Bogland

SUMMARY

Our country (Ireland) doesn't have any wide-open grassland, the kind that cuts cleanly across the setting sun. Everywhere we look, our eye is limited by a horizon that seems to lean in on us, or drawn to a mountain lake that looks like the single eye of an ancient monster.

The open country here is wetland, which keeps crusting over between sunrise and sunset.

Paleontologists have dug the skeleton of the prehistoric Irish elk out of the peat bogs and reconstructed it like an amazing, empty container.

Butter that had been buried in the bogs for more than a century has been dug up, still salty and fresh-looking. The boggy earth itself is like dark, soft butter, melting and caving as you step on it; it hasn't been solid in millions of years.

No one will ever find fossil fuels buried here—just the trunks of huge evergreen trees, soaked to mush.

The pioneers in *our* country head down into the land's interior, and every layer they uncover seems to have been previously occupied.

The sinkholes in the bog may be caused by water seeping in from the Atlantic Ocean. The land has no firm foundation; it leads down to the bottomless sea.

THEMES

THE IRISH LANDSCAPE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

On one level, "Bogland" simply describes the bog country of Ireland; on another, it examines Irish identity in all its multi-layered slipperiness and strangeness. The speaker, who seems to speak on behalf of Ireland, contrasts the cramped, wet, marshy Irish landscape with the wide-open, solid terrain of other countries. What the environment lacks in breadth, the speaker suggests, it makes up for in depth: the bogland preserves layer after layer of the country's history. At the same time, the bogland is also precarious and ever-changing, a slippery terrain that appears to be "bottomless." Through its portrait of the land, the poem symbolically suggests that Irish identity (or perhaps national or human identity in general) is impossible to get to the bottom of.

The poem vividly describes the distinctive "bogland" of Ireland, contrasting it with other kinds of landscapes abroad. The speaker declares that "We have no prairies" (as America, for example, famously does). The landscape of Ireland feels more cramped and bounded, with the "horizon" seeming to close in "Everywhere." Moreover, "Our unfenced country" is not grassland but wetland, or "bog"—something much less picturesque and much less solid.

Through all of these descriptions of the landscape, the poem implicitly contrasts Ireland's *history* and *identity* with those of other countries. "They'll never dig coal here" suggests that the land isn't useful in terms of traditional extraction and exploitation. It holds rewards that aren't utilitarian, such as tree trunks "soft as pulp" and other natural wonders. These are the kinds of discoveries that would appeal to a poet or historian, not a mining company.

And the bog is indeed rich in history, preserving incredible artifacts unearthed by paleontologists and archeologists (the skeletons of ancient mammals, buried butter that's still "salty," etc.). In fact, in its endless layers, it seems to contain and stand for the whole history of Ireland since antiquity. "Our pioneers" (again unlike America's, perhaps) thus move "Inwards and downwards" rather than outwards. Symbolically, they explore the internal rather than the external, taking a journey of knowledge rather than one of conquest.

And yet, the landscape is so shifty and "bottomless" that it becomes impossible to define, suggesting that Irish identity (and/or human identity more broadly) might have no solid "centre" at all. Comparing the country's "tarn[s]" (lakes) to the eyes of "cyclops" (one-eyed monsters from Greek mythology), the speaker suggests there's something treacherous about the Irish landscape. And comparing the bog to "black butter / Melting and opening underfoot," the speaker portrays the land as almost hopelessly slippery.

In fact, the land has "Miss[ed] its last definition / By millions of years," suggesting that Ireland itself, or the identity and experience of the Irish people, has always been and always will be undefinable. Observing that "The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage" (might lead to the Atlantic Ocean), the speaker concludes that "The wet centre is bottomless." The quest to understand the land seems to end out at sea—in other words, completely unresolved, with no solid foundation whatsoever.

The speaker can say what the landscape *isn't*, then, but can't reach a firm sense of what it *is*. By extension, Irish identity—or even human identity, from the speaker's point of view—is permanently slippery and shifting, something that can never be understood to its core.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

We have no ...
... Encroaching horizon,

The first stanza begins by describing the poem's setting: the "Bogland" of the title. Interestingly, it prefaces this description (lines 3-4 onward) with a statement (lines 1-2) about what the bogland is *not*: a flat, grassy expanse stretching clear to the horizon.

