



National College of Ireland

**REVISION SESSIONS Feb '14
LEAVING CERTIFICATE ENGLISH NOTES**

PAPER II

Seamus Heaney

John Devitt's account of Heaney as 'an archaeologist of language... which claims our attention by its personal urgencies and its responsiveness to the currents of the times' is clearly evident in the selection of poems selected for our Leaving Certificate course. His poetry is a delicately crafted record of clear and vivid observations and intense feelings. Heaney has a very strong sense of place and the people who populate these places are a strong and forceful presence in his poems. The familiar landscape of the Irish bog had according to Heaney 'a strange assuaging effect' on him (*Preoccupations* p.54) and was to become a powerful motif for his poetry. The tensions between love and loneliness are sensually presented, inviting us into the intimacy of his personal life. According to The Royal Swedish Academy Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature 'for an authorship filled with lyrical beauty and ethical depth which brings out the miracles of the ordinary day and the living past.' He is arguably the most popular contemporary Irish poet whose poetry has a universal significance and his extraordinary gift of language is easily accessible to a contemporary audience.

Heaney's images are crafted from the ordinary, the common place; rusted iron, an anvil, bogland, a bike. He infuses these with a vivid imagination and gathers possibilities around them, threading them to particular situations and settings, associating them with other images, until a moment of epiphany or insight evolves.

The Forge is a particular example of a master at work. A carefully crafted sonnet, recording a changing way of life, from horse to car, also reveals a growing awareness of the mystery of the creative process. It becomes a poem about poetry and the sacred nature of art. In 1957 E. Estyn Evans, warned 'that knowledge of ways of life that have altered little for centuries is passing away'. Heaney wanted to preserve in the present, in literature, the customs and crafts of the past. The 'door into the dark', signals an awareness of mystery and complexities, to which we the reader are excluded. The speaker of the poem finds himself shut out of the process of creation inside the smithy but is fascinated by the cacophonous sounds emanating from within and the occasional brilliance of the sights he glimpses 'The unpredictable fantail of sparks'. Like the blacksmith, Heaney 'expends' himself teasing the raw materials of his craft into 'shape and music'. The anvil positioned in the middle of the forge, is located too at the centre of the poem. 'Hidden from view as it is, the anvil takes on magical and elusive properties', according to the critic Thomas Foster. It becomes 'horned as a unicorn', a fabulous, mythical creature of legend, serving as 'an altar' where the smith celebrates the rites of his mystery, the smith himself becoming the priest of a lost religion. We admire the wonder of his skill and the mystery and sacredness of art that can 'beat real iron out', that can 'work the bellows'. Does the sestet of the poem suggest that the craft of the poet is as out of place in modern society as that of the blacksmith? Heaney assails our senses in this poem with the sights and sounds of the forge. The language is visual, aural and tactile. The 'fantail of sparks' bursts forth before our eyes; the cacophonous sound of 'the hammered anvil's short pitched ring' and the onomatopoeic 'hiss' as the 'new shoe toughens in water' amalgamate to re create for us the mystery of a lost tradition, alive in the much respected work of this master craftsman.

Heaney began his poetic career with a resolution to 'dig' with his pen and this delving into the darkness is realized in his poem *Bogland*. Heaney had been reading about the American frontier and understood how mythically important the west was for the American consciousness. In his essay *Feeling into Words in Preoccupations* Heaney writes: '...the best moments are those when your mind seems to implode and words and images rush of their own accord into the vortex. Which happened to me once when the line "we have no prairies" drifted into my head at bedtime, and loosened a fall of images that constitute the poem *Bogland*'? He had a need to make congruence between memory and bogland and our 'national consciousness'. *Bogland* contrasts two very different landscapes, with a double exposure effect. There is a cinematic effect created in the opening stanza in the image of the prairies slicing 'a big sun at evening'. Likewise, 'our unfenced country' is evocative, as John Devitt suggests 'not only of bogland but also of the open range, another standard visual motif in western.' Words such as 'horizon', 'pioneers' camped' have essentially the same resonance. There is a tone of awe and wonder in the amazing preservative properties of the bog; the past, the poem and the bog open up to reveal a hidden history. The digging for turf becomes a metaphor for the Irish people and their digging into the past and discovering more about themselves, layer by layer. The critic Edna Longley says that *Bogland* is 'door into the dark rich places of the human psyche'.

