

## Sample response on Heaney's *Opened Ground*

The following sample response on Seamus Heaney's poetry is based on three complete poems:

- 'Punishment'
- 'Act of Union'
- 'The Strand at Lough Beg'.

Shows how poems share meaning by identifying central linking images.

Uses central ideas to provide brief overview of the three poems.

Identifies important structure in poem and its purpose.

Analysis shows how poet positions the reader.

Explains how the feature of imagery works to convey meaning.

Notes Heaney's use of language to effect the transition between verses.

Analyses Heaney's use of metaphor.

Explores the poet's intention in using a turning point to shift the tone and its purpose.

Bodies pulled out from, poured into or laid over 'opened ground' become metaphors in these poems for the violation, anger and rebellion, seething up from the brutal colonisation of Ireland by the British; the seizing of its 'ground'. In 'Punishment', a poem about an executed body found in a northern European bog, the bemused 'voyeur' acknowledges that the rough justice of the community which wanted the death of this frail adulteress so long ago, is the same as that rough justice which tars and feathers Irish girls consorting with English soldiers now. The speaker bleakly recognises his own connivance in such revenge. More directly, in the difficult sexual/political analogy wrought through 'Act of Union', the metaphor of lovers' bodies is made to stand for England and Ireland, their coastlines grappled, lover to lover, front to back, and the 'tonight' of the poem is when the birth of their shared legacies happens. Ulster, whose heart beats ominously, like 'a wardrum', is born. And the requiem poem, 'The Strand at Lough Beg', soothes the violence of anger and execution through the rural burial where the body is bathed in the balm of a dew-laden landscape. At least here, the ground seems washed clean rather than torn and clotted with blood; the body is blessed.

'Punishment', written tersely in eleven quatrains of varying line lengths, opens in the centre of the act itself. The speaker feels the rope tugging, the cold wind blowing, as he/she is led to death. The 'I' who shivers is bridled by rope and wind, and also by the bitterness of judgement. The nipples, exposed thus to hatred and cold, are artfully polished by the poet's imagery into 'amber beads'. They become jewel-like, luminous, precious, beautifying this thin, humiliated body. In the third sentence and verse, the speaker shifts his gaze outside the body, watching on, becoming an onlooker. The heaviness of the 'weighing stone' that pushes the girl down is seen and counterpointed with the 'floating' of the 'rods and boughs' which push her under the bog. The counterpoint works to focus awareness on the exacting, conscious, deliberate exercise of murder.

It is the stone 'under which' (as the next verse commences) she is dug up centuries later. The weighing stone becomes the transitional link; she was buried under it and now she is 'unburied', exhumed, from under it. Wedded to nature now, her frailty has become strength, beaten out in the assonance of 'dug up/oak bone', her bones now 'barked sapling', her brain become 'firkin'. These images of her indomitable survival, of a strengthening through time, transpose her humiliation into a kind of conquest. Even the noose surrounds her differently; it is 'a ring//to store/ the memories of love'. Time has transfigured her, and love not violence has survived. The speaker tenderly addresses her as 'you', and gazes at her flaxen hair, imagining her beauty in spite of the tar-blackened face. But in his declaration of 'almost love', a stony realisation of something familiar surfaces. The poem turns about on itself and its artful *cinéma vérité*. There is a change in the gaze. How easy it is to register civilised shock through images of 'frail rigging', of 'amber beads', reconstructions of a primitive world haltering a girl's neck. 'I ... would have cast, I know/the

stones of silence' the speaker broods, knowing the bloody violence, the revenge meted out by his own time and place in Northern Ireland, where the tarring and feathering of girls still happens. He sees that the tribal instinct to violence remains in place.

The speaker's realisation, 'I am the artful voyeur', and the enjambment of that final line works its force through the final three verses, like the handle of the lash which combs out this acknowledgement of connivance in punishment. The imagery is brain, muscle and bones, those systems that animate our bodies. In addressing 'all your numbered bones', he draws into his metaphor of bodies, both the ritual of Catholic prayer and the cool gaze of science. The poem shows that tribal and intimate revenge persists as some dark inevitability in any culture.

The dark inevitability brought by the long strands of politics and history coalesces again under the looming title of the poem 'Act of Union'. It is set out as two irregular sonnets, a reference no doubt to sonnets and their traditional connection with love. The title points to an analogy centred on giving birth, an act of union, and then the birth of Ulster, an act of union between imperial Britain and colonial Ireland. At the core of the poem heaves the metaphor, 'opened ground', which refers not only to the pain and blood of giving birth, but also to an opening up of ground, a conquering, the consequence of the act of colonial transgression. In this poem Heaney binds the personal body to the political body. The first sonnet, located firmly in 'tonight', merges the landscapes of rain and bogland, the visceral physicality of the birth process, with the geography of colonisation. Unnervingly, 'The tall kingdom over your shoulder' represents the stronger male, Britain, looming and threatening Ireland from behind. The agonising language of birth: 'slip', 'flood', 'gash breaking', 'heaving', 'culminates', dramatises the analogy of birth with the establishment of Ulster.