"We have no prairies," the speaker says, "To slice a big sun at evening." Context suggests that the speaker, a collective "We," represents the Irish people as a whole. (Ireland is famous for its extensive bogland, and the mention of the "Great Irish Elk" in line 10 further hints that this is a poem about Ireland. Heaney was also well known for writing about his native country.)

The phrase "slice a big sun at evening" evokes a familiar visual image: the setting sun cut into a wedge shape as it sinks below the flat horizon, like a piece of fruit being sliced by a blade. This doesn't happen in Ireland, the speaker notes, because "Everywhere" you look in the Irish landscape, "the eye concedes to / Encroaching horizon." That is, the horizon line isn't flat: it contains hills, mountains, and so on, which seem to lean toward viewers and "Encroach[]" on their space. The viewer's eye has to "concede[]," or acquiesce, to this encroachment; even if it might want a more spacious landscape, there's none available.

The speaker is thus juxtaposing Ireland's landscape with those of other, more wide-open countries. Although flat, grassy plains exist in other parts of the world, including Eurasia (where they're called the "steppes"), the word "prairie" is particularly associated with the Great Plains of North America. Combined with the later reference to "pioneers" (line 23), the word "prairie" suggests that Heaney is most likely contrasting Ireland with the U.S. (He went on to teach in the U.S. the year after *Door into the Dark*, which contains "Bogland," was published, so perhaps the country was already on his mind.)

This opening stanza also establishes the form the rest of the poem will follow: free-verse quatrains (four-line stanzas) with relatively short lines. Fully half of the poem's lines are enjambed, as lines 1 and 3 are here, smoothing the flow of the language from line to line. This relative smoothness fits a poem about terrain that, as lines 16-19 describe, slips and slides around like "butter."

LINES 5-8

Is wooed into ...
... of the sun.

Lines 5-8 continue to describe the boggy Irish landscape. Everywhere in this landscape, according to the speaker, the viewer's eye "Is wooed into the cyclops' eye / Of a tarn." In other words, the landscape is full of mountain lakes (*tarns*) that resemble the eyes of cyclops—one-eyed giants from ancient Greek myth—and that attracts the viewer's eye as though "woo[ing]" it.

This metaphor hints that the landscape is charming and attractive, yet hazardous. After all, cyclops (or *Cyclopes*) were deadly to human beings: you wouldn't want to be wooed into getting too close to one! The mythological allusion also casts the landscape as ancient and mythic, a place of wonder as well as terror.

The speaker then mentions the "bog" itself for the first time, describing it as "Our unfenced country"—emphasis on *Our*. This open bogland is Ireland's answer to the prairies and plains of other nations. It "keeps crusting" over "Between the sights of the sun": that is, it's generally mushy, but hardens in the daytime heat (between morning and evening, when the sun looks down from different angles in the sky).

Notice how dense the alliteration becomes in these lines:

> Our unfenced country
> Is bog that keeps crusting
> Between the sights of the sun.

The assonance—including the internally rhyming syllables in "unfenced"/"country"/"sun"— is just as heavy:

> Our unfenced country
> Is bog that keeps crusting
> Between the sights of the sun.

These clusters of repeating sounds seem to *bog down* the lines; the thickness or heaviness of the language mimics the terrain it describes.

LINES 9-12

They've taken the ...
... full of air.

Lines 9-12 allude to the discoveries paleontologists—and occasionally average people—have made in Ireland's bogs. Because the land is soft, wet, and full of "bogholes" (line 27), it can be treacherous for people and large animals to walk on. Over the ages, some creatures have gotten trapped in the muck, died, and disappeared under the ground. But the cool ground often makes for an excellent preservative, so some of the fossilized remains have emerged in incredible condition, centuries or millennia later.

One prehistoric creature whose "skeleton" has been dredged from the "peat" bogs is the "Great Irish Elk," a.k.a. the giant deer or Irish deer. Though it once ranged over much of Europe and Asia, this large mammal is closely associated with Ireland

because the bogs have yielded the best-preserved specimens. Referring vaguely to "They[]" (i.e., scientists and fossil hunters), the speaker notes that "They've taken the skeleton [...] Out of the peat" and "set it up" on dry land.

