

**THE SPIRIT OF NORTH IRELAND  
IN SEAMUS HEANEY'S POETRY**

**Mamdouh Ali Ahmed (Ph. D.)  
Dept. of English,  
Faculty of Arts,  
Assiut University.  
Jan., 2020**



### *Abstract*

This paper aims to shed light on the Northern Irish historical, political and social effects on the poetry written by the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century poet, Seamus Heaney. The writer's tremendous concern with the problems facing people in his country and his attempt to connect such affairs with the broad landscape of humanity gave him the chance to get a lofty position among the world's prominent poets. Through his poetry, this noted literary figure tried to draw a vivid picture of the agony of his people due to the sectarian and political struggles in their country. He attempted also to dig deep in history so as to show the misery of people in the past in North Ireland and how they had suffered just like those who lived during his time. Therefore, Heaney's poetry gave a sincere image of life in his homeland.

*Keywords: Heaney's poetry, Nobel prize, North Ireland, sectarian struggle, and bog people.*

The Nobel Prize winning poet Seamus Heaney was born in Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1939. This preeminent literary figure succeeded in reaching universality via his immersion in locality. Northern Ireland with all various aspects of life in it finds its way through his poetry. The local material that comes to the surface in Heaney's verse has been absorbed and then coined throughout all the stages of his life.

Heaney was brought up on a cattle farm in Castledawson, in the province of Derry. Moran comments on this point stating that "Heaney's connection to physical stuff, to farm implements, tools, and physical labour, was born in his growing up as the eldest of thirteen children on a small farm outside of Castledawson, Co Derry" (p. 14). The environment where he was brought up linked him firmly with a concrete world in which real men lived and toiled. Actually, the spirit of this place constitutes the basis upon which he built "his work and gives it a vivid substantiality" (Moran Sean, p. 14). He benefited from the Butler Education Act which was imposed in his country in 1947. Then, he managed to become a student at Queen's University in Belfast. There, he studied English. As a university student, Heaney was able to meet a group of poets such as Michael Longley and Derek Mahon and critics like Edna Longley and Michael Allen. This chance emerged through the regular meetings held at the school of English. Together with these noted writers, Heaney established the Northern Irish Renaissance. Henceforth, the distinguished poet has attempted to indulge in his people's affairs and to voice their preoccupations. What absorbed him throughout most of his life was basically the sectarian conflicts which were mercilessly grinding his country. When he died in 2013 his death "was the passing of one of the most revered literary figures in the world" (O'Brien, *The Soul*, p.1). Commenting on this

saddening event, Tyler indicates that it “came as a shock and is now a residual sadness” (p. 159). Yet, the wound he was trying to heal in his poetry is still bleeding. North Ireland is still suffering from its historical struggles.

It is quite clear that the spirit of his homeland haunts his literary works most of the time. This is the reason why Ahmadgoli and Taheri indicate that "the presence of Irishness in Heaney's poetry" is certainly "inevitable" (p. 59). The word 'spirit' is metaphorically used here to refer to the cultural, political, social, historical and environmental background of North Ireland. Heaney's readers can find themselves roaming the Irish countryside, enjoying its natural beauty, fearing assassination conspired by partisan conflicts, and even sympathizing with the innocent victims of sectarian prejudice. This outstanding literary figure wrote poetry, critical essays, and translations in which the effect of his country is overtly reflected.

Heaney's poetic production was so noticeably rich that it covers a long period of time. To Pratt, "Any new book of poems by Seamus Heaney is an event." (p. 73) Mallett calls him “the best known and best loved English language poet of the past fifty years” (p. 7). The critic's view indicates the great position of the poet in the field of verse. His main books of verse are *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *Selected Poems* (1980), *Poems* (1980), *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *New Selected Poems* (1990), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Opened Ground: Poems* (1998), *Electric Light* (2001), and *District and Circle* (2006). His noteworthy prose works are: *Preoccupations: Selected Prose* (1980), *The Government of the Tongue: the 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (1988), *The Redress of Poetry: An Inaugural Lecture*

*Delivered Before the University of Oxford* (1990). Heaney's most important translation is *Beowulf* (1999). The most salient moment in this man of letter's literary career is that at which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995. Describing Heaney's distinctive contribution to verse, Hughes says,

