

Ancestral Photograph

Jaws puff round and solid as a turnip,
Dead eyes are statue's and the upper lip
Bullies the heavy mouth down to a droop.
A bowler suggests the stage Irishman
Whose look has two parts scorn, two parts dead pan.
His silver watch chain girds him like a hoop.

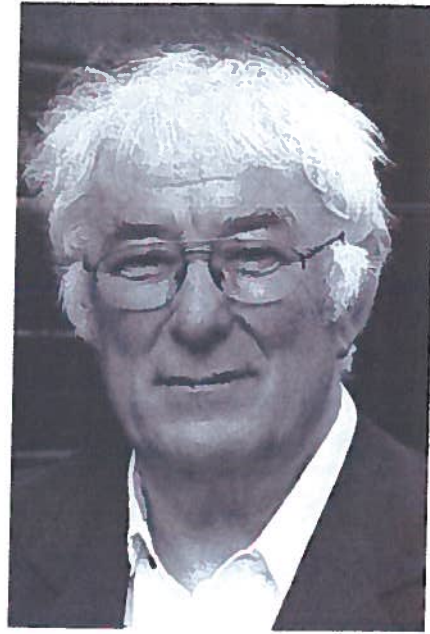
My father's uncle, from whom he learnt the trade,
Long fixed in sepia tints, begins to fade
And must come down. Now on the bedroom wall
There is a faded patch where he had been –
As if a bandage had been ripped from skin –
Empty plaque to a house's rise and fall.

Twenty years ago I herded cattle
Into pens or held them against a wall
Until my father won at arguing
His own price on a crowd of cattlemen
Who handled rumps, groped teats, stood, paused and then
Bought a round of drinks to clinch the bargain.

Uncle and nephew, fifty years ago,
Heckled and herded through the fair days too.
This barrel of a man penned in the frame:
I see him with the jaunty hat pushed back
Draw thumbs out of his waistcoat, curtly smack
Hands and sell. Father, I've watched you do the same

And watched you sadden when the fairs were stopped.
No room for dealers if the farmers shopped
Like housewives at an auction ring. Your stick
Was parked behind the door and stands there still.
Closing this chapter of our chronicle
I take your uncle's portrait to the attic.

Seamus Heaney



Seamus Heaney

You might have noted some or all of the following:

- **Subject:** the poem is about a photograph of Heaney's great uncle, through which the speaker weaves comment about both his great uncle and his father, and explores various memories associated with them.
- **Action:** while looking at the photograph and thinking about its significance, the speaker has taken it off the wall. Describing the "faded patch" that is left "As if a bandage had been ripped from skin" gives the experience an organic quality, suggesting a degree of physical, perhaps emotional pain that the action of removing the picture from the wall incurs. At the end of the poem, the speaker takes it "to the attic", which suggests moving on and leaving the past behind.
- **Character:** the poem obviously describes both the figure of the uncle as well as his father in considerable detail. Through close physical details such as "Jaws puff round and solid as a turnip" and "the upper lip / Bullies the heavy mouth" the uncle is portrayed as a rather



self-assured, perhaps even somewhat arrogant man. The presentation of his father, however, is more interested in characteristics associated with personality than physical appearance; the lines "Until my father won at arguing" and "Bought a round of drinks to clinch the bargain" communicate his sense of expertise and pride in his work, which then gives way to sadness "when the fairs were stopped".

- **Relationship:** through the description of both men as they set about their work, the speaker in the poem expresses a feeling of admiration for them. In the lines, "I herded cattle / Into pens or held them against a wall" there is a sense in which the speaker feels at one with a familial history and tradition. His action at the end of the poem perhaps indicates his present sense of distance and detachment from both men, as well as a break from the past.
- **Setting:** the house and the attic, as well as the cattle market he imagines in the past, are given some importance in the poem, largely as a means to represent the nature of both men and the contrast between past and present.
- **Narrator:** the poem communicates a personal voice and the use of pronouns in lines such as "where he had been" and "Father, I've watched you do the same" register an intimate, 'involved' speaker. At the same time, the presence of physical detail establishes a degree of distance and objectivity to the speaking voice.
- **Themes and ideas:** a number of ideas are explored by the poem, including both involvement and separation from family tradition, the relationship between the past and the present and the passing of time, and the value of agricultural traditions. One key idea that perhaps underlies the poem is a degree of tension between past and present, himself and his family. The speaker seems to want to hang on to the past by writing about it, at the same time as let go; he seems to feel a sense of security in the family history that precedes him as well as the desire to forge his own path. Family and tradition are therefore a source of inspiration and comfort as well as a constraint.
- **Imagery and figurative language:** the speaker's uncle is referred to figuratively through similes and metaphors such as "solid as a turnip", which registers his substantial physical presence when alive, in contrast to "Dead eyes are statue's" through which his image in the photograph captures a sense of absence and stillness in his death. In "Empty plaque to a house's rise and fall" Heaney communicates the impact of passing time, and the image of the father's stick "parked behind the door" says something about when the agricultural fairs "were stopped", as well as commenting on the paradox of time having moved on while yet being preserved. The stick is still and yet "there still".
- **Sound:** Heaney uses a preponderance of assonance and vowel sounds generally in the first stanza; words and phrases such as "round and solid", "Dead eyes" and "down to a droop" enhance the sense of the great uncle's physical presence. There are a number of examples of alliteration in "Heckled and herded" and "stick... / ...still", which have the effect of bringing alive the memories and the poignant reflection the speaker undergoes.
- **Diction:** of note here, perhaps, are words that capture the physical presence of the various concerns of the poem, whether in the descriptions of the uncle or father, the house, the photograph or the agricultural fair. Active verbs such as "Bullies", "ripped", "herded", "groped", "handled", "Heckled" and "smack" draw attention to the physicality of the work undertaken by both men and the speaker's reminiscence in sense experience. Adjectives such as "Dead", "heavy", "penned", "jaunty" and "parked" are equally vivid.
- **Structure:** the poem is divided into stanzas of regular length, each of which systematically takes us from the present, then ever further back into the past, before coming back to the present again. The syntax is irregular; some lines make use of caesurae, while others are continuous; some are end-stopped, others run on and there is a loose sense of organization in an irregular rhyme scheme. In this way, Heaney provides a sense of structure while at the same time an informal 'speaking' voice.
- **Tone:** much of the poem is expressed in a fairly detached voice as the speaker portrays his great uncle and father with an exact, almost scientific visual precision. At the same time, key images suggest a sense of sadness at time having passed and distance from a heritage, a world that the speaker no longer feels a part of. The last two lines are fairly insistent in their tone, as if the desire to move on is undertaken with purpose.