In a vivid metaphor, the speaker compares this reassembled structure of bones to "An astounding crate full of air." The comparison captures the size, bulk, and wondrous weirdness of the "Elk," whose once-buried body now stands exposed to the "air." By extension, it illustrates the wonders of the "Bogland" in general, which hides many such secrets underground.

LINES 13-16

Butter sunk under ...
... kind, black butter

Following the description of the "Great Irish Elk" in the previous stanza, lines 13-15 describe an artifact that, in its way, is equally "astounding." According to the speaker, "Butter sunk under" the surface of the bogland for "More than a hundred years" has been "recovered salty and white." In other words, the cool, boggy earth preserved the butter in decent condition for years, if not centuries.

It sounds like a tall tale, but it's based on fact! Pre-modern Irish peoples did, evidently, use the bogland as a primitive refrigerator. There's even a name for the waxy food archeologists have dug up from this terrain: "bog butter." Some of the specimens they've recovered date back a couple of millennia, and some samples still, amazingly, look and smell like dairy. The speaker describes one such sample, buried for more than a century, which still looked "white" and smelled (tasted?) "salty" after it was recovered.

Playing off this imagery, line 16 likens the boggy ground itself to "kind, black butter." Unlike the literal, "white" butter dug up in containers, this soil is "black." It's also soft and yielding, or, figuratively, "kind." Using a sort of associative logic, the speaker slides smoothly from a literal image to a metaphorical comparison.

Once again, these lines are heavy with alliteration ("**b**lack **b**utter") and assonance/internal rhyme ("B**u**tter"/"**u**nd**e**r"/"h**u**nd**e**red"). The repeated vowels and consonants make the language sound as dense as the bog—or the bog butter.

LINES 17-22

Melting and opening ...
... soft as pulp.

Lines 17-19 continue the sentence, and the metaphor, begun in the previous stanza (line 16). The sentence is enjambed over both the line break and the stanza break, so the "butter" image provides a (buttery-smooth) transition from one stanza to the next:

> The ground itself is kind, black butter
> Melting and opening underfoot,
> Missing its last definition
> By millions of years.

The bog soil, likened to "black butter," softens and caves in—"Melt[s] and open[s]"—as people and animals walk over it. According to the speaker, it's "Miss[ed] its last definition / By millions of years," meaning that it hasn't been solid for eons. The land is perpetually slippery, shifting, and lacking in "definition." (The pun here also suggests that it's difficult to *define* in terms of language, as the poem ostensibly hopes to do).

Lines 20-22 build on this image by further illustrating how damp and unstable the land is. "They'll never dig coal here," the speaker observes, again implicitly contrasting Ireland with other countries (think "here" as opposed to elsewhere). Coal forms underground in conditions of intense heat and pressure; the cool, unstable bogland can't exert those kinds of forces. The peat of Irish bogs *has* historically been dried and burned for fuel—hence the comparison to another fuel source—but it's not as dense and solid as coal.

So what *do* the Irish dredge from their bogs, besides ancient "skeleton[s]" and "butter"? According to the speaker, they "dig" up "Only the waterlogged trunks / Of great firs, soft as pulp." Of course, the wet, crumbling trunks of evergreen trees aren't very useful as fuel! They are, however, a striking sight to behold—perhaps a symbol of fallen power or crumbling "great[ness]"—and that's part of Heaney's point. As depicted in the poem, these bogs are less a practical resource than a source of mystery, fear, and awe, as well as a kind of natural museum of Ireland's history.

LINES 23-28

Our pioneers keep ...
... centre is bottomless.

The poem ends by describing a journey "Inwards and downwards," beneath the surface of the "Bogland" and, symbolically, toward the foundation of Irish identity.

Once more, the poem seems to contrast Ireland with other nations—especially the U.S. Unlike the storied and controversial "pioneers" of North America, the speaker suggests, the explorers of Ireland have no vast expanses of land to roam over. (Recall the statement in line 1: "We have no prairies.") Instead, "Our pioneers" (emphasis on *Our*) "keep striking / Inwards and downwards," digging deeper into the *interior* of the country. Symbolically, these lines evoke a journey of knowledge—a quest to understand Ireland better—as opposed to an expedition of plunder or conquest.

As they "strip" away "layer[s]" of bogland, Ireland's "pioneers" keep discovering antique artifacts, evidence of past habitation.

