

# The Searchers

*after the film by John Ford*

He wants to kill her for surviving,  
For the language she spits,  
The way she runs, clutching  
Her skirt as if life pools there.

Instead he grabs her, puts her [5]  
On his saddle, rides back  
Into town where faces  
She barely remembers

Smile into her fear [10]  
With questions and the wish,  
The impossible wish, to forget.  
What does living do to any of us?

And why do we grip it, hang on [15]  
As if it's the ribs of a horse  
Past commanding? A beast  
That big could wreck us easily,

Could rise up on two legs, [20]  
Or kick its back end up  
And send us soaring.  
We might land, any moment,

Like cheap toys. There's always  
A chimney burning in the mind,  
A porch where the rocker still rocks,  
Though empty. Why

Do we insist our lives are ours? [25]  
Look at the frontier. It didn't resist.  
Gave anyone the chance  
To plant shrubs, dig wells.

Watched, not really concerned [30]  
With whether it belonged  
To him or to him. Either way  
The land went on living,

Dying. What else could it choose?

***The Searchers:*** a famous 1956 U.S.

Western film directed by John Ford. Debbie, a young white girl, is abducted by a raiding party from the Comanche tribe of Native Americans. Her uncle, Ethan, a war veteran who despises the Comanche, spends years searching for her.

[1] ***He wants to kill her for surviving:***

Ethan finally locates Debbie, only to find that she has embraced the ways of the Comanche and has no desire to return to white society. For a moment Ethan regards Debbie as just another Comanche, as someone evil or even sub-human. He has to be restrained from shooting her.

[2] ***the language she spits:*** refers to the Comanche language

[23] ***the rocker still rocks:*** a rocking chair features prominently in several of the film's more domestic scenes.

[26] ***the frontier:*** the outermost limit of 'settled' territory in the United States when the country was being colonised by white settlers

## Tease It Out

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- Smith focuses on the final scenes of *The Searchers*, after Ethan has discovered Debbie in the Comanche encampment:
  - What did Debbie have to do to survive during her years of living with the Comanche?
  - Class Discussion:** Why might Ethan want to kill Debbie for ‘surviving’ in such a fashion?
  - What is Ethan’s view of the Comanche language? Give a reason for your answer.
  - True or false:** Debbie has a clear memory of the white community in which she lived before her abduction.
- The poet compares human life to an untamed and unruly horse:
  - Each of us, at times, feels that our lives are out of control. What lines and phrases does Smith use to convey this?
  - ‘A beast that big could wreck us easily’. What attitude to living is the poet expressing here?
  - In what two ways, according to Smith, might a horse unseat its rider?
  - Who or what is compared to ‘cheap toys’? What does this comparison suggest about human life?
- Smith describes the shifting American border or ‘frontier’ in the 19th century, when the country was being gradually conquered by white colonisers:
  - What is the literary device known as ‘personification’? Who or what is being personified in these lines?
  - What phrases suggest that control of America’s vast territories changed hands over this period?
  - Did the land itself ‘resist’ these changes?
  - True or false:** The land itself was deeply concerned with who claimed ownership of it at any particular time.

## Technique

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- Smith gives us two striking metaphors for human life: a wild horse and the American frontier. Which of these metaphors is most effective in your opinion? Give a reason for your choice.
- Smith imagines Debbie’s return to town after her years living as a Comanche:
  - What phrase indicates that the townspeople are happy to see her alive and well?
  - True or false:** The townspeople are curious about Debbie’s time living among the Comanche.
  - Why might the townspeople ‘wish to forget’ that Debbie was ever abducted? Is such forgetting possible?

