Requiem for the Croppies

SUMMARY

The speaker, one of the titular "Croppies" (a name for Irish rebels during a 1798 uprising against the British), describes the days dealing up to the Battle of Vinegar Hill. They say that they ate grain out of their coat pockets because they couldn't stop to cook in a kitchen or to make a fire while running from the approaching British soldiers. They had to suddenly flee from the British, despite being in their own country. Everyone was thrown together by circumstance: religious clergy and unhoused people alike took cover in the trenches. It would be a stretch to say that these ordinary people were marching (as an army does). Still, every day they'd devise new ways to fight back. They used rudimentary spears to keep the British soldiers on horseback at bay and they'd make their cows charge into the ranks of British foot soldiers. Then the Croppies would retreat into the rows of bushes where the soldiers had abandoned their horses. They fought until the last meeting at Vinegar Hill, where, lined up shoulder to shoulder, thousands of Irish died, facing the blast of cannons with basic farming tools. The hillside turned red, saturated with the blood of the fallen Irish. The British threw the dead into a mass grave, not bothering to cover them. When August rolled around, the barley from the Irish rebels' coats sprouted from the burial ground.

THEMES

THE POWERFUL SPIRIT OF IRISH RESISTANCE

"Requiem for the Croppies" is about the 1798 Battle of Vinegar Hill, in which Irish rebels (nicknamed "Croppies" for their short haircuts) fought for their independence from the British. The poem depicts the Irish as brave but untrained farmers whose "scythes," "pike[s]," and "cattle" are no match for the British "cannon[s]" and "cavalry." Though the British handily crush the uprising, the poem implies that the Croppies' rebellious spirit can't be so easily broken: the "barley" that the fighters carried in their pockets sprouts from the blood-soaked ground at the poem's end, symbolizing the way that the *spirit* of Irish resistance would live on.

The poem celebrates the Irish rebels' courage and ingenuity while also acknowledging that, given their lack of training and resources, they stood no chance against the British military. The "Croppies" were farmers and townspeople, not soldiers. Unlike the British troops, the Irish were "hardly marching." They were "on the run" and couldn't even stop to set up "camp" and cook a meal. Instead, they merely ate "barley" from their "pockets." Most weren't prepared to fight at all; they'd been forced to flee "in [their] own country," and everyone from the "priest" to the "tramp" desperately hid from the British.

Even so, the Irish used "new tactics [...] each day," such as making their cattle charge at the British foot soldiers and "retreat[ing] through hedges where cavalry must be thrown." They cleverly used what they had available to stave off the British troops as best they could. They shook "scythes" (tools used for cutting wheat) "at cannons," an image illustrating both the bravery of these rebels and the hopelessness of their situation.

The British, by contrast, come across as ruthless oppressors who wiped out "thousands." So high was the death toll that the "hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave." This imagery reveals that the encounter wasn't so much a battle as a bloodbath, and it also conveys the British soldiers' brutality: it's as though the landscape itself is ashamed and appalled by this violence. The rebels are buried "without shroud or coffin," another image conveying British disrespect for the rebels as well as the desire to smother Irish dignity and pride.

The speaker describes the battle as the "final conclave," indicating that the Croppies' defeat at Vinegar Hill was a turning point in the war for Irish independence. Yet, despite the carnage at Vinegar Hill, the poem ends with hopeful imagery that implies the persistence of the Irish in their pursuit of freedom.

Though the Croppies themselves were killed, the "barley" that had been in their "pockets" grew "up out of [their] grave." This suggests that although this particular effort had failed, the Irish wouldn't give up on their dream of breaking free from British tyranny. The longing for freedom, the poem implies, is stronger than oppression. In this way, the poem suggests that resistance is never futile; the sacrifice of the brave rebels would ultimately not be in vain, because their rebellious spirit would live on.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Line 14

REMEMBERING AND HONORING THE DEAD

A "Requiem" is a song or dirge for the dead—in this case, for the fallen "Croppies" who died at the Battle of Vinegar Hill in 1798. The poem highlights (and implicitly critiques) the lack of respect the British showed the Irish rebels, whom they killed mercilessly and then left uncovered in a mass "grave." The poem suggests the shamefulness of this treatment and acts as a

memorial, honoring the lives of the "thousands" of Irish who died fighting for their homeland.