Among the most famous of all living poets, Nobel Laureate, highly educated, revered for his lectures and ideas as well as for his poetry, Seamus Heaney has a daunting reputation. He remains, however, enjoyed by a broad spectrum of readers, accessible, song-like, direct, concerned with everyday details and human relationships. Essentially, Heaney's poetry strike to the heart through its central metaphor, the very mechanics of being human. (p. 42)

In other words, his literary production has a mark of distinction that an eye can never miss. Russell indicates that the noted Irish poet firmly embraced the belief that "poetry ... could have an ameliorating effect on the violence in the province [North Ireland]—could save it from a descent into a sectarian hell" which was quite prevalent especially during his lifetime (*Regions*, p.69). Heaney's eloquent pen has been manipulated in a masterly way to expose the ugliness of life especially in Northern Ireland and to proceed with an attempt to provide an ethical remedy for the injured souls of people even through discussing human miracles either in the past or the present.

So, Heaney uses his lyrical talent to reconcile contradictions in his home land. He looks for a meeting ground between clashing sides in his society, Protestantism and Catholicism, republicans and royalists, activists and pacifists. This has been the most salient characteristic of Heaney's verse. Tillinghast sees that "If ...[he] were to pick one word to characterize the overall tenor of Heaney's poetry, that word would be

'balance.' His mission has been to reconcile opposing demands, both within the culture of Northern Ireland... and within himself" (p. 31). Asserting this characteristic of Heaney as a poet, Russell adds "Through his... work, ...Heaney began conceiving of Northern Ireland as a viable region in which to ground his poetry and anchor his attempt to unify the province's divided inhabitants" (Regionalism, p. 49). This noted poet's glorious movement is still going ahead for, in 2009, he was awarded the David Cohn prize for literature.

In addition, this noted writer had the privilege of being a foreign member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for his massive contribution to the universal circle of literature. For the same reason, this prominent literary figure worked also as a professor of poetry at the University of Oxford through the period 1989-1994, and a professor of rhetoric at the University of Harvard in 1981. Quinn sees that such "institutional positions and international awards are an indication of Heaney's status as the most celebrated Irish poet in the second half of the twentieth century" (p. 132). Through both teaching and writing, the distinguished Irish literary figure showed "ongoing interest in plurality, the poetic voice, and heritage" (McGuire, p. 92). So, his readers can notice how he has made good use of mankind's history to shed light on human suffering and wretchedness. However, sometimes he has not ignored the importance of addressing public affairs, especially in Ireland, in the light of his private affairs. Andrews puts it:

The centre of the poet's imaginative world is also the centre of family and community life.... For Heaney, a sense of self depends on a sense of place and a sense of history, something which is typical of the Irish writer and derives to some extent from the Irish writer's desire to protect and preserve what is

threatened and diminished.... [Thus,] he extends his excavation of self to place it in relation to ...[the] past. (p. 369)

It is true that Heaney is a renowned figure not only in Ireland but also outside it. What has enthralled a lot of people in his works especially poetry is that he has kept using his Irish roots, sights and heritage both as a source and a means of clarifying his thematic concerns. The references to Ireland, especially the county of Derry, are quite current in his literary works.

At the age of twenty seven, Heaney published his first full book of poetry *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966. This group of his early poems actually established his reputation as a noted poet. Allison illustrates this point when he says "Following the publication of a handful of poems in newspapers and magazines and the appearance in the late 1960s of *Death of a Naturalist*... (published by Faber & Faber), Heaney began to gain reputation as one of the most brilliant poets in Ireland" (p. 44). Through the poems included in this volume, the author looks northward at his mother land where he, as a child or even a young man, passed through several vivid experiences. McGowan emphasizes the profound impact of north Ireland on Heaney's literary production by indicating that "Nursed in this world [Northern Ireland] ... Heaney [uses]... poetry in... [a] manner... [through]...which the rural student becomes [a] world-famous poet" (p.25). This proves that his feet seem to be deeply implanted in the Irish soil. Therefore, Heaney uses most of these poems to depict his responses to both the threats as well as beauty of nature as seen by a young person. Furthermore, the loss of his innocence as a child due to the fervent emotional and physical changes brought by adolescence is obviated.

