

Skunk by Seamus Heaney

Heaney's images accurately depict

MEMORIES
IDEAS
FEELINGS.

Uses images of

PEOPLE,
NATURE
ANIMALS

to comment on himself and people in his life.

Explanation of Content

He wrote a number of poems about his wife, Maire. In these poems, he shares his memories of Maire with the reader. In **'The Skunk'** he tells us about his relationship with Marie. They were married eleven years at that stage in 1971.



Seamus Heaney based the poem **'The Skunk'** on his memory of living in California in 1971. When Heaney wrote this poem, living away from home was more unusual than it is today. Long distances seemed to separate people more than today.

Setting

There are two settings for the poem. The first five stanzas are memories of California nights. The last stanza is a recent memory of waiting in bed for his wife as she changed into a nightdress.

Each setting prompts memories of the other setting. Heaney frames or surrounds his memories of California within his recent bedroom memory. He uses the senses of smell, sight and taste to link the two different settings of the poem.

Structure

The poem contains **six** stanzas of four lines each.

Stanzas

In the **first** stanza, Heaney recalls his memory of a skunk that used to enter his garden at night while he was living in California. Heaney focused on the skunk's tail. The skunk's tail is upright and erect, behind the skunk. He knew the skunk was among the flowers and shrubs of his garden because he could see its tail bobbing around in the dusk.

The skunk's tail is black with a white stripe. To show the black and white pattern in the tail, Heaney compares the tail to a priest's vestment:

'like the chasuble at a funeral mass'.

It is unusual to compare a skunk to something holy like a priest's funeral outfit. In 1970, the Catholic Church played a bigger role in people's lives than it does today.

Heaney states the tail was **'damasked'**. It had a striped pattern. The black and white pattern on a skunk's tail is like a damasked garment.

The tail also reminded Heaney of the **'chasuble'** because of its rounded shape. Later, in the fourth stanza, Heaney

mentions the beautiful scent of the eucalyptus tree. This **'tang'** or aroma probably reminded Heaney of the sweet smell of incense used during the funeral mass by a priest. This is another reason why he makes the very unusual comparison of the skunk to a priest's vestment. The sights and scents of the garden in combination remind him of a funeral mass.

Then Heaney surprises us by comparing the skunk to a **'visitor'**. This word means secret lover in the context of the poem. When you re-read the poem, there are many signs that Heaney was focusing on love.

In the **second** stanza, Heaney recalls a particular memory of the skunk's nighttime visits. The noisy fridge switched off:

'The refrigerator whinnied into silence'.

This detail is amusing. He compares the vibrating noise of the fridge to a horse's whinny or moan. It is as if the fridge is watching the scene also. This image shows Heaney's attention to detail. It shows his precise memory. The next phrase creates atmosphere:

'light softened'.

This light caused oranges to come into clearer view. The **'small oranges'** shows the detailed way Heaney remembers the scene.

The word **'voyeur'** in the next line is an unusual word for someone who is merely waiting for or watching an animal:

'I began to be tense as a voyeur'.

The word **'tense'** means 'on edge'. This might describe Heaney's feeling of waiting for the skunk to make its nightly visit.

'Voyeur' normally means someone who secretly watches a sexual scene or secretly watches someone undress. That is exactly what Heaney did in the final stanza. In that stanza, he describes how he watched his wife undressing for bed.

'Tense' also describes when a male is sexually aroused. The two words **'tense'** and **'voyeur'** connect the garden scene to the later bedroom scene with his wife.

Heaney is telling us that he really longed for his wife in a physical way when he was in California.

In the **third** stanza, Heaney makes it clear that he was thinking of his wife back in Ireland. He missed her physically and tenderly. Something about the curved shape of the skunk's tail and its black and white colours had put Heaney in a mood to be with his wife. He reveals in the last stanza how the skunk made him connect to his wife. There is a connection between his wife in her nightdress and the skunk's tail. Thus the skunk's tail reminded Heaney of both religious and sexual garments. He immediately began to write passionate letters to her: **'After eleven years I was composing love-letters again'**.

Heaney admits he began to see the common word **'wife'** as a precious word again. He compared the word to a wine barrel hidden away; **'like a stored cask'**. The word **'wife'** blended [**'mutated'**] into the night air of his garden in California.

In the **fourth** stanza, Heaney describes smells and tastes that delighted his senses. The eucalyptus reminded him of Maire's perfumes:

'The beautiful, useless tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence'.

From reading the first stanza, this glamorous smell had a connection with the **'chasuble'** of the funeral mass. In this stanza, **'the tang'** of the **'eucalyptus'** made Heaney miss Maire intensely, perhaps because she had a perfume that was similar. **'The tang'** was **'useless'** because she was absent. The **'tang of eucalyptus'** did not delight Heaney. Instead, it provoked in him a need to make love to Maire at that moment.

