

# Take-home exam

## Instructions

Your exam should consist of three essays of about two pages each (double-spaced, one-inch margins, Microsoft Word if possible). Choose one topic from those selected by the class (your own or someone else's), one topic from those I've supplied, and the third one from either category. Some topics might be suitable for two essays focusing on different poems; I've supplied two questions about one poem, and you could conceivably write an essay on each of them. You may also, if you wish, group all three essays around a set of related topics or concerns, but it's not obligatory.

Writing essays (or, answers to questions) of this abbreviated length imposes certain necessities: you should get right to the point of what you're interested in without a lengthy (or any) introduction; you should try to be concise; and you should make your concluding point clear, but brief. I don't expect fancy writing, just good grammar and prose that gets its point across. Try not to generalize but to be quite specific to a particular text (or, in the case of *Beowulf*, a particular passage). I do hope to learn something from what you write.

You may or may not choose to spend time on this exam over the next week. One piece of advice, however, would be to memorize or otherwise make copies of the poems you expect to write on, and bring them with you wherever you go for the break. Whether you work on them or not, glance over the poems at odd moments -- waiting for the water to boil, waiting for the train, waiting for a page to load. Let your mind begin to work on them before you deliberately sit down to work on the essays. I have found this kind of practice both painless (pleasurable, actually) and helpful.

The take-home will be due Friday, April 6, at 5 p.m. You can submit your essays on MIT server, using the Homework page; or, if that's difficult, e-mail them to me in some format which I will not have trouble opening.

## Your topics (choose one poem as the primary subject of your essay).

1. Heaney seems to feel a need to be answerable to the local. What does he feel is the responsibility of the poet with regards to the local, and what needs to be said? Does he succeed in fulfilling this responsibility?
2. Heaney seems to be preoccupied with death as a subject. Does he treat it as something to be feared and opposed, or something more beneficent?

3. How does the poet's perspective on the bog bodies change from poem to poem, and how does the sex of the bodies affect his attitudes, if it does?
4. In his introduction to the translation of *Beowulf*, Heaney remarks that the first few stanzas of "Digging" unintentionally followed old English meter. What are some of the thematic connections between this opening poem of his first book, and the opening lines of *Beowulf*?
5. How would you characterize -- and distinguish -- the speaker's relationships with the woman he addresses and with their unborn child, in "Act of Union"?
6. We talked about the circulation of objects or possessions in *Beowulf*. Describe and analyze the significance of one or two "circulating objects" in one of Heaney's own poems, preferably *not* one -- like "Pitchfork" -- in which the object is the main focus of the poem.
7. A number of these poems convey a sense of transformation: in the speaker, in what is observed, in a perspective on what is observed, in relationships, in attitude. Follow this transformation through in one poem, and note its implications for the poem as a whole.
8. Heaney often seems to reserve a childlike wonder for simple tools, a wonder which implies that it is these common objects and those who wield them who should be glorified and revered. Talk about Heaney's ability to cast everyday objects and tasks in a heroic light, and be sure to pay attention to specifics like word choice and sentence structure.
9. In art, some unclothed bodies are nudes, formally posed, part of a classical tradition dating back to Greek and Roman art. Some, however, are simply naked, with a sense of exposure and violation quite foreign to the nude. How would you characterize the two unclothed bodies of "Punishment" and "Grauballe Man", and why?
10. Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* not only renders the poem in modern English but captures some of the preoccupations we see in his own poetry. What features of the translation might be characterized as closely linked to the interests of the translator, and why?

## My topics

11. "Tollund Man" (62) characterizes the sacrificed man found in the bog as "bridegroom to the goddess," who "opened her fen" for him. (A "fen" according to the *OED*, is "low land covered wholly or partially with shallow water ... marsh ... mud"). This identification of the ground with a goddess, mother, or other kind of female figure gets pursued more explicitly and at more length in "Kinship" (115), one of the poems in *North*. Here, the speaker surveys a bog he characterizes as "Earth-pantry, bone vault, sun-bank... insatiable bride. Sword-swallower...". At the end of III, having disturbed (I think) two snakes, he is "facing a goddess". What is the net effect of gendering the earth in this poem? How does it imagine the feminine, and how does it imagine the male citizen's relationship to the ground of Ireland? Note: this is a longer poem, and you aren't responsible for making sense of the whole thing.

12. In "Casualty" (147), a local man often seen drinking in the neighborhood pub does not heed the word to stay home on the night of a retaliatory bombing, and is killed when the more distant pub he seeks out is blown up. Either one of the questions below can serve as a short essay topic, or you are free to do them both.
- a. This local man asks two questions in the poem. First, how culpable *is* he (and, I might add, in what exactly)? Second, he asks the speaker something about poetry. What moves or entitles him to ask these questions? Why are they posed to the speaker, and how are they answered in or by the poem?
  - b. There are also two funerals in the poem. In II, the funeral is presumably of the 13 men shot by Protestant paramilitaries in Derry (I). In III, we hear about the funeral of the local man, which the poet did not actually attend. How would you describe and make sense of the differences between these two scenes and their presentation in the poem (including the memory which substitutes for the actual funeral in III)?
13. "Clearances" (282) serves as a memorial to the poet's mother, and sections III-VI specifically describe the relationship between mother and son. How or where is this relationship distant, how or where is it close, how or where is a balance reached between closeness and distance -- in the relationship or in the text?
14. In the "Introduction" to his volume of prose, *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney refers to Robert Frost's poem "Directive," which in the passage he quotes juxtaposes "the children's house of make-believe," where the children played with playthings in a playhouse under a tree, and the "house in earnest" where a family actually lived (xiv-xv). "A Sofa in the Forties" (373) similarly juxtaposes children's play (pretending the sofa is a train) with family life (other uses of the sofa) and with history, in this case with the events of the Second World War which enter the house by way of news reports on the radio (the use of actual trains in transporting troops or transporting deportees to concentration camps). There are a number of differences to be noticed: for instance, the sofa has an actual role in family life as well as its "play" role as a train; for another instance, the speaker of this poem does not invite the reader to play trains on the sofa as a remedy for history. (Frost's poem invites the reader to drink from the children's cup and become "whole again beyond confusion"). Read the pages from the introduction I've referred to, and tell me something about what this poem claims for the role of play or make-believe; tell me something also about the sofa as an object or character.