Tollund Man continues the bog metaphor, however unlike *Bogland*. This bog poem is in Heaney's own words, 'complicated by Jutland bog burials'. It filled him with a 'completely new sensation, one of fear.' *Feeling into Words*. The incredible photographs discovered by Heaney in P.V. Glob's book *The Bog People*, provided him with a historical framework in which he confronts the difficult period of modern unrest. Heaney finds it difficult to confront the Troubles directly and in this poem he presents a point of view that the distance between iron-age Denmark and modern Ireland is a very short one. The bog and its capacity for preservation, is also the ground which is 'kind', a receptacle of a former culture, a treasured memory-store, which keeps the past alive. The language of the poem is spare and simple, evoking the innocence and gentleness of the Tollund Man. The tone is reverential; silence and stillness are called for. Extraordinary power and force is created in the final two stanzas of section one where Heaney recreates the deep intimate union between the Earth Goddess and the Tollund Man. Heaney, quoting P.V.Glob, says in *Preoccupations* that 'This mother Goddess needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring'. The second section of the poem forms a connection between the iron-age sacrifices and the violent history of Northern Ireland. In *Preoccupations* Heaney relates this to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom. He says 'the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles.' This poem is a prayer that something would become of the bodies of people killed in these struggles, 'some kind of new peace or resolution', according to Heaney. As the sacrificed body of Tollund Man germinated into spring, so too, the poem wants a similar flowering to come from the violence in the present.

The Constable Calls also highlights the tensions in Northern Ireland. The images present in the poem suggest fear and intimidation felt by the child who stands before the 'boot of the law'. Words such as 'fat black handlegrips', 'cooked back', 'holster', 'revolver butt', 'spring', and 'ticked' all suggest an undercurrent of fear and violence.

There is a tense, brooding atmosphere in this poem which highlights the oppressed lives of the people of Northern Ireland at the time, held in check by 'Arithmetic and fear'. The last line of the poem 'And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked.' suggests that the tension in the poem is ready to explode as it did in 1969.

Heaney develops the tension that exists between love and the loneliness of separation in his intensely personal love poems. His early love poems *Twice Shy* and *Valediction* are simply charming poems. They are light and witty, built on an extended metaphor and offer a warm sunny glimpse of an uncomplicated love. *Twice Shy* presents the early stages of a relationship. Two lovers walk gingerly along the riverbank, wary of 'publishing' feeling, preferring the safety of 'friendly talk'. *Valediction* conveys the heartache he felt at the departure of the 'Lady with a frilled blouse'. Her absence is simply conveyed in the sea-faring conceit i.e. an interesting connection made between two things. This carefully crafted image expressed the depth of his loneliness since her departure. A powerful sense of pathos is created in the line 'Need breaks on my strand', as the reader experiences the wave upon wave of loss and emptiness 'break on (his) strand'.

Past and present, love and loss come together playfully in his risky, zoomorphic poem *The Skunk*. Heaney was separated from his wife in the mid-seventies when he was briefly working in California. The Skunk in this poem is immediately feminized and is a regular nocturnal visitor. The run-on-lines create a sense of urgency as Heaney waits expectantly for his night time visitor. This poem assails our senses: the soft light on the verandah creates the ambiance, the 'tang of eucalyptus' fills the air, the taste of wine fills our mouth and the memory of his wife's smell from the cold pillow heightens the sense of loss. In the final stanza of this poem the time-frame shifts from past to present, or more precisely to 'last night'. We find ourselves as 'voyeurs' in the stark intimacy of real people. We hear the erotic 'sootfall' of her clothes, a 'barely audible prelude to physical love'. John Devitt.

Heaney's poetry is sensitive and sympathetic. His poetry emanates from an intensely personal space. It is clear that what he writes about has been lived through and tinged with loneliness or filled with love. His poetry is a celebration of people and place. The well crafted phrases, on the other hand, reflect the poet's ability, not merely to record objects, situations, or events, but to reflect on them to the point where they almost materialise before our eyes in striking aural, visual and tactile passages.

W.B. YEATS

Yeats lived in a time of extraordinary change and his poetry explores a powerful series of tensions between youth and age, order and chaos. He explores conflicts, both at a personal and national level, in a direct and compelling manner. He was a man, as Seamus Heaney described, never simply 'content to live', who spoke with an authoritative voice and a commanding tone. His poetry is full of questions, revealing a man who was sensitive to the world around him, voicing criticism, anger, admiration, nostalgia, advice and opinion. He encountered his world with intellectual vigour while always remaining true to his heart.