The British didn't just defeat the Irish rebels in battle; they more or less *butchered* them, the poem implies, firing "cannon[s]" at people armed only with "pike[s]" and "scythes." The speaker says that "The hillside blushed," imagery that suggests the shextent of the bloodshed: it turned the hills red. As a metaphor, it also implies that what the British did was shameful: the earth itself seems to be embarrassed by this show of cruelty. That the British went on to "bur[y]" these people "without shroud or coffin" further suggests their complete disrespect, as, even in wartime, it is customary to properly bury the dead.

By giving voice to those Irish who died on Vinegar Hill, the poem attempts to make up for this disrespect and honor those who were killed. In this way, the poem itself is a kind of memorial; like a headstone or monument, it reminds the reader that these people lived, and died fighting for their freedom.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 11-13

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The pockets of ...
... with the tramp.

The poem's title tells the reader what to expect: a "Requiem" is a song or dirge to commemorate the dead, and "Croppies" refers to Irish rebels in the 1798 uprising against British rule (the name derives from their short haircuts, which were fashioned after those of French revolutionaries).

In the first line of the poem, the speaker immediately identifies themselves as one of those titular "Croppies," mentioning the "pockets of our greatcoats," or long, warm coats. These pockets are "full of barley," a kind of cereal grain that's also symbolic of the Irish spirit of resistance. The mention of this grain hints at the fact that these rebels were predominantly *peasants*—poor farmers who were by no means trained or equipped to fight.

The Croppies carried grain in their pockets to eat because they had "No kitchens on the run," nor could they stop to set up "camp." The anaphora of the word "no" here emphasizes the Irish rebels' lack of resources, while the asyndeton between these clauses quickens the poem's pace, conveying the rush with which the Irish flee from the British:

> No kitchens on the run, no striking camp—

The rebels were forced to "move[] quick and sudden in [their] own country," made outlaws on their own turf. The speaker also points out that "The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp." In other words, the violence affected *everyone*; farmers, religious clergy, vagabonds—they were all forced to flee, and all united in their desire to be free from British rule.

The sharp /ck/, /ch/, and /t/ consonance in these lines evoke the unpleasant reality of being "on the run," ("pockets," "greatcoats," "kitchens," "striking," "quick," "country," "ditches," etc.). Take a moment to consider the poem's form as well: "Requiem for the Croppies" is a loose sonnet, containing 14 lines of iambic pentameter (a meter in which each line contains five iambs, poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern: da-DUM).

On the one hand, this marching meter conveys the swift movement of the Croppies and also connects the poem to a deep literary legacy: sonnets are some of the oldest poetic forms around, and they were famously popularized in English by William Shakespeare.

Given that the heroes of this poem are fighting *against* the British, however, it's perhaps no wonder that the poet plays with this traditional form. The meter is far from perfect; many of the lines contain more than the expected 10 syllables and swap in trochees (DUM-da) or spondees (DUM-DUM) in place of iambs. Take line 3, for instance:

> We moved quick and sudden in our own country.

While *overall* the poem's rhythm is still recognizably iambic, lines like this one make it feel less formal than a traditional sonnet.

For now, the poem's rhyme scheme seems to match up with that of an English sonnet: lines 1 and 3 and lines 2 and 4 rhyme ("barley"/"country," "camp"/"tramp"), creating an ABAB pattern. Of course, "barley"/country" is really a subtle slant rhyme, as many of the poem's rhymes will be. The imperfection of the verse reflects how untrained and under-resourced the Croppies are compared to the British troops.

LINES 5-9

A people, hardly ...
... must be thrown.

The Croppies were "hardly marching," the speaker says. They weren't trained to advance precisely the way British soldiers were, but rather were "on the hike," trudging through the land as best they could.

Combined /ar/ assonance/consonance ("hardly marching") adds musicality and emphasizes the disorganized movement of the rebels. Caesura (especially the em dash after "marching") adds to this sense of distraction or disorderliness, as if the rebels are having to change directions at a moment's notice.

Despite their lack of finesse, however, the speaker says that the

Croppies used "new tactics [...] each day" to keep ahead of the British. For example, the rebels would "cut through reins and rider with the pike." A "pike" is an old-fashioned spear, a weapon made of a steel spike or blade on a wooden shaft.

