

THE WIFE'S TALE by SEAMUS HEANEY

Subject:	The speaker describes bringing lunch to her husband and his workmates in a cornfield.
Themes:	Rural life, country people, relationships, communication.
Context:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In <i>Stepping Stones</i>, Heaney explains that the scene in this poem came out of first-hand experience. It therefore seems likely that the female speaker is based on his own mother. • In the same book, Heaney expresses his belief that this poem 'gets something right about man/woman companionship and contesting.' This quote suggests that his purpose in writing it was to explore the nature of communication between rural men and women.
Form & structure:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The poem comprises four stanzas written in free verse with a final rhyming couplet. The loose structure reinforces its conversational feel, while the varying lengths of the stanzas can also be seen as reflecting the way power is continually being negotiated in the husband and wife's relationship. The final rhyming couplet imbues the poem's conclusion with a sense of balance which implies that both are content in their respective roles.

Language, imagery & metaphors:

- The poem's title can be interpreted as Heaney's attempt to give a voice to women, who are often excluded from pastoral poetry. It can also be seen as a play on words, since the phrase 'old wives' tale' refers to a superstition that has no basis in fact. By associating the female perspective with this phrase, Heaney is perhaps acknowledging the way women's opinion are routinely dismissed in rural life.
- Heaney uses the **onomatopoeic nouns** 'hum' and 'gulp' to vividly capture the sound of the thresher. The contrast between the 'quiet' and the **onomatopoeic description** of the workers' boots 'Crunching the stubble' also brings the scene to life by creating **strong aural imagery**.
- The poem is replete with **contrasting images** of indoor and outdoor rural life: the domestic sphere, associated with the female speaker, is represented by the **image** of the 'linen cloth' and the speaker's nurturing actions – 'I poured a cup / And buttered the thick slices that he likes' – while the sphere of manual work, associated with the male, is represented by **images and metaphors of tools and machinery**; the thresher, **personified** as an intimidating predator, has 'straw / Hanging undelivered in its jaws', and the speaker notes that 'forks were stuck at angles in the ground'.
- The contrast between the male and female spheres is reinforced by the **juxtaposition** of 'woman' and 'boys' in the line 'a woman could lay out a field / Though boys like us have little call for cloths.'
- The **husband's authority** is signaled by the way he addresses his wife using **imperatives**, commanding her to 'Give these fellows theirs' and 'Away and look', and the way he expresses his pride in his work 'as if he were the land itself' (a **simile** that conveys his self-assurance and sense of ownership).
- Heaney's use of **weapon similes** implies that rural work fulfills some primitive male need to assert their dominance. The corn is described as 'hard as shot', while the forks are stuck in the ground 'As javelins might mark lost battlefields.' These **similes** also hint at the speaker's sense of exclusion from the men's work by evoking a sense of unfamiliarity and even hostility.
- A feminist reading might argue that the husband takes his wife's role for granted. Yet it could be argued that the speaker asserts some control through the **half-affectionate, half-exasperated tone** of her observation that 'Always this inspection has to be made'. Furthermore, the husband still looks to her for approval, and while she is dismissed after the men have finished eating, Heaney's use of the **adjective** 'grateful' to describe their demeanour as they 'still kept their ease / ... under the trees' implies their appreciation of her role and her sense of satisfaction at having fed them. The **concluding rhyming couplet** and the wife's **placid tone** in the final lines reinforce the impression that the male and female roles in this rural world are complementary, albeit different, and that both are content in their roles.
- Although on the surface the exchange between the husband and wife seems banal, Heaney indicates their underlying closeness through small gestures such as that in the **image** 'he winked'.

Tone: The speaker's **tone is calm and impassive** in the opening stanza as she describes the scene in the cornfield, and **affectionate** when she notes 'Always this inspection has to be made'.

Her husband's **tone is appreciative** when he says 'I declare a woman could lay out a field', and **proud and self-satisfied** when he says 'There's a good yield, / Isn't there?'

- The wife's **tone is placid, accepting, matter-of-fact and satisfied** in the concluding lines (as indicated by the **short sentence** 'And that was it', her acknowledgement that 'I'd come and he had shown me, / So I belonged no further to the work' and her use of 'grateful' to note the men's appreciation of her work).