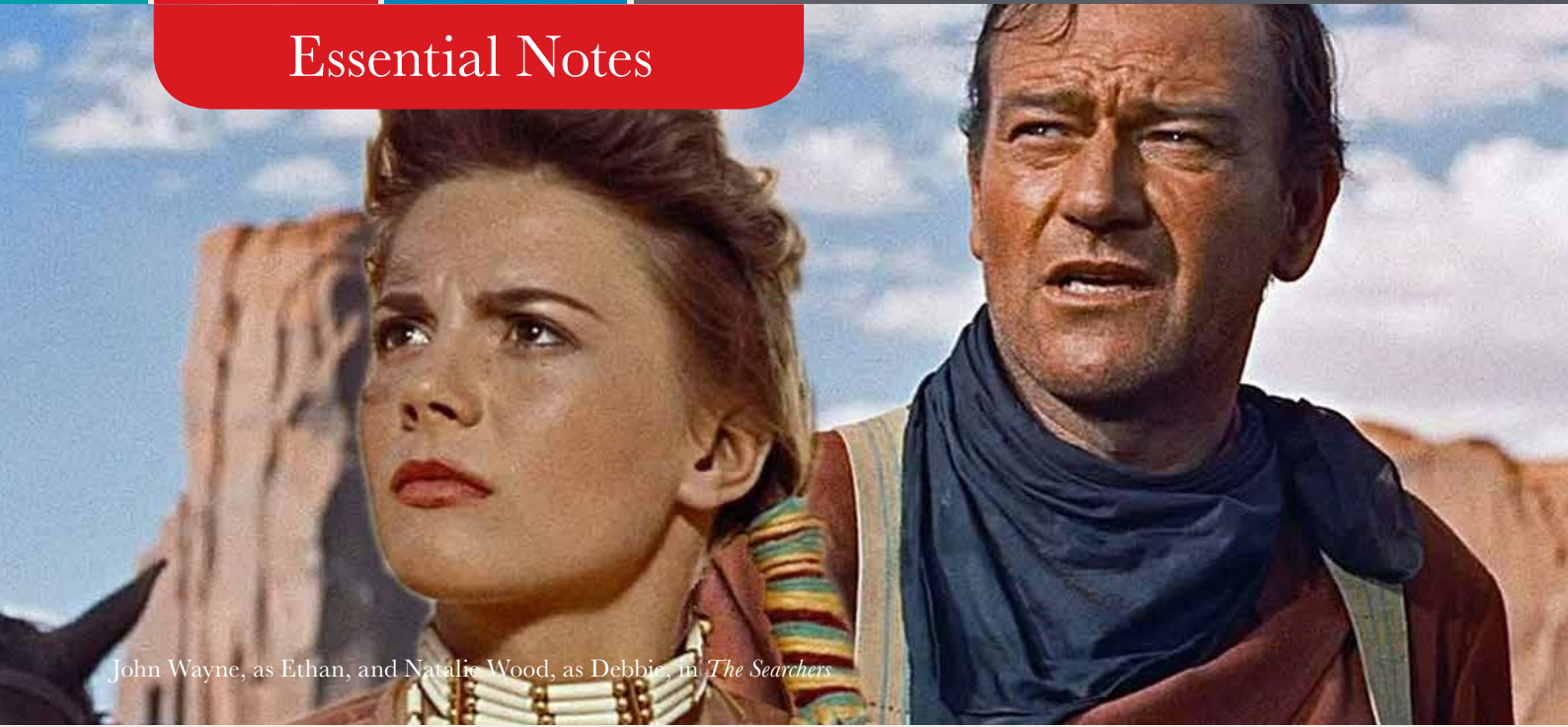
## Theme

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- Personal Response:** Smith has obviously been affected deeply by John Ford’s film *The Searchers*. Choose a film that you found emotional or thought provoking. Write a brief essay about your response to this film.
- Class Discussion:** Lines 24 to 25 suggest that none of us actually ‘own’ our lives. Discuss this statement as a class. In what different ways might it be true? Is this lack of ownership necessarily a bad thing?
- Theme Talk:** Consider the phrase ‘What does living do to any of us?’ What does it suggest about existence? Is the poem’s view of life, overall, an optimistic or a pessimistic one?
- Exam Focus:** ‘This poem uses startling imagery to reflect on the strangeness, risks and possibilities of living.’ Write a short essay in response to this statement.



## Essential Notes



John Wayne, as Ethan, and Natalie Wood, as Debbie, in *The Searchers*

### A murderous desire

This poem is inspired by *The Searchers*, an epic western set in Texas during the 1870s. The film's main character, played by John Wayne, is Ethan Edwards, a middle-aged veteran of several wars. Ethan harbours an intense hatred of the Comanche tribe of Native Americans, whom he regards as sub-human savages.

Ethan, then, is distraught when his niece Debbie is kidnapped by a Comanche raiding party. He sets out to find her, determined to rescue her from his hated enemy and return her to civilisation. The search for Debbie, however, proves a difficult one, lasting about five years and involving many hardships and adventures. Ethan finally tracks Debbie down to a Comanche encampment. But he is shocked to discover that she has no desire to be rescued. She has embraced the ways and language of the Comanche and now considers herself to be a member of Comanche society.

The poem's opening describes how Ethan, after making this discovery, is filled with the desire to shoot Debbie then and there: 'He wants to kill her'. Debbie, as Ethan sees it, is now a Comanche rather than a 'proper' human being. But there's a sense, too, in which Ethan wants to kill Debbie simply for 'surviving'. Debbie, after all, simply adapted to the circumstances and did what she needed to do to survive. Adopting the ways of the Comanche allowed her to be accepted by her captors and live a fruitful life among them.

