

Vol 2 Issue 12 June 2013

Impact Factor : 1.2018 (GISI)

ISSN No :2231-5063

Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Golden Research
Thoughts*

Chief Editor
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Publisher
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Associate Editor
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Mr.Ashok Yakkaldevi

IMPACT FACTOR : 0.2105

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

Indian Streams Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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SEAMUS HEANEY- “THE POET WHO DIGS WITH HIS PEN”

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Abstract:

Seamus Heaney is a poet of world recognition now-a-days. His poetry is autobio-graphical to some extent if we examine his poems-“Digging”, “Death of a Naturalist” etc. They give meaning and sound, thought and image while studying them.

KEYWORDS:

Culmination, assonance, onomatopoeia, ploughed, snug, bog and fad.

INTRODUCTION

SEAMUS HEANEY'S POSITION IN ENGLISH TODAY :

Seamus Heaney, an Irish poet, won the 1965 Nobel Prize for Literature for works of “Lyrical beauty and ethical depth” which “exalt everyday miracles and living past”. He is the fourth Irish writer to receive the world's most prestigious literary award, following W. B. Yeats (1923), Bernard Shaw (1925) and Samuel Beckett (1969). The Nobel prize for Heaney is a happy culmination of a series of prestigious awards he has already won-Eric Gregory Award in 1968, Irish Academy of Letters Award in 1971, Denis Delvin Memorial Award in 1973, American-Irish Foundation Award, in 1975, Duff Cooper Memorial Award and Smith Literary Award in 1976.

Recognised by several accolades, in 1989 Heaney was elected by a five-year period as a professor of poetry at Oxford University, later he worked a professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University. Besides poetry, Heaney also worked as a translator. He rendered into English the famous Anglo-Saxon poem 'Beowulf' (1999) which was composed towards the end of the first millennium. The translation won the White Bread Award as the best book of 1999. In 2003, Heaney won the Truman Capote Award for Literary criticism.

HIS BOYHOOD ENVIRONMENT SUITABLE TO HIS POETRY'S THEMES:

Seamus Heaney was born in the family farm Mossbawn in country Derby in Northern Ireland, on 13th April 1939, the year in which Yeats passed away. It looked as though one great Irish poet was born into another to continue the unique poetic tradition. He began publishing poems even as a student, using the pseudonym 'Incertus' at St. Joseph's school in Derry, forty miles away from his farm home called Mossabawn. Here he began learning Latin and Irish. He later went to Queen's College, Belfast, where he studies Anglo-Saxon and English Literature. He became a school teacher and then a lecturer at queen's and began writing poems on themes remembered from his rural childhood. Heaney, an Irish poet writing in English, is acutely conscious of the cultural and national and religious issues which set him aside from the predominantly English culture of the British Isles. Ireland also has its own Irish-language tradition, as Wales has its equally potent Welsh-language tradition.

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Source:Golden Research Thoughts [2231-5063] P.RADHIKA yr:2013 vol:2 iss:12

Heaney is well aware of his double heritage as a poet, the Irish bards and the precursors writing poetry in English, the language he elected to write in so as to reach out to a far wider audience than what his own island. This is where he grew up, and he was very much attached to it. Heaney's "Bog Poems" reveal this fascination. Prof. P. V. Glob's book, "The Bog People", serves as an influential book. He lighted on two motifs, water and bog, as symbolic tropes. They are connected, for the past bogs of Ireland, covering one-sixth of the island, are wet lands. It is terra infirma. In 'Bogland' he describes his image of a landscape. He has written many poems, dealing with themes and a description of the bog people, and employing the bogland as a metaphor.

INFLUENCES:

Among the influences Heaney absorbed and diverged from were G. M. Hopkins and Ted Hughes for their stark idiom, W. B. Yeats for his verbal music, Thomas Hardy for his country themes, Robert Frost for his farmer's accuracy and earthiness, and Patrick Kavanagh for his Irish lilt and directness. He shunned vague, romantic and sought to write poems founded on what his senses experienced in real life. He is no preacher, but conveys through his writings an acute moral sensibility which points to his cherished values, like decency, devotion to one's chosen work, tenacity, integrity, compassion, harmony with nature and respect for tradition and cultural roots.

POEMS FROM HEANEY'S COLLECTION "DEATH OF A NATURALIST":

Heaney's first collection, "Death of a Naturalist" (1966) won praise for its authenticity. The first poem in it, "Digging", the best known of his entire poetic output in four decades, is a prophetic, contrast between his spade-wielding agricultural father and grandfather and himself striking a new path in an uncertain vocation, with no spade in hand, but holding instead a squat pen between thumb and finger, 'snug as a gun'. Here, in Heaney's hands the pen becomes metamorphosed into a crow-bar, digging out the poisonous seeds and roots embedded in the soil, He Says,

"Between my finger and my thumb
the squat pen rests, I'll dig with it.

He has indeed been 'digging, since his first book of verse "Eleven poems" (1965) followed by "Death of Naturalist". In 'Digging', in a mood of nostalgia, the poet recalls vividly and evocatively how his father and traditional community of his grandfather farmed on land with spades as potato farmers.

