



## Personal Helicon<sup>1</sup>

*The poem you are going to read belongs to Heaney's first collection and contains his statement of the poet's task.*

Seamus Heaney  
*Death of a Naturalist*  
(1966)

As a child, they could not keep me from wells<sup>2</sup>  
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses<sup>3</sup>.  
I loved the dark drop<sup>4</sup>, the trapped sky, the smells  
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss<sup>5</sup>.

5 One, in a brickyard<sup>6</sup>, with a rotted board top<sup>7</sup>.  
I savoured<sup>8</sup> the rich crash when a bucket  
Plummeted<sup>9</sup> down at the end of a rope<sup>10</sup>.  
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow<sup>11</sup> one under a dry stone ditch<sup>12</sup>  
10 Fructified like any aquarium.  
When you dragged out<sup>13</sup> long roots from the soft mulch<sup>14</sup>,  
A white face hovered over the bottom<sup>15</sup>.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call  
With a clean new music in it. And one  
15 Was scaresome<sup>16</sup> for<sup>17</sup> there, out of ferns<sup>18</sup> and tall  
Foxgloves<sup>19</sup>, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry<sup>20</sup> into roots, to finger slime<sup>21</sup>,  
To stare<sup>22</sup>, big-eyed Narcissus<sup>23</sup>, into some spring<sup>24</sup>  
Is beneath<sup>25</sup> all adult dignity. I rhyme  
20 To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.






- 1 Helicon. Elicon, monte della Grecia considerata sede delle Muse dagli antichi.
- 2 wells. Pozzi.
- 3 buckets and windlasses. Secchi e argani.
- 4 drop. Goccia.
- 5 dank moss. Muschio umido.
- 6 brickyard. Cortile di mattoni.
- 7 with a rotted board top. Con in cima un'asse imputridita.
- 8 I savoured. Assaporavo.
- 9 Plummeted. Precipitava.
- 10 rope. Corda.
- 11 shallow. Poco profondo.
- 12 ditch. Fosso.
- 13 you dragged out. Tiravi fuori.
- 14 mulch. Residui vegetali.
- 15 hovered over the bottom. Volteggiava sul fondo.
- 16 Was scaresome. Incuteva paura.
- 17 for. Poiché.
- 18 ferns. Felci.
- 19 Foxgloves. Digitali (erbacee perenni velenose con fiori in spighe e foglie lanceolate).
- 20 pry. Frugare.
- 21 finger slime. Toccare la melma.
- 22 stare. Guardare fisso.
- 23 Narcissus. Narciso, giovane bellissimo che morì per la sua vanità mentre guardava la propria immagine riflessa in una fonte.
- 24 spring. Fonte.
- 25 beneath. Al di sotto di.

### VISUAL ANALYSIS

**1 READ** the poem and write a heading for each section.

- Part 1 (lines 1-16): .....
- Part 2 (lines 17-20): .....

**2 LOOK** at the visual analysis of the poem and write down what each highlight and colour represents.

-  .....
-  .....
- wells  .....
-  .....
- dark  .....
-  .....
-  .....

**3 DISCUSS** the following questions in pairs.

- 1 How did the various wells differ?
- 2 What do you think the wells symbolise?
- 3 What kind of nature is described in the poem?
- 4 What does the poet think of the contact with nature? How has it changed?
- 5 Can you find one or more examples of synaesthesia in the poem? Can you explain them?
- 6 What effect is achieved by Heaney through the use of such language?
- 7 Why does Heaney write poetry? What does he compare it to?

**4 COMPLETE** the summary of the poem with the words from the box.

fear	underworld	darkness	inspiration	inspired
synaesthesia	frightening	curious	consciousness	empty

Helicon is the name of a mountain which in ancient Greece was considered a holy place and the dwelling of the nine muses. Muses **(1)** ..... artists, therefore *Personal Helicon* means personal

**(2)** ..... . The poet claims that he was a very **(3)** ..... child, he looked into wells and he used to watch the mystery of drawing buckets of water from the well.

He found it fascinating that the water was coming out of a mysterious **(4)** ..... . The 'trapped sky' is also a mysterious symbol as the sky is reflected in the water at the bottom of the well and there is also the smell of water weed, fungus and dank moss. All the five senses blend in these examples of **(5)** ..... .

The poet's whole physical being is involved in the mystical experience of something that is coming out of **(6)** ..... . Heaney tries to explain the phenomenon of inspiration by saying that he sees his own face in the full buckets and hears his own voice from the **(7)** ..... buckets. Then suddenly the poet has an experience of **(8)** ..... when a rat jumps out. It might mean that inspiration is exciting as well as **(9)** ..... . Finally he suggests that inspiration is the echo of the mysterious in the **(10)** ..... , the resonance of his own soul.