### A return to civilisation

Ethan, thankfully, overcomes his desire to kill Debbie. She may have become a Comanche but she is still his own flesh and blood. 'Instead' of shooting her, he 'grabs her' and hoists her on to his saddle. Ethan then 'rides back/ Into town', returning Debbie to the little settlement where she lived before the Comanche took her all those years ago.

Smith imagines how Debbie might react on her return to town. Debbie, Smith suggests, would 'barely remember' the faces of the townspeople she once knew well. She would, after her years among the Comanche, find the town a rather alien environment, one that fills her with 'fear' and unease. Smith also imagines how the townspeople might react when they see Debbie has been returned to them. They would 'smile', delighted to see that Debbie is safe and sound. They would, no doubt, be intensely curious and would have many 'questions' about her time with the Comanche.

But the townspeople would also, Smith believes, be eager to move on from this incident. They would like things to go back to the way they were. They would like Debbie, perhaps after a brief period of readjustment, to start acting like she had never been away. But such a traumatic incident, of course, will not easily be forgotten, either by the townspeople or by Debbie herself. The 'wish to forget', as Smith points out, is an 'impossible' one.

## The American landscape

Smith turns her attention to the 'land' of America itself, to the hills, plains and valleys that make up that sprawling continent. Smith personifies the land, presenting it as being capable of thinking and observing, of giving and resisting. The land, we're told, 'Watched' the so-called 'Indian Wars' of the 19th century. This conflict, which saw the United States expand westwards across the American continent, conquering and displacing the indigenous tribal societies that had lived there for hundreds of years, forms the backdrop to *The Searchers*. The land, it seems, watched this conflict in a casual, almost distracted fashion. The land didn't care whether it was claimed by white settlers or by the native tribes. Indeed, the land we sense, had no interest in such human concepts of ownership.

The land, then, offered no resistance as the United States claimed ever more territory, as the 'frontier' or border between settler and native crept ever further westwards: 'Look at the frontier it didn't resist'. Indeed, the land 'Gave' the same treatment to settler and native, offering both the opportunity to survive and thrive, to farm and cultivate: 'Gave anyone the chance/ To plant shrubs, dig wells'.

## Focus On Theme: Racial Hatred and Life's Challenges

The story of Ethan and Debbie highlights how powerful racial hatred can be. Here is a man so consumed by hatred of another ethnic group, in this case the Comanche tribe, that he's almost willing to kill his own niece for embracing their ways. And such fanatical hatred of the 'other', we sadly realise, is all too common not only throughout history but also in our own troubled times.

The poem also reminds us of the great historical suffering endured by the Native American population in the 19th century. We remember how the 'frontier' between the white settlers and the indigenous peoples shifted further and further west as the settlers seized more and more land. The settlers, then, dug wells and planted shrubs on lands that had once belonged to the natives. The natives themselves, meanwhile, were conquered, displaced and exterminated.

Life, Smith acknowledges, can be difficult and challenging. Life is compared to a horse that each of us must ride but that none of us can easily control. Life is like an enormous 'beast', one that can 'wreck us easily' in both body and mind, smashing us as if we were 'cheap toys'. It fills us with trauma that we long to forget but that we can't easily put out of our minds. Smith finds herself wondering, therefore, why we continue to 'grip' our lives, like a rider might 'grip' an unruly horse. Why do we attempt to steer our lives when we know that life can be so unpredictable and uncontrollable?

Smith suggests that we adopt a more spiritual attitude to life and its difficulties. We shouldn't simply give up on life. Nor should we attempt to control everything around us. Instead, we should embrace an outlook that emphasises humility and acceptance. In this regard we must be like the land of America itself. The land, as Smith presents it, realised there was nothing it could do to slow or alter the advance of the American settlers into the west. It, therefore, offered no resistance to the white man's march. We, like the land, must go on living even as everything changes all around us. We must continue to enjoy life as best we can, by focusing on its positive aspects.

## Focus On Technique

'The Searchers', like many of Smith's poems, is rich in figures of speech. Smith, for instance, uses a conceit or **extended metaphor**, comparing each of our lives to a powerful, unruly horse that we must ride. This comparison might strike us initially as strange and unexpected. But it powerfully captures how chaotic and unpredictable each of our lives can suddenly become, how difficult it can be to remain in control of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

A **simile**, meanwhile, features in line 21 where Smith describes how riders thrown from a powerful horse would have their bodies broken like 'cheap toys'. Another powerful simile features when Smith describes Debbie fleeing from Ethan during the film's climactic scene: 'clutching/ Her skirt as if life pools there'. Life, in these lines, is presented as some strange but precious liquid. Debbie's upturned skirt, meanwhile, is presented as a flimsy vessel in which such a liquid might be carried. Debbie, we sense, must run as quickly as she can without spilling a drop of this priceless substance. This is a strange but memorable image, one that powerfully conveys both the fragility of life and Debbie's desperation to survive.

