International Journal of Information Movement *Vol.1 Issue II (June 2016)*
ISSN :2456-0553(online) Pages 89-94

SEAMUS HEANEY AS A POET OF NATURE: A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS FROM DEATH OF A NATURALIST

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Abstract: This research paper aims to examine Seamus Heaney's deep engagement with nature throughout his poetic career, demonstrating how the Irish Nobel laureate transformed ordinary rural landscapes into profound metaphors for human experience, cultural identity, and philosophical inquiry. Through close textual analysis of selected poems from his first poetry collection—Death of a Naturalist (1966)—this paper establishes Heaney's unique position as a nature poet who bridges personal memory with universal human experience. The study also demonstrates how Heaney's nature poetry transcends national boundaries while remaining deeply rooted in Irish soil, offering insights that resonate across cultures and continents.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, Nature, Irish, Farming, Poetry

1.0 Introduction:

Modern poetry finds very few voices as authentically connected to the natural world as Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), whose work earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. Unlike poets who observe nature from a distance, Heaney writes from within it. His verses emerge from direct contact with soil, water, and growing things. His relationship with the natural world stems not from romantic idealization but from lived experience—the daily rhythms of farming life in County Derry, Northern Ireland, where he spent his formative years on the family farm at Mossbawn. Heaney's significance as a nature poet extends beyond his Irish context. His work resonates particularly strongly in cultures where the relationship between human beings and land remains intimate and essential.

Understanding Heaney's relationship with nature requires situating his work within several critical frameworks. His poetry participates in what might be called "embodied environmentalism"—an approach to nature writing that emerges from physical engagement rather than abstract contemplation. This differs significantly from Romantic nature poetry, which often positioned the natural world as an object of aesthetic appreciation or spiritual revelation. Heaney's nature is worked soil, not sublime landscape; it is the bog that preserves bodies and artifacts, not the mountain peak that inspires transcendence.

Bernard O'Donoghue's influential study Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry (1994) demonstrates how Heaney's vocabulary draws heavily from agricultural and craft terminology, creating what O'Donoghue terms "a poetry of skilled labour" (O'Donoghue 47). This approach dignifies manual work while suggesting that poetic creation shares essential qualities with farming, blacksmithing, and other traditional crafts.

Helen Vendler's comprehensive analysis in Seamus Heaney (1998) explores the psychological dimensions of Heaney's nature imagery, showing how landscapes in his poetry function as "objective correlatives" for internal

states and emotional development. Vendler argues that Heaney's genius lies in his ability to make "the external world speak the internal one" (Vendler 89), creating poetry where natural phenomena become mirrors for human experience.

Neil Corcoran's The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study (1998) situates Heaney's nature poetry within Irish literary tradition, demonstrating how his treatment of landscape engages with both Gaelic poetry and Anglo-Irish writing. Corcoran emphasizes Heaney's role in reclaiming Irish landscape from colonial appropriation, showing how his poetry "renativizes" the Irish countryside by presenting it through Irish eyes and experiences (Corcoran 156).

From a postcolonial perspective, critics have read Heaney's emphasis on local knowledge and traditional practices as a form of cultural resistance. His detailed attention to farming techniques, craft processes, and seasonal rhythms preserves forms of indigenous knowledge that colonial education systems often dismissed as primitive or irrelevant. This aspect of his work speaks powerfully to readers from other postcolonial contexts, including India, where traditional ecological knowledge has similarly been marginalized by modernizing forces.

Ecocritical readings of Heaney's work, developing particularly strongly from the 1990s onward, emphasize his sensitivity to environmental degradation and his advocacy for sustainable relationships with the natural world. Critics such as Terry Gifford have argued that Heaney's poetry offers models for what Gifford terms "pastoral ecology"—ways of relating to nature that acknowledge both human need and environmental limits (Gifford 134).

