

Seasoned

He cannot bend to tie his shoe.
I stoop to make the knot
that takes me back
to when he carried fully grown men
down stairs in the middle of the night

found them in floods or snowdrifts
hauled them up cliffs on stretchers
pulled them out of sheughs and bogs
all in a day's work

he held mothers' hands in ambulances
gave the kiss of life
in porches, on roadsides
delivered babies in toilets
of country bars long after closing.

At home he bathed us on a Saturday night
bent over the tub, sleeves rolled up
arms covered in suds
told stories of him as a boy
when once he cycled twenty miles to run a race
and won, then cycled twenty home.

His back, a solid Irish oak,
bent, moved, straightened
to each particular need.
Now its knots tell the years
of a thousand people who leant on him
shoulders that carried other people's lives
as well as his own.

He cannot bend to lace his shoe
and I have learned to make the loop.

Elaine Gaston**Elaine Gaston says:**

'-when I start to write a poem quite often I write down what happened, what I felt about it and I write a whole list of different visual images, I think visual images are really important in a poem.'

Suggestions for work on SEASONED by ELAINE GASTON**TALKING AND LISTENING - FOR DISCUSSION**

Elaine Gaston's poem is partly about the sense of role reversal she felt as a daughter when she suddenly had to look after her father as he recuperated after an operation - whereas he once tied her laces when she was young, she now finds she has to tie her father's laces. In groups, read the poem and discuss the idea of changing roles within a family. Perhaps some pupils have elderly grandparents, great-aunts or -uncles. How does age and aging change the nature of relationships within families? And what about youth - do any pupils have very young brothers and sisters and if so what effect does this circumstance have on the family unit? As you grow older, does your role within your family change? If so, how and in what ways?

Points to consider:

1. The poet's father was a country doctor or GP. List the evidence from the poem that would support this fact.

2. What key image in the poem does the title link up with? Explore the possible significance of the title?
3. From a close reading of the poem, write a character study of Elaine Gaston's father. Discuss his public and his private personas.
4. Explain in what way 'a thousand people' have leaned on him.
5. Explain the flash-back technique in the poem and in what ways has the poet 'learned to make the loop'?

Final thoughts for discussion:

Seamus Heaney's poem *Follower* is about the changing role within a father/son relationship. Groups might compare the two poems and discuss what images and emotions the poems share. What differences are there between the two?

Gary Snyder's poem *Axe Handles* might also be usefully included in such a discussion.

In a poem about visiting his mother in hospital, Robert Sund talks about how we 'Die daily of unexpressed affection.' On a personal, individual level, ask pupils to focus on a member of their own family and think of an appropriate and effective image or series of images that somehow captures how they feel about that person. This might develop into a poem or piece of descriptive writing.

Why Brownlee Left

Why Brownlee left, and where he went,
Is a mystery even now.
For if a man should have been content
It was him; two acres of barley,
One of potatoes, four bullocks,
A milker, a slated farmhouse.
He was last seen going out to plough
On a March morning, bright and early.

By noon Brownlee was famous;
They had found all abandoned, with
The last rig unbroken, his pair of black
Horses, like man and wife,
Shifting their weight from foot to
Foot, and gazing into the future.

Paul Muldoon**Suggestions for work on WHY BROWNLEE LEFT by PAUL MULDOON****TALKING AND LISTENING - FOR DISCUSSION****Missing Person!**

The class may be divided into groups. Each group is a special investigation team (in the style of the X-Files or Men in Black). The second line of the poem contains the word 'mystery.' Each group must investigate this disappearance. The poem is a sort of scene of crime: what clues and background does it present to the investigators? Each group must work towards compiling a preliminary report for formal presentation to the rest of the class (no solution to the mystery is as yet required).

OR

Read All About It!

Imagine how the incident and the circumstances surrounding the incident might appear in the local newspaper. Discuss possible headlines, layouts, photo possibilities and interviews. Then individual pupils may write their own newspaper report.

Alternatively, groups might dramatise a report on the incident for radio or television.

Points to consider:

1. Consider the title. It offers itself as a solution - but to what questions? Does it give a satisfactory answer?
2. Is the poem set in the immediate present or the recent past? Give reasons for your answer.
3. What is 'a milker' and what is so special about there being a 'slated farmhouse'?
4. Say what it was made Brownlee famous at noon.
5. List the reasons why Brownlee should have been content. Do you find this a reasonable list?
6. Identify the simile that is used at the end of the extract.
7. Is it possible that this simile together with reference to 'gazing into the future' might offer us a solution to the mystery of the disappearance?
8. What makes Brownlee's disappearance so shocking to his neighbours? Do they measure happiness solely in material terms?

Final thoughts for discussion:

Having read between the 'plough-lines' why do you think Brownlee left? What is your opinion of him? Do you respect him or is he just running away?