The poet's adopted strategy of writing is pinpointed in one of the poems presented in the above-mentioned book of verse. The poem

'Digging', as seen by Smith, could show "the way ordinary actions and events could somehow conjure up the transcendent" (p. 9). Heaney tackles harshness as a predominant feature in farming life. He also shows how he himself tries to employ this experience as a master; which could make it available to him to learn valuable lessons in his career as a writer who takes upon his shoulders the responsibility of 'digging' into the past and the present of his country. Malone says "In ... 'Digging', Heaney expresses a desire to follow after his father through the craft of poetry, to "dig with it" in a way similar to his father's working the earth" (p.1099). Hence, he draws a vivid rural scene in which the poet shows how his father and grandfather used to dig their land so carefully that they would guarantee plentiful crops.

Heaney himself seems to hint at the idea that he likewise intends to dig his personal as well as human records using his pen in a way to reach wise conclusions and attain logical interpretations:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; as snug as a gun.  
Under my window a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
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  
Where he was digging.

....

My grandfather could cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog. (DOAN, p.13)

The poem as a whole is laden with the author's feeling of respect and admiration for his father and grandfather who represent both the roots that have fixed him in the Irish soil and his masters in the art of life and work. Just like what these two hard working men did with the hard land, Heaney could use his writings to make the seeds of his past and that of Irishmen blossom and yield fruitful lessons. Cusack emphasizes this point stating that this poem "contemplate[s] the function of the poet in society, and ... end[s] with a declaration of confidence in the socially redemptive power of poetry"(p. 54). Irish farmers have been known for their ability to dig land skillfully. These people's labour and skill are shown with respect and dignity. The simile through which the writer's pen is compared to a gun indicates the importance of writing in defeating man's ignorance and even the morbidity of his life. A writer's pen is as useful as a spade in a farmer's hand; both are indispensable in human life. Peseroff comments showing that, in this poem, "the pen begins as a sword and ends as a ploughshare" (p. 7). This central figure of speech together with the whole literary work deftly relates Heaney to his Irish heritage and indicates how he reveres it.

It is evident that Heaney has remained devoted to the accomplishment of the mission he proclaimed in the poem 'Digging' through his whole literary career. Therefore, this preeminent man of letters often emphasizes his sacred relation to the Irish heritage, and his constant commitment to burrowing his own route in life. Like almost all writers, Heaney was deeply affected by the social conditions in which he lived in Ireland especially when he was still a child or a young man. So, he attempted to deploy his works of art to elucidate such social circumstances and clarify his responses towards them. For instance, in the late 1960s North Ireland was shocked by the outbreak

of terribly violent events known as ‘the Troubles’. This bloodshedding event kept haunting the poet’s mind throughout his lifetime. He even called these “riots [that broke out] in Belfast... ‘our predicament’.(qtd in Brown 192)” (Mackichan, p. 1) The vicious circle of violence continued for a period of about thirty years. Mackichan clarifies this point in the Irish history:

In the late 1960s, ...the unionists believed the nationalists intended to revive the Irish Republican Army, they formed a paramilitary organization of their own in 1966 called the Ulster Volunteer Force which declared war on the IRA. Attempts to end government

discrimination against the Roman Catholic majority living in Northern Ireland culminated, on August 12, 1969, in nationalist demonstrations in Bogside that rapidly grew violent. (pp. 5, 6)

During this time there was a bloody conflict between the two religious sectors of the Irish society, the Catholics and the Protestants. The struggle was politically rather than religiously motivated. The former group have been politically known as the ‘Nationalists’ whereas the latter as the ‘Unionists’. Yadav and Yadav clarify that " Many of his [Heaney's] poems from the poetic collections like *Death of Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, *North* etc. are full of Catholic agonies" (p. 1353). Just as the above two labels indicate, the Catholics have been in favour of getting independence from Britain but the Protestants have supported the union of Ireland and Britain.