The gritty /r/ alliteration in "reins and rider" helps to evoke the roughness of these altercations; the Irish were fighting against trained soldiers atop horseback, after all. But the Irish were clever; they'd "stampede cattle into infantry," meaning they'd chase a herd of cows into the British ranks. Then they'd "retreat through hedges" (walls made of bushes) where soldiers on horseback had to abandon their horses and proceed on foot, thus robbing the British of the upper hand.

These lines are thick with sharp consonance: "hike," "tactics," "cut," "pike," "cattle," "cavalry," etc. These harsh, spiky sounds help to convey the danger and difficulty of this fighting.

LINES 10-11

Until, on Vinegar ...
... scythes at cannon.

Sonnets usually contain something called a volta: a turn in thought that traditionally falls between the octave and sestet in an Italian sonnet or in the final couplet of an English sonnet. In this poem, the volta falls *after* the sestet has already begun, in line 10, with the speaker saying:

> Until, on Vinegar Hill, the final conclave.

Until this moment, the speaker had focused largely on the bravery, ingenuity, and unpreparedness of the Irish rebels. Now, the speaker shifts focus to "the final conclave," or meeting between the rebels and the British: the Battle of Vinegar Hill. Notice the use of caesura in line 10 (the pauses created by commas after "Until" and "Hill"). Caesura slows the line down, building a sense of foreboding.

Apparently, no amount of courage or ingenuity can make up for the Croppies' disadvantages in the end. Outnumbered, poor and hungry, untrained, and armed only with "scythes"—that is, basic farm equipment—against the British "cannon[s]," the rebels are mown down in the "thousands." The fact that they die "shaking scythes" illustrates their continued bravery in the face of certain defeat: the rebels don't cower in fear, but rather run towards certain death with all they've got.

LINES 12-13

The hillside blushed, ...
... shroud or coffin

The speaker doesn't go into great detail regarding the bloodshed, but rather relies on a single, evocative metaphor to convey the extent of the violence:

> The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.

The metaphor implies that the "hillside" turned crimson with the rebels' blood. By personifying the landscape here, the poem further suggests that such violence was shameful, that the earth itself seemed to be embarrassed by the cruelty of the British. Instead of showing mercy to these underequipped, untrained people, the British annihilated them.

Sibilance in lines 11-14 ("Terraced thousands," "shaking scythes," "hillside blushed," etc.) adds a solemn, somber hush to the description of the Croppies' deaths. The assonance/consonance of "soaked in our broken wave" emphasizes both the extent of the bloodshed (there was so much of it the landscape was saturated with it) and the result of the violence: the rebels were completely defeated.

After the battle, the speaker says, the British "buried [the Croppies] without shroud or coffin." In other words, they threw their bodies into unmarked graves, without bothering to cover them. Even in times of war, it is customary to show respect to the dead; thus, the poem illustrates the utter disrespect of the British, who treated the Irish as if they were less than human. In a way, the poem attempts to right this wrong; like a headstone or memorial, it stands as a reminder that the Croppies lived and died fighting for their freedom, honoring their sacrifice and condemning the actions of the British troops.

LINE 14

And in August ... of the grave.

Though the Irish rebels have been brutally defeated by the British troops, the poem's final line implies that their rebellious spirit lives on. The "barley" here represents that spirit, which sprouts "out of the grave" of the fallen Croppies. Their desire for freedom was not killed along with their bodies, and their blood, the poem suggests, has watered the seeds for future revolutions. The "barley" thus becomes a symbol of Irish persistence in the face of oppression.

Notice the use of /b/ alliteration in lines 12-14 ("blushed," "broken," "buried," "barley"). These bold, booming sounds add to the intensity of the poem's final moments, while also highlighting important imagery: though the Irish are bloodied and "broken," they do not give up their fight. Likewise, growling /gr/ alliteration ("grew up out of the grave") draws attention to the juxtaposition between death/defeat and the resilience/persistence of the Irish people.

Note that the poem ends on a line that is metrically imperfect; it is 13 syllables long and its stresses are irregular. The poem's refusal to conform to the rigid conventions of the sonnet might reflect the way the Irish refused to remain oppressed by British rule. In any case, the poem's ending reads as subtly hopeful—even *triumphant*—despite the terrible event it commemorates.

