

SEAMUS HEANEY, 'A KITE FOR AIBHÍN'

Professor Tess Maginess

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- Seamus Heaney was born in April 1939, the eldest member of a family which would eventually contain nine children. His father owned and worked a small farm of some fifty acres.
- Even though his family left the farm where he was reared (it was called Mossbawn) in 1953, and even though his life since then has been a series of moves farther and farther away from his birthplace, the departures have been more geographical than psychological: rural County Derry is the “country of the mind” where much of Heaney’s poetry is still grounded.

Source: [Seamus Heaney – Biographical - NobelPrize.org](#)

POETICS

- Heaney's poems first came to public attention in the **mid-1960s** when he was active as one of a group of poets who were subsequently recognized as constituting something of a **“Northern School” within Irish writing...**
- [Though stylistically different], he does share with all of them the fate of having been born into **a society deeply divided along religious and political lines**, one which was doomed moreover to suffer a quarter-century of violence, polarization and inner distrust. This had the effect not only of **darkening the mood** of Heaney's work in the 1970s, but also of giving him a deep preoccupation with the question of **poetry's responsibilities and prerogatives** in the world, since poetry is poised between a need for creative freedom within itself and a pressure to express the sense of social obligation felt by the poet as citizen.

- Heaney later lived for many years in **Dublin**. He was the author of over 20 volumes of poetry and criticism, and edited several widely used anthologies. He won the **Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995** "for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past." Heaney taught at Harvard University (1985-2006) and served as the Oxford Professor of Poetry (1989-1994). He died in 2013.
- **‘A Kite for Aibhín’ is the last poem in Heaney’s last collection, *Human Chain*.**

Source: [Seamus Heaney | Poetry Foundation](#)



Picture source: https://pro2-bar-s3-cdn-cf.myportfolio.com/39c4bc98d430c80e6a284619b1382993/b28919ba-6e94-445b885b-1bb55fed9aa2_rw_1920.jpg?h=2cd5225e1108cf22531a2d7cd1359cd8



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A KITE FOR AIBHÍN: A CLOSER LOOK

- What do we make of the title? The poet declares his intention to make, to fashion or/and present a kite to someone called Aibhín. Heaney had a **granddaughter called Aibhín.**
- The kite is for a child; the **association of kites and adults** is expressed as a derisory one; 'away and fly your kite'; an imperative implying the dismissal of a daft or fanciful notion. The **Kite flier** is regarded as rather **an impractical class of person; a dreamer, a poet.**

- We note that, as is the case, in a number of Heaney's poems, **the poem is 'after' another artist**. In itself, this suggests immediately a linkage to other literature or art; so the poem inhabits, as it were, not just its own particular air, but a wind blows through it from **another artistic source**. To put this another way, the poem draws attention to itself not simply as a direct, lyrical capture (or as the young people say now, a 'grab') of a moment in time, but as **an artefact related, by allusion, to other works of art**.
- There may be an allusion to **'The Kite' by John Newton**, the Anglican cleric who wrote 'Amazing Grace'.
- This poem is also about **ageing**, so the intertextuality may help prepare us for a geotranscendent view of that condition.
- And **Hosseni's *The Kite Runners*** may even be in there – making a parallel between Troubles in global north and global south.

- We can see and hear from the first three lines, as with all great lyrical poetry, he captures (as did Pascoli) **a moment in time**, and a moment that is, as it happens, **rapturous**. The mood is elevated, pure, 'elate'.

- And the **uniqueness of the object** – natural, perhaps a bird, and yet, given the title, possibly also a man-made object, a kite and indeed **the whole moment is extraordinary**. Presided over, as it were, made possible by an air that is unique, different, say, perhaps it is the air of **pure imagination**. That moment comes from **looking upwards and outwards**, away from life.
- And the **rhythm of the triplet** – a form much favoured by Heaney, especially in his later poems – forming almost a kind of **aural signature** – has about it an apparently freewheeling quality, there is no great regularity of stresses, so that, as it were, the voice beneath the poem, is free to act naturally.
- What does this show about the **poet's attitude to ageing?**

- What about the **colouration of the poem?**
- We have white (purity), blue (sky, the Madonna).
- The poem might be a celebration of the birth of a child, but it is also about **mortality – about age and imminent death.**



- In the second stanza the kite seems to act as a kind of imaginative vehicle by which we are immediately transported out of this life and time and place and back to a **specific moment in the speaker's childhood**. The present evokes memories of the past. Heaney bears witness, again, stands for, **a collective past as well as a family past**.
- Perhaps one of the gifts of ageing is to be able to reflect upon the past and see a meaning not just in an individual's life, but in a family and community past – **a sense of tradition?**
- And, a poetic past too – **how does the speaker fit in to the tradition of literature?**

- Ageing is often associated with the **recall of memories of childhood** – and such reminiscence offers comfort and solidity maybe to older people, making them feel less estranged in the new, modern world.



