

The Harvest Bow

As you plaited the harvest bow
You implicated the mellowed silence in you
In wheat that does not rust
But brightens as it tightens twist by twist
Into a knowable corona,
A throwaway love-knot of straw.

Hands that aged round ash plants and cane sticks
And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of gamecocks
Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent
Until your fingers moved somnambulant:
I tell and finger it like braille,
Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable,

And if I spy into its golden loops
I see us walk between the railway slopes
Into an evening of long grass and midges,
Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges,
An auction notice on an outhouse wall--
You with a harvest bow in your lapel,

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick
For the big lift of these evenings, as your stick
Whacking the tip off weeds and bushes
Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes
Nothing: that original townland
Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.

The end of art is peace
Could be the motto of this frail device
That I have pinned up on our deal dresser--
Like a drawn snare
Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.



Summary and analysis:

Heaney's father is plaiting straw into a harvest bow: something he did each autumn. As he works, he seems to be weaving something of himself into the bow. The word 'implicate' has two possible meanings: to imply or to intertwine. Both have significance here.

The father's 'mellowed silence' suggests that he is becoming tempered by maturity and experience. As he ages, he is gentler and more easy-going. This line flows into the next which helps to create a sense of gentle movement in keeping with the idea of weaving the straw into a delicate shape.

The wheat 'does not rust / But brightens' as it is transformed into a small piece of art. Literally, of course, the wheat straw would shine as it was tightened more and more by the plaits. The rhyming and alliteration in this line: 'brightens as it tightens twist by twist' give the line energy.

The idea of the bow shining is picked up again in the word 'corona'. Although it is beautiful, it is also familiar or 'knowable'. Heaney would have seen these bows made each autumn, after all. Another way to look at the word 'knowable' is to consider that the bow gives Heaney an insight into his father. It is a way for the older man to express a gentle, artistic side to himself. There is nothing practical about the harvest bow, after all. Its only function is to decorate.

The bow is a 'throwaway love-knot of straw', something that would have been worn briefly then cast aside. But it is also an expression of the father's unspoken love for his son, for tradition and the land. He could never put these thoughts into words, but the bow does the job for him. Heaney does not throw it away because he sees this significance; he keeps it on his dresser and when he touches it he feels a connection to his father.

Heaney's father's hands are more used to holding a stick to drive cattle or tie spurs onto fighting birds, yet he can turn them now to this delicate, intricate task. It shows another side to the man. He is so used to doing this job now that his fingers move without conscious effort, almost as if he were doing it in his sleep.

When Heaney touches the harvest bow 'like braille' he feels that he is able to read something that was never put into words. This little plait of straw is a physical manifestation of his father's emotions. It is also a key to memories of past harvests and the time Heaney and his father spent together.

When Heaney looks at the loops of the bow it is almost as if he were looking at a screen on which scenes from his youth are played out.

And if I spy into its golden loops
I see us walk between the railway slopes
Into an evening of long grass and midges

Heaney evokes the atmosphere of those childhood days through details such as smoke going straight up on a windless evening, ditches littered with old furniture and farming implements and an auction notice. He is not romanticising his youth and imagining it all to have been perfect; he mixes beautiful images like the 'Blue smoke going straight up' with the less pleasant descriptions of littered ditches. However, his memories of that time are warm and special to Heaney because of the time he shared with his father.

Heaney says that he is 'already homesick' for these evenings. This could have several meanings.

- The adult Heaney feels homesick when he looks at the harvest bow on his dresser because it is a reminder of those times that are far in the past.
- The young Heaney would have been going away to school in autumn, so on those walks at harvest time he would have been keenly aware that his time at home was drawing to an end.
- The young Heaney had a poet's awareness that this was a special moment and that in times to come he would look back nostalgically. (This is a common idea in poetry. In 'A Christmas Childhood' Patrick Kavanagh talks about 'my child poet' seeing significance in simple things in nature when others did not. Similarly, in 'Skating' Wordsworth says that even while playing with his childhood friends he was somehow apart from them and saw the world and his place in it on a deeper level than they did.)

Heaney's father moves energetically, whacking bushes with his stick. This is a more violent image than the one of him twisting straw into a delicate bow, but it serves to remind us that there were two sides to the poet's father: the practical farmer and the gentle man who could not put emotions into words. As he strikes the bushes the father might be hoping to flush out a bird or small animal, but he does not. There is a second meaning, however. Heaney's father and the others in 'that original townland' express their emotions through things like the creation of a harvest bow, but they find it difficult to flush out or express their feelings. (The word 'original' to describe the townland means that it is Heaney's place of origin.)

The line 'Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand' is a clever one in that it is quite difficult to read aloud without stumbling slightly over the words, or becoming momentarily tongue-tied.

Heaney does not share this inability to express himself. Where his father twists straw into a bow, Heaney plaits memories into a poem.

In the final stanza, Heaney reflects on the purpose of art. He takes a line from *Yeats: 'The end of art is peace' and says it could be the motto of the harvest bow. The end, or ultimate achievement, of art is to create a feeling of love or peace in us.

The poem ends with a comparison between the bow and a 'drawn snare'. The corn is trapped, or snared' in the bow but the spirit of the corn has slipped away*. As it went, it burnished or polished the corn and the bow is 'still warm'. Likewise, the poet's father may be gone but an echo of his spirit and his love remains in the harvest bow.

Themes:

Memory: The poet's memories of his childhood and the time he spent with his father are vividly recreated. When he touches the bow and looks through its loops, he can almost see his younger self walking with his father.

A sense of place: The poet's home place is recreated perfectly here. The details such as the old furniture and farm equipment in the ditches is wonderfully evocative. However, as in a number of Heaney's other memory poems, there is a sense of dislocation. Even when he is in his beloved home place, he is already homesick for it.

Poetry / Craft: Heaney likens writing poetry to weaving the harvest bow. Through the creation of the bow, Heaney's father 'implicates' something of himself, just as Heaney – and all poets – do in the weaving of words into poetry. Both men express themselves through different types of art.

As we discussed in earlier classes, there are many other themes that can be explored in this poem and we will look at them in more detail when we begin to compile our table of themes and style.

** Yeats took this quote from the Roman poet Horace (he of 'Dulce et Decorum Est') and used it in his 1901 essay 'Ireland and the Arts'. The full essay is available online if you ever feel like reading it.*

** Does this remind you of the gentle depiction of aging and death in Larkin's 'At Grass'? There the word 'slipped' was used too: 'They have slipped their names'.*