

An Ecocritical Perspective in Select Poems of Seamus Heaney

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Abstract

This paper explores an ecocritical approach to Seamus Heaney's poetry, with a particular focus on how his work portrays the natural world, the rural heritage and ecological consciousness. Drawing on ecocritical theories by scholars such as Cheryl Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, and literary critics like Helen Vendler the study shows how Heaney's poetry transforms landscapes, farming practices and natural processes into metaphors for identity. His intimacy to nature and his deep-rootedness to rural areas of Ireland is quite extraordinary. Analysing his key poems we are able to relate his sensuous memories to nature and his childhood memories to his family farm. This paper argues that Heaney constructs a poetics of place along with an ecological intimacy that anticipates contemporary environmental concerns.

Key-Words: Ecocritical, Heaney, Consciousness, Memories, Ecological intimacy.

The intersection of literature and environment has become increasingly important in contemporary literary criticism, particularly through the lens of eco-criticism. Ecocriticism is a new literary trend in the literary theory of the 1990's. The seed of eco-criticism seems to be sowed in the Romantic age where 'Nature' occupied the central position in the poetry of France and England and later on it was transmitted to other parts of the World.

The Term, 'Eco criticism', was first coined by Rueckert William in his essay 'Literature and Ecology : An Experiment in Eco-criticism'. According to him, Eco-criticism is "The application of ecology and concepts to the study of literature." One of the pioneers in this field, Cheryl Glotfelty, defined eco-criticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as a feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective and the Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, similarly the Eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty, 1996 xix)

Seamus Heaney, a Nobel laureate and one of the most acclaimed poets, is a nature poet and much of his work finds its roots in nature and the rural areas of Ireland. In his poetry, we find a presentation of the cultural topography of rural Ireland. In Heaney's work the approach to nature differs from that of William Wordsworth. He does not idealize nature, but in his literary works there is a complex relationship between humans and the natural world. Heaney's work is never merely a setting, it is an active participant in the formation of personal and collective identities. He establishes himself as a prominent literary figure with his first volume of poetry, "Death of A Naturalist (1966.) Heaney's other collection of poetry are "Door into the Dark (1969), Wintering Out (1972), North (1975), Field Work (1979). Station Island (1984), The Haw Lantern (1987), Seeing things (1991), The Spirit Level (1996), Electric Light (2001), District and Circle (2006), New Selected Poems and new translation of the old English heroic poem 'Beowulf'.

Seamus Heaney enjoys a background of being the son of the farmer. His deep attachment to the Northern Irish countryside and his intellectual engagement along with the classical and modernist traditions makes his poetry a rich site for ecocritical analysis. According to Terry Gifford, Heaney's poetry, "repeatedly returns to the ecology of rural life to explore how the landscape shapes and reflects human values" (Gifford, 2011). Heaney's poetry demonstrates an eco-critical awareness. His work is permeated by an ethos of ecological attentiveness and the core concerns are reflected in his poetry. For Seamus Heaney, land, is not just a passive back drop but it is a dynamic entity that records human actions, preserves history and influences the ethical behaviour. Tim G. Campbell, so rightly asserts, Heaney's natural imagery "allows for a moral reflection grounded in physical engagement with the environment" (Campbell, 2003).

Seamus Heaney was raised a Roman Catholic in Massbawn, County Derry, a rural community in Protestant Northern Ireland. Even though his family had left the farm, the departure for Heaney was more of a psychological one rather than geographical. He constantly recalls his childhood reminiscences of his familiar farm, Massbawn, a major

source of inspiration in his poetry. In the poetical works of Heaney, we come across the ecological glimpses that tempt us to evaluate his work from the ecological points of view.

The present paper explores how Heaney's poetic imagination is rooted in an ecological awareness that transcends nostalgic ruralism and engages itself in questions of land use, environmental history and human responsibility. His writings show a keen interest in landscape and nature elements and his imagery has a distinct stamp of Irish landscape. The landscape becomes the language of poetry. Thomas Docherty Visualizes Heaney "as a modernist poet, the ephebe (one approaching manhood) influenced by Yeats and by a Romantic tradition which was crucially concerned with landscape and a particular kind of eco-relation to land" (Michael Allen 207).

