

21L.315, Prizewinners  
Prof. Mary Fuller

## Lecture 5: Seamus Heaney, *Field Work*, *Seeing Things*

Triptych – objects are presented without description.

This book seems to be set in a different geography (compared to *Death of a Naturalist* with all that slime in the bog poems), one that is cleaner, harder.

“like water hitting off granite” (*The Singer’s House*)

dry, bright, hard things

Seals coming in, music going out like a rowboat

Winnowing, separating wheat from chaff

look at *Clearances* briefly – italicized part at the beginning; breaking something open to get at the richness inside.

What to make of the last line? Capacity of language and song to make things feel true.

### Drink of Water

Well (from *Personal Helicon*), metal cups and buckets

“Remember the Giver”, religious references

At a first level, what’s in this poem?

The old woman almost becomes a magical, mythical figure. The cheap souvenir cup now holds magic, or the full moon.

### The Toome Road

Omphalos – the invisible center of the universe

Is this a patronizing voice, or is it childlike, innocent?

Does that make sense, given his concerns in *Casualty*?

Or is it a voice of sadness, the last few lines in particular (after ellipsis).

### Casualty

“How responsible am I?” For his death, for example, at the end of the second section.

At the end, the narrator wants to be asked again.

Bodies dug out of the bog – a few lines that connect – he’s getting closer to the sectarian violence that he wants to write about.

### The Strand at Lough Beg

“let me re-place you in this familiar landscape”, re-imagining into the childhood place

“fought shy” – their fighting was avoidance, in contrast to the brassy duck hunters

Violence intrudes on the world of softness and mist.  
Transform the death from something that just happened, unknown, placing it in the familiar childhood setting.

[read excerpt from Dante, Purgatorio I, about girding with rushes]

Bathe and clean his face, gird him with smooth rushes – this is what he does, preparing his cousin for paradise.  
page 239 of Station Island – Heaney's rewriting of his own elegy. Was he too escapist, wrapping it in a kind of beauty?  
Walcott will do something similar, critiquing himself.

### **Field of Vision**

"spare ounce of emotional weight" – so just the right amount?  
Not someone who feels sorry for herself, or guilt of others, or regret  
The poem feels stripped and ready for action, yet there's not much "action" that we can see.

### **Pitchfork**

The rhythm changes from the clipped lists of the third stanza to the long first line of the next.  
Heaney seems to focus a lot on the physical, almost apologizing or self-conscious about being a writer, working with the intellect (also *Digging*, or *Casualty*).  
So we can read "aiming" as the mind, "opening hand" as the physical. How else can we read that line?

Not aiming the pitchfork to do something, just surrender.  
He feels the movement that's in it (first stanza).  
In the background, perhaps, the idea of pitch of music or voice – like the tuning fork in the introduction to *Beowulf*  
Or, is the farmer looking at life through his pitchfork? Writing about an object but really talking about people.  
Contrast between the lofty, "weird" fourth stanza to the last, which is more real.