

Learner Resource 5 bringing it all together

In the exam, you are asked to compare two poems. This activity poses the following exam-type question:

- Explore how Seamus Heaney presents ideas and feelings about the relationship the speaker has with the past in "Punishment" and "Strange Fruit".

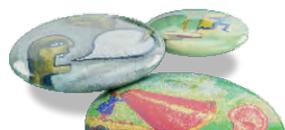
You should consider his use of stylistic techniques, as well as any other relevant contexts.

Below are two tables to help you to find ideas for the essay. Divide into two groups: one group is responsible for completing Table one and the other for completing Table two.

Once you have completed your half of the table, you can either take it in turns to feedback to the class, or swap one of your completed tables with another pair, so that you have the two halves to refer to when you write your essay.

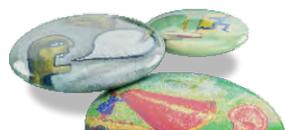
Table one:

Punishment	Strange Fruit
<p>Voice: First person narrator ("I" appears six times) "I can feel..." suggesting empathy, "I can see..." indicating a distance (ref. to the "artful voyeur"). Shift to addressing the girl in verse six – verse six is graphologically the central point of the poem.</p>	
<p>Form: 11 quatrains, moving from empathy prompted by the physical presence of the exhumed head, to a description of her head, (blindfold, noose), to an imagined vision of her alive, to a realisation of the speaker's guilt about his silence against brutality (both current and that exacted against the exhumed girl).</p>	
<p>Lexical groups: I (× 6) "you" (× 3) "your" (× 5) "her" (× 8) – indicating the first person who observes throughout, and the move from definite article ("the nape") to "her" neck to "your" face – suggesting the increasing personal engagement.</p> <p>Use of kennings (compound expression often in Old English and Old Norse poetry) "oak-bone""brain-firkin" – indicating Heaney's links to literary tradition.</p> <p>Low frequency lexis of "firkin" (small cask) "cauled" (head-covering for women) – again indicating links to the past.</p>	



Learner Resource 5 bringing it all together

Punishment	Strange Fruit
<p>Context: “It’s a poem about standing by as the IRA tar and feather these young women in Ulster. But it’s also about standing by as the British torture people in barracks and interrogation centers in Belfast. About standing between those two forms of affront. So there’s that element of self-accusation, which makes the poem personal in a fairly acute way. Its concerns are immediate and contemporary, but for some reason I couldn’t bring army barracks or police barracks or Bogside street life into the language and topography of the poem. I found it more convincing to write about the bodies in the bog and the vision of Iron Age punishment. Pressure seemed to drain away from the writing if I shifted my focus from those images.” http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney</p> <p>“They have numbered all my bones” (Psalm 22): reference to a Roman Catholic prayer said after Mass and Communion, as part of a call for forgiveness – perhaps indicating the speaker’s own attitude to his reaction to brutality, ancient and current.</p> <p>One of several poems inspired by the bog bodies that had been found in Northern Europe, published in the collection <i>North</i> (1975). See also, for example, “The Tolland Man”, from <i>Wintering Out</i> (1972).</p>	
<p>Syntax: Use of the present tense – creating the immediacy of the speaker’s experience, and contrasting to the past tense of “punished”. Link of the past tense in “punished” and “cauled” – emphasising the connection between the ancient brutalities inflicted against the girl, and the more recent brutalities inflicted against the women in Ulster. Use of modal in “would”, (rather than “will”) – implying an uncertainty or tentativeness about how effective his “civilised outrage” (perhaps, this poem) really is.</p> <p>Use of naming: “Little adulteress” – indicating, perhaps, a patronising, judgemental attitude that reflects that of those who punished her, contrasting to “My poor scapegoat”, suggesting a personal engagement with the first person possessive pronoun, and a more contemporary perception. The naming coincides with the use of the second person pronoun “you”, as the speaker addresses the girl.</p>	