The poems selected for the present paper are – "*Digging*", "*The Death of a Naturalist*", "*Blackberry Picking*", "*The Churning Day*", "*At a Potato Digging*", "*Waterfall*", "*Follower*", "*Storm on the Island*" and "*Personal Helicon*", In all these poems Seamus Heaney paints a vivid, sensuous and descriptive picture of the Irish rural life and land with an ecological point of view.

"*Digging*" is the opening poem in Heaney's debut collection "Death of a Naturalist" (1996). It establishes the central motif of land and labor :

"The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge.

Through living roots awaken in my head" (Digging 14)

This tactile imagery connects the poet's intellectual work to the physical labor of his forefathers. The poem gives a generational continuity through the act of digging, both literally, with spades, and metaphorically, with words.

But "I have no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and thumb.

The squat Pen rests. I'll dig with it" (Digging 14).

It portrays that he and his activity is not much different from the rural activities of his ancestors. To Heaney – "Working with words is no less dignified, no prissier, than working with earth" (Michael Allen 22). Digging is a part of his ancestral occupation and family history. Moreover, it shows his close relation to earth. Helen Vendler, in her study on Seamus Heaney remarks that "his attention to the earth is not simply nostalgic but sacramental. The act of digging becomes an offering" (Vendler, 1998).

Seamus Heaney uses the symbols of water, tree and stone which in fact are the part of the dominant Irish landscape. The title of his first collection. 'Death of A Naturalist' begins with flax dam, a symbol like water. It includes the vivid stages of frog in water and its life cycle. The childhood days of Heaney are reflected by the 'swimming tadpoles' in jam bottles. The same flax dam seems to be invaded by angry frogs distracting and disturbing Heaney.

"Angry frogs Invaded the flax dam, I ducked through hedges

to a coarse croaking that I had not heard

Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.

Right down the dam gross bellied frogs were cocked...

The slap and plop were obscene threats. (16)

A young boy's fascination transforms into disillusionment when he confronts the harsh realities of nature. The experience changes his attitude towards nature.

Heaney's poems "*Blackberry Picking*" and "*Churning Day*" represent the family life of the rustics in countryside during the traditional agricultural times. In "*Blackberry Picking*", the poet is a grown up man and is recollecting his childhood from experiences. He reflects that how as a child he used to harvest and store blackberries. This poem begins with a vivid depiction of the excitement and sensory experience of finding and picking blackberries in late August.

"Late August, given heavy rain and sun

For a full week, the blackberries would ripen." (20)

The heavy rain and full week's sun symbolize the life giving force. It is quite natural for a farmer's child to observe natural season and go on to perceive the symptoms of ripening.

Heaney uses rich imagery to evoke the sights, smell and tastes associated with the berries, highlighting their glossy purple, sweet flesh and the sticky residue on hands. The farmers pick the blackberries for future uses. Natural resources always provide man with plenty. During the harvesting time, the fertility of land is categorically marked by the heavy production of fruits. The fruits are collected in plenty and are canned for use in the future.

A rat grey fungus, glutting on our cache.

The juice was stinking too. (20)

The natives work very hard to cultivate the fruits but they leave them carelessly. The Irish agricultural fields are exploited by the colonial masters. Heaney portrays that Ireland is blessed with fertile land but it is spoiled by human action.

In "*Follower*", Heaney celebrates the expertise of his father as a farmer.

"I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,

Fell sometimes on the polished sod;

sometimes he rode me on his back

Dipping and rising to his plod"

Seamus Heaney expresses his guilt at not carrying the tradition of farmer like his father :

"I wanted to grow up and plough.

To close one eye, stiffen my arm.

All I ever did was follow" (24).

Later on, he learns the artistic skill to present nature in texts and thus give voice to Northern Irish landscape. Farming goes on to become a metaphor for mentorship, labour and ecological literacy. Fran Brearton rightly puts that "Heaney's early poems encode a form of environmental piety, a commitment to the integrity of place that challenges industrial and colonial ideologies" (Brearton, 2005).

In the literary work, "*Waterfall*", Heaney presents the sights and sounds perceived during a waterfall. The torrents of water steadily drown everything on the earth:

"The burn downs steadily in its own downpour,

A helter skelter of Muslin and glass

That skids to a halt, crashing up suds. (40).