Like a lot of remarkable men of letters, Heaney has been affected by the social atmosphere predominant in his country. Hence, the bitter sectarian conflict in his society had a deep influence upon him. In response to a question raised by Kearney about the effect of bloody struggles on a poet’s literary reactions, the noted Irish writer said he

would consider such a bitter conflict as the "fertile ground for poetry"(p. 14). Instead of preferring one sector to the other, the Nobel-Prize winning writer called for the safety of his country and its unity. It is not surprising that a man of letters like him, who emphasized the necessity of the "relationship between self and other", indicates that need to unify his society is a matter of life and death (O'Brien, *Searches for Answers*, p. 181). To him, what matters most is not the political or religious affiliation of an Irishman, but it is his love for his country and his profound keenness on his fellow-citizens' security and welfare that count. In order to indicate the importance of the unity of the Irishmen and the necessity of stressing blindness to religious or political differences among his people, Heaney clarifies in one of his poems his limitless frustration triggered off by an unfortunate incident that took place during the time of the violent confrontations.

Consequently, in 'Casualty' from *Field Work* (1979), Heaney elucidates that the fire of the blind struggle in Ireland during the period of turmoil could demolish everyone in society whether those who were involved in it or not. To prove the accuracy of his view, the poet expresses his frustration resulting from the murder of a Catholic with whom he was acquainted. This man was a drunkard who had nothing to do with the fierce sectarian conflict. Gangola points out that 'Casualty' "is an elegy not for the dead of Bloody Sunday, but for one man, a fisherman, killed by the Irish Republican Army in the reprisal bombing of a pub shortly afterwards." (p. 342) Ironically, this helpless man was killed at the hands of his fellow-Catholics just because he violated a curfew imposed by them. This happened when he went out to a tavern to get a drink. At the outset, the simplicity of this man is emphasized:

In waders and peaked cap

Into the showery dark,  
A dole-kept breadwinner  
But a natural for work.  
I loved his whole manner,  
Sure-footed but too sly, (FW, p. 21)

This Irishman was similar to a lot of simple people around him for he seemed to have no connection with the bloody struggle around him. He had another type of mission for he had to earn his living, and to get fun whenever he could without bothering himself about the sophisticated talk of the political activists.

Unfortunately, this passive attitude did not rescue him from the nasty grip of the conflict. Thus, one day

He was blown to bits  
Out drinking in a curfew (FW, p. 22)

The elegy handled here seems to echo implicitly Yeats's 'Easter Rising' in which he mourns the death of the chief Irish revolutionaries in 1916. What is different here is that Heaney is lamenting the death of a simple human being who had no significant role in the Irish struggle. So, not only do the leaders of the Irish conflict but also the humble victims of the crisis deserve remembrance and pity.

Similarly, in another poem, 'The Strand at Lough Beg' from *New Selected Poems* (1990), Heaney explains another miserable incident that conduced to the loss of another innocent victim of the Irish bloody antagonism. The poet attempts to emphasize his view that the heartless sectarian confrontations between the major two sectors of the Irish society have been apparently leading the country to nothing but blind hatred and limitless destruction. Massacres and atrocities indicate the necessity of terminating the aimless struggle in which neither of the two conflicting sides could win. Cusack comments:

Through these poems, the poet attempts to transform slain loved ones alternately into symbols of tribal victory and resistance to the conflict. Through these transformations, he seeks to define his own role in the conflict, and thus escape the roles imposed upon him by his social and religious heritage.(p. 57)

As a Catholic Irishman, Heaney was supposed to take sides with the Nationalists and to reinforce their political call for the independence of North Ireland from Britain. But the prominent poet did not accept this role which could be imposed on him. He rather found it more appropriate and even more ethical to speak for the sake of his country, North Ireland, as a whole, and to strive hard for its peace and prosperity. Killings on both sides would represent a national loss, and even the victory of one sector could lead to dividing the house against itself.

