

## Heaney – Approaching the Essay

List of poems we have covered (remember that you can access the notes on these on my website at any time):

1. Bogland
2. A Constable Calls
3. The Skunk
4. The Harvest Bow
5. The Underground
6. A Call

### **Organised by theme:**

<b><u>Memory</u></b>  Bogland The Skunk The Harvest Bow	<b><u>Nature</u></b>  Bogland The Skunk A Call
<b><u>The Marvellous</u></b>  Bogland The Skunk The Harvest Bow	<b><u>Violence / Conflict / Politics</u></b>  A Constable Calls The Harvest Bow (possibly)
<b><u>Sense of place</u></b>  Bogland The Skunk	<b><u>Poetry / Craft</u></b>  Bogland The Skunk The Harvest Bow



The Harvest Bow	A Call
The Underground	
<b><u>Childhood / Family / Family love</u></b>	<b><u>Romantic Love / Marriage</u></b>
A Constable Calls	The Underground
The Harvest Bow	The Skunk
A Call	

### Sample Questions from Dublin Exam Board past papers

**2019 DEB:** “In his poetry, Seamus Heaney delights his readers with his willingness to share his personal experiences and insights in a unique and refreshing way.”

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Support your answer with reference to the poetry of Seamus Heaney on your course.

#### Points may include:

##### Willingness to share personal experiences and insights:

- In his poetry, Heaney shares personal experiences of his relationships with (for example) his father and wife
- Almost all of Heaney’s themes are rooted in his personal experience, but many of these are common experiences readers can relate to, so there is a universality about them
- However, many of his poems contain unique childhood memories, e.g. “A Constable Calls”
- In “A Constable Calls” we see disturbing images of / memorable insights into the violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s: violence can be found everywhere, so we can identify with this, etc.



### Unique and refreshing way:

- Heaney engages his readers through his use of evocative language and imagery
- He utilises myth and mythology, which adds depth to his exploration of his personal experiences, uniquely engaging / delighting readers
- His poetry conveys empathy and warmth, which, while certainly not unique, add to the reader's enjoyment / appreciation of his work - it is a refreshing quality
- His poems make wonderful use of visual imagery, which he often uses to create a sense of place
- Heaney's poems engage us because they bring everyday natural events before our eyes through the precision of his language and his innovative use of imagery
- Many of his poems captivate readers because of his use of techniques such as impressive alliteration and musical assonance
- His precise use of assonance, onomatopoeia, cacophony and alliteration help create this musical effect, while run-on lines help the poems to flow smoothly, creating an overall effect that is unique and which appeals to readers
- The layers of meaning to be found in his poems can be a source of delight, etc.

**2012 DEB:** "Heaney can bring everyday natural events before our eyes through the precision of his language and his innovative use of imagery."

Write your response to this statement, supporting the points you make with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.



## Sample Questions from educate.ie papers

1. “While Heaney’s poetry depicts ordinary people in ordinary places, his language and style are dramatic.”

To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Seamus Heaney on your course.

2. “Heaney’s poetry appeals to the senses in terms of its themes, language and imagery.”

To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Seamus Heaney on your course.

3. “All that is natural and truthful, both good and bad, is revealed in Heaney’s poetry.”

To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Seamus Heaney on your course.

When trying to work out what sort of question might come up, you should examine the poet’s main themes / features of style in detail. I have done an example of this for you on the next page. You should go through the notes carefully and fill in the remaining tables.



The idea of making the ordinary extraordinary is important. Everyday events take on a huge significance. Sensual, dramatic yet accessible language enables us to share Heaney's vision.

### Theme: Memory

### Language

**Bogland:** The bog is a metaphor for our national consciousness  
Heaney said the bog was 'the memory of the landscape' and 'a museum preserving the history of the Irish race'. He wanted to 'make a congruence between memory and bogland and... our national consciousness'.

Memory and national consciousness are shapeless and fluid, like the bog itself. Stories and memories change depending on who is recounting the narrative.

Think also of the job of a poet: stripping away layers of personal memory to explore areas of his past that might provide inspiration for a poem.