Political conflict

Yeats was frequently disillusioned with Ireland, as is apparent in September 1913. Yeats protests furiously at the materialistic and vulgar values of the merchant classes, in contrast with the heroism and idealism of the patriots of the past. The events which inspired this poem were the failure to raise money for an art gallery to house the Hugh Lane collection and the Lockout in 1913 of the workers by the employers led by W.M. Murphy, one of the captains of Irish industry. The polar opposites of the poem are O'Leary (one of the founder members of the Fenians and friend of Yeats) and the Catholic Nationalists. To Yeats, the latter were more concerned with the acquisition of personal wealth than with the establishment of a nation. Yeats was disappointed that a group who were taking the lead economically could not do so culturally. He scorns and satirizes the middle-class piety and the philistine culture of Ireland; September 1913, that has 'dried the marrow from the bone'. O'Leary, the dignified patriot, represents the perfect blend of courage and learning. He placed prime importance on the cultural life of the nation and had a strong appreciation of art and culture yet was physically daring, sacrificing himself for his country. Yeats' opinion however, was to change. These very people, derided for their lack of passion had now 'resigned' their part 'In the casual comedy' and had 'changed utterly'. Easter 1916 recognises that heroic, self sacrificing patriotism was not dead. (quote) It is not however a single-minded celebration of what the leaders of The Rising had done. This event, though heroic was also tragic. It was, in Yeats' eyes, the birth of a 'terrible beauty' achieved at the expense of life. This haunting juxtaposition highlights Yeats' conflicting and paradoxical responses to this event. The rhetorical questions of the final stanza reveal the poet's uncertainties about the process of revolution. Yeats was not in favour of militant behaviour but had always desired that Ireland be self-governed and seeing the Irish population rouse themselves and resign their part in the 'casual comedy' gave him cause to sympathise and honour their heroism.

Conflict between youth and old age.

Yeats often became melancholic as a result of his awareness of the brevity of life. This is clearly evident in his doleful reflection in *The Wild Swans at Colle*. His heart is 'sore' as he observes these 'brilliant creatures,' which function as a symbol for the poet. They represent his youth which is now long behind him. He states passively that

'The nineteenth autumn has come upon me', the years weighing heavily upon him, in contrast to the swans which are active and powerful, they 'mount' and 'scatter', rising from the lake to wheel above him 'in great broken rings.'. Yeats observes something timeless in the swans and sees the permanent presence of beauty that they embody. They symbolise that which is eternal for Yeats in contrast to the autumnal surroundings to which Yeats feels inextricably linked.

Sailing to Byzantium is another poem dealing with the issues of growing old in a changed world. Yeats feels no part of this vibrant country, a 'country for old men'. The opening stanza presents a dramatic affirmation of youth where the young are in 'one another's arms' mesmerised by the 'sensual music' of love. There are conflicting claims presented between the younger generations who live in a sensual world and the more sedate singing of the old scarecrow, reincarnated into the eternal art form of the golden bird. The movement from scarecrow to golden bird represents the central theme of Sailing to Byzantium, escaping the imperfect physical, sensual world to the ideal world of art. The bird has transcended the decay and infirmities of the transitory world; it may claim to be superior to the 'Fish, flesh, or fowl,' who have been 'begotten, born' but must also die. The poem gathers its tension through the dramatic conflict between passion and wisdom. However though wisdom conquers, its victory is almost Pyrrhic (victory gained at too great a cost). The poet has sailed to Byzantium, but his heart, 'sick with desire', is full of Ireland and he cannot speak of the natural world without celebrating it. Yeats opts for the rather cold mechanical song of the golden bird but it doesn't quite match the passionate, vibrant music of the young. The richness of nature is so powerfully evoked in the first stanza that, by contrast, the world of art described in the last stanza, seems tame, cold and uninspiring. As Ellmann suggests 'such a fate could only satisfy Yeats momentarily. Having sailed to Byzantium, he was ready to re-embark.' (From the Man and the Mask.) Yeats had pursued wisdom and that pursuit had changed everything.

Returning from his voyage he would find a 'new intensity' in 'all visible and tangible things'. Ibid. Yeats himself regarded this as a bitter poem but Eavan Boland argues that it is 'an immortal fury against the tragedy of decay and the inevitability of death'.

In a letter to his friend Olivia Shakespeare he wrote, 'I am tired and in a rage at being old. I am all I ever was and much more but an enemy has bound me and twisted me so I can plan and think as I never could but no longer achieve all I plan and think.' But Yeats' 'pugnacious thrust never deserted him'. (Heaney, Finders Keepers) so much so, at the age of 74, 'here at life's end' he prays for 'an old man's frenzy,' He courageously wished to 'remake' himself. His 'old man's eagle mind' still wishing to 'pierce the clouds'. An Acre of Grass.

