

Digging Down into the Bog of Metaphor and Symbolism with Seamus Heaney

Now it is time for you all to get a little dirty. On our field trip today to the Natural History Museum, I hope you will be able to experience this extensive collection of archeological finds with the same awe you might have had as a child. Of course, we can never return to our eight-year-old minds and bodies, but we can recapture some of that youthful imagination and creativity by looking at the world through poetry.

Now don't misunderstand me. I do not mean that we should turn weepy and sentimental and nostalgic. That's just gross. I do mean, however, that children tend not to censor their imaginations, that is not until untutored and boorish adults get hold of them; so I would like you all to see the items on display with that same freedom of the mind at play. Essentially I want you to be poets for the day.

Take a walk around the museum, check out all the floors with dinosaur and mammal bones—a giant mesosaur swims right above your heads in the atrium—an exotic if not macabre collection of stuffed birds, and snakes, live snakes that will leave you “Zero at the bone”! Oh, yes, and you can stand a foot away from General Custer's horse left standing when Custer himself lay littered with feathered arrows.

1. Find an object you like and write the name of the display:
2. Describe the object in detail, noting its overall composition (how the curators have chosen to display it) as well as its smaller or less conspicuous parts.
3. What attracts you to it? What is fascinating or curious or provocative?
4. Use a simile to describe the object:
5. Use a metaphor to describe the object:
6. List four or five images (or more for the truly ambitious) drawn from this display that you think would work well in a poem. Remember imagery evokes all the senses so don't limit yourself to the visual.

7. Name two or three abstract ideas this object could symbolize.

8. If you were to name this display as if it were a piece of art in Spencer or the title of a poem, what would you call it?

a. First, name it something concrete:

b. Second, name it something abstract:

9. Write a poem. This may seem like the time to panic but don't because, as I have said in class, I don't expect your poem to be great or good even. See? No pressure. I do, however, want to see you put some of what you have learned to use.

To make this easier, a) choose one Heaney poem on which to model yours, and follow his as closely as possible while using material you generated in the observations above. For example, he tells a brief story in "Limbo," the literal stuff going on about the girl disposing of her baby, but uses figurative language (simile and metaphor) borrowed from fishing and religion to tell that story. I think "Bogland" and "Punishment" make fine examples to follow as well.

b) Concentrate on story and description while allowing your figurative language to suggest meaning beyond the literal. In other words, let the language work/play for you, and you just might discover a significant symbol that way.

c) In addition to figurative language, incorporate at least one other literary device we have studied thus far, e.g. some form of irony, a created persona, or a tone that reveals the speaker's attitude.

d) If you have not already, select either a concrete or abstract title for your poem. Godspeed and go Team Poetry.

You may be able to accomplish only numbers 1 through 8 during class. That is fine because you can take Tuesday and Wednesday to work on your poem a little at a time.

For **Thursday, 2/11**, bring this completed Heaney worksheet along with your poem, **typed on a separate sheet**, for class discussion. The separate sheet with the poem and this worksheet must all be **STAPLED** together.