

GCSE

English Literature
Poetry Anthology Three
Seamus Heaney and
Thomas Hardy

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ANTHOLOGY THREE:
SEAMUS HEANEY AND
THOMAS HARDY

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Thatcher

Bespoke for weeks, he turned up some morning
Unexpectedly, his bicycle slung
With a light ladder and a bag of knives.
He eyed the old rigging, poked at the eaves,

Opened and handled sheaves of lashed wheat-straw.
Next, the bundled rods: hazel and willow
Were flicked for weight, twisted in case they'd snap.
It seemed he spent the morning warming up:

Then fixed the ladder, laid out well-honed blades
And snipped at straw and sharpened ends of rods
That, bent in two, made a white-pronged staple
For pinning down his world, handful by handful.

Couchant for days on sods above the rafters,
He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together
Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,
And left them gaping at his Midas touch.

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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.

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At a Potato Digging (Section 1)

A mechanical digger wrecks the drill,
 Spins up a dark shower of roots and mould.
 Labourers swarm in behind, stoop to fill
 Wicker creels. Fingers go dead in the cold.

Like crows attacking crow-black fields, they stretch
 A higgledy line from hedge to headland;
 Some pairs keep breaking ragged ranks to fetch
 A full creel to the pit and straighten, stand

Tall for a moment but soon stumble back
 To fish a new load from the crumbled surf.
 Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black
 Mother. Processional stooping through the turf

Recur mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
 Of fear and homage to the famine god
 Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
 Make a seasonal altar of the sod.

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Last Look
(in memoriam E. G.)

We came upon him, stilled
 and oblivious,
 gazing into a field
 of blossoming potatoes,
 his trouser bottoms wet
 and flecked with grass seed.
 Crowned blunt-headed weeds
 that flourished in the verge
 flailed against our car
 but he seemed not to hear
 in his long watchfulness
 by the clifftop fuchsias.

He paid no heed that day,
 no more than if he were
 sheep's wool on barbed wire
 or an old lock of hay
 combed from a passing load
 by a bush in the roadside.

He was back in his twenties,
 travelling Donegal
 in the grocery cart
 of *Gallagher and Son,*
Merchant, Publican,
Retail and Import.
 Flourbags, nosebags, buckets
 of water for the horse
 in every whitewashed yard.
 Drama between hedges
 if he met a Model Ford.

(continued overleaf)

If Niamh had ridden up
to make the wide strand sweet
with inviting Irish,
weaving among hoofbeats
and hoofmarks on the wet
dazzle and blaze,
I think not even she
could have drawn him out
from the covert of his gaze.

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An Advancement of Learning

I took the embankment path
 (As always, deferring
 The bridge). The river nosed past,
 Pliable, oil-skinned, wearing

A transfer of gables and sky.
 Hunched over the railing,
 Well away from the road now, I
 Considered the dirty-keeled swans.

Something slobbered curtly, close,
 Smudging the silence: a rat
 Slimed out of the water and
 My throat sickened so quickly that

I turned down the path in cold sweat
 But God, another was nimbling
 Up the far bank, tracing its wet
 Arcs on the stones. Incredibly then

I established a dreaded
 Bridgehead. I turned to stare
 With deliberate, thrilled care
 At my hitherto snubbed rodent.

He clockworked aimlessly a while,
 Stopped, back bunched and glistening,
 Ears plastered down on his knobbed skull,
 Insidiously listening.

The tapered tail that followed him,
 The raindrop eye, the old snout:
 One by one I took all in.
 He trained on me. I stared him out

Forgetting how I used to panic
 When his grey brothers scraped and fed
 Behind the hen-coop in our yard,
 On ceiling boards above my bed.

This terror, cold, wet-furred, small-clawed,
 Retreated up a pipe for sewage.
 I stared a minute after him.
 Then I walked on and crossed the bridge.

Trout

Hangs, a fat gun-barrel,
 deep under arched bridges
 or slips like butter down
 the throat of the river.

From depths smooth-skinned as plums
 his muzzle gets bull's eye;
 picks off grass-seed and moths
 that vanish, torpedoed.

Where water unravels
 over gravel-beds he
 is fired from the shallows
 white belly reporting

flat; darts like a tracer –
 bullet back between stones
 and is never burnt out.
 A volley of cold blood

ramrodding the current.

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The Old Workman

“Why are you so bent down before your time,
 Old mason? Many have not left their prime
 So far behind at your age, and can still
 Stand full upright at will.”

He pointed to the mansion-front hard by,
 And to the stones of the quoin against the sky;
 “Those upper blocks,” he said, “that there you see,
 It was that ruined me.”

There stood in the air up to the parapet
 Crowning the corner height, the stones as set
 By him — ashlar whereon the gales might drum
 For centuries to come.

