he departs? Is it affectionate, suspicious or indifferent?
24. What does the poet imagine was on the constable's mind as he 'looked at [him]'?

## Think About Themes

1. 'In this poem, Heaney vividly captures the experience of being forced to comply with a regime that treats you as a number rather than a person.' Write a short essay in response to this statement.
2. Heaney is a poet well known for his ability to capture a child's point of view. Can you identify three or four phrases or lines in the poem where a child's outlook and concerns are accurately conveyed?
3. Watch video 1, which depicts a series of events that took place twenty years after those described in this poem. What is ticking at the conclusion of the poem? Which other devices are known for producing a ticking sound? Do these lines anticipate the Troubles depicted in the video?

## Language Lab

1. Heaney goes to great lengths to describe the constable's equipment and regalia. Fill out the grid below, based on the information provided in the poem:

| | KEY FEATURES | THE CHILD'S ATTITUDE TO IT | REASONS FOR YOUR ANSWER |
|---|---|---|---|
| **BICYCLE** | | | |
| **HANDLEGRIPS** | | | |
| **DYNAMO** | | | |
| **LEDGER** | | | |
| **HOLSTER** | | | |
| **BATON** | | | |

2. Are there any descriptions in the poem of the constable's physical appearance, or is it just his equipment that is described? Why do you think Heaney might have chosen to do this?

# A Constable Calls


**Seamus Heaney grew up on a farm in Co. Derry, Northern Ireland, during the 1940s. The Northern Ireland of the poet's youth was a divided place. On one hand, there was the Protestant majority, which dominated the state and controlled parliament, the civil service and the police. On the other was the Catholic minority, to which Heaney and his family belonged. This Catholic minority suffered discrimination and inequality at the hands of the Protestant-dominated state institutions.**

**This poem is based on a memory from the poet's childhood. A constable, or police officer, arrives on a routine visit the farmhouse. He's come to note the 'tillage returns', to record the different varieties of crop growing on the farmhouse, and the area of land devoted to each one. This would enable the authorities to determine how much tax the poet's father had to pay and to bill him accordingly.**

## TEASE IT OUT

### THE CONSTABLE ARRIVES

The constable arrives on a bicycle, which he leaves leaning 'at the window-sill' of the house. Heaney provides a typically vivid and detailed description of the bike's various features.

- He describes its 'mud-splasher', a piece of rubber fabric draped over the front wheel. Like the mud-guard, it protected the constable's uniform from getting dirty as he cycled around the countryside performing his duties.
- He depicts the 'fat black' grips on its handlebars.
- He describes the bike's dynamo, a little electrical device that charged as the constable pedalled and powered the bike's front light. The dynamo, because of its stubby shape, reminds the young speaker of a 'spud' or potato.

We might think of bicycles as a simple and old-fashioned means of transport. In the 1940s, however, when cars were still extremely rare in Ireland, a bike was an important piece of equipment. It enabled the constable to travel around the district and carry out his duties.

The speaker presents the bike almost as a kind of weapon. Its dynamo is depicted as 'gleaming and cocked back', like a gun ready to fire. Similarly, its 'flat black handlegrips' resemble the handle of a gun. There's even something menacing about the speaker's depiction of the 'mud-splasher', which is presented as a 'cowl' or hood that might be draped over a prisoner's head. And tellingly the constable keeps it 'gleaming', just as he keeps the holster of his revolver 'polished'. For the speaker, then, the

constable's bicycle is a machine of menace and violence, one that facilitates the agent of a hostile regime.

## ARITHMETIC AND FEAR

The constable enters the farmhouse and takes a seat. He removes his cap and places it beside his chair: 'The cap was upside down/ On the floor, next his chair'. His hair is described as 'slightly sweating', suggesting the exertions of his cycle to the farmhouse.

The constable begins recording the tillage returns, taking down this information in his ledger or record book: 'He had unstrapped/ The heavy ledger'. The father lists the different crops growing on his farm, describing the amount of land devoted to each in terms of 'acres, roods and perches', which are measurements of area.

The poet describes this moment as one of 'Arithmetic and fear.' The 'arithmetic' relates to the calculations the constable makes in his ledger, adding up the volumes of the various crops that grow on the farm and working out the taxes due on each of them.

The 'fear', meanwhile, is experienced by the young speaker. Any small child might be frightened by the presence of an armed police officer in their kitchen. But in this instance, the unease is even greater. The constable is a member of the RUC, the Protestant controlled police force. To the young speaker, he represents oppressive state power.

The young speaker's fear is evident in how he finds himself 'staring' at the constable's gun, taking in its every detail: 'the polished holster/ With its buttoned flap, the braid cord/ Looped into the revolver butt.' We sense that he is simultaneously horrified and fascinated by this weapon that, although it terrifies him, he can't take his eyes off it.

Throughout the poem, the constable is associated with an oppressive weight. His boots are associated with heaviness: his pedals are 'relieved' when he steps off them. Tellingly, the speaker associates these boots with the 'law', suggesting that, like many Northern Irish Catholics he regards 'the law' as an oppressive force.

The policeman's cap is also associated with heaviness and pressure, leaving a wedge-shaped indentation in his sweat-damp hair: 'The line of its pressure ran like a bevel'. Its weight is also hinted at when he uses both hands to replace it on his head: 'fitted his cap back with two hands'. The ledger in which he makes his returns, too, is described as 'heavy'.

## A SMALL DECEPTION

The speaker's father has 'a line/ Of turnips' growing on his land that he doesn't want the authorities to know about. (Presumably the father wants to avoid paying tax on the sale of these vegetables.) The turnips have been planted far from prying eyes. They grow at the very end of the potato field, where the father ran out of potato seed when he was sewing the season before.

The constable has nearly completed the tillage returns. But he wants to be sure he has recorded absolutely everything, asking the father: 'Any other root crops?/ Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?' The father, of course, says no, failing to mention the secret turnips.

The young speaker, already uneasy in the constable's presence, is terrified by this little piece of fraud. He imagines that his father might be taken to the 'barracks' for lying to the constable. Perhaps the speaker himself might be jailed also, for not speaking out against his father's deception.

The speaker sits there nervously, 'Imagining the black hole in the barracks.' He seems to envisage an almost dungeon-like cell into which he and his father will be cast for carrying out this deception. Perhaps the young speaker has visited the barracks on business with his father and has had occasion to glimpse this cell.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Heaney is nothing if not a poet of description. We see this in his comprehensively detailed descriptions of the bicycle with its handle-bars, dynamo and mud-splasher. It's also evident in his description of the constable's holstered weapon, with its flap and cord.

The constable's movements are also precisely described: how he unstraps, closes and secures his ledger, how he adjusts his 'baton-case', how he carefully replaces his cap. Importantly, however, the speaker never describes the constable's demeanour or facial expressions. He is presented only in relation to his uniform and equipment. It's as if, for the young speaker, the constable is completely identified with his job, with the role he plays as representative of an unloved and oppressive regime.

Cacophony occurs in lines 19 to 20, where the repeated hard 'b', 'd', 'p' and 't' sounds create a harsh verbal effect suited to the tough and rigid material of the constable's gun. The phrase 'black hole in the barracks' is also satisfyingly cacophonous, the harsh verbal music appropriate to the imagined horror of the barracks' jail cells.

There is an interesting use of metonymy in line 8. Metonymy occurs when a person or thing is called not by its own name but by the name of something closely associated with it. In this instance, the constable's boot is presented referred to as 'the law'. Therefore, the constable's boot is presented as the 'boot of the law'.