Conflict between order and chaos

Another major and significant conflict in Yeats' work is between order and chaos. Yeats admired the aristocratic tradition of 18th century Ireland. The world of the Great House was aligned to his own sense of identity. He felt very much at home in Lady Gregory's house at Coole. As Heaney points out, he was a 'mythologizer of aristocratic ceremony and grace' ibid. Yeats believed the Anglo Irish Ascendancy had a duty to set an example of gracious and cultured living. This is evident in his elegy for Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz. The graceful living of Lissadell is beautifully evoked in the opening images: 'The light of evening, Lissadell, /Great windows open to the south, /two girls in silk kimonos, both/Beautiful, one gazelle.' Yeats creates an elegant and graceful picture here. The transition from the refined,

elegant youth of the girls to their turbulent adult lives is graphically portrayed, as a 'raving autumn[which] shears/Blossom from the summer's wreath;' Autumn is personified as a violent reaper, stripping away the youthful beauty of the girls. Their political activism as much as the passing years are responsible for their 'withered old and skeleton gaunt' appearance. The poem laments the passing of such an ideal world in the woman's futile attempt to find 'Some vague Utopia'! (Yeats at his arrogant best!). The 'conflagration' at the end of the poem points to the destruction of the traditional values that were cradled in places such as Lissadell.

Chaos, the birth of 'Mere anarchy' is graphically depicted in Yeats' masterpiece *The Second Coming*. It is a stark, terrifying and prophetic vision of a disintegrating social order with burgeoning evil born and 'loosed upon the world'. Images of the 'blood-dimmed tide' and the 'rough beast' slouching 'towards Bethlehem' show how troubled the poet is by the increasing violence and annihilation of cultural and aristocratic values. This poem is situated in the midst of great historical upheaval; World War I, the Russian Revolution, the collapse of the great Empires, the Irish War of Independence and the uprooting of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. In his major prose work entitled *A Vision*, Yeats outlines his theory of history. He believed that each major historical period, lasting approximately two thousand years, would be overthrown by some massive upheaval. He is predicting the violent, cataclysmic end of the Christian era. The collapse of civilization is dramatically conveyed in the active, force-filled words of the opening stanza. The 'gyre' is spinning chaotically out of control. The 'falcon', metaphorically representing Christian civilization, has lost contact with the essence of Christ's teachings, 'the falconer'. Very soon 'the blood – dimmed tide' will engulf the world in a wave of anarchy. The terrible desert beast, the antithesis of innocence, represents the violent, apocalyptic events that will end the Christian era in a cataclysmic wave of violence and devastation. This poem presents a nihilistic vision of a world without justice, reason and order. It is a frightening prospect and still today a realistic one.

Yeats did attempt to resolve some conflicts in his poems but in many cases he had to accept that such a synthesis was not always possible let alone probable. He did remain in contact with the world, however imperfect it seemed, and encountered it with his complex temperament that could whisper of grace, youth and beauty or clamour against injustice, old-age and decay. Perhaps we should be grateful that many conflicts were never resolved, for it was they that evoked his most difficult struggles and his most poignant poetry, granting him 'an old man's frenzy'.

EMILY DICKINSON

A staggering two thousand poems was Emily Dickinson's legacy to the world. She described it as her "Letter to the World" that never wrote back! She was born in December 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts and retired from society at the age of 25, which was customary for a spinster of her time. During the last two decades of her life her exclusion became extreme. There is much speculation about her reasons for seclusion; however the evidence is all conjectural and fragmentary. Dickinson's inner world became her only reality and her poems trace her attempt to gain insight into the human condition. She deals with the dramatic poles of human existence – ecstasy and despair. She also examines the nature of death and the possibility of immortality. She is in pursuit of sensation as much as fact. (influenced by T. M) In her mindscapes she explores states ranging from rapturous joy to debilitating despair.

In her poem, 'I taste a liquor never brewed' we meet a very energetic, playful, joyfilled characters. This poem has the essence of an intensely imagined moment. The language is highly metaphorical. She describes herself as 'Inebriate of Air--.... and Debauchee of Dew - -'. She is intoxicated with the essence of summer and the dash captures the energy of summer, its never-ending nature. Stanza 3 and 4 are imaginatively striking. We see butterflies and bees drinking the experience of summer. The poem shows us Dickinson in an ecstatically happy state. The endless summer days allow her to imagine she is in heaven where the "Seraphs" and "saints" celebrate her rapturous wonder and play full rebellion.