*This leads neatly to...*

Striking metaphors: American sunset slicing a big sun, elk is 'an astounding crate full of air', bog is 'black butter', those who dig in bog are 'pioneers', tarn is 'cyclops'. Turns ordinary into extraordinary.

Malleable nature of bog reinforced by repeated reference to softness and wetness: 'waterlogged', 'melting and opening underfoot', 'soft as pulp' etc.

References to food – butter; 'crusting' reminds us of bread, suggests we are nourished by the bog. It is also described as 'kind'.

Hyperbole at end 'wet centre is bottomless' is striking and effective.

Effective similes: bow is like Braille – poet can read his past.

Ordinary is made extraordinary by powerful images such as the 'big lift' of the evening sky and the bow being



**The Harvest Bow:** Simply touching the harvest bow causes memories to come flooding back. Evening with his father is remembered in great detail but not overly sentimentalised.

Looking into the loops of the bow is like looking into a television set and seeing the past. An ordinary object becomes extraordinary and triggers intense memories.

*This leads neatly to...*

**The Skunk:** In California, everything reminded him of his wife. Now he is home, his wife reminds him of that time in California.

likened to a television set in which he can see his past.

Musical, pleasant sounds appropriate for poem about childhood.

Line about being 'tongue-tied' is actually a bit of a tongue twister: clever and amusing.

Deeply sensual: smell of eucalyptus, noise from refrigerator, light on verandah, vividness of oranges on tree. Word 'refrigerator' reminds us that he is in another country.

Paradox of skunk being 'ordinary' and 'mysterious'. Religious imagery - sacred

**Theme: The Marvellous**

**Language**

**Bogland:** Ordinary place becomes mysterious and wonderful. Depth of the bog is stressed. No matter how many layers are stripped away, there is more to discover. Sense of awe at this. Variety of objects found in the bog emphasises mystery and historical / cultural significance of this place. Linked to our national consciousness.

Striking metaphors: American sunset slicing a big sun, elk is 'an astounding crate full of air', bog is 'black butter', those who dig in bog are 'pioneers', tarn is 'cyclops'. Turns ordinary into extraordinary.



**The Skunk:**

A most unlikely creature – the skunk – is transformed into something mysterious and glamorous. Heaney is mesmerised by it and eagerly anticipates its arrival every night. Exotic world – although he is only describing a back garden, he makes it appear a wonderfully sensual and exciting place. Similarly, his wife looking in a drawer for her nightdress is transformed into a memory of that time and the unusual image

**The Harvest Bow:**

Looking into the loops of the bow is like looking into a television set and seeing the past. An ordinary object becomes extraordinary and triggers intense memories.

Deeply sensual: smell of eucalyptus, noise from refrigerator, light on verandah, vividness of oranges on tree. Word ‘refrigerator’ reminds us that he is in another country.

Paradox of skunk being ‘ordinary’ and ‘mysterious’. Religious imagery makes the experience appear almost sacred, highlighting its power to move the poet.

Ordinary place is made extraordinary by powerful images such as the ‘big lift’ of the evening sky and the bow being likened to a television set in which he can see his past.



## PLANNING YOUR ANSWER

**“While Heaney’s poetry depicts ordinary people in ordinary places, his language and style are dramatic.”**

**To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Seamus Heaney on your course.**

Step one: Examine the title closely. The key words are ‘ordinary people’ and ‘ordinary places’, and dramatic language.

Step two: What poems have you studied that deal with ordinary people in ordinary places? How are they dramatic in terms of language / style?

Jot down the poems (don’t worry if it turns out that you can’t use one; that’s what the plan is for) and say what is ordinary about the poem and what is dramatic about the language.

Note: I don’t usually try to work out what my thesis will be until I have chosen the poems I am going to use and have decided on the order in which I will use them in the essay. You can use four or more poems in your answer, but you are not expected to deal with all six poems you have studied. You may, of course, make passing reference to other poems if you wish, but be careful that you do not run out of time.

