

Sophister Module Description Template 2025-26

Full Name: Keeping Going: Seamus Heaney and Artistic Commitment

Short Name: Seamus Heaney

Lecturer Name and Email Address: Dr Rosie Lavan, lavanro@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester Taught: HT 2026

Year: SS

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of these course, students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate a sound critical understanding of the range and development of Heaney's work, and its contexts
2. Appraise the ethical questions raised by and applied to his writing, and to twentieth-century poetry more broadly
3. Evaluate, respond to, extend, and/or challenge key critical and theoretical assessments of his work
4. Pursue independent primary research using resources in the College Library and/or the National Library of Ireland
5. Reflect on the issues raised by this module, and apply insights and methodologies developed here elsewhere in their studies

Learning Aims:

Across the half century of his writing life, Seamus Heaney understood that, in words he borrowed from Yeats, "the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense preoccupation it demands". This module explores the nature of that "intense preoccupation" by highlighting examples of artistic commitment evoked by Heaney as he felt, responded to, or resisted different pressures during his career. Taking his Nobel Lecture 'Crediting Poetry' (1995) and his post-ceasefire, post-Nobel volume *The Spirit Level* (1996), as its starting points, the module will look in detail at a selection of his poems and prose writings to consider how Heaney formed and maintained his dedication to poetry as he confronted personal, political and aesthetic challenges. It will look at the nature of the instruction, inspiration, and confidence he took from other writers, and from visual artists. As one expression of any writer's commitment is necessarily private, the module will introduce students to unpublished work and the extensive drafts of Heaney's writings now held in the

National Library of Ireland; and, through attending to uncollected texts, it will promote discussion of the often complex and obscured textual histories of Heaney's work which have been newly established in the definitive edition of his poetry published in 2025.

Assessment Details:

- Type of Assessment: Continuous
- Research Exercise due week 6 (2000 words): 30%
- Essay due at the end of term (4000 words) 70%
- Number of Components: Two
- Word Count of Component(s): 2000 and 4000
- Percentage Value of Component(s): 30%; 70%

Preliminary Reading List:

Primary Texts

The module will refer to *The Spirit Level*, and other individual poems by Heaney, as they appear in *The Poems of Seamus Heaney*, edited by Rosie Lavan and Bernard O'Donoghue with Matthew Hollis (London: Faber, 2025). Students should not feel obliged to purchase this book: **all primary texts will be made available as pdfs on Blackboard.**

Selected prose writings by Heaney, including 'Crediting Poetry', will also be made available as pdfs on Blackboard. Students who would like to work with their own copy of Heaney's prose writings are encouraged to use *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber, 2001), but note that 'Crediting Poetry' is not included in this selection.

All students are encouraged to read Dennis O'Driscoll's *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008): this provides the best background to Heaney's life and work.

Students may also wish to watch Adam Low's documentary *Seamus Heaney and the Music of What Happens* (2019), which is available on YouTube and archive.org.

Initial Recommendations for Secondary Reading

Michael Cavanagh, *Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Poetics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

Jason David Hall and Ashby Bland Crowder eds., *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

John Dennison, *Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Rachel Falconer, *Seamus Heaney, Virgil, and the Good of Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

R. F. Foster, *On Seamus Heaney* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Geraldine Higgins ed., *Seamus Heaney in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Bernard O'Donoghue ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: HarperCollins, 1998).

Bridget Vincent, *Moral Authority in Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

David-Antoine Williams, *Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Please note:

- **Curricular information is subject to change.**
- **Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.**