Each successive layer "Seems [to have been] camped on before." The history of Ireland, then, appears to run so deep that it's literally unfathomable. By extension, the country's identity is fundamentally unknowable: there's always another layer to peel back.

Rounding out this combination of literal description and extended metaphor, the poem suggests that the land might literally be "bottomless." The "bogholes"—wet, dangerous sinkholes in the bogland—"might be" caused by "Atlantic seepage," or water leaking in from the Atlantic Ocean. In other words, the only foundation of the land might be the open sea. The speaker concludes that "The centre is bottomless," symbolically suggesting that Irish identity, like the Irish bog, is permanently centerless and unstable. No matter how many layers they strip away, no one can possibly get to the bottom of either.

Notice that the bogholes, according to the speaker, "might be" water from the Atlantic, but the land definitely "is" as "bottomless" as the sea. Ironically, the *less* firm the land is revealed to be, the *more* firm the speaker's phrasing becomes. In the end, the one thing the speaker seems to know for sure about Ireland is that it can never be known in full.

SYMBOLS

BOGS

Over the course of the poem, the "Bogland" of Ireland becomes a symbol of Irish history and identity. The terrain of a country is often used to symbolize its people and culture; Americans, for example, sometimes treat the vast prairies, deserts, and mountains of the U.S. as representative of something open, free, adventurous, etc. in their national character.

In contrast with this kind of open terrain, the bogland feels relatively confined; it doesn't stretch all the way out to a flat "horizon." But while it may lack breadth, it contains great depths. "We have no prairies" to spread out over, the poem's speaker says; instead, "Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards." It becomes the site of an *interior* journey, into the country's ancient history (embodied by everything buried in the bog, from prehistoric animals to human-made butter).

In its endless "layers," it seems to contain Ireland's entire past, including everything that has formed its national character. At the same time, it seems to have no firm "centre"; it's as "bottomless" as the sea.

Symbolically, then, the poem presents Irish identity as profound, multi-layered, yet unstable—something perpetually remade rather than fixed in stone.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-28

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem's vivid imagery conveys the appearance and consistency (or inconsistency) of the treacherous "Bogland."

According to the speaker, the bog is "wet," full of "bogholes," and ultimately as "bottomless" as the sea, because its watery "seepage" comes from the "Atlantic" Ocean. It's so damp beneath the surface that it reduces "great firs" to "waterlogged trunks / [...] soft as pulp." However, the surface "keeps crusting" over in the daytime heat, making it walkable, if hazardous.

Though most of the poem's imagery appeals to the senses of sight and touch, some startling taste imagery enters lines 13-15:

> Butter sunk under
> More than a hundred years
> Was recovered salty and white.

Because the cool bog acts as a preservative, pre-modern Irish communities buried food containers in it, using it as a crude form of refrigeration. Some of those containers have indeed been "recovered" over the years, and some have contained dairy (known as *bog butter*) that's remarkably well-preserved. The poem describes a specimen of this butter, aged "More than a hundred years," as "salty and white"—practically daring the reader to imagine taking a bite.

The poem then compares the boggy "ground" itself to butter. The adjectives "kind," "black," "Melting," and "opening" turn this metaphor into a vivid image. They indicate that the soil is soft (figuratively, "kind") and very dark, and that it slips around and caves in as you walk over it. (Notice, too, how the "white" literal butter makes for a striking visual contrast with the "black," figurative butter.)

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "We have no prairies / To slice a big sun at evening—"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Our unfenced country / Is bog that keeps crusting"
- **Lines 13-17:** "Butter sunk under / More than a hundred years / Was recovered salty and white. / The ground itself is kind, black butter / Melting and opening underfoot,"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Only the waterlogged trunks / Of great firs, soft as pulp."

- **Lines 27-28:** "The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage. / The wet centre is bottomless."

ALLITERATION

Seamus Heaney was known for his richly musical poetic language. Though it's a free verse poem (one that uses no meter or rhyme), "Bogland" shows off his love of sonic devices such as alliteration and assonance.

Readers can hear some alliteration in line 2, for example:

> We have no prairies
> To slice a big sun at evening—

Those crisp /s/ sounds (a special form of alliteration known as sibilance) sound like a blade crisply "slic[ing]" through the sun.

The alliteration gets even thicker in lines 6-8. Listen to the abundance of /k/, /b/, and /s/ sounds:

> [...] Our unfenced country
> Is bog that keeps crusting
> Between the sights of the sun.

