Seamus Heaney Themes and key quotations

**Writing and Language**

- *'Thatcher’* – “…gaping at his Midas touch.”
  Heaney implicitly compares the skill and precision of the thatcher with his own skill and precision as a poet.

- *‘Digging’* – “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.”
  Heaney metaphorically compares his pen to the spade of his forefathers. He will ‘dig’ through his memories, and through writing he will explore his own history and that of Ireland. He vows to preserve agricultural traditions by capturing them in poetry, rather than by actually becoming a farmer.

- *‘Poem’* – “Love I shall perfect for you the child…”
  Heaney claims that love will help him to write the perfect poem.

- *‘Anahorish’* – “My place of clear water”
  Heaney translates the Gaelic place name into English. The soft sound of the word is important. He is affectionate about the place he grew up in, claiming it as his own.

- *‘Broagh’* – “…like that last / gh the strangers found / difficult to manage.”
  There is a sense of belonging, pride and almost superiority in the fact that the Gaelic language is difficult for foreigners to pronounce.

- *‘A New Song’* – “But now our river tongues must rise…To flood, with vowelling embrace…”
  Heaney urges an uprising of sorts – urging the Irish to use their native language. In this poem Heaney describes a meeting with “a girl from Derrygarve” and tells how the word “Derrygarve” inspires him to a renewed faith in the Irish language.

- *‘North’* – “…trust the feel of what nubbed treasure / your hands have known.”
  In this poem Heaney imagines receiving advice from his Viking ancestors about his poetry. “The longship’s swimming tongue” tells him to look inwards for poetic inspiration, to “lie down in the word-hoard” and to “compose in darkness”. The quotation above shows the Vikings telling Heaney to trust his own imaginings and beliefs, to trust in what he knows and to search for the right words, using his intuition.

- *‘from Whatever You Say, Say Nothing’* – “Yet for all this art and sedentary trade / I am incapable. The famous / Northern reticence..”
  Heaney wishes he could say something to explain, rationalise or even justify the violence in Northern Ireland, but he is “incapable”. He too suffers from the “Northern reticence” which stops the people of the north from speaking their true feelings. Instead they speak in cliché and code: “whispering morse”.

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hynths
Religion

- ‘The Tollund Man’ – “Bridegroom to the goddess”
Heaney personifies the bog as the goddess of fertility, to whom these ancient sacrifices were made.

“Those dark juices working / Him to a saint’s kept body.”
The bog preserves the bodies perfectly. Here there is a suggestion that the ‘Tollund man’ is like a saint – in the Catholic religion saints’ bodies are said not to decay.

“I could risk blasphemy, / Consecrate the cauldron bog / Our holy ground ...”
Continuing from the previous quotation, Heaney suggests turning to an alternative religion, making the bog a new deity and worshipping that.

- ‘Limbo’ – “Even Christ’s palms, unhealed, / Smart and cannot fish there.”
Once again, Heaney expresses his feeling that Christianity is inadequate – Christ is unable to save the illegitimate baby, drowned by its mother, because Christianity is rigid and uncompromising.

- ‘Mid-Term Break’ – “Snowdrops / and candles soothed the bedside.”
Heaney describes how people need ceremony and ritual to soothe the pain of losing a loved one.

- ‘Funeral Rites’ – “we pine for ceremony”
As with the previous quotation, Heaney shows that now the sectarian violence is claiming so many lives in Northern Ireland, the people are desperate for a ceremony adequate to soothe the pain of so many futile losses.

“I would restore / the great chambers of Boyne”
Here Heaney suggests how we could soothe the pain of sectarian deaths. He suggests re-opening an ancient Pagan burial ground in the centre of Ireland, and uniting the whole country in a solemn and ceremonious procession to bury the dead.

“...imagining those under the hill / disposed like Gunnar / who lay beautiful inside his burial mound / though dead by violence / and unavenged.”
Once the whole country has united in the ritualistic procession, they will feel better, and on the way home they will think of Gunnar – a hero from a Viking saga, whose unavenged death broke the cycle of revenge and retribution. Heaney suggests this may be an answer to the cyclical violence – we must allow atrocity to go unavenged in order to lay the feud to rest. Gunnar followed the Pagan way of life; the chambers of Boyne are a Pagan burial site – is Heaney suggesting again an alternative religion, one which could unite instead of divide the country?

