The context of a composers’ society inevitably influences the perspective they present through their textual choices. James Joyce’s collection of cynical short stories ‘Dubliners’ and Seamus Heaney’s romantic anthology of poetry explore the way cultural and ideological fixation of Ireland causes a loss of humanity. While Joyce adopts a scathing perspective of such stagnation as a result of the loss of national pride due to British colonialism, Heaney uses his texts to bring people together at a time of violence, and provide hope for the people of Ireland. Despite the disapproval Joyce received for ‘Dubliners’, yet the praise that met Heaney’s poetry, both composers use their texts to encourage change in their societies through distinct textual forms and features.

Both Joyce and Heaney explore the loss of identity that results from cultural fixation to outdated tradition. Joyce was writing at a time when Ireland had suffered a lack of jobs, opportunities, and national identity due to colonialism, and thus sought comfort in the Irish revivalism movement; which meant that traditional culture was being adhered to for a sense of identity. Joyce’s rejection of revivalism is evident in ‘clay’ whereby the protagonist Maria is continuously compared to the lifeless substance to symbolise a lack of identity; “Maria laughed and laughed until the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin”. The act of Maria laughing represents conformity to Irish societal norms, while the metaphorical imagery of her face collapsing in on itself likens Maria to the malleability of clay; her identity is shaped by traditional Irish culture, and thus she is stagnated. This is further evident in the story ‘A little cloud’, wherein the comparison of Gallagher – who left Ireland, and Little Chandler – who stayed in Ireland, serves to highlight Joyce’s perspective of the lack of opportunity in Ireland, as well as to reference the mass-immigration outside of Ireland, in that Joyce believed escape was the only way to live a life of opportunity; “you must have seen the world!”. The childlike awe created by Chandler’s expression implies a sheltered life due to adherence to Irish culture through the revivalism movement. The subsequent epiphany by Chandler; “he was a prisoner for life! You could do nothing in Ireland” exemplifies the lack of opportunity in Ireland through the hyperbolic metaphor of Chandler as a prisoner. The textual form of short stories chosen by Joyce, allows him to mirror his society and develop a range of characters that are relatable to all audiences; thus the confronting nature of his scathing perspective was received poorly initially. Thus, Joyce uses his short stories to criticise the Irish revivalist movement of his time, in that cultural fixation leads to a lack of identity.

However, while Joyce’s short stories criticise Irish revivalism, Heaney appreciates his traditional culture as the foundation of his society, but believes it must adapt to move forward. His textual form of poetry allows him to use emotive, lyrical, and romantic poetic imagery to provide hope to his people during the violence of the troubles in Northern Ireland. This is evident in ‘the given note’ which thwarts the symbol of traditional Irish music, to reveal a need for change; “he got the air out of the night… it comes off the bow gravely, rephrases itself into the air”. The romantic imagery of the grandiosity of nature symbolises the force of societal change that challenges out-dated culture. While the musician starts off playing a familiar tune, it is changed by the environment which symbolises society becoming more progressive in the latter half of the 20th century when Heaney was writing. However, Heaney uses the dehumanised characterisation of the crowd; “he blamed their fingers and ears as unpractised” to show that cultural fixation on out-dated tradition, can lead to the Irish peoples’ inability to move forward. This is also evident in his poem ‘digging’ whereby
Heaney shows an appreciation for his family’s traditional culture, but also a need to move on; “by God the old man could handle a spade, just like his old man”. The idiom ‘by God’ creates a tone of excitement while the repetition of ‘old man’ highlights the futility of tradition moving forward, if it is unable to change with society. Thus, Heaney’s romantic poetry is evidently influenced by the context of violence and turmoil in his time, as he understood the need to adhere to tradition, but still believed in the need for change from cultural fixation.

Furthermore, both Joyce and Heaney criticise their societal context of ideological fixation to deep-rooted catholic traditions, and the ways in which people are prevented from experiencing true relationships as a result. Joyce’s time, at the turn of the century in Dublin, gave him the perfect opportunity to provide a wake-up-call to his people about the futility of their religious adherence, however his frosty reception from audiences reveal that his opinion was less than desired. This controversy is evident in ‘the sisters’, whereby Joyce criticises the paralysing nature of the Catholic Church through the relationship between Father Flynn and the boy; “if you ask me, a lad should be out playing with other lads his own age”. The textual form of a series of short stories gives Joyce the opportunity to use colloquial Irish slang in order to make his characters relatable to his audience and thus, more impactful. The uncle’s colloquial comment also creates a narrator voice that allows Joyce to express his own beliefs. Furthermore, the pathetic fallacy; “it was strange that neither I nor the day seemed to be in a mourningful mood” expresses the sense of freedom obtained by the boy through the death of the priest, in that he is able to experience relationships now that he is no longer paralysed by the church. However, Joyce creates a sense of contrast by describing this thought as ‘strange’, referencing the catholic guilt that keeps the Irish fixated. Joyce also criticises the forcefulness of the Catholic Church that prevents people from experiencing raw emotion; this is evident in the story ‘Grace’ in the forced evangelisation of Mr Kiernan; “God will make a new man out of him”. The imperative highlights the forceful, yet futile nature of Catholicism in Ireland at the time. It was through these provocative, confronting opinions put forward by Joyce, aided by his textual form of short stories, that his view of ideological fixation led to a negative audience reception.

Heaney also had a similar experience with Catholicism in his society, leading him to adopt an analogous perspective to Joyce through his poetry. His romantic and lyrical style allowed him to be more surreptitious about his criticism, and rather than confront his audience, he was able to evoke personal emotion through accounts of his own experiences. Heaney primarily used his poetry to criticise the superficial comfort provided by the church to the Irish during the troubles. This is evident in his poem ‘Granite chip’ which makes an intertextual reference to Joyce, due to Heaney being a “follower of Joyce”. The granite serves to symbolise both Joyce’s nature as a writer in his society, and the futility of the Catholic Church; “come to me, all of you who are burdened. I will not refresh you”. The malapropism of the religious allusion to a scripture passage highlights Heaney’s perspective that, while the church appears to be welcoming and helpful in providing hope to the people during the troubles, its selfish and greedy nature is hidden. Furthermore, Heaney uses his own personal relationship with his mother in ‘Clearances III’ to trivialise the value of Catholicism in providing meaning to a person’s life; “while all the others were away at mass, I was hers and we peeled potatoes… never closer the whole rest of our lives”. The irony created by Heaney’s rejection of mass – an intrinsically spiritual act, for a mundane activity like peeling potatoes, is emphasised by the hyperbole of the last line to show a rejection of ideological fixation in favour of real relationships, and thus encourages the Irish people to do the same.
Therefore, through the differing forms and features employed by both Joyce and Heaney, it is evident that the composers’ individual, yet somewhat similar, contextual experiences heavily affected their perspective. Through a comparison of both composers’ opinions of cultural and ideological fixation, the intended Irish audiences in particular are provoked to challenge their societal stagnation in hopes of moving forward.