Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and the accused are left speechless and renewed.

—Seamus Heaney, "The Government of the Tongue"

In "Under Ben Bulben," W. B. Yeats in his poetic last will and testament lays down a challenge to those writers who would follow him:

Irish poets, earn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made …
Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries;
Cast your mind on other days
That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

Seamus Heaney has responded to Yeats's charge by singing both "whatever is well made" and the "Irish peasantry." The main divergence between the greatest 20th-century poet in English and its finest living poet is their identifications: Yeats with the Protestant Ascendancy ("hard-riding country gentlemen") and Heaney with the Catholic laboring class of his background. Conflict, however, or what Heaney has called "the brutality of the historical onslaught," is central to both poets. Each has crafted memorable and important poetry out of the exigencies of the Irish past, its politics, and its ongoing search for identity and values. One of Yeats's most important collections is called Responsibilities. The word underscores a shared concern in both poets' attempts to reconcile the opposition between the permanence of art and the historical moment, between the poet's responsibility to his craft and vision and to political, historical, and social realities. Heaney's ongoing engagement with these issues has made him a centrally important modern writer who has managed to transform the personal, local, and at times unimaginable present into timeless and universal art.

Seamus Heaney was born in 1939, the year Yeats died. He was the eldest of nine children, raised on a family farm in County Derry, a Catholic in predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland. Although his family was part of the Catholic majority in their local area, living peaceably with their Protestant neighbors, Heaney was from an early age aware of what he has called the "split culture of Ulster," with Catholics deprived of equal rights, divided between "the marks of English influence and the lure of the native experience, between 'the demesne' [representing British and Loyalist power and privilege] and the bog." This sectarian divide and its impact in the formation of modern Irish identity and politics would shape both Heaney's career and development as a writer. At the age of 11, Heaney left home as a scholarship boarder at Derry's St. Columb's College. Taking advantage of legislative changes that increased educational opportunities for Catholics in Northern Ireland, Heaney, in his words, "emerged from a hidden, a buried life and entered the realm of education." In 1957 he went on to Queen's University, Belfast, where he studied literature and began his encounter with the works of poets such as Robert Frost [86], Ted Hughes, and Patrick Kavanagh who drew on the particulars of place and their native backgrounds to anchor their work. "I learned that my local County Derry experience," Heaney later recalled, "which I had considered archaic and irrelevant to 'the modern world' was to be trusted. They taught me that trust and helped me to articulate it." After receiving a degree in English in 1961 and his teaching certificate in 1962, Heaney taught at a
secondary school for a year before becoming a lecturer in English at St. Joseph's College of Education in Belfast, a position he held from 1963 to 1966. Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, appeared in 1966, the same year he returned to Queen's University as a faculty member.

The poem that opens *Death of a Naturalist*, "Digging," qualifies as a kind of manifesto and poetic credo. Reflecting the continuity and disjunction between himself and memories of his grandfather cutting turf and his father using his spade to harvest potatoes, the speaker observes that "I've no spade to follow men like them," but concludes that his pen will be his tool and "I'll dig with it."

Heaney would state that "Digging" was the first poem he wrote "where I thought my feelings had got into words, or to put it more accurately, where I thought my feel had got into words.... This was the first place where I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of words. I felt I had let down a shaft into real life." The poems in *Death of a Naturalist* would be shaped by the experiences and landscape of his rural upbringing. With titles such as "The Barn," "Blackberry-Picking," and "Churning Day," they are precise evocations of the poet's past and native ground and a search for an understanding of the observer's relationship with that world that is often shown as more disturbing and problematic than initially suspected. Heaney's early poems represent a vivid recovery of the past and its traditions, as well as a nuanced meditation about their meaning. "Bogland," the closing poem from Heaney's second collection, *Door into the Dark* (1969), indicates that the act of digging into layer by layer of accumulated history is a centrally important metaphor for Heaney's understanding Irish consciousness, landscape, and the mission of the Irish poet. Contrasted with the horizontal dimension of the American frontier, Ireland's mythic direction is vertical: "Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downward." Heaney's implied poetic mission is to take on that internal journey in search of the continuity and dialogue between past and present, the local and the universal.

If Heaney's initial poetry is characterized by a Keatsian sensuousness and lyrical evocation of private memories and pastoral experiences, he would find himself more and more compelled to confront wider public issues as the repression of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland spawned escalating and seemingly unending violence beginning in the late sixties. In his third collection, *Wintering Out* (1972), and particularly in *North* (1975), Heaney's focus shifts from the natural, rural world to the harsh and deadly realities of the bigotry and sectarian violence that were crippling Northern Ireland. "From the moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament," Heaney asserted, "... I felt it imperative to discover a field of force which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experiences of poetry ... it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity."

*North*, written with an intention, in Heaney's words, "to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it had never eaten before," has been praised by critic Helen Vendler as "one of the crucial poetic interventions of the twentieth century, ranking with *Prufrock* and *Harmonium* and *North of Boston* in its key role in the history of modern poetry." Poems, such as "Funeral Rites," "Punishment," "Act of Union," "A Constable Calls," and "Exposure," are simultaneously intensely local and universally resonant in their attempt to come to grips with the meaning and significance of the past and a lethal contemporary world.

At the height of the Troubles in 1972, Heaney and his family crossed the border to live outside Dublin where Heaney joined the faculty of Caryfort Teaching Training College, eventually accepting visiting professorships at Harvard and Oxford. Increasingly recognized worldwide as one of the most important contemporary poets, Heaney would continue to confront his responsibilities as a poet and the effectiveness (or futility) of poetry itself in the face of realities he left behind in Northern Ireland. As critic Andrew Murphy has observed, "Heaney ranks as one of a handful of writers who have genuinely struggled to bring their work into some kind of fruitful relationship with the contemporary political situation and its historical antecedents." Heaney's engagement with these issues is evident in the title work of *Station Island* (1984), a poetic sequence in which the speaker, on a pilgrimage of atonement, confronts various figures from his past searching for self-renewal and a direction forward from his survivor's guilt. James Joyce [7], the archetypal Irish exile who rebelled against the nets of family, religion, and nationality claiming his allegiance and threatening to co-opt his art, becomes the speaker's final guide and provides a last word in his quest for an answer to questions of the efficacy of art and the responsibilities of the artist. "The main thing," the spirit urges, "is to write for the joy of it."

Joyce's advice "to swim out on your own and fill the element with signatures on your own frequency," becomes a testament to artistic integrity and the liberating power of the imagination that would frame the next significant stage in Heaney's work in which the paralysis and guilt experienced in confronting the pressing realities of Northern Ireland are modulated by a renewed faith in the power of poetry and the imagination to reconcile differences and discover sustaining truths. Subsequent volumes—*The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Electric Light* (2001), *District and Circle* (2006)—have added to Heaney's reputation as a poet of consequence. Awarded the [Nobel Prize in literature](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2019/) in 1995, joining Yeats as the
second Irish poet so honored, Heaney was praised by the Nobel judges for his creation of "works of lyrical beauty and ethical depths which exalt everyday miracles and the living past." Sustaining a long and productive career as poet, essayist, and translator is Heaney's commitment to the poetic enterprise and the transformative power of his art. "You write books of poems because that is a fulfillment," Heaney has stated, "a making; it's a making sense of your life and it gives achievement, but it also gives you a sense of growth."