

Blackberry-Picking – Seamus Heaney



The little things...

Sometimes we miss important moments in writing because other things shout louder for attention. Heaney is so good with his images - both literal and metaphorical - that we can miss other things.

Who is telling us about Blackberry-picking? We know he or she must be there and we assume it's the poet but we only get a hint half way through the poem when the first 'we' appears. After that, 'we' and 'our' come more and more frequently and finally three lines from the end, an 'I'.

The poem begins impersonally. The blackberries are the actors. Then the pronoun 'you' is used. Both of these techniques make the actions neutral, habitual... Nature continues to be the one doing the actions: red ones inked up, briars scratched wet grass bleached. How easily it could have been the other way around: we scratched *ourselves* on briars, bleached *our* shoes in the wet grass.

The poem moves from the general reminiscence, where it just happened, to it happening to *us* through to the final homing in on 'I'.

Although the writing has this neutral quality, the descriptions are anything but general. As ever, Heaney's descriptive language is powerfully evocative. And it seems to me that the descriptions of nature also change. Gradually, they alter from a style that is almost like a text book ('Late August...') through to the details of ripening fruit, to the entry of the human and finally the entirely personal 'I' - the feelings of the writer.

How to draw students' attention to this without just telling them? Perhaps show them the poem - with everything concealed except the pronouns. Then all the verbs removed. You may have to use some leading questions. Another approach would be to ask students to view this as a film maker might. How could you get this across in film terms? Perhaps showing just the fruit at the beginning, then anonymous hands and feet - the odd red smeared mouth - then the rotting berries and only in the last few frames, the boy looking sadly at his cache?

I don't like the business of imagery spotting - but Heaney is SO good it's hard not to make a list and luxuriate in it for once

glossy purple clot
thickened wine
summer's blood
inked up

big dark blobs burned like a plate of
eyes
palms sticky as Bluebeard's
rat-grey fungus

...wow! I can feel the smeary sticky crimson on my fingers.