- ‘The Grauballe Man’ – “…hung in the scales...with the Dying Gaul...with the actual weight of each hooded victim, slashed and dumped.”
Heaney compares the heroic, military death of a warrior Gaul with the futile, anonymous deaths of present-day sectarian victims.

- ‘Punishment’ – “I who have stood dumb / when your betraying sisters, / cauled in tar, / wept by the railings”
Again, Heaney compares past punishments with present day conflict. In this case he describes an Iron age killing and imagines having the same reaction as he has when he sees young Catholic girls publicly punished for having relationships with English or Protestant soldiers.
• from ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’ – “‘Religion’s never mentioned here, ‘ of course. / ‘You know them by their eyes,’ and hold your tongue.”
Heaney shows that although religion is the main cause of the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, the people in the province feel unable to mention it, for fear of reprisals. They judge a person’s religion by their appearance or their name.

“But I incline as much to rosary beads / As to the jottings and analyses / Of politicians and newspaper men”
Heaney is angered by the interference of the media, yet suggests that his religion is equally useless or to blame.

Politics

• ‘The Tollund Man’, ‘The Grauballe Man’, ‘Punishment’ and ‘Strange Fruit’ – In these poems, Iron Age sacrificial killings are described. Heaney compares these killings with the violent, brutal deaths occurring in Northern Ireland at the time he was writing to show that violence is cyclical and human nature has not become anymore civilised – we still seek revenge for betrayal, and kill in the name of religion.

• ‘Act of Union’ – “I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder”
The narrator of this poem is a male England, who is shown to be physically oppressing the female, subordinate Ireland.

“Conquest is a lie.”
The invasion of Ireland by England is shown to be mutually damaging. England will suffer too.

“And I am still imperially / Male, leaving you with the pain”
On a metaphorical level, England is shown to have physically abused, perhaps even raped, Ireland. Ireland is compared to a pregnant woman, but not one who is happily anticipating the birth of a much-desired child. The woman is abused and in pain, the baby appears unwanted.

“The act sprouted an obstinate fifth column / Whose stance is growing unilateral...His parasitical / And ignorant little fists already / Beat at your borders and I know they’re cocked / At me across the water.”
The metaphorical baby is described as a ‘fifth column’ – a hostile enemy within – the Protestant paramilitaries who are hated by Catholics. This extreme group is so determined to keep the North Protestant, they are willing to strive for independence from England, if necessary.

“No treaty / I foresee will salve completely your tracked / and stretchmarked body”
A tone of pessimism is apparent as Heaney sees no solutions to the struggles; at least, no political solution. Once again, the imagery shows the woman’s body to be scarred and damaged by the abuse.

• from ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’ – “Is there a life before death?”
Heaney’s style changes in this poem – he becomes more explicit and narrative. The whole poem is one of his most political – since he states his opinions about the Northern Irish conflict directly. This particular quotation, which Heaney read graffitied on a wall, sums up the sense of despair felt in the province.
History – Personal

- ‘Digging’ – “I look down / Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds / Bends low, comes up twenty years away...”
  “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.”

- ‘Digging’, ‘Death of a Naturalist’, ‘Follower’ and ‘Blackberry Picking’
  In these poems Heaney paints vivid, sensuous descriptions of his childhood memories of rural, Irish life. His language is often onomatopoeic as he describes the “squelch and slap of soggy peat”, the “bubbles [that] gargled delicately” in the flax-dam, the “coarse croaking” of fat frogs, the “big dark blobs” of blackberries, the horses “strain[ing]” at his father’s “clicking tongue.”

- ‘Mid-Term Break’ – “No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear. / A four foot box, a foot for every year.”
  In this iambic rhyming couplet, Heaney sums up, with an embittered tone, the painful event of losing his younger brother.

- ‘Personal Helicon’ – “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.”
  Here Heaney summarises his reasons for writing: he writes poetry in order to look inwards at himself and his history. He is willing to explore “the darkness” – the negative elements of himself. In his later poetry, he also explores the darkness of Ireland – its brutal and violent past and present.

