

Blackberry Picking

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
 for a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
 At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
 among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
 You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
 like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
 leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
 picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
 sent us out with milk-cans, pea-tins, jam-pots
 where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
 Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills
 we trekked and picked until the cans were full,
 until the tinkling bottom had been covered
 with green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
 like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
 with thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.
 We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
 But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
 A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
 The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
 the fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
 I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
 that all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
 Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

Seamus Heaney

Seamus Heaney says:

'...I think childhood is, generally speaking, a preparation for disappointment.'

'...what sets poetry part from all other kinds of writing is the fact that it's got a rhythmic unity.'

Suggestions for work on BLACKBERRY PICKING by SEAMUS HEANEY

Reaching an Understanding

TALKING AND LISTENING - FOR DISCUSSION

Memories of past events provide us with a wide range of thoughts, feelings and emotions. Childhood memories, in particular, provide us with opportunities to laugh, cry and reminisce. Try to recall an occasion from your early childhood which is particularly memorable. Do you actually remember these events or have they been told to you by a member of your family? Share a memory with the members of your group and explore why it is so important to you.

Points to consider:

1. Heaney refers to poetry as when 'human experience comes to life.' How does the experience of blackberry picking come to life in this poem?
2. How is the child's perspective shown in the description of blackberry picking?
3. The power of language is shown particularly well by Seamus Heaney. He makes us hear words as well as see them. Similes, metaphors and onomatopoeic words are woven into the fabric of his verse. Can you find examples of these in Blackberry Picking? Explain the picture that Heaney creates with each example and show how effective it is.

4. Childhood enthusiasm and excitement are conveyed vividly in this poem. Point to language which shows this enthusiasm and comment on how successful it is.
5. Children are often disappointed in life: they ask Santa Claus for many things at Christmas time and rarely receive all their requests. Perhaps this is a learning stage for children, preparing them for the disappointments of life. How does Heaney present the theme of childhood disappointment? Is his picture pessimistic, negative or realistic?

Final thoughts for discussion:

Do you think that Seamus Heaney captures the innocence of childhood successfully? Does it help to speak the words rather than just read them? Why do you think Heaney creates a half-rhyme effect at the end of each line i.e. the consonants are similar but the vowels are not? What is your favourite description in the poem?

The 'Singer'

In the evenings I used to study
 at my mother's old sewing-machine,
 pressing my feet occasionally
 Up and down on the treadle
 as though I were going somewhere
 I had never been.
 Every year at exams, the pressure mounted -
 the summer light bent across my pages
 like a squinting eye. The children's shouts
 echoed the weather of the street,
 a car was thunder,
 the ticking of a clock was heavy rain...
 In the dark I drew the curtains
 on young couples stopping in the entry,
 heading home. There were nights
 I sent the disconnected wheel
 spinning madly round and round
 till the empty bobbin rattled in its case.

Medbh McGuckian

Medbh McGuckian says:

'...the poem is not so much about studying and doing exams as really about the desire to be creative and somehow being very frustrated in that, because of having to be a woman and having to sit still and the lack of adventure in your life really, the lack of adventure in your head. And so it is a poem about wanting to write. And not really being able to find a way of doing that.'
 '...I was able to talk about how I was cut off from the street... there is an intensity and a sadness and a loneliness that I felt that I could capture.'

Suggestions for work on THE 'SINGER' by MEDBH MCGUCKIAN

Reaching an Understanding

TALKING AND LISTENING - FOR DISCUSSION

Everyone has hopes, dreams and ambitions. Frequently young people yearn to be something they are not or cannot be. Sometimes young people become frustrated because they feel caught in the trap of conforming to what is expected of them e.g. it is only relatively recently that girls have been encouraged to pursue non-female occupations. Do you have ambitions? Do you feel restricted by a role which is expected for you by parents or teachers? Do you find it difficult to express your feelings? Discuss these issues with the members of your group to explore if there is a common viewpoint.

Points to consider:

1. What is the significance of the title of the poem?
2. Medbh McGuckian was 26 when she wrote this poem about herself at 16. What experiences does she describe?
3. Does the image of the sewing machine provide us with a comforting or frustrating feeling, or both? Explain your thoughts.

4. How is the idea that the young girl wants to be something which she is not conveyed?
5. Look carefully at the last few lines of the poem and explain your reaction to them:

'There were nights
I sent the disconnected wheel
Spinning madly round and round
Till the empty bobbin rattled in its case'

Final thoughts for discussion:

Did you like this poem? Did it successfully describe the feelings of a 16 year old? Are there any words or phrases which stand out as being particularly memorable? Explain why they appeal to you.