SYMBOLS

BARLEY

Because Irish rebels often carried barley in their "pockets" to eat while "on the run," the grain has become a symbol of Irish resistance against the British. In fact, after the 1798 rebellion was squashed, many Irish filled the "croppy-holes"—the unmarked, mass graves where British troops left the dead Irish rebels—with barley seed, ensuring that the sacrifice of the rebels would not be forgotten. As the barley regrew each spring, the Irish would be reminded to never give up on their dream of independence.

The poem makes use of this well-known symbol at the end of the poem, with the "barley gr[owing] up out of the grave." In this way, the poem hints that although the 1798 rebellion ended in defeat, it was not in vain. Indeed, "Requiem for the Croppies" was written on the 50-year anniversary of the Easter Uprising, the armed revolution that ultimately led to Ireland's independence from Britain.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley—"
- **Line 14:** "And in August the barley grew up out of the grave."

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem uses imagery to bring the 1798 Irish uprising against the British to vivid life and also to juxtapose the rebels against the British soldiers.

The poem begins with a bit of imagery that immediately indicates that the speaker is one of the "Croppies"—Irish rebels named for their short haircuts:

> The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley—

The "Croppies" were known for keeping "barley" in their "pockets" to eat because they couldn't afford to stop and cook. The specificity of "greatcoats" (a kind of long, heavy overcoat) and pockets stuffed with "barley" (rather than grain more generally) evokes a particular time and place and suggests the desperate situation the Irish rebels were in: they've shoved raw grain in their pockets.

In lines 7-9, the speaker goes into detail about the various "tactics" the Irish used to outsmart the British troops. They "cut through reins and rider" (i.e., soldiers on horseback) "with the pike," a rudimentary weapon made of a wooden shaft with a pointed steel blade at the top. They drove cows into the ranks of trained, armed soldiers to break them up, and they "retreat[ed] through hedges" where horses couldn't go.

This imagery illustrates the cleverness of the Irish while also revealing how woefully disadvantaged they were. Their lack of weapons and training ultimately results in "Terraced thousands d[ying], shaking scythes at cannon." In other words, lined up shoulder to shoulder and armed only with farming tools and antiquated weapons, the Irish stood no chance against the surrounding British with their arms and ammunition.

The poem then personifies the hillside in line 12:

> The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.

On one level, this is simply another striking bit of imagery: the British slaughtered the rebels so thoroughly and brutally that the landscape itself was "soaked" with blood. The metaphor of the fallen Croppies as a "broken wave" adds to the intensity of the scene, conveying a rush of blood crashing into the earth upon their defeat.

The personification of "hillside" also suggests the *shamefulness* of what the British did: annihilating thousands of people who were inadequately armed and trained. It's as though the hillside itself is embarrassed or shamed by such brutality.

The speaker goes on to say that the British "buried [the Croppies] without shroud or coffin," meaning that they just threw their bodies into one large, unmarked grave. Finally, the speaker says that "in August the barley grew up out of the grave." This imagery suggests that the Irish resistance couldn't be quelled, not even by all this crushing defeat. The seeds for future revolutions had been sown with the Croppies' sacrifice.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 7-9
- Lines 11-14

CONSONANCE

An abundance of consonance makes the poem's language more striking and vivid. For example, listen to all the sharp /k/ sounds that pierce the poem's first three lines:

> 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.

These crisp sounds help to evoke the roughness of life "on the run." And those same sounds run throughout the entire poem, in words such as "hike," "cut," "tactics," "pike," "cattle," "cavalry," "conclave," "cannon," "soaked," "broken," and "coffin." Combined with frequent consonance of plosive /p/ sounds, biting /t/

sounds, and harsh /ch/ sounds, the poem's language feels spiky and even violent. Take lines 7-8:

> We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike
> And stampede cattle into infantry,

The growling /r/ alliteration of "reins and rider" adds to the brashness of the language, helping to convey the terror of battle.

In line 10, a combination of /l/ consonance and short /ih/ assonance creates an intensity befitting the "final" clash between the Irish and British:

> Until, on Vinegar Hill, the final conclave.

The internal rhyme between "Until" and "Hill" adds extra emphasis to this change in the tide of the uprising.

The sibilance of the next two lines, meanwhile, adds a ghostly hush to the image of the rebels' defeat:

> Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
> The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.