The euphoria of this poem is in stark contrast with the nightmarish quality experienced in '*I Felt a Funeral in my Brain*'. This poem conveys an overwhelming sense of physical, emotional and spiritual sufferings. The funeral is internal; it is "felt" in her "Brain". The funeral ceremony dramatizes her intense suffering. The internal death or breakdown is creatively described focusing on the sense of sound. Interestingly this is the final sense to leave us when we pass away. In the first two stanzas she feels the noise, the "treading – treading— and the incessant "beating—beating— until she can feel no more. We can empathize with the torturous mind in turmoil. All sense of reality deserts the poet at this stage. She can no longer feel or see, "Space" begins to "toll". Everything becomes an aural experience. Her description "Being, but an Ear," is suggestive of a

Piccassoesque scene. Her whole sensory experience is condensed into one sense intensifying the magnitude of the experience, until she is “Wrecked, Solitary, here--. The final stanza conveys the terrifying image of complete loss as she hits “a World, at every plunge”. She has lost all sense of reality, all sense of feeling, everything: “And Finished knowing”. However this is not the full story. Dickinson writes “And Finished knowing—then— .The story has a sequel! “ -- then—” is open to interpretation. All we can say for sure is that this is not the end. We know that Dickinson deliberately left the ending inconclusive. Is she incapable of communicating with us in this complete breakdown? Or has she arrived at some sense of epiphany, some great insight or enlightenment?

Looking at her other poems we see that Dickinson is ultimately optimistic. In her poem “*Hope is a thing with feathers,*” she compares hope to a bird. She tells us that ‘sore must be the storm -- /That could abash the little Bird’. And that she has heard the song of this bird in ‘the chillest land—/And on the strangest Sea—. This poem represents a state of mind that can see the light at the end of the tunnel. In times of anguish and exceptional difficulties it comes without asking anything for what it has given: ‘Yet, never, in Extremity, / It asked a crumb – of Me.’. It can withstand the greatest of spiritual and psychological storms and offers the warmth of consolation and encouragement. Hope is never ending”.

Her poem “*There’s a certain Slant of light,*” depicts the onslaught of sudden depression. It is a metaphoric dramatization of its mysterious origin. The slant of light in this poem is shadow light, that of a winter afternoon. It “oppresses’ and hurts but leaves ‘no scar,’. But here too we see that this suffering, the ‘imperial affliction’ does not remain forever. ‘When it goes’ just like the winter light, a new season is born and from the distance we can look on Death.

Similarly in ‘*After great pain*’ we have a strong focus on the experience of recovery. Dickinson’s emotions are all used up. She is cold and numb. Her ‘Nerves’ are rigid and pained figures, sitting ceremoniously like ‘Tombs’. Here again there is a letting go—after the great pain. There is a sense of numb relief after her experience of the ‘Wooden way’.

The French poet Mallarme says that ‘poetry is the language of a state of crisis.’ Dickinson makes great use of this language in recreating with words the many crises she experienced and ‘felt’. Her mindscapes are a rich

tapestry of pain and internal suffering. We can clearly appreciate why Dickinson has been called the greatest realist of the interior America has produced. The critic Sean Dunne described her poems as ‘concise fragments from a diary, a logbook of the mind’s voyages.... she wrote of a space equally vast: her own mind.’ She believed that self-exploration was the only worthy kind of travel.

Dickinson’s breathtaking brevity was the result of labour. She took exquisite care in composing ‘lest words would be wasted’. She is strikingly original and eccentric and her uniqueness is visually and verbally exciting. She sometimes adopts various personas in her poems. This is evident in ‘*A narrow Fellow in the Grass*’, where she takes on the identity of a young boy. Dickinson, the keen observer of nature, is clearly evident here. This poem is a perfect example of her condensed style and her economical use of words. The presence of the snake is brought alive aurally and visually, without ever referring to him by name. We hear him continuously throughout the poem in her clever use of sibilance. We see this ‘narrow Fellow’, living in the “Grass”. He appears suddenly and divides the ‘Grass..... as with a Comb’. His shaft is ‘spotted’, and moves like a ‘Whiplash / Unbraiding in the Sun’. He is elusive in nature, a mysterious creature. However any encounter with this ‘Fellow’ must not be taken lightly. Dickinson’s is very aware of the danger lurking in nature. The tone of the poem is one of controlled terror. The child’s panic is intense; he is paralyzed by this encounter. His meeting with the snake is fascinating but also fear-filled as his breathing tightens and feels a ‘Zero at the Bone’.

Dickinson once described her world as ‘Vesuvius at home’. This suggests a great emotional force and power. She had no audience for her work in her lifetime. For her the inner world of the mind, imagination, and heart were sufficient and she explored brilliantly and honestly. Philip Larkin comments: ‘If Emily Dickinson could write over 700 pages of poems and three volumes of letters without making clear the nature of her preoccupations, then we can be sure that she was determined to keep it hidden, and that her inspiration derived in part from keeping it hidden.’ He concludes: ‘The price she paid was that of appearing to posterity as unfinished and willfully eccentric.’ Dickinson brings us into her private inner world into the intensity of her ecstasy and despair and her 21st Century audience can appreciate a genius that stays and understands.