Combined with assonance ("unfenced country"/"crusting"/"sun"; "keeps"/"Between") and /t/ consonance ("country"/"crusting"/"Between"/"sights"), these repeated sounds slow the language down—or, rather, *bog* it down! It's no accident that this poem about "Bogland" moves at a slow, boggy pace, aided by sound effects that keep the language dense. ("Butter sunk under / More than a hundred years," in lines 13-14, is so full of /uh/, /d/, and /r/ sounds that it's practically a tongue-twister.)

The language gets especially dense when describing the boggy ground itself. Another example comes in lines 16-19:

> The ground itself is kind, black butter
> Melting and opening underfoot,
> Missing its last definition
> By millions of years.

These repeated /b/ and /m/ sounds, combined with thick sibilance ("Missing its last") and assonance ("butter"/"underfoot"; "Missing its"/"definition"/"millions"), once again slow the lines to a crawl. Like the bogland itself, the language is lush, but tricky to wade through!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "slice," "sun"
- **Line 6:** "country"
- **Line 7:** "bog," "keeps crusting"
- **Line 8:** "Between," "sights," "sun"
- **Line 16:** "black butter"
- **Line 17:** "Melting"
- **Line 18:** "Missing"
- **Line 19:** "millions"
- **Line 22:** "pulp"
- **Line 23:** "pioneers"
- **Line 25:** "strip"
- **Line 26:** "Seems," "before"
- **Line 27:** "bogholes," "be"

METAPHOR

The poem uses several metaphors (and one simile) to capture the uniqueness of the "Bogland." What risks being a dull poem about wet ground becomes a vivid illustration of a landscape—thanks largely to figurative language.

The first metaphor (lines 1-2) refers to a different kind of landscape: "prairies" that stretch flat to the horizon, so that they seem to "slice" the "sun at evening." (In other words, the flat horizon line passes through the setting sun like a blade slicing through fruit.) But after setting up this contrast, the poem turns to describing the bogland itself.

It imagines the hilly horizon, here, as "Encroaching"—that is, seeming to lean or move toward the viewer, so that the viewer's eye "concedes" (acquiesces) to the intrusion. It compares Ireland's "tarn[s]," or lakes, to the eyes of cyclops (one-eyed monsters from Greek myth). It imagines sunrise and sunset as different "sights," or viewing angles, "of the sun," between which the bogland crusts over in the daytime heat.

Even more vividly, it compares the prehistoric elk skeleton dug from the bog to a "crate full of air"—an empty container made of bones—and envisions the boggy ground as "kind, black butter / Melting and opening underfoot." Together, these striking comparisons depict the bogland as an alien, ancient, even mythical place. The sun, ground, and water seem personified and alive here, just as natural phenomena are in traditional myths.

The poem's lone simile illustrates the sheer *power* of this hazardous landscape. According to the speaker, the "waterlogged [tree] trunks" fished from the bog are "soft as pulp." In other words, the bog can reduce something sturdy and mighty ("great firs") to something so fragile, it falls apart at the touch.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "We have no prairies / To slice a big sun at evening—"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Everywhere the eye concedes to / Encroaching horizon,"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Is wooed into the cyclops' eye / Of a tarn."

- **Line 8:** "Between the sights of the sun."
- **Line 12:** "An astounding crate full of air."
- **Lines 16-19:** "The ground itself is kind, black butter / Melting and opening underfoot, / Missing its last definition / By millions of years."
- **Line 22:** "Of great firs, soft as pulp."

ENJAMBMENT

Fully half of the poem's lines (14 out of 28) are enjambed. These frequent enjambments cause the poem's sentences to slide smoothly from one line to the next, mimicking the poem's visuals (i.e., slippery, open ground) on the sonic level.

Fittingly, the poem enjambs several lines containing images of openness, leaving them "open" rather than end-stopped. For example, the word "prairies"—meaning wide expanses of grassland—hovers in the empty space at the end of line 1. The phrase "unfenced country," meaning open land, dangles similarly at the end of line 6. In line 18, the speaker describes the bogland as lacking "definition" (firmness or boundaries); again, the word "definition" lingers in the space at the end of the line, unbounded by punctuation. And notice how the phrase "butter // Melting" (lines 16-17) is enjambed over both a line break and a stanza break, as if to make the transition between stanzas buttery-smooth.