2.0 Death of a Naturalist and the Loss of Innocence

Heaney's first collection, **Death of a Naturalist** (1966), establishes themes and approaches that will resonate throughout his career. The title poem presents one of the most memorable accounts of childhood's end, using the natural world as both setting and symbol for the transition from innocence to experience. The poem begins with the child-speaker's fascination with a flax-dam, described in language that emphasizes abundance and vitality:

> *All year the flax-dam festered in the heart*
> *Of the townland; green and heavy headed*
> *Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.* (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 3)

The opening lines immediately establish the dual nature of this landscape: it is both fertile and decaying, productive and threatening. The verb "festered" suggests infection and corruption, while "green and heavy headed" evokes abundance and growth. This ambivalence runs throughout the poem and becomes characteristic of Heaney's mature treatment of nature.

The child's initial response to this environment emphasizes wonder and learning. He collects frogspawn "in jam-pots" and listens eagerly to his teacher's explanations of amphibian metamorphosis. The flax-dam appears as a classroom where natural processes reveal themselves to curious observation. This educational dimension reflects Heaney's own rural childhood, where children learned about reproduction, growth, and death through direct contact with farm animals and seasonal cycles.

However, the poem's crucial turn occurs when the child encounters adult frogs in their full sexual maturity. The language shifts dramatically, becoming harsh and threatening:

> *The great slime kings*

Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it. (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 4)

The frogs are no longer fascinating specimens but "great slime kings" seeking "vengeance" against the human intruder. The child's fear reflects not just revulsion at adult sexuality but a broader recognition that nature contains forces beyond human control or understanding. The "death of a naturalist" is the death of the child who believed nature existed for his education and entertainment.

This poem resonates deeply with The shift from fascination to fear reflects a universal human experience, yet Heaney grounds it in specifically Irish imagery—the flax cultivation that was central to Ulster's agricultural economy.

Blackberry-Picking develops themes of desire and disappointment through the metaphor of seasonal fruit gathering. The poem captures the intensity of childhood wanting with remarkable sensual precision:

At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it. (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 8)

Heaney's description transforms the simple act of eating a blackberry into something almost sacramental. The metaphor "summer's blood" suggests that consuming the fruit means taking in the concentrated essence of the season itself. The language is rich with sensual detail—"glossy," "sweet," "thickened"—that makes readers taste and feel the berry's ripeness.

The poem chronicles the escalation from moderate enjoyment to obsessive gathering. The children fill "milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots" with berries, driven by an instinct to preserve and possess the fleeting pleasure. This accumulative impulse reflects a fundamental human desire to make permanent what is naturally temporary.

The inevitable disappointment comes with rot and decay. Despite the children's hopes, the berries cannot last:

I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not. (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 8)

The final line contains profound philosophical insight. The speaker simultaneously hopes and knows—hope persisting despite certain knowledge of disappointment. This paradox captures something essential about human nature: our tendency to desire permanence in a world characterized by change and decay.

Follower presents one of Heaney's most moving portraits of the relationship between generations, using agricultural imagery to explore themes of inheritance, admiration, and eventual role reversal. The poem begins with the child-speaker's awed observation of his father's skill with a horse-drawn plough:

My father worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
An expert. He would set the wing

And fit the bright steel-pointed sock. (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 12)

The language emphasizes both the father's physical strength ("shoulders globed like a full sail strung") and his technical expertise ("An expert"). The detailed attention to equipment—"the wing," "the bright steel-pointed sock"—demonstrates the specialized knowledge required for effective farming. This is not romanticized rural life but skilled labour demanding strength, experience, and intimate knowledge of tools and techniques.

The father's mastery extends beyond mere competence to something approaching artistry:

The sod rolled over without breaking.
At the headrig, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round
And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,
Mapping the furrow exactly. (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 12)

Heaney's description transforms ploughing into a kind of choreography, with the father as both conductor and performer. The precision required—"mapping the furrow exactly"—suggests that successful farming demands the same attention to detail and spatial awareness required in navigation or engineering.

