

21L.315, Prizewinners  
Prof. Mary Fuller  
**Lecture 4: Seamus Heaney, *North***

### **Act of Union**

Emotionally charged, describing baby as parasitic, for example  
Seems like England and Ireland, but the relationship is not entirely negative. There is a baby. What is it?

"Act of Union" is a political phrase, referring to Ireland being incorporated into England

Starts with an intimate feel, but seems forceful by the end – reads like a first-person view from a rapist?

"you're never going to be the same again"

The language is very male, as in Beowulf. It's strong, a voice of destruction, not growth.

Maybe the guy got his mistress pregnant and then took off?

The act of birth cannot be mutual. Whether this is a loving relationship or not, the woman still has to do it alone.

But why is the baby angry at the father?

This poem seems to be more about relationships, though it borrows the language of politics.

The relationship may not be anything unusual. Perhaps it's like a note with many resonances, and he's picking out the low ones.

### **Punishment**

First few stanzas are descriptive

"memories of love" – he's making her human

The artful voyeur, at a distance

This is going inside the body in a different sense, dissecting and scientific (compared to John Donne's poem about undressing)

"casting the stones of silence" – a powerful phrase

Let's read this alongside *The Grauballe Man*.

In both cases, looking at a body that's been brought out of the bog

In *Punishment* she was probably killed for adultery

Here, the body parts picked out – are they the ones we would notice?

Points out curves, as if the body has been wept out

Here he is admiring the beauty of the dead body, but in *Punishment* the identification is different, alive and vulnerable and erotic – more sensory, imagining her beauty when she was alive

in *Grauballe Man* it's a made object

Does the violence read differently in the two poems?

In *Grauballe Man* the voice is more removed, so you forget about the violence.

In *Punishment* the narrator is complicit in everything.

## **North, as a whole**

What is your reaction to this book?

Bookmarked by *Mossbawn* and *Singing School*, both rather autobiographical and similar in form

*Mossbawn* – compare to *Digging*, a love that's hidden, not dramatic  
a lot of dust and flour being sprinkled

Pause at *Funeral Rites* – no bodies in this poem

Imagine a ceremony that could put things at rest for the living.

Read as imagining forgiveness, but there is another reading.

## **Singing School**

a growing-up poem

The line after "South Derry rhyme": what's this all about? Working with sounds the way they are to you.

"ministry of fear" is a very ironic phrase when thought of in religious context – though "ministry" could be a government thing

First-order reading: police are the ministry of fear.

How do these checkpoints affect his language and his poetry?

Does the censorship and scrutiny help to shape the poetry positively?

What about the Wordsworth and Yeats passages? Trying to claim a place in the English lyric.

The constable is very human, and the word "calls" suggests a friendly, social visit.

How to balance these two parts of the poem against each other?

Either way, it makes authority more complex.