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Eco-Memory in Poetic Formation of Seamus Heaney's Select Poems

A. Judes Jalaja¹, Dr. H. Jimsy Asha²

¹ * *Research Scholar*

² *Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor*

^{1,2} *PG & Research Department of English,*

Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu

^{1,2} *Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli 627012.*

*Corresponding author: jalajajudes@gmail.com

Abstract

The ecological milieu, which a poet chooses to set his poem in, becomes a dominant force that dictates the poetic lines and determines the course of thought of the text. And memories of the past, especially of childhood, are inextricably linked to the physical environment which shapes a poet gifted with remarkable sensibility. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney writes location-specific poems which are often interlinked with the juvenile memories of the days he had spent in the northern countryside. Hence his poems exude a strong aroma of Irishness which encompasses the green, blue and brown shades of nature. The spatio-temporal quality of the effect a landscape creates in a reader distinctly manifests in the poems in Heaney's collection *Electric Light*.

Key Words: Ecological milieu, juvenile memories, location-specific poems, Irishness, spatio-temporal quality.

Introduction

Seamus Heaney is an iconic poet of the Irish region. His poems are intertwined with the environment to which he belongs. His closeness to nature has produced a rich array of unique poems. Harold Bloom claims that Heaney's poems express an "agnostic way of a stronger poetry, necessarily denser, more allusive, and persuasively difficult (14)." Hence he holds the "most prestigious position on the global stage of poetry and balances his

preoccupations with canonical self-awareness”(Moi 172). And his poems are rich with intense Irish experiences. Most of his early poems are a natural response of a young man to a rural pastoral surrounding in which he grew up. Nicholas Allen says that, “his poetry seems impossible to uproot from its locality. The northern countryside that nourished and often troubled his imagination is the metaphor for the poet’s ideas of family, community and, by extension, nationality.”

The lush Irish landscape has always been Heaney’s muse. He was inspired to often compose location-specific poems. The imposing power of a place, though perspectival, needs an “experiencing subject” to get activated. Eric Prieto, in his book on poetics of place, points out that place “requires the presence of an experiencing subject to be activated as a place. Place is not an objective, material fact there to be discovered but rather an interaction between a physical environment and an active, experiencing agent who both shapes and is shaped by that environment...” (29).

Seamus Heaney draws from his memory to weave poems of contemporary relevance. And the Irish landscape is the canvas on which he paints his aesthetic experiences. His eleventh collection of poems *Electric Light* too, as Sweeny would put it, “is no simple revisiting of old concerns. What is being set up here is the past, in all its evocativeness, and this is a past-haunted book if there ever was one. Inevitably, scenes from Heaney’s earlier life features largely ”In *Loose Box*” he recalls his favourite poet Patrick Kavanagh’s words on the “properties of land.” He writes,

That there’s health and worth in any talk about

The properties of land, Sandy, glarry,

Mossy, heavy, cold, the actual soil

Almost doesn’t matter; the main thing is

An inner restitution, a purchase come by.... (14)

The very sight of Ballynahinch Lake which runs through the county of Connemara triggers his creative faculty. He writes, “As a captivating brightness held and opened / And the utter mountain mirrored in the lake / Entered us like a wedge knocked sweetly home / Into core timber (26). He is captivated by a pair of waterbirds “splashed up and down / And on and on.”(26). Heaney writes, “something in us had unhoused itself / At the sight of them,”(26).

While the sights, sounds, and setting were stored in his memory to be later transformed into poetry, Marie continued on the journey. Eamon Grennan observes that “the sight and sounds of something that carried poetic charge might bring his journey to a temporary halt.” As a Nobel Laureate, Heaney was conscious that his poems would be subjected to exacting scrutiny. Ruben Moi notes that the volume engages with the demands of personal responsibility, aesthetic commitment, and social relevance, thereby consolidating Heaney’s celebrated position (173).

For a poet, a landscape, even though ancient, cannot be separated from the immediate effect it has on the poet. Even to Wordsworth, the visit to the river Wye on another day would have had a different impact and that would have meant a different poem. It is the perspective of the viewer that constructs the images he presents in his poems. As Alison Byerly points out that, “The picturesque appreciation of landscape that had more to do with the attitude of the viewer than the inherent qualities of the scene, which was valued only to the degree that it could be made to conform to preconceived aesthetic principles”(56).