The flavour of the wine he had been drinking also reminded him of Maire. This is because he often smelt the wine she had been drinking off her pillow. The wine he was drinking in the garden in California probably caused him to have an intense desire for Maire. The image of **'cold pillow'** reminds us of how lonely he felt for her company.

In the **fifth** stanza, Heaney remembers looking closely at the skunk:

'And there she was, the intent and glamorous, Ordinary, mysterious skunk'.

The words **'glamorous'** and **'mysterious'** often refer to a lover. **'Intent'** means with purpose. Do lovers have **'intent'** when they make secret nighttime visits? The words also remind us of the word **'visitor'** used earlier. The next two lines explain the use of the word **'ordinary'**. It is linked to the word **'demythologized'**.

Heaney puts into words the moment when he saw the full body of the skunk on his veranda. House light on the veranda made the skunk fully visible. He packs the moment into a difficult two-word line:

'Mythologized, demythologized'.

Mythology is a word for mysterious stories about gods.

'Mythologized' here means that Heaney knew the skunk only from stories, before he came to California. When he saw the skunk's tail casually wandering around the garden it had fascinated him. Then he saw the entire skunk before his eyes. At that moment, the skunk became ordinary. Its mystery vanished when it came into full view. Without its mystery, the skunk was **'demythologized'**. It was snuffing the floor within five feet of Heaney. These two lines explain the word **'ordinary'**.

In the **final** stanza, Heaney reveals that the first five stanzas were based on a memory:

'It all came back to me last night'.

What caused Heaney to remember the visit of the skunk? What **'stirred'** the poet to remember? His wife Marie provides the answer. Heaney was lying in bed when his wife entered the darkened bedroom. She took off her clothes and bent over to search in a drawer for a suitable nightdress, the **'plunge-line'** one.

The invented word **'sootfall'** indicate the light noise of his wife's clothes hitting the ground. The word also shows that he heard rather than saw her undress.

The phrase **'tail up hunt'** is a clear reminder of the skunk. It confirms the link he had made between Maire and the skunk during his night of longing in California; **'the skunk's tail paraded the skunk'**.

The plunge-line nightdress indicates **'intent'**. Heaney remembers the moment in considerable detail.

Although Heaney doesn't use the word **'voyeur'** again, that is exactly what he is in the last stanza. He watches his wife prepare for bed in a darkened bedroom. He obviously feels a sense of mystery about her, particularly in the darkness. The word **'stirred'** reveals the effect that watching his wife had on the poet. It's a clear reminder of the last line of the second stanza:

'I began to be tense as a voyeur'.

The words used by Heaney interlink this night of bliss at home with nights of longing in California.

Themes

Heaney portrays his loneliness while living away from home. He reveals his passion for his wife. He is open about his sexual feelings for his wife. He pictures his wife in both a sensual and a sexual way.

The poem links nights of **longing** in California with a night of **fulfilment** at home.

The overall theme of this poem is memory:

'It all came back to me last night'.

The theme of memory is coloured by other themes such as love and celebration.

Seamus Heaney celebrates the energy and freshness of his marriage:

'After eleven years I was composing love-letters again'.

The poet celebrates a moment of bliss:

'stirred by the sootfall of your things at bedtime'.

The poet shows his frustrated desire for his wife. Note how the word **'useless'** expresses his emotion in this quote:

'The beautiful, useless tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence'.

The theme of the poem is the pain of separation from a loved one.

The poet portrays the sensual delight of a garden in California:

'Small oranges loomed in the orange tree'.



The tone at the start shows the poet is that of admiration:
'Up, black, striped and damasked'.

Sometimes the tone is full of anticipation:

'Night after night I expected her like a visitor'.

Sometimes the tone is humorous and weird. An example of this is when Heaney compares the skunk's tail to a mass vestment:

'damasked like the chasuble at a funeral mass'.

Sometimes the tone is humorous and weird. An example of this is when Heaney compares watching the skunk to secretly watching someone undress:

'I began to be tense as a voyeur'.

In this quote, the tone is also full of desire.

Sometimes the tone is humorous and weird. An example of this is when Heaney compares the noise of the fridge to a horse sound:

'The refrigerator whinnied into silence'.

Sometimes the tone is tender:

**'I was composing love-letters again,
broaching the word "wife" like a stored cask'.**

Sometimes the tone is sensual:

'The aftermath of a mouthful of wine'.

Sometimes the tone is empty and lonely:

'like inhaling you off a cold pillow'.