- *A Constable Calls*: Farmer / father giving details of crops to government-appointed official – language/style is dramatic in that it hints at oppression, tension and conflict





- *The Underground*: Newly-married couple running to concert – language/style is dramatic in that it transforms this into mythological story – sexual tension and tension of marriage it evolves over the years
- *The Skunk*: Man working abroad, missing his wife; older version of man still attracted to his wife – dramatic language/style makes the ordinary extraordinary – clever/amusing link to desire for wife and exoticism of ordinary events.
- *The Harvest Bow*: Farmer making little straw decoration; son remembers evenings together – dramatic language / style links past and present and shows power of simple objects to evoke extraordinarily strong feelings.
- *A Call*: Simple act of phoning his father, normal everyday conversation; mother says she will get him as he is out in the garden – dramatic language / style transforms this into an exploration of death and the passage of time. Ordinary things such as pulling out the weeds / the clock ticking take on a great significance

Step three: In what order would you arrange these poems? Think about the theme and the dramatic language. Is there any sort of gradation? I would look at the fact that two of these poems deal with Heaney's father and upbringing, and two deal with his marriage. Then I might think of organising them in some sort of vaguely chronological order.

1. A Constable Calls – Young Heaney
2. The Harvest Bow – Slightly older Heaney
3. The Underground – Newly-married Heaney
4. The Skunk – More settled Heaney



## 5. A Call – Reflection on ageing / passing of time and death

Obviously, this is only a suggestion and you are free to use other poems and organise them in any way you like. I find it helpful to do it this way as it is easier to create links between poems and to create a naturally-flowing essay.

### **DEB Pre 2014**

'Heaney uses evocative language and imagery to lend universal significance to his personal experiences of life.'

The first thing you must do is 'unpack' (I hate the expression, but it works here) the title.

Analyse the question carefully. The key words/phrases are:

Evocative language and imagery

Universal significance to his personal experiences

Start with personal experiences. Then ask yourself what is universal about these. Finally, ask yourself how the language and imagery contribute to making the personal universal. Breaking it down like this can make a question far more approachable.

If you cannot make a link at the planning stage, forget that poem and move on to another one. This is the benefit of plans. If you just launch into your essay without a clear idea of where each poem is taking you, you will get a low grade.

A poem-by-poem approach can make a daunting essay title seem quite manageable. Remember, you are aiming to write two strong paragraphs on each poem, as well as an introduction and conclusion.

You should aim to write on four to five poems in your exam answer.

As usual, this is a THEME and STYLE question. Heaney's personal experiences are harnessed in order to explore certain themes.

Next we ask ourselves if these themes are relevant to Heaney only or could be equally relevant / significant to all of us?

Does the language and imagery **help us to understand the themes?** This latter part of the sentence is important.

Next we jot down the poems we have studied and quickly examine them under these headings. You will not use all the poems in your answer, of course, so choose those that best answer the question.

1. Bogland
2. A Constable Calls
3. The Skunk
4. The Harvest Bow
5. The Underground
6. A Call

**Bogland:** Reflection on memory – national consciousness (see breakdown of theme / language in table on memory) Language helps us to see the bog as he sees it and to understand the importance of it in terms of our cultural identity / history

**A Constable Calls:** Theme of childhood AND violence/oppression. Child's view of the world accurately portrayed through language and imagery – fear highlighted by descriptions which add to sense of tension: pressure of constable's boot on pedal, mark of hat on head, negativity of 'fat, black handlegrips', child's eye view of holster and gun etc. We can relate to child's view of world and exaggerated sense of guilt etc. Also, theme of violence/oppression is relevant to Troubles and any similar situation.

**The Skunk:** Theme of memory and love. Sensual, evocative language enables us to be almost present in Heaney's world. Humour and sensuality beautifully blended. Exoticism and tension created through carefully crafted images etc. Love, longing are universal themes etc.

