



Seamus Heaney

By Helen Vendler

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Join Professor Helen Vendler in her course lecture on the Yeats poem "Among School Children". View her insightful and passionate analysis along with a condensed reading and student comments on the course.

Poet and critic are well met, as one of our best writers on poetry takes up one of the world's great poets.

Where other books on the Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney have dwelt chiefly on the biographical, geographical, and political aspects of his writing, this book looks squarely and deeply at Heaney's poetry as art. A reading of the poet's development over the past thirty years, *Seamus Heaney* tells a story of poetic inventiveness, of ongoing experimentation in form and expression. It is an inspired and nuanced portrait of an Irish poet of public as well as private life, whose work has given voice to his troubled times.

With characteristic discernment and eloquence, Helen Vendler traces Heaney's invention as it evolves from his beginnings in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) through his most recent volume, *The Spirit Level* (1996). In sections entitled "Second Thoughts," she considers an often neglected but crucial part of Heaney's evolving talent: self-revision. Here we see how later poems return to the themes or genres of the earlier volumes, and reconceive them in light of the poet's later attitudes or techniques. Vendler surveys all of Heaney's efforts in the classical forms--genre scene, elegy, sonnet, parable, confessional poem, poem of perception--and brings to light his aesthetic and moral attitudes.

Seamus Heaney's development as a poet is inextricably connected to the violent struggle that has racked Northern Ireland. Vendler shows how, from one volume to the next, Heaney has maintained vigilant attention toward finding a language for his time--"symbols adequate for our predicament," as he has said. The worldwide response to those discovered symbols suggests that their relevance extends far beyond this moment.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Perhaps no late 20th-century poet feels the poignantly complex responsibilities of literary vocation as deeply as Seamus Heaney, and with this book Vendler proves that no reader of his work is better attuned to those concerns. Following last year's widely admired *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, her intelligent, lively and reflective exploration of the first three decades of the Nobel laureate's career succeeds in many tasks: it is both an admiring, readable introduction and an anthology of best poems, and it builds an important case for attending to stylistic innovations while still addressing Heaney's relation to Northern Ireland's troubles.

Vendler admires his display of a "private mind and heart caught in the changing events of a geographical place and a historical epoch... while enlarging the specifically literary inheritance on which they depend." She enumerates Heaney's innovative, social expansions of forms such as the sonnet and the elegy ("At the Wellhead" and "Clearances") in thematically and chronologically arranged chapters accompanied by codas that compare poems on similar themes. Defending the poet's artistry at a moment when many critics seem narrowly political, Vendler argues that faithfulness to a more purely poetic agenda is a rewarding virtue: "the only thing to which the genre of the lyric obliges its poet is to represent his own situation and his responses to it in adequate imaginative language."

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Review

Ms. Vendler's *Seamus Heaney* serves as a wonderfully succinct road map to the poet's verse, illuminating the effect that both private and public events have had on the development of his work, while explicating the continual evolution of his style. She shows us how Mr. Heaney has pushed the boundaries of the traditional lyric poem in his efforts to articulate his changing vision of the world, even as she helps us to understand his masterly use of sound, symbol, imagery and parable. (Michiko Kakutani *New York Times*)

[Helen Vendler's] reading of Heaney is a marvelously illuminating achievement...Most magically of all, [this book] manages, while rejecting engagement on the 'thematic' level, to be constantly stimulating towards other readings while it entertains. (Bernard O'Donoghue *Essays in Criticism*)

Seamus Heaney's readers will welcome this latest study of his work, written by America's most distinguished poetry critic, Helen Vendler...A thoughtful lyric poet with the power to re-think and re-feel his earlier positions, Vendler's Heaney emerges as not only a better craftsman, with profound linguistic resources, but also as a conscientious citizen of letters, and a restless re-maker of himself. (Jonathan Allison *South Atlantic Review*)