Sometimes there is a tone of wonder:

'And there she was, the intent and glamorous'.

Sometimes the tone is delicate:

'the sootfall of your things at bedtime'.

Sometimes the tone is playful:

'Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer'.

This erotic description is startling. Heaney compares his wife's pose to the skunk's as **'the skunk's tail paraded the skunk'.**

The tone is both tender and humorous in this poem. The poet tenderly deals with his love for his wife. He humorously uses some very weird comparisons.

Imagery

He gives the reader a picture of a garden in a suburban house in California.

He reveals his passion for his wife He pictures his wife in both a sensual and a sexual way.

In his imagination, Heaney makes a very unusual link between his wife and a skunk. The poem links nights of longing in California with a night of fulfilment at home.

The images are highly imaginative. The central image is an unusual comparison between the poet's wife and a skunk. In this image, Heaney connects two realities.

The skunk, in the California garden, reminded him of Maire, who he missed dearly.

Later in a bedroom scene back in Ireland, Maire bends over naked to pick up a nightdress. Her posture in the darkened bedroom reminds Heaney of the skunk over in California.

Here are 12 examples of descriptive images in the poem:

**'Up, black, striped ... skunk's tail...
The refrigerator ...
My desk light softened beyond the verandah...
Small oranges loomed in the orange tree...
After eleven years I was composing love-letters
again...
California...
Tang of eucalyptus
mouthful of wine ...
snuffing the boards five feet beyond me...
last night... at bedtime...
a bottom drawer...
the black plunge-line nightdress'.**

There are three clothes images in this poem:

**'like the chasuble...
sootfall of your things...
plunge-line nightdress...'**

There are two animal images in this poem:

**'the skunk...
whinnied...'**

There are two images of trees in this poem:

**'the orange tree...
eucalyptus...'**

There are many comparison images in the poem.

There are 6 similes in this poem

A simile is a comparison of two different things using 'like' or 'as'.

'damasked like the chasuble...'

[This is a very unusual comparison. It compares the colour and pattern of a skunk's tail to priest's mass vestments.]

'like a visitor...'

[The skunk is like a mistress.]

'tense as a voyeur...'

[The poet is like a peeping tom.]

'like a stored cask...'

[The word **'wife'** is like an old precious wine barrel in a cellar.]

**'as if its slender vowel had mutated into the night
earth and air ...'**

[The word **'wife'** is in the air and rich scents of the garden.]

'like inhaling you off a cold pillow...'

[Heaney feels lonely because Marie is back in Ireland]



There are 5 unusual metaphors in this poem

A metaphor is a comparison between two things that are different.

'Paraded...'

[The skunk's tail is like a stylish object in a parade. A priest, in his black vestments, parades behind the coffin in the funeral procession. Heaney knows the skunk is

present, though he only sees its tail above the plants. The skunk's tail is like the parading priest.]

'whinnied into silence...'

[He compares the vibrating noise of the fridge to a horse's whinny or moan.]

'mythologized...'

[He compares his curiosity about skunks to the wonders of mythology.]

'sootfall...'

[This is an invented word. He compares the very soft noise of clothes falling in the dark on a floor to the gentle fall of soot down a chimney. The clothes seem black, like soot, in the dark bedroom.]

'tail-up hunt...'

[He compares his wife's search in a drawer to the skunk hunting. He sees his wife's silhouette [dark outline] and links it to the skunk.]

Sound Effects

Alliteration

[Alliteration is the repetition of first letters.]

Note the four 's' sounds in this phrase:

'stirred by the sootfall'.

The 's' sound is soft, like what is described.

This is an example of sibilance [repetition of 's' sounds].

Assonance

[Assonance is repetition of vowels.]

Note how five the 'a' vowels reinforce the colour black in this quote:

'Up, black, striped and damasked like the chasuble'.

Assonance

Note the four long 'u' sounds of this quote:

'The beautiful, useless

Tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence'.

Consonance

[Consonance is repetition of consonant sounds.]

Note three 'nd' sounds in this line:

'My desk light softened beyond the verandah'.

Consonance

Note the nine 'I' sounds in the fourth stanza.

Rhyming

There is no regular rhyming pattern in this lyric. The lack of line rhyming suits the conversational manner. Rhyming dictates word choice and can make word order seem stiff.

Internal Rhyme

[Internal Rhyme is a word or sound rhyming within a line]

Note the way the 'in' sound occurs three times in this half-line:

'whinnied into silence'.

The phrase sounds like a fridge switching itself off.

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

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 casual air. Note this everyday line from the final stanza:

'It all came back to me last night'.

Other sound repetitions and the three and five 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 with memories sincerely addressed to the reader.