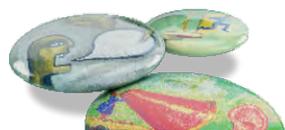


Learner Resource 5 bringing it all together

Punishment	Strange Fruit
<p>Rhyme/rhythm: No full end rhyme, but a few half rhymes (“drowned” “stone” “combs” “bones”) – internal open vowel sounds that evoke suffering perhaps: (“drowned” “body” “bog” “stone” “rods”, “boughs” etc.).</p>	
<p>Figurative language: Simile (× 1), metaphor (× 10) – the numbers of metaphors perhaps suggesting the immediacy of the experience: “barked sapling” “stubble of black corn” etc. – nature indicating the melding of the body and the land: “rigging” foreshadows “drowning” and “floating” in the next verse. Link of bog body and the current brutalities: the speaker recognises the voyeuristic nature of his observations about the girl, and feels complicit in his silence against all tribal revenge, including the recent Irish Troubles.</p>	

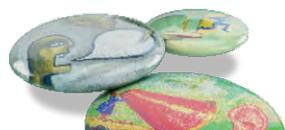
Table two:

Punishment	Strange Fruit
	<p>Voice: Implied first person narrator with deitic language (“Here is...”), but no first person pronoun – emulating a curator, perhaps, observing the external features of the head.</p>
	<p>Form: An unrhymed sonnet, with almost unbroken ten-syllable lines. Opening three sentences describe more recent history of the head as an object, before the reported speech from Diordorus Siculus prompts a realisation that the speaker was objectifying the head (with “what had begun to feel like reverence”), considering the brutality of the act. This change of direction in line ten could be seen as the “volta” (a term used to describe the turn – in tone, thought, idea, argument – that often occurs later on in a sonnet).</p>



Learner Resource 5 bringing it all together

Punishment	Strange Fruit
	<p>Lexical groups: Nature: gourd, prune, fern etc.</p> <p>Use of kennings (compound expression often in Old English and Old Norse poetry) “oval-faced” “prune-skinned” – indicating Heaney’s links to literary tradition.</p> <p>Low frequency lexis of “pash” (head) and “tallow” (animal fat used for candles, for example) – indicating links to the past.</p> <p>One abstract noun (“beauty”) in the first 9 lines of the poem, and three (“ease”, “beatification”, “reverence”) in the last five lines – suggesting the change of tone from observation of the physical object, to personal reflection.</p>
	<p>Context: Same title as the song sung by Billie Holiday in 1939 – a protest song about racial brutality and injustice.</p> <p>Diodorus Siculus – a Greek historian from the first century A.D., who commented on how he became increasingly desensitised to the brutality he was observing.</p> <p>One of several poems inspired by the bog bodies that had been found in Northern Europe, published in the collection <i>North</i> (1975). See also, for example, “The Tolland Man”, from <i>Wintering Out</i> (1972).</p>
	<p>Syntax: Verbs – “they” are agents of three dynamic verbs in the first five lines; the girl’s head has the repeated dynamic verb in the final three lines – these first verbs are fixed in the past, the last repeated verb is ambiguously in the present.</p> <p>Cumulative effect of adjectives, pre-modifying the girl (rather than the head) – (“Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible//Beheaded”) – attempt to capture extremity of reaction; readjusting the speaker’s complacency in the face of this brutality from the past. Move into the pluperfect in the final line (“had begun”) to indicate something that no longer happens: the speaker no longer sees the head as an object to be admired and revered.</p> <p>Verb “outstaring” stretches from the past to the present in its continuous state: she outstared the axe, as she now outstares the speaker’s reverence towards her.</p>



Learner Resource 5 bringing it all together

Punishment	Strange Fruit
	<p>Rhyme and rhythm: Regular ten-syllable lines, with a change of tone marked by the move to the longer six-line sentence at the end (from “Diodorus – reverence”). Enjambment (appearing only twice elsewhere) increases the sense of insistence, and sense of the spoken voice and personal engagement at this point of the poem. Internal half-rhyme “broken nose” “eyeholes” “pools” – emphasise the connection of the head and the land.</p>
	<p>Figurative language: Contrast of imagery associated with cherished items (“unswaddled”, “treasure”) and that associated with nature – suggesting the features of the head as part of the land, and revealing the reverence of the archaeologists who found it, as well as that of the speaker.</p>