

## RELIC OF THE PAST: AN OVERVIEW OF THE SELECT POEMS OF SEAMUS HEANEY

**Sheeba V. Rajan**  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
St. Xavier's College for Women,  
Aluva, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

### ABSTRACT

Poetry is a record of the past, present and future because it has an element of continuity which no other art of the world has. Seamus Heaney is one of the most important poets writing in English since World War II. The incidents and events of past and present are preserved through the power of poetry. Heaney's poetry has cultivated worldly, cosmopolitan views with the relics of the Northern Irish landscape, rural life, Irish history and contemporary Northern Irish politics. He has been fascinated by his culture and civilization of the past and through his poetry, Heaney has revived his past and he has kept it alive. As a poet, Heaney put great reliance on the importance of past history in understanding present events. In order to fully comprehend and find a solution for the troubles ailing Ireland, Heaney resorts to the wisdom of the past. This research paper is an attempt to analyze and describe in detail the portrayal of historical events in the select poems of Seamus Heaney. Some like "At a Potato Digging" and "Requiem for the Croppies" has an overtly historical theme, describing a specific event in Irish history. Others like "Funeral Rites", "The Tollund Man" and "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" include some references to Ireland's past.

**Keywords:** Culture, Famine, Memorial, Mythology, Relic, Revolutionary.

### 1. Introduction

Seamus Heaney began publishing his first poems in the early 1960's and is the oldest of a group of Ulster poets. He is widely recognized as one of the major poets of the twentieth century. Part of Heaney's popularity stems from his subject matter-modern Northern Ireland, its farms and cities beset with civil strife, its natural culture and language over run by English rule. The rural landscape of Heaney's childhood forms the background to many of his poems and is frequently the central subject of the best. His work reminds us that until recently Ireland has been the only country in northern Europe to retain something approaching a genuinely peasant culture. Heaney's work often deals with the local surroundings in Ireland, particularly in Northern Ireland. *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969) focus on the detail of rural

parochial life. Allusions to sectarian difference, widespread in Northern Ireland through his lifetime can be found in his poems. His books *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) seek to interweave commentary on the troubles with a historical context and wider human experience. Heaney has tried to discover a historical framework in which to interpret the current unrest. Richard Murphy described Heaney as the poet who has shown the finest art in presenting a coherent vision of Ireland, past and present. Heaney's poetry is known for its aural beauty and finely wrought textures. Heaney's poetry has always been concerned with nature, the seasons, the country side and its community, a sense of the past and the dark undercurrent of danger and menace in Irish life, both in past centuries and in the present political instability.

Heaney relates past and present, his personal past and the country's history in order to get beneath the dangerously oversimplified political perspectives on Ireland and its people. Some of the poems which clearly exemplify the theme of history include "At a Potato Digging", "Requiem for the Croppies", "The Tollund Man", "Funeral Rites" and "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces".

## 2. An Overview of Select Poems of Seamus Heaney

### 2.1. At a Potato Digging

Digging in one form or other, remains the archetypal act in Heaney's poetry. "At a Potato Digging" from Heaney's collection *Death of a Naturalist* concerns with the Great Irish Potato Famine (1845-51), when a million people died as a result of the failure of the potato crop in Ireland in several successive years. Potatoes were the staple diet of the Irish peasantry. Heaney opens the poem with a description of a contemporary farming scene. The poem deals with two different potato harvests. One is the harvest from the present day that goes successfully and which delivers a rich crop. The second potato harvest looks back to the famine of 1845 when the crop failed and many people starved. While the famine is no longer a threat, its ongoing fear remains and this can be seen in the use of religious language throughout. In this poem he brings out the suffering of the people of Ireland and effectively analogizes the present experience of the farmers with that of the 1800's. On one hand the poem is a memorial to those who died in the famine; on the other it reminds the reader the hardships of the present day farmers and creates an image of them paying homage to the earth in an effort to appease her.

### 2.2. Requiem for the Croppies

"Requiem for the Croppies" is a poem commemorating the Battle of Vinegar Hill and the rebels who died. He not only takes the reader through the emotions and thoughts of the narrator, one of the rebels; he also foretells the seeds in the pockets of the dead rebels as the germ for further revolutions in future years. The poem from *Door into the Dark* takes a historical incident as its source. It is written as if spoken by the rebellious croppies who in an earlier period revolted against the landlords and who lived at Vinegar Hill. It takes up a colonial equation-the history of Irish resistance to English domination. The poem was written in 1966 when the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1916 uprising was being celebrated. "Requiem" does not deal directly with the uprising but rather harks back to another revolutionary moment- the 1798 United Irish men rebellion, which was rigorously suppressed by the British. The Easter uprising was the harvest of seeds sown in 1798, when revolutionary republican ideals and national feeling coalesced in the doctrines of Irish republicanism and in the rebellion of 1798 itself. The poem was born of and

ended with an image of resurrection based on the fact that sometime after the rebels were buried in common graves; these graves began to sprout with young barley, growing up from barley corn which the croppies had carried in their pockets to eat while on the march. The seeds of violent resistance sowed in the Year of Liberty had flowered in what Yeats called the right rose tree of 1916. The poem gives a sense of historical continuity between Irish acts of resistance across the centuries—from the uprising of 1798 to that of 1916. Heaney offers an image of regeneration towards the end of the poem.