By contrast, the last three lines all end with periods. These are the only three consecutive end-stopped lines in the poem. The series of full stops gives the poem a strong sense of closure, which contrasts somewhat ironically with the instability the lines describe. (The ending says firmly that the land isn't firm at all!)

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "prairies / To"
- **Lines 3-4:** "to / Encroaching"
- **Lines 5-6:** "eye / Of"
- **Lines 6-7:** "country / Is"
- **Lines 7-8:** "crusting / Between"
- **Lines 9-10:** "skeleton / Of"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Elk / Out"
- **Lines 13-14:** "under / More"
- **Lines 14-15:** "years / Was"
- **Lines 16-17:** "butter / Melting"
- **Lines 18-19:** "definition / By"
- **Lines 21-22:** "trunks / Of"
- **Lines 23-24:** "striking / Inwards"
- **Lines 25-26:** "strip / Seems"

REPETITION

The poem repeats several key words, often varying their context so that their meanings or connotations shift. (Everything in this poem is a bit shifting and slippery.)

For example, the prairie "sun" in line 2 becomes the bogland "sun" of line 8; it's the same sun, of course, but the repetition marks a major geographical shift. (Those "prairies" in line 1 sound like a reference to the American Midwest, which is half a world away from the bogs of Ireland.)

The "eye" of the landscape viewer in line 3 is drawn to the "cyclops' eye / of a tarn" (i.e., a mountain lake) in line 5. Here, there's a visual shift from small to large scale, as well as an imaginative shift from literal to metaphorical and from real world to myth.

Another transition to metaphor occurs in lines 13-16, as the literal, white "Butter" recovered from the bogs sets up a comparison of the boggy soil to "black butter." One image slides into the next, shifting as smoothly as the ground itself.

The pronoun "Our" also occurs twice, in lines 6 and 23. The repeated use of "We" (line 1) and "Our" sounds emphatic and perhaps a little flush with national pride, as the speaker highlights how things are in "Our [...] country" as opposed to others. Finally, the form of repetition called anaphora pops up in the final lines:

> The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
> The wet centre is bottomless.

These parallel, end-stopped statements bring this slippery poem to a surprisingly firm conclusion.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "sun"
- **Line 3:** "eye"
- **Line 5:** "eye"
- **Line 6:** "Our"
- **Line 8:** "sun"
- **Line 13:** "Butter"
- **Line 16:** "butter"
- **Line 23:** "Our"
- **Line 27:** "The"
- **Line 28:** "The"

VOCABULARY

Prairies (Line 1) - Wide expanses of open grassland.

Slice (Line 2) - Here referring to the way the horizon seems to cut through the setting sun. (Think of a blade slicing fruit.)

Concedes to (Lines 3-4) - Accepts (in the way one accepts limits, or things one can't change).

Encroaching (Lines 3-4) - Intruding or infringing, as on territory or personal space. Here referring to the way the Irish

horizon appears close (crowding the viewer with hills, trees, etc.) rather than distant.

Wooed (Lines 5-6) - Courted, flirted with, attracted. Here referring, metaphorically, to the way mountain lakes attract the viewer's eye.

Cyclops' eye (Lines 5-6) - A cyclops is a one-eyed monster from Greek mythology. The poem metaphorically compares an isolated "tarn" (mountain lake) to the lone eye of a cyclops.

Tarn (Lines 5-6) - A mountain lake.

Unfenced (Line 6) - That is, not broken up by fences, walls, or other human boundaries.

Bog (Lines 6-7) - Wetlands; marshy areas composed of peat (dead plant matter).

Crusting (Lines 7-8) - Drying to a crusty consistency.

Sights (Line 8) - The sun as it appears in the east and west, looking down like an eye from different angles.

Great Irish Elk (Lines 9-10) - A large extinct species of deer, formerly found throughout Asia and Europe, including Ireland.

Peat (Lines 9-11) - The dead plant matter that makes up bogland.

Crate (Line 12) - A large container, as for shipping. Here used metaphorically.

Definition (Lines 18-19) - Here meaning "solidity" or "stability," the quality of being *defined* as in fixed and known. (The land lacks this quality, so it's shifting and unstable.)

Waterlogged (Line 21) - Soaked completely through; heavy and saturated with water.