## A Call

'Hold on,' she said, 'I'll just run out and get him.  
The weather here's so good, he took the chance  
To do a bit of weeding.'

So I saw him

Down on his hands and knees beside the leek rig, [5]  
Touching, inspecting, separating one  
Stalk from the other, gently pulling up  
Everything not tapered, frail and leafless,  
Pleased to feel each little weed-root break,  
But rueful also ... [10]

Then found myself listening to  
The amplified grave ticking of hall clocks  
Where the phone lay unattended in a calm  
Of mirror glass and sunstruck pendulums ...

And found myself then thinking: if it were nowadays, [15]  
This is how Death would summon Everyman.

Next thing he spoke and I nearly said I loved him.

## Exploring the Poem

1. The poet makes a phone call to his elderly father:
  - a. Someone else answers the phone. Who do you think this might be?
  - b. What has prompted the father to work in the garden?
  - c. How do we know that the poet has called an old-fashioned landline, rather than a mobile phone?
2. As he waits for his father to come to the phone, the poet imagines his father working in the garden:
  - a. With what vegetables does he imagine the father to be working?
  - b. What phrases suggest that the father searches for weeds with great focus and attention?
  - c. The poet imagines that his father experiences contrasting emotions when he plucks the weeds. What emotions does he imagine him experiencing?
3. The poet imagines the hallway in which his father's landline phone is located:
  - a. Suggest why more than one clock might be audible in this hallway.
  - b. What might have caused the clocks to sound 'amplified'?
  - c. Do you think the poet knows this particular hallway well?
4. The poet reflects on the medieval story of Everyman:
  - a. In the story, who or what summoned Everyman?
  - b. By means of what technology, according to the poet, would Death summon Everyman today?
  - c. What do these reflections suggest about the father's age and physical well-being?

## Focus on Technique

5. The description of the hall is richly atmospheric. Identify three words or phrases that contribute to this **atmosphere**. How would you characterise this atmosphere overall? Is it sombre and forbidding, or peaceful and soothing?
6. Heaney is a poet of careful **word choice**. What three adjectives does he use to describe the leeks? What does each suggest about the leeks' appearance?
7. 'The **allusion** to the story of Everyman reminds us that time is fleeting and that we must express our love towards those around us while we can.' Discuss this statement as a class.

## Focus on Theme

8. What does the poet want to say to his father when he finally comes to the phone? Does he actually say what he intends to? What does this suggest about the nature of their relationship?
9. 'Heaney provides us with subtle but significant hints regarding the father's personality.' Discuss this statement as a class.
10. Using one of these as an opening, write about the overall mood of the poem:
  - I think this is a happy poem because...
  - I think this is a sad poem because...

### Annotations

[5] *leek rig*: a structure around the plot where the leeks are growing. [8] *tapered*: becoming thinner towards one end.

[10] *rueful*: sad, regretful. [14] *pendulum*: a swinging weight that regulates the mechanism of a clock.

[16] *Death would summon Everyman*: refers to the 15th-century play *Everyman*, in which a character called Everyman, representing all mankind, is summoned by Death and must journey to the next life.



## Essential Notes



### The poet phones his father

In this poem the poet remembers a phone call he made to his father. This call would have been placed in the mid-1980s, between the death of the poet's mother in 1984 and the father's own death in 1986. Heaney was living in Dublin at the time, while his father continued to reside in Co. Derry.

The poem, of course, is set at a time before mobile phones were widespread. The poet, therefore, called his father's landline telephone, which was located in the hallway. The call was answered by a female voice, one belonging to a carer who was looking after the widowed father during the final years of his life. The carer told the poet that the father was busy gardening. She asked the poet to hold the line while she fetched the father from the garden: "Hold on," she said, "I'll just run out and get him."

The poet, while he waited, pictured his father gardening. The poet imagined his father kneeling beside a 'rig' or bed of leeks: 'So I saw him/ Down on his hands and knees beside the leek rig'. He imagined the father closely examining each leek plant, searching carefully for any weeds growing between them: 'Touching, inspecting, separating one/ Stalk from the other'. He imagined his father removing any weeds that he came across, being careful to pluck them by the roots so they would not grow back.

We sense that the father approached the work of weeding with real care and finesse. We sense that he was not one for half measures and felt satisfaction in a job well done: 'Pleased to feel each little weed-root break'. We sense that the father had a great love for the leeks that he took such pains to grow, that he really appreciated these graceful, fragile plants. This is evident in the careful, almost reverential manner the poet imagines him handling the leeks. Surprisingly, perhaps, the father's love for plant-life extended to the weeds themselves, for he would also, the poet imagines, have been 'rueful' or regretful at having to eliminate these unwelcome intruders in the leek-bed.