Finally, /gr/ alliteration ("grew up out of the grave") calls readers' attention to the gritty, unconquerable nature of the rebel spirit.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pockets," "greatcoats"
- **Line 2:** "kitchens," "striking camp"
- **Line 3:** "quick," "country"
- **Line 4:** "priest," "ditches," "tramp"
- **Line 5:** "people," "hardly marching," "hike"
- **Line 6:** "tactics"
- **Line 7:** "cut," "reins," "rider," "pike"
- **Line 8:** "stampede cattle into infantry"
- **Line 9:** "cavalry"
- **Line 10:** "Until," "Hill," "final conclave"
- **Line 11:** "Terraced," "shaking scythes," "cannon"
- **Line 12:** "hillside blushed, soaked," "broken"
- **Line 13:** "buried," "shroud," "coffin"
- **Line 14:** "barley," "grew," "grave"

ASSONANCE

In addition to consonance and alliteration, the poem also uses assonance to create rhythm, musicality, and intensity.

In line 3, for example, clipped /uh/ assonance in "sudden" and "country" evokes the quickness of the rebels' escape from the advancing British soldiers. Later, the assonance/internal rhyme of "hardly marching" creates a slow, trudging sensation, drawing attention to the fact that these movements are far from the kind of steady movements of an army; after "Croppies" are not trained soldiers. They're regular people fighting for their freedom.

There's more clear assonance in line 10, with the short /ih/ sounds of "Until, on Vinegar Hill." This assonance (which combines with consonance of the /l/ sound), heightens the poem's language at this moment, calling readers' attention to the Croppies' shift in fortune. The internal rhyme between "Until" and "Hill" also draws attention to the importance of this historical landmark where the bulk of the violence took place.

Finally, in line 12, combined /oak/ assonance/consonance ("soaked," "broken") helps to evoke the heaviness of all this bloodshed.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sudden," "country"
- **Line 5:** "hardly," "marching"
- **Line 7:** "rider," "pike"
- **Line 8:** "stampede," "into," "infantry"
- **Line 9:** "retreat"
- **Line 10:** "Until," "Vinegar," "Hill"
- **Line 11:** "died," "scythes"
- **Line 12:** "soaked," "broken"

CAESURA

Caesurae create pauses within lines, breaking up the poem's rhythm and adding emphasis to key words and phrases. Take a look at line 2, for example:

> No kitchens on the run, no striking camp—

The caesura created by the comma between "run" and "no" evokes the "quick and sudden" way the rebels move. They aren't moving slowly and confidently in one direction; they are darting from one place to the next just trying to keep one step ahead of the British. The anaphora of the word "no" adds to the effect, creating the sensation of a people in desperate, frantic retreat.

In line 5, there are two more caesurae:

> A people, hardly marching—on the hike—

Here, caesura evokes the disorderly way the rebels move across the landscape. Unlike the trained British troops, the rebels aren't regimented—they're just doing their best to get from one place to another undetected. There's a feeling of distraction or interruption rather than planned, precise movements.

In line 10, the phrase "on Vinegar Hill" appears between caesurae. This calls readers' attention to this location and adds some drama, suggesting the importance of this "final conclave"

(or meeting) between the Irish and British. Furthermore, the pauses build anticipation, slowing the reader down just as the battle is coming to a head.

The caesura in line 11, created by the comma between "died" and "shaking," emphasizes the fact that the Irish died while bravely confronting the blast of "cannon[s]." The caesura also affects the rhythm of this line, making it feel blunter (it would feel a little different if it read, for example, "Terraced thousands died *while* shaking scythes at cannon"). And the caesura in line 12 ("blushed, soaked") emphasizes the words on either side of it, highlighting the shamefulness of such extensive violence.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "run, no"
- **Line 5:** "people, hardly," "marching—on"
- **Line 10:** "Until, on," "Hill, the"
- **Line 11:** "died, shaking"
- **Line 12:** "blushed, soaked"

VOCABULARY

Requiem () - A song or a dirge for the dead.

Croppies () - The nickname given to Irish rebels, due to their cropped haircuts.

Barley (Line 1, Line 14) - A kind of grain; here, a symbol of Irish resistance.

Great coats (Line 1) - Long overcoats.

Striking camp (Line 2) - Setting up a fire and a place to sleep.

Tramp (Line 4) - Someone who travels around on foot looking for work; an unhoused person.