Emily Dickinson

- Dickinson is one of the most prolific and innovative writers of the 19th century.
- She has a sparse, elegant style.
- Hymnal meter, verbal shocks, disjunctive punctuation and disruptive syntax are her trademark as well as a unique usage of capitalization.
- Elisions and ellipses create an intense compacted experience (elisions: the omission of a sound or syllable when speaking and the process of joining together or merging things, especially abstract ideas. Ellipses: omission of words that are obviously understood)
- Her poetry is full of elliptical compression, multiple meanings, unusual word order and syntax
- Is similar to modern verse in its power , flexibility and intensity
- Her poetry attempts to understand profoundly abstract concepts.
- It also reacts against organised religion evident especially in her totally outrageous metaphor in 'I Taste a liquor...' and her hymnal versification.
- Her wit is her accuracy. Alice Brackenbury says 'she is the spider, not the fly', relating to why she withdrew from a world in which she saw women snared in the strict geometrics of the social web. For her freedom was elected solitude, not a spinster but a recluse.
- Dash replaces traditional punctuation. It is used for many purposes:
- To pause, slow down, draw our attention to aspects of the poem we might otherwise miss. To isolate words for emphasis, hook our attention, slow our movement through the poem. Also suggestive that something further takes place at the end of the poem, that she is either unwilling or unable to relate to us.
- She was influenced by The Transcendentalist Movement which was prevalent in New England around 1830/40's. it was a protest movement against the general state of culture and society, especially against the state of intellectualism and doctrine of the Unitarian Church. Def.: Ideal spiritual state that transcends the physical and empirical world realised through an individual's intuition rather than doctrine of established religion.
- Themes evident in her work include: nature of hope, feeling of despair, experience of breakdown, imagining death, essential nature of animals i.e. bird/snake, struggle to name or master experience.

Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts and died a brief thirty years later in 1963. Her Journals which she began writing in 1950 open with a quotation from the poet W. B. Yeats. He states: 'we only begin to live when we conceive life as a tragedy' It is true to say of Plath that in her short thirty years she certainly lived and produced a volume of work which only gained the respect it deserved posthumously. For her life was always 'shifting, flowing, melting.like quicksand... hopeless from the start.' *The Journals*. Many people find the work of Plath depressing. Certainly she herself was prevalent to extraordinary mood swings, she contemplated and attempted suicide, she underwent electroconvulsive therapy, she had psychiatric help, she most certainly was depressed many times in her life. But what is fascinating about her work is as Ted Hughes said in his Forward to *The Journals* (1982) is that 'Her real self showed in her writing....When a real self finds language and manages to speak, surely it is a dazzling event.' Hughes continues 'It is important to distinguish between a work that is trying to reach an artistic form using a real event as its basis and a documentary of some event that did happen.' Plath basis her work on real events but takes us on incredible imaginative journey. Like the poet Emily Dickinson her poems are mindscapes which present a rich tapestry of pain and suffering. Her poems reflect the intensity of despair and one can only admire a genius who stays and understands.

Plath was most concerned with her identity as a writer. She lived in a time when there were significant curtailments imposed by society on women. There were particular expectations of the role of women in the 1950's. The world of poet and motherhood were as Eavan Boland was to suggest 'almost magnetically opposed' (*Object Lessons*). Yet Plath

longed for both. It was a novelty in the 60's to write about pregnancy and birth. Plath did and did so in a most exciting, delicate voice. *Morning Song* is a perfect example of her struggle to fuse the two. The mother's life is shadowed by the child's arrival. She is aware of the repetitive nature of looking after children and finds herself standing 'round blankly as walls.' However she is soon enriched by the joy of love as 'All night' she listens to her child's 'moth breath' as it 'Flickers among the flat pink roses.' And with 'One cry' she 'stumble(s) from bed, cow heavy' to respond. There is a striking difference between the immobility of the parents in stanza two and the warm domestic reality of stanza five. Her poem *Child* also reflects the simple pleasures she derives from her child. His 'clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing' that she longs to fill with the beauty of the world. At the same time she feels an underlying threat to the child's safety and this distresses her.

Like most poets Plath struggles at times to find inspiration and searches for poetic vision. Her despondency at the lack of inspiration is expressed in *Black Rook in Rainy Weather*. The poet is surrounded by wintry bleakness and paints a psychic landscape for her audience. There is a strong association between poet's mood and the scene evoked. She desires 'some backtalk/From the mute sky'. A quiet longing is felt here, a longing for the miracle that will transform this bleakness into something radiant. That miracle is the creative impulse, that spark of the imagination that will change the ordinary into the extraordinary. Her despondent mood is lifted as she sees that 'spasmodic /Tricks of radiance' which can be called miracles occur. And she awaits once again 'that rare, random descent.'