### Imagining the father's hallway

It seems that there were several clocks in the father's hallway. As the poet waited for his father to come to the phone, he could hear them ticking. Their sound, it seemed to him, was 'amplified', or made to seem louder, by the hallway's emptiness, by the absence of human voices or other sounds.

The poet, as he continued to wait, imagined what the hallway must look like on this sunlit afternoon. He imagined the phone's receiver lying 'unattended' on the hall table. He imagined sunlight striking the pendulums of the clocks and reflecting from the hall mirror. The hallway, the poet imagined, must have been a calm or soothing environment at this particular moment.

## A flight of fancy

The poet, as he waited, found himself thinking of *Everyman*, a famous 15th-century play. The play's main character, known simply as Everyman, is confronted by a personification of Death. Death informs Everyman that his life is over, that it is time for him to journey from this world to the next. Death, it is important to note, takes Everyman by surprise, appearing at a time when he least expects it. Everyman, of course, as his name suggests, represents every human being, reminding us that we will all eventually be summoned by Death, and often at an unexpected moment.

The poet, as he continued to wait, found himself imagining an updated version of *Everyman*, one that featured modern technology. In the original play, Death simply manifested himself, appearing before Everyman as a dark, ominous figure. But in a modernised version, Death would simply summon Everyman over the phone, making an unexpected call to tell him that his time here on Earth was up: 'if it were nowadays,/ This is how Death would summon Everyman.'

This flight of fancy was interrupted when the father finally comes to the phone, picks up the receiver and speaks to the poet: 'Next thing he spoke'. The poet, at that moment, felt the urge to tell his ageing father how much he loved him. But the poet, crucially, only 'nearly' expressed these feelings. He couldn't quite bring himself to actually utter these words of love.

## Focus on Theme: Awareness of Death

The poet, during this call, clearly appreciates that his father's life is coming to a close, and is deeply sorrowful at this realisation. The poet's description of the leeks as 'frail' and 'tapered' suggests his awareness of his father's own frailty as he nears the end of his life. The description of the weeds being plucked and broken, meanwhile, suggests how the father will soon be metaphorically plucked and broken by death. The 'ticking' clocks remind us that the father's life is counting down towards its end. The description of this ticking as 'grave', suggests that it is a solemn, serious noise, but also calls to mind the grave in which the father will all too soon be buried.

The poet's musings on *Everyman* reinforce this sense of finality. For the poet understands that his father will all too soon be subject to death's unwelcome summons. It is this heightened awareness of mortality, no doubt, that causes the poet's desire to express his feelings, to tell his father how much he loved him.

Why then does he fail to express his feelings when his father comes to the phone? Perhaps it's a question of masculinity; perhaps the poet, like many men of this time, is uncomfortable with such expressions of emotion. Perhaps it's a generational issue; for the poet grew up in a time when fathers and sons rarely articulated their feelings for one another. Perhaps it relates, too, to the father's personality, for Heaney has described his father as someone with a contempt for speech, someone uncomfortable not only with expressions of love, but with any expressions at all. The poet, no doubt, felt that any expression of his feelings would have resulted in an uncomfortable silence on the other end of the phone. The poet's love, then, is destined to remain tragically unspoken.

## Focus on Technique

The poem generates a gentle, soothing **atmosphere**. The poet depicts the father's hallway as a place of stillness and light, a place of serenity and ease, one where sunlight is reflected from mirrors and pendulums, where silence is only ever broken by the ticking of the clock.

Heaney's use of **euphony** contributes to this soothing atmosphere. We see this in the phrase 'sunstruck pendulums', where the repeated 'u' and 's' sounds create a soothing effect. A similar effect is created by the repeated 'a' sounds in 'a calm/ Of mirror glass'.

There is an element of **onomatopoeia** in the 'amplified grave ticking of hall clocks', where the repeated hard consonants suggest the sound of a slowly ticking clock.





## Paul Muldoon

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Paul Muldoon was born in County Armagh in 1951. Muldoon's father was a labourer and gardener, and his mother was a schoolteacher. Muldoon began writing poems in his teenage years and went on to study at Queen's University, Belfast, where he was tutored by poet and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney.

At age 19, Muldoon completed his first collection of poems, *Knowing My Place* (1971). He graduated in 1973 and then worked for BBC Belfast as a radio and television producer until 1986. Following the death of his father in 1987, Muldoon emigrated to the United States. He and his family settled in Princeton, New Jersey, where he taught creative writing.