In the impressive elegy ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, Heaney mourns the death of a cousin of his named Colm McCartney. This catholic man fell victim to “a random sectarian killing in the late summer of 1975”(Cusack, p. 57). The literary work starts with the voice the speaker who represents the author himself attempting to depict the political atmosphere of the time as well as the geographic scene in which his cousin was murdered at the hands of the unionists. The poem proceeds until it reaches the end which sheds light on the preparations for the victim’s burial. In between the start and the close, the poet attempts to employ the incident metaphorically in a way that makes the body “transcend the sectarian boundaries in the landscape, allowing the dead man ... to be subsumed into an undivided vision of natural Ireland”(Cusack, p.57). In this manner, the poem clarifies the writer’s vision about the ugly face of the struggle as well as his hope to make his countrymen understand that they belong to the same nation

however different in religion or politics they could be. Auge comments by stating that “death ... binds us to others, by forging from the discarded mortal coil a link that connects even the most distant members of the human race” (pp. 33, 34). Nonetheless, Irish people seemed to be insistent on ignoring the fact that they belonged to the same place which they did their best to tear apart.

However, through the elegiac poem “The Strand at Lough Beg”, Heaney is actually moved by the fierce antagonism dominating social and political life in North Ireland. It is quite obvious that the description of the Irish landscape is seen by the writer as a device which could enable him to reflect the hostile atmosphere in that country. In other words, his feelings are divided between two sharply contrastive aspects, familiarity and terror. The mourning voice in the poem “envisions the political and geographic circumstances of his cousin's murder”(Cusack, p. 58). The place drawn in the work represents the speaker's home land that has belonged to the Irishmen for ages. As a result, he is greatly familiar with it. It is part of his existence. To show the strong affinity between Heaney and Northern Ireland, Andrews indicates that:

For Heaney, a sense of self depends on a sense of place  
and a sense of history, something which is typical of the  
Irish writer and derives to some extent from the writer's desire  
To protect and preserve what is threatened and diminished. ( p. 369)

Simultaneously, the landscape depicted, due to the destructive inimical attitudes poisoning life there, could be seen as a frightening strange place. In this manner, Heaney expresses ambivalent feelings. Cusack puts it:

The site depicted here is both an ancestral home and  
frighteningly alien territory. The competing claims of Catholics

and Protestants to Irish soil force the speaker to see the landscape in double vision, through which sites like Lough Beg become both familiar and deadly at the same time. (p. 58)

This double-sided picture of North Ireland is actually the atmosphere in which the Irish people, either the Catholics or the Protestants, have lived. The duality in their feelings has made matters more complicated for them.

The innocent victims came in big numbers during the conflict, however, their blood was apparently not enough to redeem the country or push it back to right course. They were killed while they were walking in the streets or practicing their daily affairs. What enhances the feeling of bitterness was that they were murdered in their own country. In “The Strand at Lough Beg”, Heaney indicates that the land dominated by terrorism was in fact the tender cradle in which all Irish children tasted joy and delight. It is the very land where terror has managed to wrap their life. His cousin is one of these people:

Leaving the white glow of filling stations  
And a few lonely streetlamps among fields  
You climbed the hills towards the Newtown Hamilton

.....

There you used to hear guns fired behind the house  
Long before rising time, when duck shooters  
Haunted the marigolds and bulrushes,  
But still were scared to find spent cartridges,  
Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected,

On your way across the strand to fetch the cows (FW, pp. 17-18)  
Familiarity and fear could be seen as two major factors of life in North Ireland just as the poet conveys in these lines. The gunshots referred to here are connected with familiar life in the Irish countryside. Vast

green lands have witnessed the practice of the sport of hunting. It is a normal daily affair for local hunters to go out to grassland and shoot birds especially ducks. Nevertheless, due to the hostilities between the main sectors of the nation, terrorism has become quite prevalent. Hence, the same gunshots heard by Heaney's cousin could belong to the terrorists who used to hide among bushes and ensnare their victims. In this way, being a Catholic or a Protestant in that place has two contradictory but related meanings; it could mean living in the land of his grandfathers and being united with its glorious heritage, or to fearfully wait for the sectarian enmity to reap your soul.