  In the above poems Heaney tells readers about key people or events from his own personal history. Sometimes, as in ‘Funeral Rites’ he uses these stories from his personal history to comment on political matters.

History – Irish

- ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ – “They buried us without shroud or coffin / And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.”
  In this poem Heaney tells the story of part of the rebellion of 1798 in which Catholic rebels met English soldiers in the Battle of Vinegar Hill. Therefore, in this poem Heaney refers specifically to a particular event from Irish history. The quotation above suggests the cyclical nature of violence: just as crops grow annually, Heaney anticipates another Catholic uprising. He sees the Catholic defiance at Vinegar Hill as the seed for future rebellion. In this poem he shows explicit support for the nationalist cause. The events of the past are linked with the present day, as in so many of Heaney’s poems.

- ‘Punishment’ – “I can see her drowned body in the bog”
  Contemplation of a sacrificial, Iron Age killing leads Heaney to reflect on violent reprisals enacted in his own society. Once again, violence of the past is shown to be repeated in the present.
• 'The Grauballe Man' – “I first saw his twisted face in a photograph”
In describing another ‘bog body’, many analogies are made between the man in the bog and the contemporary victims of sectarian atrocity.

• 'The Tollund Man' – “Out there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home.”
This poem is about another ‘bog body’ found in Denmark. Heaney empathises with the man, imagining “something of his sad freedom. Heaney knows that if he visited the scene of the brutal sacrificial killing he would recognise traces of the same vengeful practices that violate his own society.

• ‘Strange Fruit’ – “Diodorus Siculus confessed / His gradual ease among the likes of this”
In Heaney’s final poem about a ‘bog body’, he refers to a Greek historian from the 1st century AD, who recorded his reactions to murder and violence, commenting that with each atrocity he became more desensitised. Heaney worries that the present day community is becoming used to the present day sectarian violence.

In all the ‘bog body’ poems Heaney refers to events from European history to draw comparisons with the conflict in Northern Ireland and to try to make sense of the sense of “tribal, intimate revenge” he sympathises with.

• 'North' – “...and suddenly / those fabulous raiders...were ocean-deafened voices / warning me”
Heaney again looks to European past – this time to the Vikings, a race known for their violent, yet adventurous exploits. The Vikings invaded Scotland, England and Ireland, as well as much of Europe. Heaney links the struggles of the Vikings with those of his own world. He also looks to the Vikings in ‘Funeral Rites’, when he refers to Gunnar, the hero of a Norse saga, and recognises the Viking foundation of certain places in Ireland, such as ‘Strangford’ and ‘Carlingford’.

• 'Gifts of Rain' – “I cock my ear / at an absence - / in the shared calling of blood / arrives my need / for antediluvian lore.”
In many of his poems Heaney comments on a need to look to the past for answers. There is a sense of time and history being cyclical – he looks to the past, to the ancient wisdom of his ancestors, in order to improve the future “for my children’s sake”. “Soft voices of the dead are whispering by the shore...The tawny guttural water / Spells itself”
Heaney imagines the voices of his ancestors to be heard in the flowing water, just as he hears the voices of the Vikings in the Atlantic Ocean.

• 'Broagh’ This poem is a description of the images and memories conjured by the place name, which is Gaelic and so makes Heaney think about Ireland’s Gaelic past.
• 'Anahorish' – “those mound-dwellers / go waist-deep in mist”
As if through the mists of time, Heaney imagines the first inhabitants of his childhood town – the place name of which is also Gaelic.
Irish Landscape and Traditions

- ‘Digging’ – “...then fell to right away / Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf. Digging.”
In this quotation, Heaney describes his grandfather at work on the farm: a memory from his childhood. He describes his grandfather’s skill and precision as a farmer; mirrored in his own expertise as a poet in his ability to choose such exact verbs, to recreate the rhythm of digging and paint the scene so precisely.
“But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.”
Heaney suggests a sense of guilt or remorse that he cannot follow in the family tradition of farming.
“Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. I’ll dig with it.”
Heaney resolves his guilt by vowing to continue the rural traditions of Ireland in his poetry, instead.