Firs (Line 22) - Referring to a type of coniferous, evergreen tree.

Camped on (Lines 25-26) - Used as a campsite; lived on temporarily.

Atlantic seepage (Line 27) - That is, water seeping in (through the bogholes) from the Atlantic Ocean.

Bogholes (Line 27) - A sinkhole in bogland, full of wet, loose soil and hazardous to humans and animals.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Bogland" consists of seven quatrains, or four-line stanzas. Its lines consistently range between five and ten syllables, but it never follows a regular meter or rhyme scheme.

Heaney was highly skilled with both metrical and free verse (though he tended to write more in the former). In this poem, the choice of freer lines seems to reflect the subject at hand. The Irish "Bogland" is slippery and shifting; it "crust[s]" over in the sun, making it relatively solid at times, but it hasn't had a rigid "definition" in "millions of years." Similarly, the poem is grouped into even stanzas and relatively even lines, but its rhythm remains slippery and inconsistent, and its sounds never conform to a rigid pattern.

METER

"Bogland" is a free verse poem, so it has no meter or rhyme scheme. The lines are of roughly even length, ranging from five syllables (e.g., line 1: "We have no prairies") to ten (line 27: "The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage"), but they never fall into a regular rhythm.

Heaney was a master of metrical as well as free verse, so his avoidance of meter here seems highly deliberate and suited to his subject. The poem is about slippery, unsteady ground, so its unsteady rhythm matches its imagery. At first glance, the lines *look* like they might follow a predictable pattern, but their sound shifts and varies as the bogland does.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Bogland" has no rhyme scheme. Because it's about wet, unstable ground, any kind of rigid scheme would be a poor match for its subject!

Two lines do end with the same word ("years" in lines 14 and 19), and a few line-ending words form imperfect rhymes (e.g., "under/"butter" in lines 13 and 16; "years"/"here" in lines 19 and 20). These sounds enrich Heaney's dense, often musical language, but they're subtle connections within a poem that's much too slippery to follow a strict pattern.

SPEAKER

The voice of the poem is a collective "We," which seems to be synonymous with "the Irish people." In other words, the speaker seems to speak for all of Ireland.

Over the course of the poem, they contrast "Our" open landscape with that of other countries—especially, perhaps, America. Unlike the European colonizers (and their descendants) who explored American "prairies," the "pioneers" of Ireland, according to the speaker, "keep striking / Inwards and downwards." In other words, they don't have any surface-level territory left to explore, so instead, they explore the interior of the land—including the historical artifacts buried in layers under its soil.

Overall, the speaker seems to view the Irish landscape with a mix of affection, wonder, and unease. The speaker is "astound[ed]," for example, by the prehistoric skeletons recovered from the bog, and they describe the "butter"-like consistency of the "ground" as "kind." At the same time, they sound unnerved by the seemingly "bottomless" nature of the land, whose "bogholes" can be treacherous for those who tread near them.

SETTING

The poem's title announces its setting: "Bogland." Specifically, the poem describes the peat bogs (a.k.a. "peatland" or "bogland") of Seamus Heaney's native Ireland. Some 14 percent of the country is covered by such bogs (some of the "raised," some of the "blanket" variety), though this percentage is in flux due to climate change and human land use.

As the opening stanzas indicate, the bogs are "unfenced country"—open terrain—but they don't stretch all the way to a flat horizon, the way "prairies" typically do. Instead, they're surrounded by hills and mountains that make the horizon seem to "Encroach[]" on the viewer. The ground is mushy, marshy, and often slippery, like "black butter"; it "keeps crusting" in the warmth of the sun, but it lacks firm "definition" (and has for "millions of years"). Its peat has traditionally been dug for fuel throughout much of Ireland, but it's not solid enough to produce "coal"—a fossil fuel formed under heavy pressure in underground deposits.

At the same time, the cool bogland can act as an excellent preservative. As the poem notes, it's been the source of extraordinary archeological and paleontological finds, including the remains of prehistoric animals such as the "Great Irish Elk." (Also, the remains of ancient humans: a subject Heaney addressed in other poems.) It has yielded numerous discoveries of substances known as "bog butter": ancient dairy and meat products buried for preservation and subsequently lost or abandoned. (Some of this "butter" still smells like dairy, even after "More than a hundred years.") As more "layers" are "strip[ped]" from the land, such discoveries continue.