An intense interest in what appears on the surface and what is hidden underneath fascinated Plath. In her poem *Mirror* the depths hide something frightening and sinister, something to be avoided but which

one cannot escape. Her mirror is a mirror in which each reader sees his or her own concerns reflected. For Plath it is a mirror belonging to a woman whose soul is troubled and tortured, as 'Faces and darkness separate us over and over.' Her dual identity as poet and mother are reflected in this poem. She tries to come to terms with the social pressures to reconcile the competing of artistic and domestic life. She feels her younger self is 'drowned'. She is caught between past and future. Something frightening, dark, terrible and true 'Rises toward her day after day'. Does this represent her fear of growing old? Or perhaps it is her fear of her troubled, divided self.

The apparent calm of the mirror as it 'simply meditates the opposite wall', is reflected in the opening stanzas of her masterpiece *Elm*. Yet again the hidden terrors surface as she talks. Plath's language is remarkably simple and direct. However her imagery in this poem is richly evocative. We are taken on a journey deep into the subconscious. Plath said of this poem that it contained 'the stigma of selfhood.' Colour is important and symbolic in her work and we see shadings of her most prevalent colours here. The sinister elements of **black** are prevalent in *Elm*, it knows 'the bottom' with its 'great tap root', it feels the shadowy presence of love which escapes it into the night. She is 'terrified by the dark thing / That sleeps in (her)'. The colour black elucidates her anger, depression and fear of destruction, of annihilation. **White** too is symbolically sinister. The 'merciless' moon represents coldness, it is associated with fertility but is 'barren', it cannot create life. There is a surreal, hallucinatory quality to her imagery and symbolism in this poem. It begins with the Elm as narrator addressing the poet. Both are compelled to explore great depths. The absence of love haunts the poet and as the poem progresses the Elm taunts her about this. As we move into the sixth tercet the Elm speaks for the poet. My red filaments burn

and stand a hand of wires.’ At this stage the distinction between the ‘you’ of the poem and the Elm become blurred. The external violence creates inner turmoil. Both Elm and poet are ‘inhabited by a cry.’ A cry that nightly ‘flaps out / Looking with its hooks for something to love.’ Expressed here are the most open and intense feelings, which originate from the deepest self. This ‘dark thing’, this internal malignancy, conjures a silent inward terror. *Elm* is a richly textured poem, designed to evoke an understanding of the despair and frustration felt as a result of the loss of love, and the stigma of selfhood, that awful fear of being oneself, of being imbued with those ‘slow faults / That kill, that kill, that kill.’

Plath’s landscapes and seascapes are mostly a backdrop to the mood of the poet. What fascinates me about her poem *Finisterre* is the final stanza which paints a perfect picture postcard of the westernmost tip of Brittany. If you or I were to visit this tourist resort we would see the eclectic mixture of stalls selling postcards, trinkets, and pancakes, a myriad of colours bustling with the energy of any tourist resort. But not Plath. In contrast to the last stanza the first three are dark. The ‘black / Admonitory cliffs’ are ‘knuckled and rheumatic’. Her vista is bleak and desolate. The waves are ‘whitened by the faces of the drowned.’ The sea is a pounding force ‘exploding’ around her. It is a bottomless void. The mist holds the ‘Souls’ of the dead and as she walks ‘among them’ she feels herself almost suffocated as they stuff her ‘mouth with cotton.’ When she walks free she is ‘beaded with tears.’ This poem is a powerful and startling psychic landscape.

Martin Booth says that Plath’s poetry ‘has a beautiful weirdness to it, an inviting malevolence, that the world is dark.... And it seeks to set a mood as much as tell you something concrete.’ This is what makes her poetry fascinating. Plath’s world is undoubtedly dark. At times it is ‘only temporary’ *Arrival of the Bee Box* but finally it became an overwhelming ‘ceiling without a star’.

COMPARITIVE STUDIES

When embarking on Comparative Studies it is important to differentiate between your approach to studying Single Text and Comparative Texts. Single Text involves close reading whereas in Comparative Texts you read for the general storyline. In both you must study character and plot but in Comparative Studies you focus on **KEY MOMENTS** from your three texts. Your study should be **MODE** based i.e. **Theme/Issues, Cultural context, Vision and viewpoint** and you are expected to analyze, contrast and compare moments from your texts under these headings. You must **not** summarize your texts. Remember to compare means to look at similarities and differences. You are invited to “interact with the different worlds encountered and to make discriminations and evaluations.”P.71 Draft Guidelines.

THEME/ISSUES

In this section you are expected to focus on the central message presented by the writer and then to look at how the authors of your other texts treat the same message. For example: War/Violence, Power, Love, Revenge, National Identity/Racism, Isolation, Loneliness, Communication. Do they treat the theme similarly or differently? You should also consider both positive and negative aspects of your chosen theme. How are the main issues of the theme introduced to the audience? Are they immediately obvious or are they perhaps more subtle? Notice how the issues are developed. Who are the important characters in this development? How and where do the complications arise? How do the characters react to these situations? Always look at similarities and differences. What brings the theme to a climax in each text? What resolution do they arrive at? What insights are given at the conclusion? Is the story left open-ended and what effect does this have on the reader?