A prolific writer, Muldoon has published over thirty volumes of poetry, essays and song lyrics. Widely considered to be one of the most original and inventive poets of his generation, Muldoon has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the T.S. Eliot Prize.

Asked about what inspires great poetry, Muldoon said: 'Great poems come from that area: ignorance. When I teach at Princeton, for example, I tell my students, "What we want to really work on now, is what you don't know: the condition of not knowing." There are many people who write poems who've not got their heads around this idea, and who actually think that they know what they're doing. I really believe that the minute one thinks one knows what one's doing – actually, in any department of life – one's probably making a terrible mistake.'

## The Loaf

When I put my finger to the hole they've cut for a dimmer switch  
in a wall of plaster stiffened with horsehair  
it seems I've scratched a two-hundred-year-old itch

*with a pink and a pink and a pinkie-pick.*

When I put my ear to the hole I'm suddenly aware  
of spades and shovels turning up the gain  
all the way from Raritan to the Delaware

[5]

*with a clink and a clink and a clinky-click.*

When I put my nose to the hole I smell the floodplain  
of the canal after a hurricane  
and the spots of green grass where thousands of Irish have lain

[10]

*with a stink and a stink and a stinky-stick.*

When I put my eye to the hole I see one holding horse dung to the rain  
in the hope, indeed, indeed,  
of washing out a few whole ears of grain

[15]

*with a wink and a wink and a winkie-wick.*

And when I do at last succeed  
in putting my mouth to the horsehair-fringed niche  
I can taste the small loaf of bread he baked from that whole seed

*with a link and a link and a linky-lick.*

[20]

[1] **dimmer switch:** a switch that can adjust the brightness of an electrical light as well as turning it on and off.

[2] **plaster stiffened with horsehair:** In the past, horsehair was used as an insulating material.

[6] **turning up the gain:** increasing in volume.

[7] **from Raritan to Delaware:** The Raritan is a river in New Jersey. The Delaware is a river in the western United States. In the 1830s, a canal was dug between them. Many Irish immigrants workers died while working on the project.

[9] **floodplain:** an area of flatland that tends to flood when a nearby river becomes too full

[15] **ear:** the grain-bearing part of the stem of a cereal plant

[18] **niche:** a hollow in a wall

## Tease It Out

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1. A hole has when been cut in the wall of the poet's rather old New Jersey home:
  - a. What is the purpose of this hole?
  - b. Why was horsehair placed in the wall's cavity? For how long has the horsehair been there?
  - c. What itch, in the opinion of the class, is the poet scratching when he places his hand in the hole?
2. The poet, when he puts his ear to the hole, imagines he can hear Irish immigrant workmen from New Jersey's past:
  - a. When did these workmen live? On what major project were they employed?
  - b. What tools did they use?
  - c. What phrase suggests that the sound of their labours, as the poet imagines it, is getting louder?
3. The poet then 'puts [his] nose' to the hole:
  - a. What do you understand by the term floodplain?
  - b. What weather event, as the poet imagines it, has just occurred around the Raritan-Delaware Canal floodplain? How might this impact the floodplain's smell?
  - c. What phrase suggests that many Irish workers were buried on this floodplain?
4. The poet, when he looks into the hole, imagines that he can see an Irish immigrant workman who laboured on the canal in the 19th Century:
  - a. What does this immigrant hope is contained within a lump of horse dung?
  - b. What does he hope to accomplish by holding the horse dung to the rain?
  - c. Does the poet think it's likely that he'll succeed? Give a reason for your answer.

## Technique

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5. Working in groups, can you identify the poem's rather complex **rhyme scheme**? Describe in your own words how each of the poem's stanzas appeals to a different sense.
6. Working as a class, comment on the poem's **refrain**, on the similar-sounding lines that occur after each stanza:
  - Would you agree that the refrains have a nursery rhyme quality?
  - How many of these rather cryptic statements can the class make sense of?
  - Suggest why the poet chose to print these refrains in italics.
7. Consider the poem's **tone**. Do you imagine the poet speaking in a serious tone or in a light-hearted one? Give a reason for your answer.

## Theme

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8. 'This poem emphasises the intense connection that the poet, as an Irish immigrant to New Jersey, feels with the previous generations of Irish immigrants who have come before.' Write a paragraph in response to this statement.
9. 'This poem is a flight of fancy, one that sees the poet's imagination skip from image to image in a playful but emotional fashion.' Would you agree with this view of 'The Loaf'? Give a reason for your answer.
10. 'The poem concludes on an image of triumph, as an impoverished Irish immigrant bakes a small loaf of bread from a seed recovered from horse dung.' Discuss this statement as a class. What does the poem suggest about the resilience and success of the Irish in America?