The child's relationship to this mastery is complex, involving both admiration and frustration:

I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod. (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 12)

The child cannot match his father's easy competence. He "stumbled" and "fell," his smaller legs unable to keep pace with adult strides. Yet moments of tenderness emerge when the father "rode me on his back," sharing his strength with the struggling child.

The poem's conclusion provides one of Heaney's most poignant reversals:

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away. (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 12)

The adult speaker now finds himself in the position of strength, while his aging father "keeps stumbling" and following. The reversal is both natural and heartbreaking, capturing the inevitable progression of generations while suggesting that the child's early desire to follow his father has been fulfilled in unexpected ways.

This generational dynamic resonates powerfully in Indian culture, where respect for elders and agricultural traditions remains strong. The image of a son helping an aging father recalls countless similar relationships in Indian farming

communities, where knowledge passes between generations through direct observation and gradual assumption of responsibility.

3.0 Digging: The Poet's Inheritance

Digging, though published in **Death of a Naturalist**, represents a crucial statement of poetic purpose that influences all of Heaney's subsequent work. The poem begins with the speaker holding a pen, establishing writing as a form of manual labour analogous to farming:

> *Between my finger and my thumb*
> *The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.* (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 1)

The simile comparing pen to gun suggests both the power of writing and its potential for violence—an insight that will prove prophetic as Heaney's poetry increasingly engages with political conflict in Northern Ireland. The pen is "squat" and "snug," adjectives that emphasize its materiality and the physical comfort of holding it.

The poem moves from this immediate scene to memories of the speaker's father and grandfather working with spades rather than pens:

> *My father, digging. I look down*
> *Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds*
> *Bends low, comes up twenty years away*
> *Stooping in rhythm through potato drills.* (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 1)

The temporal shift from present to past occurs through sustained observation of physical labour. The father's "straining rump" and rhythmic "stooping" emphasize the bodily demands of agricultural work, while the "twenty years away" suggests how manual labour can trigger powerful memories across decades.

The grandfather's digging expertise receives even more detailed treatment:

> *My grandfather cut more turf in a day*
> *Than any other man on Toner's bog.*
> *Once I carried him milk in a bottle*
> *Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up*
> *To drink it, then fell to right away*
> *Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods*
> *Over his shoulder, going down and down*
> *For the good turf. Digging.* (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 2)

The passage celebrates the grandfather's superior skill ("cut more turf in a day / Than any other man") while providing intimate details that make the memory vivid and personal. The "bottle / Corked sloppily with paper" belongs to a world where improvisation and making-do were necessary survival skills. The grandfather's technique—"nicking and slicing neatly"—demonstrates the precision required in manual labour.

The poem's conclusion establishes writing as the speaker's chosen form of digging:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it. (Heaney, **Death of a Naturalist** 2)

This resolution is both declaration and promise. The poet commits to "digging" with his pen just as his ancestors dug with spades, suggesting that writing can be as honest and productive as physical labour. The metaphor also implies that poetic excavation might uncover buried truths about Irish experience, much as bog-digging reveals preserved artifacts from earlier civilizations.

4 .0 Conclusion

This study of Seamus Heaney's nature poetry reveals a body of work that transcends its Irish origins to address universal human concerns through the medium of specific cultural experience. From his early exploration of childhood's relationship with the natural world through his mature philosophical meditations on memory and meaning, Heaney demonstrates how local knowledge can speak to global questions.

Heaney's particular genius lies in his ability to make ordinary rural experiences resonate with mythic significance while never losing sight of their practical dimensions. His farmers, craftspeople, and traditional workers possess both individual humanity and archetypal significance, making them recognizable across cultural boundaries while remaining grounded in specific Irish soil.

Perhaps most significantly, Heaney's poetry demonstrates how literary art can serve as repository for forms of understanding that transcend academic disciplines. His integration of ecological knowledge, cultural memory, philosophical insight, and aesthetic beauty creates a synthesis that speaks to the whole human person rather than merely to intellectual analysis.

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