As he sits writing under the window of his farmhouse, Heaney describes lovingly the straining rump of his father bending low, rooting out tall tops, burying the spade and coming up with the potatoes. He recalls how his family picked the scattered potatoes, "loving their cool hardness in our hands". The poet admiringly comments that the old man could handle a spade, like his old man (grandfather of the poet).

The poet recalls proudly how his grandfather cut more turf in a day than any other man on Toner's bog. The poet romanticises digging when he describes how his grandfather straightened from digging to drink the milk he had brought for him in a bottle covered slopping with paper and continued with his nicking and slicing. He remembers how he heaved sods and went on digging, digging for a good turf.

The smell of potato mould, the sucking sound of walking in damp land awaken in the poet's mind a desire to follow his father, and grandfather, representing the traditional community of Ireland. But he doesn't have a spade to follow the footsteps of his ancestors. But he has a spade of a different kind-his pen. From the gun, the pen became a spade. He will dig with it. In fact he is digging not for potatoes but for words to give expression to his poetic thought. The concept of the pen being mightier than the sword is suggested by the comparison of the pen to a gun. To Heaney, poetry is digging. Digging involves labour just as the potato farmers go on digging and digging for the good turf, a poet has to sweat for the right combination of words. The poem is also indirectly a statement of Heaney's concept of creative writing.

The poem has a loose structure. At the beginning of the poem, the stanzas are short and to the point. However, as Heaney's mind wanders and searches, the stanzas expand in length, and the syllabic patterns keep changing. The poet urges several aural devices like alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia to conjure up an image of a farm scene. "Rasping", "gravelly", "Squaleh" and "Slap" render a lasting effect on the reader. His language is rich with description and sensuousness. There is here an affinity with "The prelude" by Wordsworth, who describes how as a boy he embarks on an evening in a small row boat, "an elfin Pinnacle", as he calls it, taken from a nook by the lake in "an act of stealth". Heaney's poem has also a close analogy with Ted Hughes' poem "The Thought Fox". The sight of his digging below conjures up a memory for Heaney, as the image of a fox conjures up Hughes' poem, that is, the fox enters into "the dark

hole of the head”.

The poem “At a Potto Digging” describes a scene from a potato field, where the farmers are harvesting a potato crop. It refers to the great potato famine. Here Heaney describes the plight of the people and their attempt to placate, Mother Earth prevents this happening again. In “Churning Day” Heaney describes graphically, the act of making butter and other produces in the family dairy.

In the poem “Black berry-picking” the poet describes harvest season, those days during his youth when he picked black berries during late August, savouring their sweetness. He describes in some detail the ripe berries, their flesh, “like thickened wine”, numerous and sticky as he gathered them.

The very next poem, “Death of a Naturalist”, which gives the title to the book, is a remarkably accurate recall of a boyhood fad abandoned. The school boy needs to muck around, gathering frog spawn from a riverbank in Jam-pots, eager to observe “the fattening dots burst into nimble-swimming tadpoles”. Then one day, he hears a “coarse crocking” in a “bass chorus” beside the flax-dam and comes upon a menacing army of frogs. Thus, “Death of a Naturalist” ends threateningly.

In another poem, “Follower” brings out the nuances between the relationship of Heaney and his father. It draws upon two distinct images, one of the poets as a boy, with his father on his childhood farm, and another of himself as an adult. In the first image, the poet describes the still and effortless way in which his father ploughed the land, and how he followed him around. Then his father was the protector and guide, teaching him, looking out for him, and plucking him up when he fell. In the second image, the little boy became an adult. Now he needs no protection. He now walks his own path, leads his own life, and it is now his father who is “behind” (him), and needs protection. This poem brings out the theme of the parent-child relationship.

GREAT APPLAUSE FROM THE CRITICS:

Heaney enjoys widespread popularity in both Europe and America, and his poetry has received numerous awards, culminating with the 1995 Nobel Prize. The scholar Helen Vendler notes that his poetry allows readers to “recognise profound family affections, eloquent landscapes, and vigorous social concern”. His poetry like Wordsworth's is centred in his rural background-in the activities of farm life, its crafts and skills and its relationship with the land.

Other areas of Poetry:

In addition to writing evocative nature poetry, Heaney has never shielded away from commenting on the politics that divide his homeland. His commentary resonates with equal compassion for all the victims of a senseless civil war. Christopher Ricks said, “Heaney's poetry is lovingly specific and specifically loving”.

Critique:

Thus, Seamus Heaney is known today for the warmth of his poetry. He reactivates his language every time he writes, even if he is just describing a bucket in his bathroom or a path in the woods. He still retains his wonderful capacity to feel, to wander and explore. He sings as he roars, like Shelly's Skylark, synthesising meaning and sound, thought and image, and like Keats “Grecian Urn” proclaiming:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty-that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”.

It is said that Heaney once equipped, “the British inventing English, and the Irish perfect it.”

So Seamus Heaney is often hailed as Ireland's greatest poet since W. B. Yeats.

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