In these poems Heaney does what he promised he would in ‘Digging’. He paints vivid, sensuous, descriptive pictures of rural Irish life and traditions. Through his poetry he hopes he will keep these dying traditions alive; although the blackberries “would turn sour”, in his poem the “sweet flesh” is forever preserved.

- ‘Bogland’ – “The wet centre is bottomless”
This is the first poem in these collections which explores the Irish bogs. For Heaney, the bogs become a symbol for the whole of Ireland. This is the start of Heaney really ‘digging’ into the darkness; he invites us to explore the past, showing how the bog can preserve things for “millions of years”. The bogs come to represent deep areas of memory and history, exposing the cycles of nature, as nature starts and finishes in the bog. In this poem Heaney describes archaeologists digging through the bog and finding many things: “the Great Irish Elk”, “Butter”, “waterlogged trunks / Of great firs”. The original quotation I chose suggests the search is infinite and endless – more and more rich, valuable wealth will be discovered. The men who dig for turf are also digging through history, mythology and folklore.

- The ‘bog body’ poems
After ‘Bogland’ come the ‘bog body’ poems; indeed the bog has kept even greater secrets perfectly preserved. The ‘bog bodies’ help Heaney to explore Irish conflicts as he looks to the past to understand the future.

Loss of Innocence

- ‘Death of a Naturalist’ – “The great slime kings / Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew / That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.”
Heaney shows innocence to be lost through knowledge and maturity. Once he discovers that the “jellied specks” he collects are actually the offspring of frogs, he feels guilty, and when he returns to the flax-dam, the frogs are now threatening as if poised to attack. Now he imagines that the frogs will attack him, in revenge for his naïve crime.

- ‘Blackberry Picking’ – “Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not.”
This poem is about Heaney’s memories of childhood traditions, but it also records memories of blighted hopes and disappointments as the “sweet flesh” of the juicy blackberries “would turn sour.” This poem carries suggestions of the loss of childhood innocence in this realisation of the transitory nature of instant gratification and also in the sexual connotations, which suggest gradual sexual awakening.

- **Mid-Term Break** – “In the porch I met my father crying - / He had always taken funerals in his stride.”
  In the event of a shocking family tragedy, the young Heaney was forced to grow up. In losing his four-year-old brother, Heaney also lost his childhood innocence, as he discovered the true brutality of the world. This violence and brutality is hinted at in the violent imagery of these early poems, but it is in ‘Mid-Term Break’ that the full force of tragedy first hits the young Heaney and he sees his father’s vulnerability for the first time.

**Heaney’s Inspiration**

- ‘**Digging**’ – “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.”
  Heaney writes to justify his decisions to become a poet, rather than a farmer. He vows to keep Irish agricultural traditions alive through his writing. Thus, he sees himself as a voice for rural Irish culture.

- ‘**Personal Helicon**’ – “I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing.”
  By the end of his first collection, Heaney feels he knows why he writes: to explore himself, and at the same time, to explore the whole of Irish culture and history.

**Other reasons why Heaney writes (many quotations can be found to support each of these):**

- To explore human cruelty;
- To analyse, and attempt to understand present day sectarian conflict;
- To explore the past, and use it to try to understand the present;
- To use explorations of the past to attempt to offer solutions for a brighter future;
- To respond to the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, as he was expected to, but to look inwards as well, and thus avoid merely ‘reporting’ on the Troubles;
- To engage with language, to enjoy the challenge of perfection;
- To acknowledge his split loyalties in terms of language. The English language is the language he writes in, has studied in. He owes a lot to the English language. However, English has taken over from the original Gaelic language of the Irish, which is rarely used now. Heaney recognises this conflict within himself, and seeks to encourage Irish people not to completely forget the Gaelic language, since it is so bound up with their history and identity;
- To offer support to the nationalist cause. Although his poems are not usually explicitly political, he does demonstrate his Catholic sympathies;
- To suggest, perhaps, that we might look to an alternative religion. Heaney looks to the past – to the ancient Pagan religion – suggesting that the whole country could unite, and perhaps worship natural objects, such as the bog.