

**Compare the ways in which the poets present the theme of education and social class in *Out of the Bag* by Seamus Heaney and *Poetry* by Tom Leonard (30 marks)**

Both Seamus Heaney in *Out of the Bag* and Tom Leonard in *Poetry* present a presumably working class view of the education they received, which, in the case of both poets, appears to have been dominated by upper class figures. As such, both poets seem somewhat cynical – Heaney suggests that more can be learned from ordinary people, such as the family doctor he idolised as a child, than from distinguished academics, while Leonard completely rejects the lessons he was taught in order to pursue his own ideas. Overall, both poets question the extent to which a formalised education led by a potentially out of touch social class can be applied to the real world.

In both poems, the poets imply that the lessons they were formally taught have not been useful to them. In *Out of the Bag*, for example, Heaney describes his studies of famous medical figures – “*Poeta doctus* Peter Levi says/Sanctuaries of Asclepius (called *asclepians*)/Were the equivalent of hospitals ... Or of shrines like Lourdes/says *poeta doctus* Graves.” The reference to established academic figures suggests that the poet was well educated, as does the use of Latin and Greek terminology, which often connotes high status and a significant level of formal education. Indeed, the poet appears to have excelled in his education to the extent that he is on the verge of joining the academics he refers to, as he presents his own theory, “Or of the cure/By poetry that cannot be coerced,/Say I”, immediately after those he has learned, suggesting that he considers himself to be on the same intellectual level as the professionals he has studied. Nonetheless, despite his extensive theoretical knowledge, Heaney notes that his study has given him few practical skills; when he describes his pilgrimage to Lourdes, a site of supposed spiritual healing, he states that, instead of experiencing the expected strength, he was “groggy” and “nearly fainted”, suggesting that the lessons he had learned contradicted, and hinting that he did not find that the statements made by upper class theorists were applicable in the lives of ordinary people. This is further demonstrated when he describes himself “[pulling] a bunch of grass”, which he “posted off/To one going in to chemotherapy”. Here, Heaney uses juxtaposition to demonstrate the powerlessness he encountered when trying to translate his educational experiences to the real world – when presented alongside a destructive and potentially fatal illness such as cancer, which can only be treated with powerful “chemotherapy” and other medical interventions, something as simple as “Bits of ... grass” seem useless in comparison, suggesting that this is how the poet feels about his formal education. More important to his learning, he suggests, was the influence of Doctor Kerlin, who he witnessed as a child performing the deliveries of his siblings, and whom he “hallucinate[s]” when he faints at Lourdes, suggesting to readers that the doctor is a far more significant figure in the poet’s life than the academics he initially tries to emulate (in addition, Doctor Kerlin is mentioned in three of the poem’s four sections, while the academic figures appears in only one, suggesting that Doctor Kerlin has had a much longer lasting impact on the poet’s development). As such, Heaney suggests that he was able to learn much more from ordinary people in his life than from formal educators.

Likewise, Leonard presents an education which seems built on upper class principles, which he does through an exaggerated set of instructions for pronouncing the word “poetry”. The different elements of the word are referred to using examples which are over-complicated or not associated with the lives of working class people, for example, “the pee as in pulchritude”, “a languid high tea”, “pause: then the coda”, all of which appear mocking and suggest that the poet, like Heaney, felt unable to relate to the lessons he was taught. This is also suggested by the result of the ‘instructions’, which present the word “poetry” as “Poughit.rih”, a somewhat inaccurate pronunciation, which could imply that Leonard feels that the concepts he learned through his education became distorted by the gap between his teachers’ experience of life and his own. While Heaney suggests that it was the content of his education itself

which led to his being unable to apply it, Leonard addresses the theme of social class more explicitly, mockingly referring to the collection of syllables he describes as a “gracious bouquet!”, evoking readers’ typical perceptions of the upper class, and satirising those who believe that ‘lessons’ like the one given in the poem (which, despite its detailed explanation of the word, would give a student little information about poetry itself, suggesting he views this form of teaching as superficial) teach anything of value, before finally denouncing the process as “nothing to do with me”. While he stops short of explicitly condemning the education system, the poet does seem to react strongly against it; as Heaney undermines the system of academia by placing much greater importance on his own observations of Doctor Kerlin, Leonard also subverts the conventions of upper class education, in this case, through his poem’s structure. *Poetry* contains none of the traditional features of a poem which a child might be expected to learn at school (particularly in a system as apparently formal as the one the poet depicts): there is no rhyme, except for the assonance in the lines “oh pronounced ough/as in bough”, which suggests an almost comically exaggerated pronunciation of these words, adding to the satire with which Leonard illustrates his teachers; the line and stanza lengths are irregular, with enjambement fragmenting sentences over several lines; and the first sentence of the poem does not begin with a capital letter, all of which signal a concerted effort by Leonard to fight against the restraints placed on creativity by restrictive teaching. Therefore, while Leonard does not address the discrepancy between theoretical teaching and everyday life as directly as Heaney does, both poets express the view that there are more important lessons to be learned than those taught by the teachers they were given.

In conclusion, both Seamus Heaney and Tom Leonard depict the shortcomings of formal education, particularly when this is taught or dominated by people of a completely different social class to those who are learning, as this can lead to theoretical knowledge having little practical use in everyday life. In particular, both poets reject the view that this kind of education is superior to others, suggesting that other ways of learning about the world, such as through vocational experiences, as Heaney suggests, or personal creative processes, as is suggested in Leonard’s poem, can in fact be much more valuable.

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