**Seamus Heaney**

**“Requiem for the Croppies”**

The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley…

No kitchens on the run, no striking camp…

We moved quick and sudden in our own country.

The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.

A people hardly marching… on the hike…

We found new tactics happening each day:

We’d cut through reins and rider with the pike

And stampede cattle into infantry,

Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.

Until… on Vinegar Hill… the final conclave.

Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.

The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.

They buried us without shroud or coffin

And in August… the barley grew up out of our grave.

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**Story**

It begins with the rebels "on the run", fleeing with the only thing they had time to carry, the barley stuffed "in the pockets of [their] great coats". Their inadequacy against the English legions is emphasized in their battle tactics, farm boys fighting with their own tools - "pike[s]... cattle... hedges", and again when, finally brought to open battle they "shak[e] scythes at cannon". The hillside, smeared with their blood, becomes their grave, but when summer comes, "the barley [grows] up out of the grave".

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**Structure**

The poem is written in sonnet form - fourteen lines, although without any division into sections.

**Language**

The poem uses the past tense. They "moved", they "died", they were "buried", and finally "the barley grew up out of the grave". Heaney never makes these events person specific, it is all of "we" who died, and "they" who conquered. His definite events and precise images give the poem emotional impact, and the more generalized speaking voice refuses to allow the reader's emotions to settle into distant pity - he must become more involved. It is the voice of humanity speaking to him.

The surroundings receive more description than the speakers, in their uniform of "great coats". It is the personified hillside that "blush[es]" not any rebel. It is the hillside that is named, that is coloured in blood. It is the actions of the fighters that words are devoted to, not their thoughts.

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**Diction**

Requiem for the Croppies is spoken in the collective persona of the 1798 United Irish rebels. Heaney uses the first person plural - "we" - of the rebels to convey the poem, and the third person plural - "they" - when speaking of their English enemies. This device makes the poem more universal, although circumstance and place clearly identify the speakers, they have a more general identity.

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**Tone**

The tone is rendered quite distant by the use of the first person plural; the universality Heaney is attempting to create precludes a simultaneous personal tone. There is a sense of urgency, of desperation conveyed by their actions. They must move "quick and sudden in [their] own country", the insistent tempo emphasized by the shortened adverbs. They must "[find] new tactics happening each day", improvise. They must be fleet, they are disorganized and hurried - "no kitchens on the run, no striking camp" - cut off from all that is comfortable and "livable". Heaney is stripping heroism down to its essentials - an idea and an action.

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**Mood**

The mood is somber, there is tragedy in the poem from the opening images, to the burial "without shroud or coffin". Fatalism hangs over the entire poem - "a people, hardly marching - on the hike" is not a promising sign. On their own territory "cavalry must be thrown", but in the open force will win, it is a "fatal conclave" before specifics are given.

The final line is delivered in a matter-of-fact, understated tone, merely what happened, but it modifies the mood greatly. There is no death or burial here, but growth in the summer sun.

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**Imagery**

The poem both opens and closes with the image of barley. It is the little the fighters have gathered, that they devote "pockets" to. It is closely related to them, an image of their native environment, and their reason for fighting. Thus, in the closing line, it is the "barley [that] grew up out of the grave" - the symbol of the countryside, the image of their struggle is left behind them.

The images of their "hike", their "tactics", their life "on the run" has twofold meaning. It is first a dramatic exposition of their desperation, their movement "quick and sudden". It is also, however, a further image of their heroic ideal, that Ireland is their country, that they are at home in its ways, that there "cavalry must be thrown". Their weapons are effective on their own ground, their "pike[s]" kill in the countryside, as their "scythes" cannot in the open, when force is all and idealism nothing.

It is on "Vinegar Hill" where the battle is separated from ideals. The bravery of "terraced thousands... shaking scythes at cannon" is momentous, but pointless. Heroes are cut down in a "broken wave", and are buried without recognition in the form of "shroud or coffin".

However, the final image is a small victory of idealism. When conditions are favorable, in the "August" warmth, the barley seeds grow from the unmarked graves, the symbols of home carried with the fighters become the growing barley that all can see.

This triumphant conclusion, the final words after death, is not in spite of the "thousands [who] died" in "the fatal conclave", but a consequence of it. The two images are balanced by the word "and". It is the necessary conclusion of the battle that something remains and grows.

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**Theme**

Heaney uses the specific image of Irish freedom, and of the 1798 rebels, to explore the theme of life and death. The life of the idealist and fighter is "unsatisfactory". There is no rest, no relaxation, "no kitchens on the run, no striking camp". All men are reduced to one level. The weak must fight on the sly, and hope that no "fatal conclave" is in store, that "new tactics" will buy them time.

Yet destruction may come, a hillside soaked in blood. Given sufficient power of opposition, it will be brought about. The life lived, and its ending then becomes "unsatisfactory". Life is a "broken wave", and so might be death.

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