“I carried them up,” he said, “by a ladder there;
 The last was as big a load as I could bear;
 But on I heaved; and something in my back
 Moved, as ‘twere with a crack.

“So I got crookt. I never lost that sprain;
And those who live there, walled from wind and rain
By freestone that I lifted, do not know
 That my life’s ache came so.

“They don’t know me, or even know my name,
But good I think it, somehow, all the same
To have kept ‘em safe from harm, and right and tight,
 Though it has broke me quite.

“Yes; that I fixed it firm up there I am proud,
Facing the hail and snow and sun and cloud,
And to stand storms for ages, beating round
 When I lie underground.”

Wagtail And Baby

A baby watched a ford, whereto
 A wagtail came for drinking;
A blaring bull went wading through,
 The wagtail showed no shrinking.

A stallion splashed his way across,
 The birdie nearly sinking;
He gave his plumes a twitch and toss,
 And held his own unblinking.

Next saw the baby round the spot
 A mongrel slowly slinking;
The wagtail gazed, but faltered not
 In dip and sip and prinking.

A perfect gentleman then neared;
 The wagtail, in a winking,
With terror rose and disappeared;
 The baby fell a-thinking.

A Sheep Fair

The day arrives of the autumn fair,
And torrents fall,
Though sheep in throngs are gathered there,
Ten thousand all,
Sodden, with hurdles round them reared:
And, lot by lot, the pens are cleared,
And the auctioneer wrings out his beard,
And wipes his book, bedrenched and smeared,
And takes the rain from his face with the edge of his hand,
As torrents fall.

The wool of the ewes is like a sponge
With the daylong rain:
Jammed tight, to turn, or lie, or lunge,
They strive in vain.
Their horns are soft as finger-nails,
Their shepherds reek against the rails,
The tied dogs soak with tucked-in tails,
The buyers' hat-brims fill like pails,
Which spill small cascades when they shift their stand
In the daylong rain.

POSTSCRIPT

Time has trailed lengthily since met
At Pummery Fair
Those panting thousands in their wet
And woolly wear:
And every flock long since has bled,
And all the dripping buyers have sped,
And the hoarse auctioneer is dead,
Who 'Going – going!' so often said,
As he consigned to doom each meek, mewed band
At Pummery Fair.

At Castle Boterel

As I drive to the junction of lane and highway,
 And the drizzle bedrenches the wagonette,
 I look behind at the fading byway,
 And see on its slope, now glistening wet,
 Distinctly yet

Myself and a girlish form benighted
 In dry March weather. We climb the road
 Beside a chaise. We had just alighted
 To ease the sturdy pony's load
 When he sighed and slowed.

What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of
 Matters not much, nor to what it led, —
 Something that life will not be balked of
 Without rude reason till hope is dead,
 And feeling fled.

It filled but a minute. But was there ever
 A time of such quality, since or before,
 In that hill's story? To one mind never,
 Though it has been climbed, foot-swift, foot-sore,
 By thousands more.

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
 And much have they faced there, first and last,
 Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
 But what they record in colour and cast
 Is—that we two passed.

And to me, though Time's unflinching rigour,
 In mindless rote, has ruled from sight
 The substance now, one phantom figure
 Remains on the slope, as when that night
 Saw us alight.

I look and see it there, shrinking, shrinking,
 I look back at it amid the rain
 For the very last time; for my sand is sinking,
 And I shall traverse old love's domain
 Never again.

An August Midnight

I

A shaded lamp and a waving blind,
 And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:
 On this scene enter — winged, horned, and spined —
 A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore;
 While 'mid my page there idly stands
 A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands . . .

II

Thus meet we five, in this still place,
 At this point of time, at this point in space.
 — My guests besmear my new-penned line,
 Or bang at the lamp and fall supine.
 “God’s humblest, they!” I muse. Yet why?
 They know Earth-secrets that know not I.

Overlooking The River Stour

The swallows flew in the curves of an eight
 Above the river-gleam
 In the wet June’s last beam:
 Like little crossbows animate
 The swallows flew in the curves of an eight
 Above the river-gleam.

Planing up shavings of crystal spray
 A moor-hen darted out
 From the bank thereabout,
 And through the stream-shine ripped his way;
 Planing up shavings of crystal spray
 A moor-hen darted out.

Closed were the kingcups; and the mead
 Dripped in monotonous green,
 Though the day’s morning sheen
 Had shown it golden and honeybee’d;
 Closed were the kingcups; and the mead
 Dripped in monotonous green.

And never I turned my head, alack,
 While these things met my gaze
 Through the pane’s drop-drenched glaze,
 To see the more behind my back . . .
 O never I turned, but let, alack,
 These less things hold my gaze!