Then the climax of the poem is drawn through the scene in which the cousin is shot and his bleeding body is stretched on the grass. The integration of the body into the Irish soil symbolizes belonging or the strong unity between the Irishmen regardless of their religious or political differences, on one hand, and their land, on the other hand. Thus, the poet "attempts to integrate his cousin's slain body into the Irish landscape without conflict"(Cusack, p. 59). The speaker begins to take some materials from the land itself and anoints the body with. This ritual act is apparently meant to show how the sacred land of North Ireland can redeem its people who have been defiled by their blind antagonism:

... Like a dull blade with its edge  
Honed bright, Lough Beg half shines under the haze.  
I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees  
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss  
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud. (FW, p.18)

In a symbolic sense, the integration between the slaughtered body and the land signifies that it is necessary for all the Irishmen to renounce their senseless antagonism and aimless conflict since they belong to the same land and they are to be buried in its soil. After death, there could be no place for hatred or sectarian hostility. The imagery taken from rural life in the above lines intensifies the author's hint at the infrangible relation between North Ireland and its simple people. Cusack affirms this view by stating that "the pastoral imagery of the last stanza suggests that the speaker has moved beyond sectarian conflict to a broader communion with the Irish landscape" (p. 59). The feelings conveyed through such images used in the concluding lines of the poem show the Dante's effect on Heaney. Cavanagh argues that "The convergence of Seamus Heaney and Dante" was quite evident in Heaney's ...career." (p. 145) Hence, just as what is presented in Dante's *Purgatorio*, the Irish poet conveys the abyss of sadness created through the hellish sadness of the conflict in his country. So, "the poem's epigraph and its final images of loss, [and] mourning . . . are borrowed from the first canto of the *Purgatorio*" (Heininger, p.50). Unfortunately, the failure to transcend sectarian prejudice in life remains at the back of scene. Or, perhaps it is the only solution for those conflicting people to continue demolishing one another until the land takes them instead of taking it.

*North* is Heaney's fourth volume which was published in 1979. This book of verse was devoted to the discussion of the apparently ceaseless and bitter civil struggle in his country, North Ireland. What is so distinctive about this collection of poems was the author's employment of figures of speech derived from the preserved dead bodies which had been buried in scattered bogs in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries. These corpses were discovered in the fifties of

the twentieth century. The talented Irish poet “knew ... that his work lay in uncovering the conjunction of the Scandinavian Iron-age North and Ireland's savage northern conflict” (Hillan, p.100). To the contrary of what happens to dead bodies and the decay they suffer from shortly after death, bog bodies, due to chemical conditions in swamps, keep their skin and organs but these become dark in colour. Hillan puts it:

Heaney's "bog" series comprises a loose grouping of some eight thematically-related lyrics, two ("The Tollund Man" and "Nerthus") ... the rest ("Come to the Bower," "Bog Queen," "The Grauballe Man," "Punishment," "Strange Fruit," "Kinship") .... The bog poems are linked through their ... references to ... well-preserved bodies of Iron Age men and women, mainly victims of ritual murders, dug from bogs in Denmark and elsewhere in northwestern Europe. Thus, Heaney's poems are archaeological texts in the sense of responding directly to and thematizing an account of actual archaeological discoveries.(p. 101)

This technical feature seems to be intended by the poet to view the local conflict in his country through a universal scope. Heaney attempts stress the victimization of the Irish men in the bloody struggle that is meant to please blind hatred and prejudice and satisfy their aimless and evil motivations. Consequently, his people could be placed in the sublime position of martyrs.

Evidently in one of the poems included in *North*, ‘The Tollund Man’, the Noble-prize winning poet discusses the close connection between the bog bodies and Heaney’s agonizing people. The label ‘Tollund man’ refers to a preserved dead body of a man who belonged to the fourth century before Christ. The body was discovered in a bog in Denmark in the middle of the twentieth century. The poem was

triggered off when Heaney was stunned by the terrible pictures of the bog man he saw in a book entitled *The Bog People*. The book was written by P. V. Glob and published in 1969. Shen indicates:

With this object in mind, Heaney attempts a “refraction” of the Northern Irish atrocities from the perspective of the earth itself. In [the bog poems]... he associates the bog victims out of Iron Age Denmark with recent Irish sectarian turmoil... Heaney makes an analogy between the bog people and the contemporary victims of the sectarian fight. (pp. 13, 14)

The sight of the mummified body immersed the poet in a moment of illumination. The experience expanded Heaney’s perception of the dilemma of his countrymen. The striking similarity between the dead man sacrificed for fertility and those reaped by the nasty hand of the sectarian struggle in Ireland flooded the Irish victims in overwhelming, noble and holy light. They looked as if they were saints who had sacrificed their souls for the sake of their homeland. Shen puts it:

The victim dug out of the bog discloses the ordeal which he suffered before being sacrificed ... in order to ensure the return of spring and the increased fertility of the land... Those casualties [of the present-time Ireland], like the Tollund Man, sacrifice their lives to germinate their troublesome ground. Political sacrifices in contemporary Ireland are accorded with the ritual significance of a fertility cult. (pp. 14, 15)

The similarity between the Tollund Man’s murder carried out as a sort of sacrifice and the victimization of the Irishmen based on religious or political differences could, therefore, clearly established. Both cases indicate how human illusion can lead to self-destruction.

Heaney as a poet who has been profoundly conscious of the crisis of his nation sees that the victims found in the North European

bogs remind him quite vividly of crimes committed under the slippery label ‘sectarian struggles’. Hillan comments on this point by stating that Heaney “inexorably ... dug beneath the surface layers [of the Irish civil struggle], striking outward as well as downward,” in a way which made his poetry work as a sharp weapon used to fight against sectarian hatred (p. 100). Hence, the terrible mutilations and deformations appearing in the found bog bodies, as seen by him, are similar to distortion in social life and human relations among people belonging to the same nation as a result of notorious interference of both politics and religion in the Irish cause:

I could risk blasphemy,  
Consecrate the cauldron bog  
Our holy ground and pray  
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed  
Flesh of labourers,  
Stockinged corpses  
Laid out in the farmyards,

.....

Out here in Jutland  
In the old man-killing parishes  
I will feel lost,  
Unhappy and at home. (OG, pp. 62-63)

The writer simultaneously seems to be wondering at human beings’ groundless need to kill one another while they are being misled either by spiritual or political rituals. Thinking that they are serving a higher cause or even availing humanity as a whole, men have sacrificed human blood and innocent victims have been offered to propitiate

phony gods. The practice of this heinous attitude is still vigorously going on in North Ireland. The due repulsion for such inhumane practices needs to be drawn from readers in an attempt to break the gear rotating to grab all the Irish people in the hideous circle of violence and revenge. To Shen, like all Heaney's bog poems, 'Tollund' is used to "suggest the analogy between the bog people and the victims of sectarian strife of the present day" (p. 15). In other words, the prehistoric victims are employed to shed light on the current predicament of Irishmen who are suffering under the yoke of sectarian prejudice and violence.

In his poetry, in general, and the verse volume *North*, in particular, Heaney attempts to avoid presenting himself as the spokesman of his people or any other human being. It is a fact that he is keen on commenting on the morbid social and political conditions in north Ireland and even indicating the similarities between them and other hideous and bloody events through man's history like what happened in the Stone Age as expounded in the bog poems. However, the noted poet exerted all effort to remain firm against the tendency to speak for community or to deal with their dilemma from a narrow racially or religiously or nationally prejudiced point of view. This attitude did not save him from the severe critical comments directed against him by a few critics. Mackichan puts it:

Heaney's use of the bog bodies as a means of representing strife-ridden Ireland has not gone without criticism. Denouncing Heaney's possible appropriation of the bog bodies, "some critics have implied that Heaney expropriated the bog as a symbol ... [;]which is simply to say that, by using the bog bodies, he has dishonourably taken advantage of them..." Others see pseudo-sexual proclivities manifest in the poetic

depictions of the bodies and “‘recognize’ in them the poet’s ‘necrophiliac’ tendencies, or his ‘neo-sadism’ (pp. 32-33).

Simultaneously, Heaney's attempt to wrap the sectarian struggle in his country with a veil of nobility since he, in the bog poems, establishes a relation between the barbaric events during the time of the Troubles and sublime rituals of victimization that could be performed for the sake of fertility. Heaney, however, seems to resort to history so as to stress the origins of evil among men and to satirize human brutality whatever the reason may be. McHale approves this view by arguing that “The bog poems, too, foreground the historical depth of their world by mingling the Iron Age of the bog people with the Ulster Troubles of our own times” (p. 243). Then, Edna Longley regrets Heaney’s inability to get liberated from his Catholic background or social and political affiliation especially when he is referring to religious rituals.

