

A Constable Calls

Heaney's images accurately depict

MEMORIES
IDEAS
FEELINGS.

The props in this poem include a bicycle, a uniform, a book, a baton and a gun.

Heaney describes these props in such a way that he persuades us to dislike the policeman.

Explanation of Content

Like other Heaney poems, '**A Constable Calls**' is based on a **MEMORY**.

The **SETTING** for the poem is the Heaney family farm at Mossbawn.

In the poem, Seamus Heaney tells us about an episode from his childhood. The poet describes a policeman checking tax returns on his father's farm at Mossbawn. During the visit, the policeman wrote down crop totals for the farm. Back then, in Ulster, policemen gathered information about crops. Seamus Heaney was a boy then and he watched the scene anxiously.

The poet looks at **TENSIONS** in society in '**A Constable Calls**'. The poem shows the fears felt by a Catholic farming family. Catholics did not join the police. Catholics feared, distrusted and disliked the Protestant police. Heaney's father was cold and distant to the policeman during the visit. Seamus Heaney as a young boy was terrified. During the visit the boy was nervous about the things the policeman had. The poem shows us the tension Heaney felt during the visit.

There are **nine** stanzas of four lines each.

In the **first** stanza, Heaney describes the policeman's bicycle. He tells us some facts about the bicycle:

'His bicycle stood at the window-sill'.

He describes its mud splasher, fixed to the mudguard. The bicycle was neat.

Heaney uses the bicycle to tell us how he felt about the policeman in the fourth line:

'fat black handlegrips'.

This description is ugly. A child would fear something **'fat'** and **'black'**.



In the **second** stanza, Heaney uses the phrase **'cocked back'**. That phrase reminds us of the trigger of a gun. It shows that Heaney thought the policeman was dangerous. The policeman seemed to be prepared for violence. The words show us the fear young Heaney had.

Then Heaney shows his feeling that the policeman was a heavy man. He suggests that the pedal was relieved when the policeman got off:

'the boot of the law'.

He felt the boot might injure his family. Law existed to kick you or control you in the eyes of Catholics.



In the **third** stanza, Heaney describes the policeman's cap. Heaney's father did not politely take it from him. His father was not mannerly to the policeman. The cap **'was upside down on the floor'**. Heaney also describes the mark made by the rim of the cap on the policeman's sweaty hair. This description is unpleasant. The policeman's uniform represents his power—a feature disliked by

young Heaney.

Perhaps the policeman was not relaxed as he sweated in front of a hostile farmer. The third stanza shows that the visit was uncomfortable for all of them.



In the **fourth** stanza, Heaney describes the record book of the policeman: **'heavy ledger'**. This is the policeman's most important prop. The word **'heavy'** shows something frightening about the policeman.

All the words show how a child with a big imagination became terrified.

The poet's father was giving details of the amount of crops he had grown. He used measurements of acres and fractions of acres.

In the **fifth** stanza, Heaney sums up the situation in two words. He refers to the way the policeman added up the details: **'Arithmetic'**. He then refers to the atmosphere in the room: **'fear'**.

At this point, the young Heaney noticed the policeman's gun holster. You can sense his emotion of complete fear.



In the **sixth** stanza, the policeman questioned the poet's father about his crops. The policeman was business-like: **'Any other crops?'** His father

answered abruptly: **'No'**. The farmer was not friendly towards the policeman.

Then his son had a frightening thought. He remembered a drill of turnips his father forgot. Maybe his father didn't want to admit to growing these turnips. Maybe he forgot. But young Heaney felt very worried.

In the **seventh** stanza, young Heaney feared his father would be found out. He **'assumed small guilts'**. This caused the boy to imagine his father locked in the black hole of the police station:

'Imagining the black hole in the barracks'.

At this high point of fear, the policeman stood up to leave. The policeman frightened the child by adjusting his **'baton-case'**.

In the **eighth** stanza, the adult Heaney makes this fear known to the reader by comparing **'the heavy ledger'** to the **'domesday book'**. This shows his dislike for the ledger.

'Domesday book' is a nickname people gave to a hated survey of lands by an English king. In people's minds, it is the name of a book that God will check at the end of the world. It may send some of them to hell.

The **'the heavy ledger'** could send Heaney's father to jail.

He felt fear as the policeman looked at him while saying goodbye.

In the **ninth** stanza, the frightened boy saw the policeman's shadow outside the window. The policeman was fixing the record book securely on the carrier. The word '**snapping**' shows conveys tension.

Heaney uses the word '**bobbed**' to show how the policeman moved outside the window. '**Bobbed**' means up and down movement. But there is a word play. A nickname for a policeman in Britain is 'Bobby'. Heaney's pun is getting revenge by mocking the policeman in the poem.



The final image imitates the sound of the bicycle as it moved off:

'the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked'.

A clock ticks. The adult Heaney may be referring to a clock that is used as a timer in a bomb. He

means that the hatred between the police and farmers will lead to explosions in the future.

Themes

Every aspect of this poem presents images from memory, a common theme in Heaney's poetry. Memories are coloured by the theme ideas that follow.

A very striking theme arising from the images is distrust and fear: **'Arithmetic and fear'.**

The poet uses an interrogation method to portray distrust between a Protestant policeman and a Catholic farmer:

'Any other root crops? Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?'

No'.

In this poem, Seamus Heaney portrays the costume and props of a policeman in clear visual detail in order to build a picture of distrust:

**'I sat staring at the polished holster
With its buttoned flap, the braid cord
Looped into the revolver butt'.**



The poet shows us the way violent conflict is rooted in distrust:
'the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked'.

