



The poet – contextual information about the poet relevant to the poem (AO3)

- Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) was born at his parents' farmhouse, Mossbawn, in County Derry, Northern Ireland, the eldest of nine children.
- His rural upbringing informed much of his early poetry, including 'Blackberry-Picking'.
- As well as being a prolific poet, Heaney also became known as a playwright and translator; his version of the Anglo-Saxon poem 'Beowulf' was particularly successful.
- In 1995, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Connections and contrasts (AO3)

This list is not exhaustive and other comparisons are valid.

'Blackberry-Picking' could be compared and/or contrasted with these poems from the Anthology:

- 'The Schoolboy' by William Blake
Both poems explore themes of childhood, nature and memory.
- 'Drummer Hodge' by Thomas Hardy
Both poems explore themes of childhood, nature and place.
- 'Catrin' by Gillian Clarke
Both poems explore themes of childhood and memory.
- 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' by William Wordsworth
Both poems explore themes of nature, memory and place.

The poem

Content (AO1)

The speaker looks back to childhood, describing how, in late August, when blackberries began to ripen, the taste of the first mature berries gave them the urge to pick more. They recall how they filled any containers they could find, even picking unripe berries, leaving their hands scratched and stained with blackberry juice. They stored their haul in an old bathtub in a cattle shed, but soon the berries began to rot and turn sour. The speaker felt like crying at the unfairness of this and reveals that they did this year after year, hoping the berries would keep their sweetness despite knowing that they wouldn't.

Context (AO3)

'Blackberry-Picking' was included in Heaney's first poetry collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, in 1966. Despite being a late-20th-century writer, Heaney was a traditionalist, and his poetry tends to hark back to the past. In an increasingly urbanised society, much of his early poetry explored rural life and nature. As an Irish Catholic born into a Protestant-run part of the United Kingdom, he was particularly interested in exploring Irish culture. For much of Heaney's life as a writer, Northern Ireland was divided by the violent political conflict known as the Troubles.

Structure and form (AO2)

The two stanzas reflect the contrasting experience the speaker has with picking blackberries: the first describes the speaker's enthusiasm for tasting and picking the blackberries, while the second shows their feelings changing to disgust and disappointment as the berries decay.



Language and imagery (AO2)

- Heaney employs sensory language to convey the experience of picking blackberries vividly.
- Similes are used to show the pleasure of tasting the blackberries – 'sweet / Like thickened wine' – but also suggest feelings of guilt: 'our palms sticky as Bluebeard's'.

Example of analysing a quotation:

Heaney's description of how the blackberries 'burned / Like a plate of eyes' is a striking simile, as it not only suggests the berries' visual resemblance to eyeballs but also implies the speaker's feelings of guilt for picking so many, as if the eyes are watching and judging him.

Key quotations (AO1)

- 'Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen'
- 'a glossy purple clot'
- 'its flesh was sweet / Like thickened wine'
- 'summer's blood was in it'
- 'that hunger / Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots'
- 'big dark blobs burned / Like a plate of eyes'
- 'our palms sticky as Bluebeard's'
- 'we found a fur, / A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache'
- 'the sweet flesh would turn sour'
- 'I always felt like crying'
- 'Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not'

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Key questions to ask about 'Blackberry-Picking'

1. How does Heaney use the first two lines to set up the rest of the poem? (AO1)
2. How does the setting of the poem link to its context? (AO3)
3. Why might Heaney have used the second person in the line 'You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet'? (AO2)
4. What effect does eating the first ripe blackberry have on the speaker? (AO1)
5. Who might Heaney be referring to when he uses the first-person plural, 'we' and 'us'? (AO1/AO3)
6. What is the effect of the personification 'that hunger / Sent us out'? (AO2)
7. What evidence is there that the speaker and the other blackberry pickers are picking unripe blackberries? (AO1)
8. What does Heaney mean when he describes the speaker's hands as 'sticky as Bluebeard's'? (AO1/AO3)
9. What are the connotations of the words 'hoarded' and 'cache' used to describe the collection of blackberries? (AO2)
10. How does Heaney show the speaker's disgust at the decaying blackberries? (AO1/AO2)
11. What do the words 'always' and 'each year' tell us about the speaker's experience with blackberry picking? (AO1/AO2)
12. What is the effect of the juxtaposition of the verbs 'hoped' and 'knew' in the final line? (AO2)

Links for further research

- [Poetry Foundation biography of Heaney and links to his poems](#)
- [RTÉ tribute to Heaney after his death](#)
- ['Blackberry-Picking' analysis video](#)
- [Podcast episode on 'Blackberry-Picking'](#)