Tactics (Line 6) - Strategies.

Pike (Line 7) - A pointed steel weapon on a wooden shaft; a rudimentary spear.

Stampede cattle (Line 8) - The speaker is saying that the Croppies made a herd of cows frantically charge toward the British.

Infantry (Line 8) - Foot soldiers who have been trained and armed for combat.

Hedges (Line 9) - Rows of bushes.

Cavalry (Line 9) - Soldiers on horseback.

Vinegar Hill (Line 10) - The name of the place where the battle took place, located outside of Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Ireland.

Conclave (Line 10) - A meeting, usually a significant or influential one.

Terraced (Line 11) - The speaker is describing the way the Irish were lined up shoulder to shoulder to fight.

Scythes (Line 11) - Tools used for harvesting grains or cutting grass.

Shroud (Line 13) - Something used to cover the dead.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Requiem for the Croppies" is a sonnet:

- It contains 14 lines of iambic pentameter (more about that in the Meter entry of this guide).
- These are organized into an opening octave (an eight-line stanza) followed by a sestet (a six-line stanza).
- The octave can be further divided into two quatrains.
- Note that there are no stanza breaks between stanzas; rather, the poem uses rhyme to signal these transitions (more on that under Rhyme Scheme).

The sonnet is a very classic form that originated in 13th-century Italy, and Heaney's use of it here lends the poem some additional gravitas. At the same time, the poet's use of the sonnet might be considered surprising considering the poem's subject: sonnets originated with European aristocracy and have also been closely tied to British history ever since Shakespeare helped to popularize the form in English. This poem, meanwhile, is giving voice to Irish peasants fighting for freedom from the British.

This is a loose sonnet, however; the meter is imperfect, and the rhyme scheme is a kind of mashup of the Italian and English sonnet forms. Many of the rhymes are also slant. The imperfect verse perhaps reflects the rebels' lack of finesse and fighting experience compared to the British army.

At the same time, there's something *subversive* about using a sonnet to give voice to Irish rebels. Heaney's tweaks to the expected sonnet form perhaps suggest an ongoing resistance to British influence.

METER

"Requiem for the Croppies" is written in iambic pentameter, the typical meter for a sonnet. In this meter, each line consists of five iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, da-DUM). This meter gives the poem a predictable, marching rhythm.

Here's line 7 as an example:

We'd cut | through reins | and rid- | er with | the pike

That said, the poem's meter is far from rigid. Take a look at the first two lines of the poem, for instance:

The pock- | ets of | our great- | coats full | of bar- | ley—
No kitch- | ens on | the run, | no strik- | ing camp—

While overall the rhythm is iambic, there are a couple of clear deviations. There's a spondee (a foot consisting of two stressed beats in a row) in the fourth foot of the first line, for example ("coats full"), as well as in the first and fourth feet of the second line. There's also an extra, unstressed syllable at the end of the first line.

These imperfections in the meter keep the poem from feeling too strict or formal. This makes sense given that "Croppies" were generally peasants.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is a kind of mashup of sonnet forms. The octave/opening quatrains follow the pattern of a Shakespearean sonnet, while the sestet looks like a Petrarchan sonnet:

ABAB CDCD EFEFEF

Note, too, that many of these end rhymes are decidedly slant: "barley"/"country," "day"/"infantry," and "thrown"/"cannon"/"coffin" (some might argue that "thrown" isn't really a rhyme at all here, connected only by /n/ consonance). These imperfect rhymes keep the poem feeling loose rather than rigid and make its music subtle. The poem sounds like it's being spoken by one of the "Croppies" rather than by the poet.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is one of the "Croppies": Irish rebels in the 1798 uprising against British rule. Apart from being an Irish rebel, the poem doesn't reveal any specifics about this person.

The speaker's anonymity emphasizes the fact that they were simply one of many who died at Vinegar Hill, as well as the fact that the rebellion was made up of all kinds of ordinary people. Keeping the speaker anonymous helps to convey the disrespect of the British troops, who left the dead in mass, unmarked graves.

While this disrespect was meant to break the spirit of Irish resistance, the poem implies that this spirit lived on. In this way, the speaker's voice is the voice of the Irish resistance itself, which has never been tied to a single person.