**The Harvest Bow:** Theme of childhood and memory, sense of place. Language is highly evocative and draws us into Heaney's world (see table above). Father beautifully and sensitively portrayed. He cannot express himself in words, but the bow is his way of expressing himself. We can relate to poignancy of childhood memory and blend of ordinary and marvellous in language (rusting objects versus 'big lift' of sky etc.) Being an outsider is also something to which we can relate.

Would you use other poems? Why would you use these? What order would you put them in?

## Sample Approach

**The Question:** Dublin Exam Board Pre-Leaving Cert Exam 2014.

‘Heaney uses evocative language and imagery to lend universal significance to his personal experiences of life’.

When the shocking and sad news of Seamus Heaney’s death broke in August of 2013, tributes poured in from around the world. All spoke of the enormous contribution he had made, not just to literature, but to what the actor Liam Neeson called our understanding of ‘who we are as a species’. Tániste at the time, Eamonn Gilmore said that in Heaney’s work, ‘the dignity and honour of the everyday lives of people came to life’. Yet Heaney’s work is also universal in nature and has a worldwide appeal. His winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 praised his ability to write ‘works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past’. This, I believe, is a large part of what makes Heaney one of our nation’s most beloved and sorely missed poets. He can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and show us, through beautifully crafted examples from his personal life, how we may come to a greater and deeper understanding of universal truths.

This sentence responds to the question. It mentions themes and style.

Make sure you keep linking to the question.

‘A Constable Calls’ is a perfect example of Heaney’s ability to lend universal significance to personal experiences. On the surface, this is the simple retelling of an event from the poet’s childhood during which he watched in

fear as a constable questioned his father about the crops being grown on their land so he could record them for tax purposes. However on closer examination and reflection, the themes of childish perspectives on an adult world and conflict are integral to the poem and, viewed this way, the poem takes on a new meaning and relevance. To a small child, the lie about the turnips seems enormous and, unable to distinguish between serious crimes and minor tax avoidance, he assumes 'small guilts'. In his horrified imagination he sees his father – and maybe even himself

Examine quotes in detail. Comment on poetic technique.

Universal significance

– being taken to the barracks and thrown in a cell. The harsh 'ck' sounds in 'the black hole in the barracks' add to the sense of terror as the young boy allows his fear to run away with him. **This inability to gauge the seriousness or otherwise of events in the strangeness of the adult world is something to which we can all relate and**

**Heaney's vivid and evocative description of the child's anxiety** brings us back to times in our own childhood when we struggled in this way.

Even though it might be read on one level as a small boy's naïve fear, the fact that the young Heaney is terrified of the consequences of his father's neglecting to mention the line of turnips is significant. It indicates that the law is viewed as a hostile force which exists only to punish or catch you out in some way. **The whole incident not just personal to the Heaney family but is symbolic of the tension between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.** The language and imagery in the poem is that of oppression: the constable's pedals are 'relieved of the boot of the law', his dynamo is 'cocked

Universal significance

back', reminding us of the trigger of a gun, and even his hat has left 'the line of its pressure' in his hair. It is interesting that the constable's face is never described. He is an anonymous, faceless figure of authority and an unwelcome representative of a government that Heaney's father resents and distrusts. Even in his departure, the constable is an image of menace. His bicycle ticks and ticks, which evokes the idea of a ticking time bomb that is waiting to go off. This links the constable's visit to Heaney's farm to the mounting tension in Northern Ireland at the time and the inevitability of this hostility exploding into violence. What I found particularly interesting about this poem is the way in which the child picked up on the tension between the constable and his father, conveyed through the father's terse replies to the other's questions and even his neglecting to hang the constable's hat as he would for a welcome visitor. It made me realise that conflict can be passed on through the generations in the subtlest of ways.

In 'Bogland', Heaney again examines what it is to be Irish, Unlike 'A Constable Calls', in which Heaney explores the divisive nature of Irish politics, this poem focuses on what it is we share. The bog is a metaphor for our national consciousness. Heaney said the bog was 'the memory of the landscape' and 'a museum preserving the history of the Irish race'. He wanted to 'make a congruence between memory and bogland and... our national consciousness'.

Etc. How would you finish this essay?