## Essential Notes



### A hole in the wall

The poet has emigrated from County Armagh to the United States. He is living in a period house in New Jersey, one that was built in the 18th Century:

- Some workmen have cut a hole in one of the house's walls, into which a dimmer switch will be installed.
- The poet puts a 'finger to the hole' and realises that the cavity inside the wall is filled with horsehair. The horsehair, he knows, was used to stiffen the plaster and must have been in the wall since the house was constructed over two centuries ago.
- He picks at this horsehair with his 'pinky' or little finger: *'with a pink and a pink and a pinkie-pick'*. As he does so, he feels he is scratching an itch of some kind. Perhaps this is a metaphorical itch, one that describes his need or desire to connect with his own past.
- Or perhaps, in a flight of fancy, imagines that the horse from which the hair was taken has itself been trapped in the wall for more than two centuries. Perhaps he imagines that the horse must be itchy after all this time, and is in need of a good scratch.

### Imagining the Irish labourers

The poet then puts his ear to the hole in the wall. When he does so, he imagines that he can hear the sound of Irish labourers from the 1830s, specifically those who worked on the canal that connects the Raritan and Delaware Rivers. He can hear, he insists, the clinking, clicking sound of their 'spades and shovels' as they cut through the landscape nearly two centuries ago: *'with a clink and clink and a clinky click'*. This sound, he suggests, is 'turning up the gain', becoming louder and louder the longer he stands there with his ear against the hole.

The poet now puts his 'nose to the hole'. When he does so, he imagines that he can smell the canal's 'floodplain', the area adjacent to the canal that tends to flood. He specifically imagines that he's smelling the floodplain after a great storm, at a time when its grasses would be wet and fragrant. He imagines, too, that he can smell the graves of the Irish labourers who worked on the canal, the 'spots of green grass' along the canal where 'thousands of Irish' were laid to rest.

Many of these men, no doubt, were victims of the terrible cholera epidemic that struck in 1832. But others would have died in accidents or due to malnourishment and poor working conditions. These poor labourers, the poet reminds us, would have received no headstones or memorials. Instead, their graves were marked only by a 'stinky stick', by a wooden cross that rotted quickly in the rain.



## Imagining an Irish immigrant

The poet now puts his 'eye to the hole'. The poet, it seems, winks or closes one eye when he peers into the cavity. He is using a candle, one whose wick constantly flickers and threatens to extinguish itself: 'with a wink and wink and a winkle-wick'. When the poet looks inside, he imagines that he can see one of the impoverished labourers who worked on the canal. This poor immigrant, utterly starving and destitute, is holding a lump of 'horse dung to the rain'. The poor immigrant does so in the belief that the horse might have eaten some 'ears of grain' that managed to pass 'whole' through its digestive tract. The immigrant's hope, then, is that the rain will rinse the dung away, leaving only the whole seeds in his hands. The poet, as he contemplates this imaginary scene, doesn't seem hopeful that the immigrant's plan will succeed. His comment 'indeed, indeed' suggests his scepticism, his belief that the desperate immigrant is unlikely to end up with the seeds that he desires.

Finally, the poet puts his mouth to the 'niche' or hole. When he does so, he declares, he can taste the 'small loaf of bread' that the poor immigrant managed to bake from 'that whole seed'. The poor immigrant, as the poet imagines it, did indeed manage to locate a seed within his lump of horse dung. He then planted and cultivated the seed until it produced a few strands of wheat. Finally, he harvested the wheat and made himself a loaf of bread.

The poet, as he licks the horsehair, imagines that the taste of this very loaf is in his mouth. His lick, then, is a 'linky-lick'. For it links or connects him with the past. It specifically connects him with the generations of immigrants who, like him, travelled from Ireland to New Jersey.

## Focus On Theme: Conjuring Up the Past

'The Loaf' offers an important reflection on our connection with the past. The poet, an immigrant from Ireland to New Jersey, experiences a deep sense of connection with all the previous immigrants who made similar trips before him. He focuses especially on the hardship experienced by the Irish labourers who dug the Raritan–Delaware canal in the 19th Century, describing their dreadful working conditions, their deaths upon the plain and the terrible hunger they endured. But he also salutes their resilience and ingenuity, notably when he imagines how one immigrant turned a lump of horse-dung into a loaf of bread.

The poem can be regarded as a flight of fancy; one that sees the poet's imagination run away with him as he contemplates the hole that was made for the dimmer switch. But the poem also illustrates the poet's intense feeling that he is closely connected to these fellow immigrants from the past. These previous generations are so real to him that he can almost hear, see and smell them as he studies his horsehair-filled wall. Indeed, the poem depicts the past so vividly that we have to remind ourselves that most of it takes place only in the poet's imagination.