Water finds its way to every nook and corner noisily and it refreshes the earth and the atmosphere of earth alike. The poet depicts that the acceleration and the end of the rain, both are unpredictable and thrilling :

Simultaneous acceleration.

And sudden braking : Water goes over....

Fall, yet records the tumult thus standing still. (40)

In another poem, "*At A Potato Digging*" Heaney reflects on the potato crop during the famine. He explores the potato crop as an emblem of suffering and how it evoked a moment of poverty and agony, for example the famine of the 1840's. The Cultivation of the potato is a way into Ireland's social history. It shows the relationship in terms of the soil and famine.

"Centuries of fear and homage to the famine god." (31)

"*Storm on the Island*", another poem by Seamus Heaney describes the islanders seemingly prepared to face the storm. As the storm intensifies, they develop a feeling of fear of destruction and isolation. Their initial confidence to face the storm is shattered and they bow to nature. In this poem, Heaney challenges the idea that the island life is idyllic and the sea is not always company.

"But there are no trees no natural shelter.

You might think that the sea is company,

Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs.

But no : When it begins, the flung spray hits

The very windows, spits like a tame cat

Turned savage." (51)

This poem highlights the violence and destructive power of nature. Nature can be protective as well as destructive.

Seamus Heaney's poem "*Churning Day*" evokes a sense of nostalgia for the rural Irish

landscape and the traditions closely associated with it. In this poem, the poet vividly portrays the physical labor and the experience of making butter on a farm. Heaney heavily relies on the memories he had of the farm and his rural Irish upbringing. He remembers butter-making in the traditional way that had involved a lot of hard work and the poet gives a detailed description of the physical effort that was involved.

"Muscles, skin and clothes were all affected
Ached.....blistered.....spattered."

In yet another literary piece, "*Personal Helicon*", Heaney presents the memory of a well. Wells, to him, were always a childhood fascination. As a child, Heaney enjoyed watching wells – the reservoirs of nature's unpolluted water. For the poet, the wells were not only storehouses of water but they always had a sense of depth and mystery associated with them. The old pumps and buckets near the well always attracted his attention. He loved the smell of water weeds and the reflection of sky in the water in wells.

"As a child, they could not keep me from wells.

And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.

I loved the dark deep, the trapped sky, the smells
of waterweed, fungus and dark mass.' (57)

Once he even went on to draw out water from a well in the brickyard.

"One in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.

I savoured the rich crash when a bucket.

Plummeted down at the end of a rope.

So deep you saw no reflection in it" (57).

Seamus Heaney's experience with wells show his interest to feel kinship with nature. To him, wells were also a source of poetic inspiration and artistic creativity.

Elmer Andrews has rightly put forth : "What is that the natural world meant to the young Heaney. His father is ploughing and digging, butter being churned, his own collection of frogspawn, picking blackberries, hanging around the barn and river bank, looking down wells all these memories Heaney makes vivid through his gift for recreating the physical actuality of the external world. The remembered world is undisputedly there, its objects, its animals and its processes" (12)

Seamus Heaney's poems are a source of delight and a deep insight into the Irish landscape and the activities of traditional agriculture. The farmers are not alienated from their work and even after they grow old and are unable to work with the same energy, their past experiences extend joyful memories and spiritual delight.

Heaney, in his essay, *Preoccupation* remarks :

"To this day, green wet corners, flooded waters, soft rushy bottoms, any watery ground and tundra vegetation possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction. (Preoccupations 19)

The literary writings of Heaney suggested that he is a gifted writer and he has a calibre to create remarkable literature. Seamus Heaney is highly influenced by the environmental elements. In his poetry, a close relationship is established with nature, landscape, history and community. He is a keen observant of nature. The recurrent use of the ecological elements like the earth, water, tree etc. in his poetry undoubtedly suggest that his poetry can be interpreted and enjoyed in the light of ecocritical theory. When viewed through the ecological lens, Heaney's poetry, reveals a profound ecological consciousness. He does not idealize nature. His poems function as ecological testimonies where the cultural memory, rural tradition and environmental ethics germinate together.

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