The gaze of the poet in this deeply uncomfortable poem is a disconcertingly composed gaze; the controlled structuring of the sonnet form perhaps helps to convey this. The writer is so consciously 'there', present at what is birth, but could just as easily, perhaps, be rape or maybe an untender sexual congress. The 'ignorant little fists' beating, the 'wardrum' heart, resonate with threat.

'The Strand at Lough Beg', like 'Punishment', is a poem about an execution and a burial – a prologue from Dante's 'Purgatorio' reminds us of final journeys. There is the brutality of rough justice, the seeming innocence of the executed one and the balm finally brought through the benevolence of nature and its deeper judgement.

The poem races at the start, in horror movie style. We are tracking one who is fleeing, through sporadic light into red-eyed darkness. The features of the hunt gather convulsively against forest and stars: pursuit by a demon pack; fitful illumination through headlights and taillights; staccato movement, swerving, stalling. The hunters' eyes are 'dogs' eyes', inhuman. The continuous present tense,

Completes the first analysis by positioning the specifics of the poem within a wider structure.

Analyses the poetic device and its effect on the meaning and structure of the verse.

Explains how the link between the two poems reveals their relationship with the wider context of the poet's concerns.

Identifies poetic form and its purpose.

Function of the poetic device of analogy is concisely framed.

Detailed interpretation explaining meaning and significance of details chosen.

Shows how the poet positions the reader's response.

Links establish connections between poems and the wider context of Heaney's ideas.

Close reading through identification of elements of genre and mood and links with textual detail.

Analyses language choice and its poetic effects.

Shows how the text positions the reader by identifying the turning point in the poem's structure and questioning the multiple possibilities raised.

Effective analysis and selection of textual detail to present a close reading of the poem's resolution.

Broadens from the specifics of the three poems to the wider meanings posed by the poet.

'snapping and squealing', and the sudden blaze of light, 'red lamp swung', bring to a peak the tension and horror of the pursuit. The finale, with a 'cold-nosed gun', symbolises the 'cold' hearts, 'noses' like dogs, sniffing out their prey. The 'you', where the poet gently addresses Colum, in a keening for his death in that unknowable place, shifts the mood from panic to peace. This lough shaped not only by its clays and waters, its Christian spires and Druid yews, but also by its politics of vengeance, the poet notes, is not 'what you knew'.

Steeped in the grief-stricken haze of mist and dew, the final stanza compounds sharpness and gentleness through its imagery of the Lough, a 'dull blade' and 'honed bright'. The gentle grief here changes at the centre of the stanza into the particularity of the sound of 'sweeping ... feet'. Is it a body being dragged? A ghostly follower? When the speaker turns back he sees the kneeling, murdered cousin. Ceremoniously he washes him, preparing him for burial with handfuls of dew and dabs of moss. The clouds drizzle 'fine' grace upon this cousin as he is 'laid flat', buried, his shroud woven with rushes that are like 'green scapulars', medals, talismans of protection, now given, now too late.

Bodies are sacrificed and in this deliberate, ritual, tribal violence there is forced engagement, complicity and dishonour. The opening up of ground, the violating of boundaries, leaves 'raw' an entire country. This is the repeated fate of Ireland's colonisation. Here is the ground of Heaney's imagination and what propels his poetry.

(1315 words)

## Assessor comments

This response is tightly focused on the passages and their shared features. It develops a convincing, coherent interpretation of the poems and shows a clear insight into the poet's concerns about the problems of Northern Ireland. The linking of the poet's views with the identification and analysis of the central images of bodies and opened ground provides a strong structure for this response.

The linking of the poems through the shared metaphor of 'bodies' and 'ground' enables the writer to enter strongly into both the intellectual and poetic purposes of the poems. The response notes the ways poetic structure works to produce tension and the ways poetic devices enable transition and signify meaning. Analysis is grounded in carefully selected and collated detail. The analysis provides evidence of a sound understanding of the ways in which the poet positions the reader for response. The analysis is also open enough to question its own uncomfortable responses and to track the poet's suggestions of possible responses as the poem develops.

In style the response is fluent, using expressive and precise language. The response is aware of the language of literary analysis; for example, it explains the work done by images and metaphors as in its examination of the 'amber beads'. It selects details from a range of features, even using genre and *cinéma vérité* (a style of documentary filmmaking) as other means of interpretation. An awareness of the writer's views and values permeates the commentary, especially when linking poems and in the final summary. The writer's vocabulary shows an engagement with the tone and mood of the poetry (important features of the text). Phrases such as 'seethes up', 'the lash', 'unnervingly' and 'talismans of protection' make this an expressive and engaged answer. The conclusion draws together the main ideas.