

21L.315, Prizewinners  
Prof. Mary Fuller  
**Lecture 6: Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level***

General thoughts on Heaney:

Easy to read because it's relevant to what's going on in the world, not just playing with words for its own sake

Though there are serious critiques of the relevance of his work; don't need to make him a deity

What at first seemed to be the four-squareness of his writing now sometimes seems like self-consciousness, self-awareness.

His interest in writing poetry that interacts with the public sphere, or history

What do you think about the language used in *Flight Path*?

Back to Romantic poets: whether to use the language of the common people, or "elevated" language of books, beauty etc. This has gone back and forth over time.

Repetitive language (or topic choice) – so many poems about bog bodies

But on the other hand, after the sectarian violence he was exposed to – does writing one poem work to put it behind you?

[Handout: George Herbert, *The Pulley*]

Mechanism: how to get man to return to heaven? No sin, or guilt, or redemption. A lightness about serious things, not unlike interstellar pitchforks or floating settle beds.

### **Flight Path**

"use your poetry, put your weight on one side..." (can read in context of *Weighing In*)

He is safe, translating poetry behind Virgil – a self-conscious reference perhaps (*Station Island, Strand at Lough Beg*) – and he feels guilty about this.

Here he weighs in, as much as he ever does, with this rewriting from one of the lowest circles of Hell.

### **Two Lorries**

Sestina: very demanding structure, with six 6-line stanzas and one 3-line stanza using the same set of ending words, which all reappear in the last stanza

The coalman: glamorous (sales, vehicle, he's not agricultural), from the big city

Offers an escape – into movies, away from the duty of cleaning the stove

"So tally bags and sweet-talk darkness, coalman" – is this mocking, or imperative, taking control by rewriting the situation?

The threat of the first lorry is the mother leaving for the city.

So one reading: wouldn't you rather have that threat, that lorry?

The scene in the bus station (fifth stanza) feels numb, sense of trauma or shock

Black and white (coal, ashes) – confusion, transposition, what used to be black is white

Schedules that have to be followed, by buses or lorries

A feature of sestinas: everything will be brought together again.

The only thing that's sure in the poem is the schedule.

Coming to terms with death – does that put you back on schedule somehow?