## Focus On Technique

The poem is written in a **form** known as 'terza rima', where the second line of each stanza rhymes with the first and third lines of the stanza that comes after. Therefore 'horsehair', in stanza one, rhymes with 'aware' and 'Delaware' in stanza two, while 'gain' in stanza 2 rhymes with 'floodplain' and 'lain' in stanza 3. The final stanza's 'Niche' rhymes with the opening stanza's 'switch' and 'itch', lending the poem a kind of circular form.

Each of the five stanzas, it should be noted, is devoted to one of the five senses: touch, hearing, smell, sight and taste. And each stanza is followed by a refrain, set apart by being printed in italics, that has an almost nursery rhyme quality. The refrain, we sense, might echo the working songs sung by the Irish immigrants who dug the canals of New Jersey in times gone by.

The poem is rich in **vivid imagery**: the horse trapped in the wall, the floodplain covered with Irish graves, a man who so hungry that he attempts to flush ears of grain from a piece of horse dung. The poem, we sense, is very much a flight of fancy. We can picture how the poet, as he contemplates the hole made for the dimmer switch, might let his mind drift from one image to another. The texture of the horsehair makes him think of an actual horse trapped in the wall, which in turn leads him to think of horse dung. The thought of the Irish workers digging New Jersey's canals leads him to think of their graves upon the floodplain. And both of these trains of thought combine in the image of the man holding up the horse-dung to the rain, in the loaf that gives the poem its rather mysterious title.

# Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin: Sample Answer

## Street

### 1. (a) Why do you think the man falls in love with the butcher's daughter? Explain your answer. (10 marks)

I think the man is fascinated by the butcher's daughter. She seems to occupy two worlds, the tough, masculine environment of the butcher's and the domestic, relaxing environment of her home: 'the stairs were brushed and clean, / Her shoes paired on the bottom step'. She also cuts a striking figure on the street: 'he saw her passing by in her while trousers/ Dangling a knife on a ring at her belt'. I think he is drawn to the dual aspect of her personality and the mystery she represents.

### (b) Based on your reading of the poem, how would you describe the character of the butcher's daughter? (10 marks)

I think the butcher's daughter is a loyal person, as she has followed her father into the butcher's trade. This also gives the impression that she is a tough person, unaffected by the violence of her job: 'Dangling a knife on a ring at her belt'. She even seems to drip blood as she walks along: 'He stared at the dark shining drops on the paving-stones'.

However, there is another, more domestic side to the butcher's daughter that we see in the second stanza. The man trails her to her home: 'One day he followed her/ Down the slanting lane at the back of the shambles./ A door stood half-open'. The stairs leading up to her flat are immaculate, contrasting with her blood-stained clothing: 'the stairs were brushed and clean'. She seems to discard the baggage of the working day as she climbs the stairs to her home: 'Each tread marked with the red crescent/ Her bare heels left, fainting to faintest at the top'. I imagine that the butcher's daughter's private life is very different to her working life.

### (c) Pick out an image that you find effective, and explain why you like it. (10 marks)

My favourite image from the poem is that of the 'dark shining drops on the paving-stones'. As the butcher's daughter walks home after working at the butcher's all day, she leaves a trail of blood behind her. The man in the poem is fascinated by this: 'He stared at the dark shining drops on the paving-stones'. Though a trail of blood is usually a dark and violent image, here it is portrayed in a romantic light, the 'dark shining drops' almost like jewels on the pavement. It's because of this surprising and original twist that I find the image effective.

### 2. (b) Why, in your opinion, did Eilean Ni Chuilleanáin choose to call the poem 'Street'? Illustrate your answer by referring to the poem. (20 marks)

I think the title 'Street' underlines the fact that this is a chance encounter between the man and the butcher's daughter. They are just two strangers passing each other in the street: 'He fell in love with the butcher's daughter/ When he saw her passing by'. The street also plays an important part in the landscape of the poem. First we have the image of the trail of blood on the footpath: 'He stared at the dark shining drops on the paving-stones'. The man's fascination with the butcher's daughter leads to him following her home. The poet gives a beautiful description of the side-street where the butcher's daughter lives: 'One day he followed her/ Down the slanting lane at the back of the shambles'.

The street is a public space, and it is significant that the poem ends when the butcher's daughter goes upstairs to the private space of her home. The man can only see the staircase leading to her flat: 'the stairs were brushed and clean ... Each tread marked with the red crescent/ Her bare heels left, fading to faintest at the top.' The man in the poem knows the butcher's daughter only from seeing her on the street, and her domestic side remains a mystery to him.