- And now, in the third stanza, another 'volta', another turn, as the poet-speaker alerts us to his presence, enters, as it were, stage left, into his own poem.
- There is also the sense that he is **taking his stand back into his own past** near that hill, and with the specific reference to Anahorish Hill, there is a stand too back into his own poetry and his fondness for local places.

- And what about that **comet**? Again, I think of Muldoon's star in the poem cited earlier and I think also of a very famous earlier Heaney poem, 'Exposure' (North. London: Faber and Faber, 1972, p.90)
- 'The 'who' is the speaker of the poem, accusing himself of 'escaping the massacre' of the North by going to Dublin in 1972. And paradoxically, Heaney may have thought that his focus on 'digging' may have prevented him from ever looking upwards to the sky. So, he was in danger of missing not just possibility of an entirely different metaphorical framework; a different 'way of seeing things', but also of missing his own chance of becoming a star, a comet in the sky of poetic reputations?
- This indicates the **reflection that comes with age** too, and specifically, a poet looking backs on his own choices.

- In the next stanza our view is focused on **the kite itself**.
- The kite hovers, tugs, veers, dives askew; full of **drama and movement**, but there is **no danger** of it falling; it lifts itself, rises with the wind, to loud cheers.

- And, then as we rise into the next stanza, the **angle of vision** shifts downwards to the person holding, controlling the kite; the speaker-poet.
- We cannot but think that the hand is **an older person's hand** – like a spindle. And though that hand is in control, it is also 'unspooling' (a rather Yeatsian sort of movement, not unrelated to 'ungyring').
- We think of an unravelling, of a **loss of control** and, equally, a free unwinding, a sort of **liberation**.

And the gesture, the movement might also have connotations of how a roll of film unwinds in the **screening a film**. Perhaps that is why, immediately afterwards, we have another 'frame', quite dramatically different from what has gone before; the kite is now transformed into a flower with a fine stem (perhaps with echoes of the comet's pulsing *rose*?).

There is a sort of paradox in operation here too; we have the sense of both weight – a burden that has to be carried and an opposite sense of an object that is light and which gains momentum as it flies higher. We have a rhythmic break, crucially on either side of the caesura, so that I think Heaney is encouraging us to think of the **paradoxical meanings** here – the sense of the increasingly frail body having to be carried and the spirit or soul, symbolised by the kite, diverging from the body, climbing upwards.

- Heaney is not alone (late Yeats, especially comes to mind) in the way he views ageing and impending death.
- But Heaney may also be **reflecting on his own poetic career**. He has spent a lifetime carrying, climbing (carrying us all) and now can break free, can register (seeing and inscribing), the great uplifting metaphor and vision; the comet's pulsing rose.

And so we come to the final stanza.