It is perhaps the subject of Northern Ireland that has primarily been responsible for attracting a large audience to Heaney's work. In her comprehensive and passionate new book, *Seamus Heaney*, the critic Helen Vendler reminds us, however, that 'thematic elements do not by themselves make for memorable poetry.' Instead, Vendler...deals chiefly with Heaney's craft, including his poetic inventiveness and ongoing experimentation with form and expression...[Vendler] has asserted that while a poet is inextricably connected to certain struggles, it is the ability to find new approaches to language to convey those struggles that determines his or her genius. And Vendler's survey of 11 books of poetry...clearly makes the case that Heaney has sustained such attention to language, often brilliantly bringing to light his thematic, aesthetic and moral concerns...As Vendler shows, symbol-making is only part of Heaney's excellence. She stresses the masterful formal designs that convey these symbols throughout the decades of Heaney's lyrics...One finishes her book with a remarkably clear understanding of Heaney's outstanding adventures in form and expression,

and of poetry itself. If it's true, as I believe it is, that only a few poets each century actually change the way we understand the possibilities of our language, then Heaney has earned his place as one of those. Most important, however, one finishes Vendler's critical study more inspired to return to Heaney's masterful, rigorous and deeply moving poems, which are in love with listening, life and the life of language. (Jason Shinder *Newsday*)

Vendler comments with the energy of one who has learned great sensitivity for both the work and the workers described in Heaney's poems of dockers, eel-fishers, ploughmen, cattle dealers, threshers and thatchers. Vendler allows the reader to witness her enthusiasm for the poem's craft as well as the crafts contained and celebrated in the stanzas...She eloquently expresses the poet's confrontation with contradictions of political violence, as well as sexuality, death and alienation. Both Seamus Heaney and Helen Vendler, it becomes evident, have lived and written to strengthen in people a refined sense for keen details and for courageous statements. As a critic, Vendler not only has identified the poet's phases of life and moments of creative growth and change, she has demonstrated with zeal how creative and provocative changes have characterized both the personal and the public life of the poet. (John Lavin *Philadelphia Inquirer*)

Vendler is an ideal commentator on Heaney's development. She keeps her eye firmly on the wording of the poems, only bringing in evidence from external circumstances when it bears directly on them...What confirms Vendler's book as such an excellent introduction to Heaney is her enlightening analyses of the later poems of the 1990s...By the end, Vendler leaves little reason to dispute Heaney's pre-eminence in all worlds: public, private and familial. Her book is a triumph for the poet and the reader. (Bernard O'Donoghue *Toronto National Post*)

Vendler's book is a clear, concise, and comprehensive study of Heaney's poetic *oeuvre*...Vendler strikes just the right note in her analysis of the relationship between Heaney's evolving poetic style and the Troubles in Northern Ireland...In her attention to Heaney's 'second thoughts'...Vendler makes a powerful argument for his humane political witness, accomplished by being faithful to the aim of lyric poetry, 'to grasp and perpetuate, by symbolic form, the self's volatile and transient here and now'...[An] illuminating orientation. (Daria Donnelly *Commonweal*)

The task [Helen Vendler] sets herself in this book is to demonstrate exactly how, by various means and in answer to a range of provocations, artistic, historic, and personal, the remarkable growth and development of Heaney's poetry over the last thirty years has been achieved...It is difficult to imagine a critic more in tune with her subject. Alert to the part played by etymological knowledge and wit in Heaney's work, she is also, thanks to her Irish Catholic upbringing, able to clarify for the uninstructed the meaning of his liturgical references. The political dimensions of Heaney's work, the 'dolorous circumstances' of Ireland, are referred to where necessary with restraint, compassion, and brevity...[Helen Vendler is] our period's most distinguished literary critic. (Ann Cobb *Harvard Review*)

In this critical study of Ireland's foremost living poet, Vendler explores the stylistic and thematic elements that have made Heaney a poet of stature and wide popularity. Beginning with his first book, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), moving through the developments and considerations of Heaney's several volumes of poetry, and ending with *The Spirit Level* (1996), Vendler examines the poet's changes in technique, language, and structure...This study...goes far into understanding how the intrusions and struggles of daily life define what a poet will write about and how he will write it. (John Kennedy *Antioch Review*)