The closing lines note that the bogland is porous, with treacherous sinkholes ("bogholes") apparently caused by "seepage" from the "Atlantic" Ocean. In that sense, the land seems "bottomless," leading to the open ocean rather than the solid core of the earth.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Seamus Heaney grew up a farmer's son and became the most acclaimed Irish poet of his generation. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995, with the Nobel committee citing his "works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past."

Like many of Heaney's poems, "Bogland" is inspired by the landscape of rural Ireland, including County Derry, Northern Ireland, where he was raised. It appeared as the closing poem in his second collection, *Door into the Dark* (1969), which also includes such acclaimed poems as "The Forge." Heaney dedicated the poem to his friend Terence Philip Flanagan, an Irish artist and teacher, who had previously dedicated his painting *Boglands* to the poet. On the writing process, Heaney commented:

> From the moment I wrote it, I felt promise in "Bogland." Without having any clear notion of where it would lead or even whether I would go back to the subject, I realized that new co-ordinates had been established. Door jambs with an open sky behind them rather than the dark. I felt it in my muscles, nearly, when I was writing the poem...

This became one of numerous poems Heaney wrote about peat bogs, and about the skeletons and other ancient items recovered from them. A further selection is available here.

Heaney's early literary influences include the American poet Robert Frost (1874-1963), whose work also dealt with rural topics and the natural world, and the English romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821). In his Nobel Prize lecture, Heaney referred to Keats's "Ode to Autumn" as the "ark of the covenant between language and sensation." William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)—a previous Irish Nobel laureate—was another significant influence, about whom Heaney wrote the essays "Yeats as an Example?" (1978) and "A Tale of Two Islands: Reflections on the Irish Literary Revival" (1980).

Heaney is the best-known poet of the Northern School, a group of Northern Irish poets who began to garner attention in the 1960s, as political and cultural unrest escalated in their country. The 1960s were a period of tumultuous evolution in Irish politics and literature alike. In 1960, for example, Edna O'Brien published the novel *The Country Girls*, which portrayed Roman Catholicism as oppressive to women. The novel was banned, and O'Brien left Ireland. Writers and readers began to challenge this kind of government censorship more actively over the course of the decade.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Heaney was born in Northern Ireland in 1939. He grew up in an Ireland wracked by what would become known as "The Troubles" or the Northern Ireland conflict. The Troubles (c. 1968-1998) were a dispute between Protestant unionists, who wanted Ireland to remain a part of the United Kingdom, and Roman Catholic nationalists, who wanted Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland. The struggle was often violent, and more than 3,600 people were killed and 30,000 wounded in these decades.

When "Bogland" was published in 1969, Heaney was living in Belfast. The previous year had seen the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, a unionist paramilitary group, as well as a civil rights march in Derry. In August 1969, a three-day riot called the Battle of the Bogside took place in Derry, and the British Army deployed troops, escalating the violence.

Heaney himself was a Catholic and nationalist who chose to live in the south of Ireland. Some contemporaries criticized him for declining to take explicit sides in the Troubles, but his writing (including the books *Wintering Out* and *North*) does address the conflict. Meanwhile, many of his seemingly non-political poems, including "Bogland," reflect his profound awareness of Irish history and identity.

As the poem indicates, the peat bogs of Ireland have been a rich source of discoveries for paleontologists and archeologists. For example, the prehistoric animal mentioned in lines 9-12 once ranged over much of Europe and Asia, but it was named the "Irish Elk" because so many well-preserved skeletons have been found in Irish bogland.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Heaney read "Bogland" in a 2003 studio recording. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mjwqft01FDE)
- Heaney Remembered — Watch the Irish national news service's tribute to Heaney following his death in 2013. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Hqtcsq0FV0)
- An Interview with the Poet — Watch a 1980 interview with Seamus Heaney, covering his rural Irish roots and approach to poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yt4m2Z4Pmw)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Learn more about the poet in his biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney)
- Heaney, Nobel Laureate — Check out the Nobelprize.org exhibit on Seamus Heaney, winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/facts/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SEAMUS HEANEY POEMS

- Blackberry-Picking
- Death of a Naturalist
- Digging
- Follower
- Mid-Term Break
- Personal Helicon
- Storm on the Island
- The Tollund Man

HOW TO CITE

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