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Cultural context refers to the world of the text, the type of society we see represented in the society we are reading. We must enter “into the world of the text and get some insight and feel for the cultural texture of the world created.” P 71 Draft Guidelines. Look at how the main characters live, their values and beliefs and their day-to-day rituals. What is this world like for the men, women and children who populate the story? Are men or women the dominant force? Are children protected and innocent or are they exposed to great hardship? In what country is the text set? What are the similarities and differences between these settings? What decade/century is featured? What are the social and economic circumstances of the texts? How does the cultural context affect the happiness, fulfillment, frustration, and misery of the main characters? Look at the following list and chose about ***FIVE*** aspects to focus your answer on.

Historical period.

Place.

Social customs, traditions, rituals.

Class structures: upper, middle-class, working-class and the effect, if any, they have on the characters in this society.

Money, power, wealth: who are the powerful/ wealthy people? Are they male or religious?

Religious beliefs and values: evident in lifestyles, values, attitudes toward sex and marriage.

Work ethos in society.

Political situation.

Effects of poverty: helplessness, disease, desperation, violence, honour, pride.

VISION AND VIEWPOINT

This mode deals with the general vision and viewpoint of the author, director or dramatist. This study should incorporate what kind of impression of life the author portrays for the reader. Whether the overall vision is positive/negative. Is life seen as hope-filled or is the viewpoint hopeless or full of despair? What meaning of life presented to us, the audience, in this text? Sometimes our author has a very moralistic perspective. It is essential to remember that it is the ***author's vision and viewpoint*** that you are expected to deal with in this section.

Having outlined the point of view show where the author presents this, then compare and contrast this with your other texts. You can then examine the characters that are essential to displaying the author's viewpoint.

You could examine whether the vision of the text is relevant today. Is there a final moment of redemption in the texts?

A FINAL NOTE

It is essential in Comparative Studies that you use the language of comparison and that you continue to weave your texts together. Linking phrases are so important, such as; similarly, as in, texts are linked... typical of both... a corresponding moment...however, unlike...

Do not tell the story of the text. Marks are awarded for discussion of similarities and contrasts related to the modes of comparison being question.

Mary Carroll

LITERARY GENRE

How is story told? Fiction/non-fiction Drama/film?			
Narrator: first person/ Third person?			
How is plot developed? tensions complications climax resolution			
Chronology of story i.e. Time frame flashback sequential soliloquy letter diary voiceover			
Music how does it create atmosphere? does it relate to any specific character or event? is there a particular instrument used?			
Image/motif does it relate to one specific character? perhaps express theme?			

<p>Characters how well are they developed? how well is major character developed? does character use soliloquy/ diary/voiceover to reveal innermost thoughts? choices/needs of character? are minor characters important?</p>				<p>Setting. does it help th does it change what is the est in film? Scene paragraph in n 4. props</p>
<p>Setting the scene how does the setting help the story? does it change? establishing shot(film) scenery in text descriptions (novel) props: imagine the story without them</p>				
<p>Language descriptive realistic stage directions humour exaggeration farce subtle</p>				

<p>State theme: Look at positive/ Negative sides</p> <p>Is theme dealt with similarly or differently?</p>			
<p>Introduction of theme: how are the main issues introduced?</p> <p>are they subtle or obvious?</p>			
<p>Development:</p> <p>how is the theme brought forward?</p> <p>who are the important characters here?</p> <p>are there any catalyst characters?</p>			

<p>Complication /crisis:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. where does it arise?2. what is the complication in each text? <p>how do the characters react to this situation?</p>			
<p>Resolution:</p> <p>what sort of endings or concousions are drawn?</p> <p>what are your feelings at this stage?</p>			

Cultural Context

	TEXT 1	TEXT 2	TEXT 3
In which historical period is text set?			
How important is this in the text?			
Where is the text set? Country place rural/urban castle/house/apartment			
What are the social customs, traditions, rituals?			
Class structures Upper/ middle/working class What effect does structure have on characters?			
Money/power/wealth Who has it? Male/ church?			

<p>Religious beliefs Are they obvious in lifestyle? Values of group? Attitudes toward sex and marriage</p>			
<p>Work ethos in society?</p>			
<p>Political situation?</p>			
<p>Effects of poverty: helplessness Disease, desperation, violence, honour, pride.</p>			
<p>Role of men and women in society</p>			

MARY CARROLL