Great poets demand great critical readers, and in this regard Heaney has been blessed by the steady attention of America's foremost critic of poetry, Helen Vendler. Vendler's lucid, insightful study plots the trajectory

of Heaney's poetic development from the 1960's to the present. Focusing on the art of his poems, she examines the internal structures of words, syntax, rhythm, voice and symbol that dramatize the poet's emotional responses to his experience. At the same time, Vendler demonstrates how Heaney has expanded and revised the nature of the personal lyric and cultural pressures of his time...Vendler's study, in my view, is the best analysis of Heaney the poet yet published. She brilliantly unfolds the dynamics of his poetry by her subtle reading of his language, voice and the deft syntactical shifts that give his work its lyric power and range of implication. Vendler demonstrates how Heaney is a poet of 'second thought,' one whose work constantly re-scrutinizes itself in terms of the demands of reality, justice and art...Her superb commentary achieves what first-rate criticism should do: it makes us want to go back and read the poems again. (John F. Desmond *America*)

[A] luminous new study...One of America's foremost poetry critics, [Vendler] disagrees with critics who stress [Heaney's] poetry's political content, focusing instead on the poetry as 'aesthetic and intellectual experiments.' (Jonathan Allison *The Monitor*)

Quiet virtuosity sustains this work from one of our leading literary critics...While steadfastly attentive to the words before her, Vendler shows herself to be agreeably imaginative; also, remarkably, she's a critic whose powers sometimes seem akin to those of her subjects. But she serves, too, as a loyal and true intermediary between poetry and its potential readers, offering a concise, plainspoken companion volume to Heaney's *oeuvre* without making the work seem more--or less--difficult than it really is. Her unusual fairness in an age when criticism is often either politically motivated or too arcane in its language and concepts to be read widely should be noted (and noted again). Would that there were more Vendlers writing criticism--and not about poetry alone. (*Kirkus Reviews*)

Combining biography with history and highly developed senses of aesthetics and poetics, Vendler guides her readers through Heaney's work like a naturalist identifying plants in a thick forest. She tracks the evolution of Heaney's imagery, his musicality, the beat and velocity of his poems, his many-tendriled metaphors and symbols, his flair for storytelling, and his moods, obsessions, and revelations. Astute, specific, and expressive, Vendler is an ideal reading companion. (Donna Seaman *Booklist*)

Perhaps no late 20th-century poet feels the poignantly complex responsibilities of literary vocation as deeply as Seamus Heaney, and with this book Vendler proves that no reader of his work is better attuned to those concerns. Following last year's widely admired *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, her intelligent, lively and reflective exploration of the first three decades of the Nobel laureate's career succeeds in many tasks: it is both an admiring, readable introduction and an anthology of best poems, and it builds an important case for attending to stylistic innovations while still addressing Heaney's relation to Northern Ireland's troubles. (*Publishers Weekly*)

Seamus Heaney gives us an unsurpassed unfolding of its eponym's art and, also, a plain, clear accounting of Helen Vendler's central convictions. From *Death of a Naturalist* to 1997's *The Spirit Level*, she reveals a Heaney whose essential means are those of lyric poetry as she herself defines them...Throughout *Seamus Heaney*, Vendler's method is determinedly constructivist, patient, and unswerving...Heaney's gentle agon of the saint who dared not move for fear of disturbing nesting blackbirds in his hand is glossed by an equally gentle, equally perdurable agon of close reading. Vendler poses the right questions and, in answer, feels the poem's exact effects. (Donald Revell *Colorado Review* 1999-09-01)

About the Author

Helen Vendler is A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard University.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Crystal Scott:

This Seamus Heaney usually are reliable for you who want to be considered a successful person, why. The reason of this Seamus Heaney can be among the great books you must have is actually giving you more than just simple examining food but feed you actually with information that probably will shock your previous knowledge. This book is usually handy, you can bring it all over the place and whenever your conditions at e-book and printed ones. Beside that this Seamus Heaney giving you an enormous of experience like rich vocabulary, giving you trial of critical thinking that we all know it useful in your day action. So , let's have it appreciate reading.

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