OVERVIEW

Reactions to 9/11 were not simply political and militaristic in nature. Art, literature, and poetry all reflected the profound impact 9/11 had on citizens all over the world. This lesson will ask students to analyze the events and aftermath of 9/11 as depicted by Nobel laureate Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

AGE GROUP

Grades 9-12, College Level

COLORADO GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS/HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

1. The historical method of inquiry to ask questions, evaluate primary and secondary sources, critically analyze and interpret data, and develop interpretations defended by evidence from a variety of primary and secondary sources.

2. Analyze the key concepts of continuity and change, cause and effect, complexity, unity and diversity over time.

3. The significance of ideas as powerful forces throughout history.

COMMON Core STATE STANDARDS (GRADES 11-12)

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS: SPEAKING AND LISTENING

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1
  Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS: READING

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1
  Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: READING

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1
  Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.2
  Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.4
  Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text.
Examining 9/11 Through Poetry

9/11: Post-Visit

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7
  Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Length of Lesson
One 50-minute lesson

Rationale
The events of 9/11 are an abstract concept for many high school students born close to September, 2001. The visceral effects of that day cannot be portrayed through mere facts. Seamus Heaney wrote an evocative poem that will encourage students to understand the devastating consequences of the terrorist attack through reading, discussion, and analysis. Students will strengthen their comprehension skills while extracting emotions and ideas from artistic literature.

Objectives
Upon completion of this lesson, students will be better able to:
- Describe at least three components of Heaney’s poem that help communicate his ideas;
- Draw connections between Heaney’s poem “Anything Can Happen” and the aftermath of 9/11;
- Draw connections between the experience of the author and his stylistic approach to the events of 9/11; and
- Discuss at least three ways the United States has changed as a result of 9/11.

Materials
- Handout 1: Biography of Seamus Heaney
- Handout 2: “Anything Can Happen” by Seamus Heaney
- Class copies of two sources discussing how America changed after 9/11:
- Computer with Internet access
- Projector

Included
- Handout 1: Seamus Heaney Biographical Information
- Handout 2: “Anything Can Happen” by Seamus Heaney
Lesson

1. Warm-up: Watch Visual 1 as a class, explaining that it is a newsreel film that examines the causes of strife in Northern Ireland during Seamus Heaney’s upbringing. Then, have students read Handout 1 and discuss in small groups how political developments in Ireland during Heaney’s life impacted his career.
   a. Host a class discussion to make sure all students understand Heaney’s upbringing.

2. Hand out “Anything Can Happen” by Seamus Heaney. Have students read it independently, noting evocative lines, words, images, and any questions they might have.

3. Have students get together with a partner to answer the following questions:
   a. What was the most important line in the poem and why?
   b. What are two symbols Heaney uses, and how does he connect them to 9/11?
   c. What is the emotional connection between the author’s experiences and those of the victims of 9/11?

4. Reconvene the group and have each pair of students reflect on their answers. Make sure they have the chance to ask questions about the poem, as well.

5. Hand out copies of the two sources provided on fundamental ways that the United States has changed since 9/11. Give students at least 10 minutes to read them and note at least three visible ways and three invisible ways the U.S. has changed.

6. Class discussion: bring together all sources.
   a. Relate Heaney’s imagery to the ways in which America has changed. Discuss both visible (new departments, travel security) and invisible (a sense of vulnerability) changes.
   b. Ask students what they think the world was like before 9/11. Reflection: Have students either journal or write a reflection essay about their reactions to the poem, what struck them about the class discussion, and how/if their feelings about 9/11 changed as a result of the class.
Seamus Heaney-Biographical Information


Seamus Heaney was born in April 1939, the eldest member of a family which would eventually contain nine children. His father owned and worked a small farm of some fifty acres in County Derry in Northern Ireland, but the father’s real commitment was to cattle-dealing. There was something very congenial to Patrick Heaney about the cattle-dealer’s way of life to which he was introduced by the uncles who had cared for him after the early death of his own parents. The poet’s mother came from a family called McCann whose connections were more with the modern world than with the traditional rural economy; her uncles and relations were employed in the local linen mill and an aunt had worked “in service” to the mill owners’ family. The poet has commented on the fact that his parentage thus contains both the Ireland of the cattle-herding Gaelic past and the Ulster of the Industrial Revolution; indeed, he considers this to have been a significant tension in his background, something which corresponds to another inner tension also inherited from his parents, namely that between speech and silence. His father was notably sparing of talk and his mother notably ready to speak out, a circumstance which Seamus Heaney believes to have been fundamental to the “quarrel with himself” out of which his poetry arises.