### 2.3. Funeral Rites

Published in his landmark volume *North* (1975) Heaney's poem "Funeral Rites" endures as a richly evocative contemplation of the sectarian violence that came to define life in his native northern Ireland. The poem reveals that the poet is consciously seeking an answer to a modern-day problem on two distinct levels, his own remembered past and that of antiquity. It is a memorial to Heaney's past dead relatives. The poem combines the personal and the cultural—the private and the public responses to deaths that take place in Heaney's family and wider community. Since the poem compares the natural and consoling ritual of death in the past, it is essentially an historical insight. The final three stanzas refer to resurrection and reference to mythological hero, Gunnar also known as Gunther. Through Gunnar, the poem manages to combine Christian and Pagan resurrection. For both Gunnar and Heaney, there is something great, fitting and joyful about an honourable ending. A touching historical insight has been spelled out for us and tells us that revenge achieves nothing only an endless cycle of violence. Human kind needs to seek beauty, as Gunnar sought beauty, and not revenge. In "Funeral Rites", he suggests that looking back into the Pagan origins of the Irish past would yield permanent solutions to the problems of the troubled present.

### 2.4. The Tollund Man

In "The Tollund Man", Heaney has presented a myth and by his ability and imagination he has made it a national truth. Heaney's first foray into the rich territory opened up by Glob's book *The Bog People* was "The Tollund Man", published in his volume *Wintering Out* in 1972. The tollund man is one of the recovered bodies featured by Glob in his book. He was a victim sacrificed to Nerthus, in the hope of securing a good crop from the land. Heaney imagines the killing of the Tollund Man and his subsequent burial in the bog as a kind of violent love making between victim and goddess. In the second section of the poem, Heaney makes the connection between Jutland and Ireland. If Jutland has had its victims, so too has Heaney's own native place. And in Ireland too, the killings have a certain ritualistic dimension to them. Heaney recalls an incident in which the bodies of four young Catholics, murdered by protestant militants, were dragged along a railway line in an act of mutilation. In the final section of the poem, Heaney imagines paying a visit to the museum in Aarhus where the tollund man has been placed on display. Though the names of the region he passes through and the local language unintelligible, he fancies that, as an Irish man burdened with the weight of his country's history, he will feel a kinship with a landscape that has witnessed similar conflict and killings. Heaney's most compelling exploration into the Irish past and its relations to the Irish present is the severed head of a man killed and dumped in a Jutland bog as a sacrificial offering to the Mother Goddess.

### 2.5. Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces

Seamus Heaney's "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" is a prayer to the poet's forefathers regretting the repetitions of Irish history. Heaney continues his search for the artist's place within the larger design of history in "Viking Dublin". He identifies with an unknown Viking Jeweler's apprentice, as he describes bone trial pieces taken from recent excavations at Wood Quay in Dublin. Some of the trial pieces were especially significant from an artistic or historical point of view. There are a number of similarities between designs familiar from old Irish metal work and the manuscript illumination. In the poem, the object of the poet's attention is an archeological relic, a trial piece, a born fragment upon which a Viking artisan has carved for no other purpose than to practice his hand. The poem imitates the experimental character of the trial piece and the indefinable pattern inscribed on the bone undergoes a succession of metamorphosis. The poem maintains the archeological approaches and northern theme in random musings on a Viking Child's microscopic carvings on a bone. The poem ends with an appeal to the ancestors, the Viking elders whose blood runs in the veins of today's Ireland. "Viking Dublin" identifies the poet as a moralist sniffing out corruption. He shows us the Vikings for what they are: hoarders of grudges, killers, gombeenmen. In "Viking Dublin", Heaney attempts to retrace a cultural and aesthetic identity through art. By identifying with the young cover of bone trial pieces, he neither associates nor celebrates the violent excesses attributed to the north men. He expresses his faith in art as a consolation for the chaos of history.

### 3. Conclusion

Seamus Heaney is renowned for the ways in which he combines in his work personal memories with images of Irish heritage and the landscape of the Northern Ireland. He not only pays tribute to his Irish origins in his poetry but also uses the rich rural landscapes of Ireland to explore deeper questions of identity, relationships and the power of writing. His desire to make connections between the past and present is very important in his poems-a link is made between events more than a century apart. He writes to see himself, his situation and its possibilities to open doors into the light of the rational imagination as well as into the dark interior of the self. Through his poetry, he tries to echo cultural, racial and historical definitions. The enduring value of Heaney is to acknowledge the past history and to imagine the unexpected destinations. By beautifully dovetailing the past and the present in "At a Potato Digging", "Requiem for the Croppies", "Funeral Rites", "The Tollund Man" and "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces", Heaney has placed himself as an unparalleled and unpartitioned intellect in Irish history and literature.

### 4. Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to The State Central Library & University Library, Thiruvananthapuram & St. Xavier's College Library, Aluva for providing books to carry out this research work.

**Works Cited**

- Collins, Floyd. *Seamus Heaney: The Crisis of Identity*. Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corporation, 2003. Print.
- Garratt, Robert F. ed. *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1995. Print.
- Genet, Jacqueline, and Wynne Hellegouarc'h, eds. *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*. New York: Colin Smythe Limited, 1996. Print.
- Goodby, John. *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. Print.
- King, P. R. *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Methuen & Co., 1979. Print.
- Murphy, Andrew. *Seamus Heaney*. United Kingdom: Northcote House Publishers Limited, 2000. Print.
- Sinha, Sunita, ed. *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fissions and Fusions*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributers (P) Limited, 2009. Print.