SETTING

The poem is set in Wexford, Ireland, in 1798. The speaker describes themselves and other "Croppies"—the name given to the United Irishmen, rebels who sought to free Ireland from British rule—as being "on the run [...] in [their] own country." As such, they can't stop to cook food in a "kitchen" or even set up a "camp[fire]." Instead, they eat "barley"—a kind of cereal grain—from their "pockets," suggesting how desperate their situation is.

The rebels "lay behind ditches" and attempt to find ways to outmaneuver the British despite being outnumbered, untrained, and under-armed. They "stampede cattle into infantry" (or chase cows into rows of foot soldiers), and hide in "hedges" where soldiers on horseback must abandon their horses. These examples suggest the ingenuity of the Irish, who are mostly farmers and ordinary people, not soldiers. Still, their cleverness can't make up for their lack of resources. For instance, they use "pike[s]" and "scythes," weapons which seem antiquated compared to the British "cannon[s]."

The poem mentions "Vinegar Hill" specifically, because this was where the battle came to a head. British troops surrounded the Irish and showed no mercy; thus, the "hillside" being "soaked" in Irish blood. The speaker goes on to say that the British didn't even bother covering the dead before throwing them into a mass grave, out of which a new crop of "barley grew [in August]." This image symbolizes the idea that although the British defeated the Irish in this battle (and indeed, shortly thereafter put an end to the uprising of 1798), the resistance would live to see another day.

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." "Requiem for the Croppies" was published in Heaney's second poetry collection, *Door into the Dark*, in 1969.

Much of Heaney's poetry is grounded in his native landscape. Born in majority-Protestant Northern Ireland to a Catholic family, he saw the terrors of the Troubles firsthand, and his work often reflects on the fractured and difficult history of his country. Heaney is also arguably 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.

Heaney has said that poets such as Ted Hughes ("Hawk Roosting"), Robert Frost ("After Apple-Picking"), and especially Patrick Kavanagh, work drew heavily from their native locales, helped him see the virtue of his traditional Irish upbringing. Heaney also translated many works of Irish literature and found inspiration and camaraderie among contemporary Irish poets such as John Hewitt, John Montague, and Paul Muldoon. He was one of the most consistent and persistent members of

the Belfast group, a poet's workshop that he attended from its inception in 1963. Today, countless poets cite Heaney as an influence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Seamus Heaney was born in Northern Ireland in 1939. He wrote "Requiem for the Croppies" in 1966, on the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising: an armed rebellion in which Irish Republicans fought to wrest control of Ireland from the British. But the poem itself references a much earlier rebellion: the 1798 Battle of Vinegar Hill, an uprising in which Irish rebels (nicknamed "Croppies" for their short haircuts, fashioned after French revolutionaries who cut their hair in order to stand out from the French aristocracy) failed to gain independence from Britain.

British troops surrounded the rebels, as well as the many women and children who were accompanying them, in County Wexford, proceeding to kill and bury them in mass, unmarked graves. The poem highlights the difference between the British troops, who were properly trained and armed for combat, and the Irish rebels, who were peasants equipped primarily with farm equipment.

Heaney eventually stopped reading "Requiem for the Croppies" in public when the Troubles began in Northern Ireland. 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. Though "Requiem" can hardly be said to glorify violence, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) eventually began to appropriate it for its own use and Heaney didn't want to risk exacerbating tensions by continuing to read the poem himself.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Listen to the Poem Out Loud — A recording of the poem as read by the actor Cilléin Mc Evoy. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW8Cp4s1ej8)
- An Overview of the 1798 Rebellion — A look at the history between Ireland and Britain and the events leading up to—and the aftermath of—the 1798 uprising. (https://www.theirishstory.com/2017/10/28/the-1798-rebellion-a-brief-overview/#.Yu1Y0y9h06U)
- The Poet's Life — A Poetry Foundation biography of Seamus Heaney. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney)
- Read About Heaney's Relationship to Poetry — A Guardian interview in which the poet discusses his influences, processes, and why he doesn't want to be referred to as a British poet. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/nov/08/seamus-heaney-interview)
- One of Ireland's Greatest Poets — Read an obituary published in the New York Times following Heaney's death in 2013. (https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/31/arts/seamus-heaney-acclaimed-irish-poet-dies-at-74.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SEAMUS HEANEY POEMS

- Blackberry-Picking
- Bogland
- 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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