It is equally important to note the *spatio-temporal* nature of place. This is to say that the patiality of place is not an abstract, geometrical, or static kind. A place cannot be defined in isolation from its temporal dimension any more than it can be isolated from its qualitative aspects like colour, texture and so forth.... place

requires both time and space in order to make its coherence felt to an observer.

(Prieto 28-29)

The very first poem of the collection titled “At Toomebridge” is about how the poet is triggered by the sight of Lough Neagh which is full of water. Toome lies in the Bann valley, one of the archeological sites of Ireland. And his creative urge is captured as he says, “Where negative ions in open air / Are poetry to me” (3). And the unhappy historical past of the troubled times of the Irish region is remembered in “Where the rebel boy was hanged in ’98.” (3). The line alludes to the hanging of Rody McCorley during the 1798 rebellion. The Bann river continues to inspire him. In “Perch” he sees the glory of the river,

Perch we call runts, little flood slubs, runty and

ready,

I saw and I see in the river’s glorifies body

That is passable through, but they are bluntly holding

the pass,

Under the water-roof, over the bottom, adoze,

Guzzling the current, against it, all muscle and slur

.....

That is water, on carpets of Bann stream, on hold

In the everything flows and the steady go of the world. (4)

In the poem where he mourns the death of Rory Kavanagh, the twenty five year old son of his longtime poet friend Patrick Kavanagh, Heaney, instead of a title of obvious grief choses the

places names as title. “Clonmany to Ahascragh” indicates the places to which Rory’s parents belong. The families of the friends had trekking vacations together in these places. And the thoughts of Derry come along with the sweet memories of his school days. He sings, “And walls of a school corridor in Derry / Where I drew with warm fingers once upon a time (75). Even to wipe away the tears of sorrow the poet prefers the country side

If ever tears are to be wiped away,

It will be in river country,

In that confluence of unmarked bridge-rumped roads

Beyond the Shannon, between the river Suck

And the Corrib River, where a plentiful

Solitude floods everyone who drives.... (76)

Unlike a foreign reader the Irish people get immediately related to the recollections of the Irish landscape with its cultural heritage intact. It is the memories of his past that shapes and enhances his identity and contemporary relevance. His poetry is a gateway to his rootedness to memory and the space which shaped it.

While discussing the ability of poetry “to create a landscape,” George Santyana argues that any such attempt would face the “insuperable difficulty”(qtd. in Henighan 3). Henighan, in his book *Natural Space in Literature* comments on poetry-space equation:

literature from the earliest times is full of place-descriptions: man demands to know where he is, and some of the most memorable and famous passage of the greatest works of prose and poetry as descriptions of place. Eighteenth century theories of language notwithstanding – human beings have memory, and can visualize

quite definite scene from word symbols. The investigation of natural space leads us to the center and not the periphery of many significant works. (3)

Visual representation of landscape is not a mere word picture of the actual viewing. It encompasses in itself various features including the actual experience and the cultural factors. It is true that a reader who reads the poems of Heaney would naturally tend to visualize, if familiar with the Irish landscape, or imaginatively recreate it to enjoy the poetic lines which cannot be apprehended without a visual observation.

The poet enables the reader to absorb, to visualize and then to connect with what is already experienced by the writer at the moment of his close union with the landscape which he later decides to transform into poetry. Reading these fictional representations of writers of different geographical as well as cultural regions prompts the readers to form an opinion of their own. As Prieto would argue, that “geographical spaces come to be recognized as full-fledged, autonomous places with their own identities and internal dynamics” (1).

The sense of place is deeply rooted in his consciousness that the poet himself expresses in his essay titled “The Sense of Place.” He writes of the coalescence of geography, culture and memory (mind) in creating a poetic space. The poet comments that,

It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation. (132).

Seamus Heaney’s poetry has a remarkable ability to invoke Irish consciousness as his lines are rooted in the historic as well as the cultural past of the nation. His poems not only register his unique creative felicity but also his social responsibility. The interconnectedness of his poetic

self and his natural environment get revealed in the poems that are carved out of the preserved memory of the vibrant landscape.

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