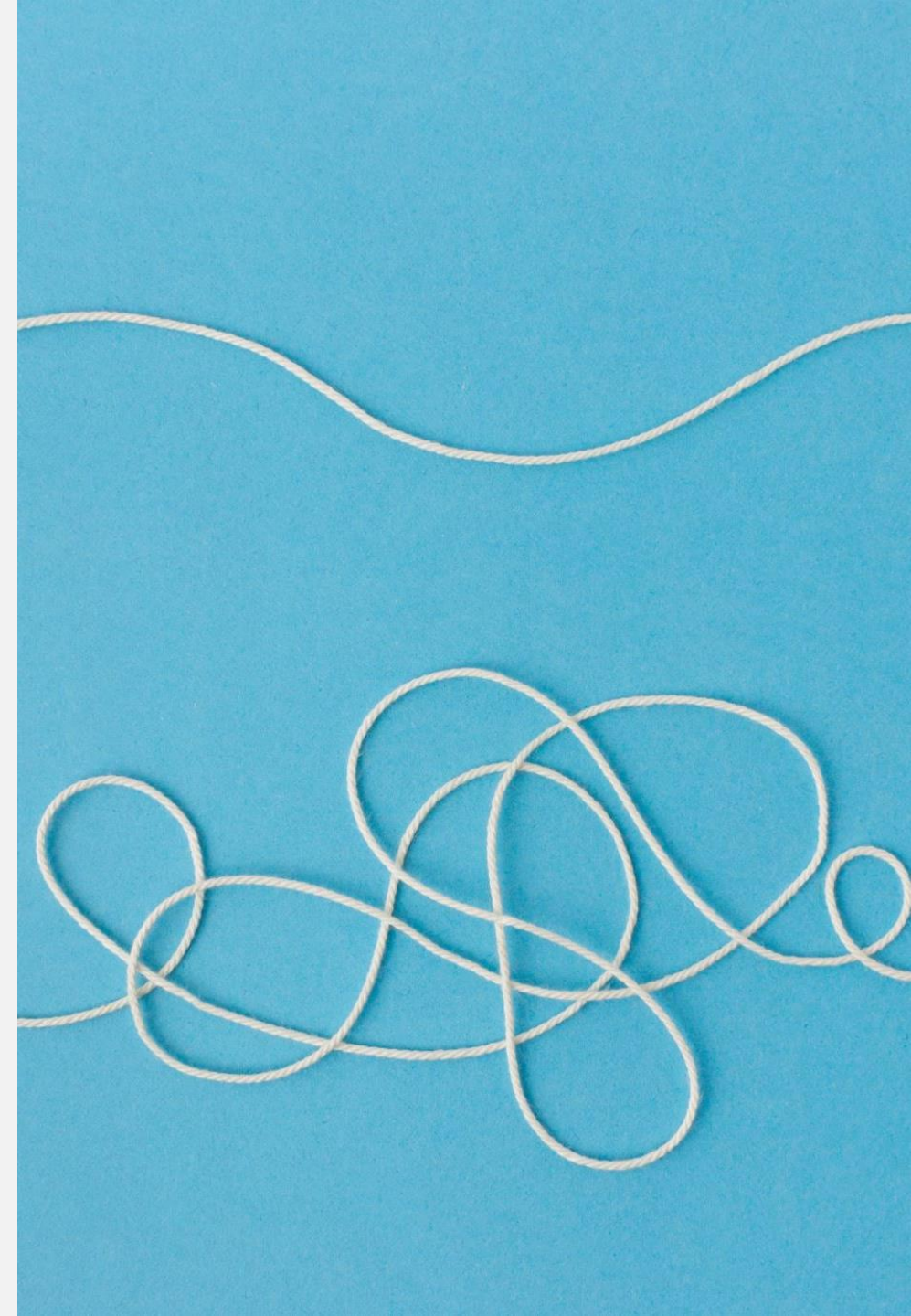
We may note that this follows, enjambed, as it were from the previous stanza.

This could mean that it is the climbing kite which carries farther and higher the longing of the kite flier. There is **a will to be free now of earth** (the planted feet).

The kite flier longs to be up there, with the kite, in the air, no longer on the earth.

- This is not some crude Thanatos, some simple-minded death wish.
- What we can hear here is the **deep understanding of a man who knows that his time is almost come and welcomes it.**
- **The kite is a metaphor for metaphor** itself – the sought after high, free thing, longed after by every poet.

- The concluding paradox, the '**resolution**', has been prepared for judiciously in the lines before. The string breaks, the human chain is severed, but oh what unbearable lightness of being there is, as the soul, the spirit, flies free into the sky.
- And what a gorgeous neologism a word like elate is, rhyming so precisely and with such lightness with the word which follows it.



- So the kite takes off. The words recall the Sinn Fein slogan, '**ourselves alone**', but ironically, because the poet – for all his sense of identification with community, is also, as poet alone, as he must be. And, as an old man, facing death, there is no 'us' either, in one sense.
- The kite is by itself, **free of tribe and allegiance, free of place and time**. It is, indeed in 'another life' (bringing us back in a virtuous circle to the first line of the poem).
- But, of course, the kite is condemned also, existentially, to be **alone**. Nobody – neighbour friend, kin, can be with it on this, its last journey. The kite, like the kite flier, is itself alone.

- But the drama of paradox is not quite over yet - we have the sublime contradiction of the last word and testimony.
- The kite is at least **four contradictory things** (a pretty bold and expansive metaphor, by any account, and yet so simple, so ordinary a word, 'windfall').
- A 'windfall' is an apple or pear which has fallen off the tree and so is hardly worth lifting.
- And yet, if you were in need, you would be terribly glad of it.
- Poetry itself, in that poem is perhaps the meagre fire that the poet makes out of a bad job, the spark that feeds that fire.
- Conversely, paradoxically, the word 'windfall' means, to all of us there, a **lucky stroke**; where the wind lets fall into our lap, riches of some kind.
- Well, it may also be that **the kite, symbolising metaphor, and even poetry is a windfall, an unexpected blessing.**

- The third meaning may be that freedom, true liberation, 'geotranscendence' only can come with **old age** and maybe even **death** itself.
- The kite however high we fly it, must **collapse and fall in tatters** ('a ragged coat upon a stick', to borrow from Yeats), for 'soul to clap hands and sing', just as **the rising of the kite is greeted with loud cheers**.
- There is no reason at all why all these meanings cannot hold true. And, indeed, they must, perhaps, all hold true, for that is the beauty of this extraordinary last word in this **wondrous, triumphant and inspiring last poem**.