The poet's image emphasises how powerless people fear authority:
'the boot of the law'.

The poet portrays the overactive imagination of a child:
'Imagining the black hole in the barracks'.

Tones

The tone is frequently cold, given the circumstances that's not a surprise:

'His bicycle stood at the window-sill'.

Sometimes the tone is negative, showing the boy's distaste for the policeman:

'Its fat black handle grips'.

Typically for a Heaney poem, the tone takes a humorous twist. Heaney imagined that the bicycle is a living thing that hates the policeman's weight:

'The pedal treads hanging relieved of the boot of the law'.

Sometimes the tone is mocking:

'A shadow bobbed in the window'.

The boy's feeling of revulsion is obvious:

'his slightly sweating hair'.

Sometimes the tone is frightened:

'Arithmetic and fear. I sat staring at the polished holster'.

Sometimes the tone is guilty:

'Imagining the black hole in the barracks'.

Sometimes the tone is tense:

'Any other root crops?...No'.



Sometimes the tone is gloomy and ominous:

'the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked'.

Sometimes there is a tone of dread:

'domesday book'.

Imagery

The central image is the policeman and his props. Heaney describes these props in such a way that we share his dislike for the policeman.

7 bicycle images.

The bicycle is the policeman's main prop. Props are the things that belong to someone. The props often reveal what a person is like.

'his bicycle...

the rubber cowl of a mud-splasher...

the front mudguard...

handle grips heating in sunlight...

the 'spud' of the dynamo...

the pedal treads...

carrier spring.'

4 images that relate to the rest of the policeman's equipment

**'his cap was upside down on the floor...the line of its pressure...
heavy ledger...
polished holster with its buttoned flap,
the braid cord looped into the revolver butt...
shifted the baton-case further round on his belt...'**

5 images of the farm and its activities

**'tillage returns in acres, roods, and perches...
mangolds...
marrowstems...
a line of turnips where the seed ran out...
potato field...'**

3 images of the kitchen where the visit took place.

**'window-sill...
his chair...
window'**

There is one image of the weather:

'the sunlight'.

4 metaphors in the poem.

'Its fat black handle grips...'

[This description compares the handle grips to a heavy person. This metaphor is personification. It is unattractive description. A child would fear something **'fat'** and **'black'**. Heaney chooses words that tell us how Catholic families on farms viewed the police.]

'The pedal treads hanging relieved of the boot of the law...'

[The word **'boot'** is a metaphor for the tough, cruel way the police behave.

This description compares the pedals of the bicycle to a living being.

This metaphor is personification. Heaney suggests that the pedal was relieved when the policeman got off. This description shows the boy's fear.]

'Closed the domesday book...'

[Heaney compares the hardback record book of the policeman to a historical book. Heaney reveals his childhood fear here. He compares **'the heavy ledger'** to the **'domesday book'**. In this metaphor, **'domesday'** shows fear. **'Domesday book'** was a hated survey of farms in England back in history. People believed that God would check at the end of time. It will send some to hell. The ledger could send Heaney's father to jail.]

'And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked'.

[Heaney is comparing the sound of the bicycle chain to a clock. A clock ticks. Heaney is referring to a clock that is used as a timer in a bomb. He means that the hatred between the police and farmers will lead to explosions.]

Sound Effects

Alliteration

[Alliteration is the repetition of first letters.]

Note the two **'b'** sounds in this quote:

'black hole in the barracks'.

The **'b'** sound is threatening. It links the colour **'black'** to **'barracks'**.

Assonance

[Assonance is repetition of vowels.]

Note how three **'a'** vowels here reinforce the colour black and the boy's fear:

'Its fat black handle grips'.

Consonance

[Consonance is repetition of consonant sounds.]

Note the six **'d'** sounds in the middle of the second stanza.

This hard sound increases the atmosphere of fear.

Sibilance

[Sibilance is repetition of **'s'** sounds].

The four **'s'** sounds here link the boy's eye to the fearful object he is staring at.

'I sat staring at the polished holster'.

Rhyming

There is no regular rhyming pattern in this lyric. The only line rhyme is between the second and fourth lines of the third stanza. The lack of line rhyming suits the conversational manner. Rhyming dictates word choice and can make word order seem stiff.

Internal Rhyme and Onomatopoeia

[Internal Rhyme is a word or sound rhyming within a line]
[Onomatopoeia is where the sound of the words imitate their meaning.]

Note the way the **'ticked'** sound occurs three times in this line:

'And the bicycle ticked, ticked, ticked'.

The phrase sounds like a bicycle moving off or a clock.

Because the sound of the words imitates a real sound, this is an example of Onomatopoeia.

Internal Rhyme

Note the repeated **'ow'** sound in this example. This sound effect deepens meaning. The **'ow'** links **'shadow'** to **'window'**.

'A shadow bobbed in the window'.

Rhythm

The rhythm has a natural feeling with the run on lines and run on stanzas.

The lack of formal rhyming helps to keep the rhythm natural. Conversational words maintain the informal air.

Note this dialogue from the sixth stanza:

'Any other root crops?

Mangolds? Marrowstems? Anything like that?

No'.

The rhythm seems a bit snappy here. The questions are bad-tempered and rude. The one word answer is very abrupt.

Other sound repetitions and the three and four beat lines of the poem give it a light formal rhythm. The dominant rhythm is casual or conversational.

The poem feels like an anecdote, a personal story about a dreaded visit. The poem is factually and sincerely addressed to the reader.