

kitchen. By its long narrow shape the poem emulates the 'long afternoon'. Through its lines the long 'o' sounds of 'stood', 'cooling', 'afternoon', 'goose's' build towards the 'finsmith's scoop' and the short 'o's of 'iron', 'honeyed', 'long', 'stove', 'apron', 'scone' lead into 'love'. An expectant mood is conveyed by the images of waiting; the pump, the water, the sunlight and the woman are strung together on the line of narrow verses, all composed in the process of baking.

2. 'The Seed Cutters'. In the opening line the poet invokes the spirit of the Flemish painter Jan Breughel (c. 1520–69) and by doing so casts his poem in a pictorial style. The labourers seems to belong to another era. They crouch under a hedge, sheltering from the wind. Their task is to cut the seed potatoes.

Small potatoes are distinguished by the dainty shape of their leaves, and the roots are protected under a bed of straw. The work proceeds slowly. The men split the potatoes and watch them fall open to reveal a stain of water at their centre.

The poet addresses the seasonal round as a god and asks that the tasks which it governs may endure. He would like the members of his community to be recorded as perpetrators of an ancient tradition.

COMMENTARY: As in 'Sunlight' the mood here is of timelessness and continuity. Two time-scales, the chronological one of 'hundreds of years' and the cyclical one of 'calendar customs', correspond to the ticking of the clocks in the previous poem. By invoking Breughel, a sixteenth-century painter of proverbs and seasons, the poet accentuates this effect.

The scene depicted is reminiscent of that in the final section of 'At a Potato Digging' and in 'The Wife's Tale'. The poet has, in this sequence, drawn from the same source, extended it from a specifically Irish context to a continental European one, and ultimately he identifies himself with the people who are his subject.

A deliberate pattern of repetitions fixes the scene and expresses the indolence of the men. Sentences begin with 'they': 'They seem', 'They kneel', 'They are'. The fourth line has a reflexive structure with 'wind-break' varied by 'wind is breaking'. The sentence running from the seventh into the eighth line combines two related colloquial expressions: 'time to kill' and 'taking their time'. The poet's use of the sonnet form parallels the farmers' adherence to long-established practices.

These two poems are a placatory prelude to the violent themes of the succeeding poems.

'Funeral Rites'

North

In this three-part poem the poet searches for a ritual that will contain the anger and grief that follow upon a death by violence.

His role as a coffin-bearer at the funerals of his relatives is recalled as a part of his initiation into manhood. Tradition demanded that the body be washed and displayed where relatives and friends could come to pay their last respects to the dead person.

The rooms would be darkened and odorous, the faces of the dead shone and the hands looked white and plump as dough. Rosary beads were twined around the fingers. The poet remembers especially the stretched skin on the swollen hands. Fingernails had discoloured and the wrists were posed as if for prayer.

He would kneel in front of the body which was dressed in a brown robe and laid upon a satin quilt. The room was candlelit, the wax dribbled and the flames flickered as women moved about. In one corner stood the lid of the coffin, its nails marked with crosses.

The poet's memory of these bodies is affectionate. Before the coffin lid was closed he would kiss the forehead. Then the funeral procession would move off.

He says that his community today lacks a ritual adequate to the shock and grief caused by sectarian murder. They need a practice ratified by tradition like the funerals described above. To this end he suggests reopening an ancient burial site in the centre of Ireland where all of these dead could be laid with dignity. He imagines the noise of thousands of cars reverberating about the countryside.

Women would remain at home, moving as if sleepwalking, following this procession in their minds. It would pass, the poet says, as quietly as a snake in the grass, its head reaching the tomb as its tail emerged from the north.

His choice of a pagan burial site prompts a reference to his country's ancient past. Certain place-names such as Strangford and Carlingford bear witness to their Norse foundation. The poet compares the ritual he has described with the practices of Old Norse society.

Satisfaction will be derived from the knowledge that these modern victims have been given an appropriate burial. The image of an ancient burial comes to the poet in the form of Gunnar, the hero of a Norse saga. Although Gunnar's death was not avenged as it should have been according to Norse law his body was seen sitting upright and unblemished inside his tomb. Here lit by candles the dead man sang of honour and looked at the moon.

COMMENTARY: A natural death is completed by the rituals of a wake and a funeral. The community is brought closer to the dead person and the usual routines of life are suspended to accommodate grief. In Heaney's description of the ceremony surrounding death the bodies appear to be restrained from proceeding towards another life, their hands are 'shackled' by the rosary beads and their wrists are 'obediently sloped'.

burden
of responsibility
towards land.

To the students