Heaney grew up as a country boy and attended the local primary school. As a very young child, he watched American soldiers on manoeuvres in the local fields, in preparation for the Normandy invasion of 1944. They were stationed at an aerodrome which had been built a mile or so from his home and once again Heaney has taken this image of himself as a consciousness poised between “history and ignorance” as representative of the nature of his poetic life and development.

When he was twelve years of age, Seamus Heaney won a scholarship to St. Columb’s College, a Catholic boarding school situated in the city of Derry, forty miles away from the home farm, and this first departure from Mossbawn was the decisive one. It would be followed in years to come by a transfer to Belfast where he lived between 1957 and 1972, and by another move from Belfast to the Irish Republic where Heaney has made his home.

Heaney’s poems first came to public attention in the mid-1960s when he was active as one of a group of poets who were subsequently recognized as constituting something of a “Northern School” within Irish writing. Although Heaney is stylistically and temperamentally different from such writers as Michael Longley and Derek Mahon (his contemporaries), and Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian and Ciaran Carson (members of a younger Northern Irish generation), he does share with all of them the fate of having been born into a society deeply divided along religious and political lines, one which was doomed moreover to suffer a quarter-century of violence, polarization and inner distrust. This had the effect not only of darkening the mood of Heaney’s work in the 1970s, but also of giving him a deep preoccupation with the question of poetry’s responsibilities and prerogatives in the world, since poetry is poised between a need for creative freedom within itself and a pressure to express the sense of social obligation felt by the poet as citizen. Heaney’s beginnings as a poet coincided with his meeting the
woman whom he was to marry and who was to be the mother of his three children. Marie Devlin, like her husband, came from a large family, several of whom are themselves writers and artists, including the poet’s wife who has recently published an important collection of retellings of the classic Irish myths and legends (Over Nine Waves, 1994).

The Heaneys had spent a very liberating year abroad in 1970/71 when Seamus was a visiting lecturer at the Berkeley campus of the University of California. It was the sense of self-challenge and new scope which he experienced in the American context that encouraged him to resign his lectureship at Queen’s University (1966-72) not long after he returned to Ireland, and to move to a cottage in County Wicklow in order to work full time as a poet and free-lance writer. A few years later, the family moved to Dublin and Seamus worked as a lecturer in Carysfort College, a teacher training college, where he functioned as Head of the English Department until 1982, when his present arrangement with Harvard University came into existence. This allows the poet to spend eight months at home without teaching in exchange for one semester’s work at Harvard. In 1984, Heaney was named Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, one of the university’s most prestigious offices. In 1989, he was elected for a five-year period to be Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, a post which requires the incumbent to deliver three public lectures every year but which does not require him to reside in Oxford. In the course of his career, Seamus Heaney has always contributed to the promotion of artistic and educational causes, both in Ireland and abroad. 1Seamus Heaney passed away August 30th, 2013.

Handout 2: Post-Visit

“Anything Can Happen”
By Seamus Heaney

Anything can happen. You know how Jupiter
Will mostly wait for clouds to gather head
Before he hurls the lightning? Well just now
He galloped his thunder cart and his horses

Across a clear blue sky. It shook the earth
And the clogged underearth, the River Styx,
The winding streams, the Atlantic shore itself.
Anything can happen, the tallest towers

Be overturned, those in high places daunted,
Those overlooked regarded. Stopped-beak Fortune
Swoops, making the air gasp, tearing the crest off one,
Setting it down bleeding on the next.

Ground gives. The heaven’s weight
Lifts up off Atlas like a kettlelid.
Capstones shift, nothing resettles right.
Telluric ash and fire-spores boil away.