In his poem ‘The Grauballe Man’, Heaney slightly handles the similarity between the bog bodies and the Irishmen who were victimized at the phony altar of sectarian prejudice. The verse lines present the poet’s description of a preserved body of a man found in a bog in north Europe. The bog body is lying on the ground while it is completely tanned. The dead man appears to be weeping. The corpse is stiffened and enclosed in cold. His slashed throat indicates the brutal way this man was killed. The bog man seems to be mingled with the elements of nature around him. So, the body is apparently mixed with the soil, the plants and the roots scattered in the place where it is lying:

the black river of himself.

The grain of his wrists

is like bog oak,

the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg.  
His instep has shrunk  
cold as a swan's foot  
or a wet swamp root (OG, p. 110).

Yet the last stanza is deployed to hint at the author's aversion to the barbarity which led to the murder of the Grauballe Man and a lot of Irishmen. McHale states that in this poem "the closing stanza insinuates an identity between the "hooded victim[s]" of Iron Age ritual sacrifice, who have been "slashed and dumped," and those of twentieth-century sectarian murder" (p. 244). This point affirms the idea that the agony of the writer's people has always been present in his mind. Sometimes this theme finds its way through expression directly and other times indirectly.

'Punishment', which is one of the most remarkable Bog poems included in the volume entitled *North*, sheds light on the attempt of Heaney to handle a contemporary crime in Ireland in the light of the country's history. The importance of this poem in Heaney's career can be noticed in Marklew's view. He sees that this poem "is the most striking example of ethical engagement of Heaney's ... moving elegies ['The Tollund Man', 'Bog Queen', and 'The Grauballe Man']" (p. 33). 'Punishment' takes readers a further step in Heaney's invocation of history asking for its aid to reflect on his people's bitter sectarian struggles. In this literary work, the poet draws attention to the similitude he sees between a girl's preserved body found in a bog in north Europe, on one hand, and young Irish women who have been killed for committing adultery with British soldiers, on the other hand. Ingelbien points out that in such a way the noted Irish poet reaches the climax of handling his country's affairs in the light of mythology which

is meant relate him closely to Ireland and his homeland itself to humanity:

Heaney's mythologizing the poetics of Irish identity reached full expression in *North*, a collection which sparked off a long and heated critical debate. This is particularly true of the controversial "Punishment," a poem in which Heaney draws parallels between a girl who was sacrificed as part of a fertility rite and the victims of punishment beatings in Northern Ireland. (p. 476)

The bog girl was victimized to propitiate the goddess of fertility. Her innocence, purity and beauty were, consequently, assassinated for no true reason at all. In a similar way, the young Irish women seem to be murdered just because they committed their mistake with men who are occupying their country. So, this type of murder has been apparently driven by hatred and prejudice and not honour.

The author in 'Punishment' implicitly attempts to express his sympathy towards the bog girl as well as the punished Irish females. He starts by stressing the parallel between his country, in general, and the Iron Age victim. Just like Ireland, the dead girl's neck is tied with a halter as if it were that of an animal drawn and led by a farmer. The country itself is fettered with the heinous shackles of occupation. Heaney, consequently, states that he himself feels that fetter of the dead female:

I can feel the tug  
of the halter at the nape  
of her neck, the wind  
on her naked front. (OG, p. 112)

The verse lines move on to emphasize his profound sympathy toward the bog female and the murdered Irish women. While he is

doing so, the groundless demolition of beauty and affection is clarified. He even describes her body and her hair erotically as if he were trying to show the waste of this beauty. The affectionate memories of his “poor scapegoat” are buried useless beside her.

Then, Heaney sees that he was involved in the murder of that girl one way or another when he kept silent in front of the bloody punishment of the Irish young women killed by his countrymen. Ingelbien argues for this view by indicating that “Heaney ...[imagines] his own passive implication in acts of tribal violence: "I almost love you / but would have cast, I know,/ the stones of silence" (OG, p. 113). The tension that this creates prompts a damning self-indictment.” (pp. 476-477) The parallel the poet establishes between the Iron Age case and that of his contemporary time as well as the allusion to his self-indictment is illustrated in the last two stanzas:

I who have stood dumb  
when your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railings,

who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge. (OG, p. 113)

The bog girl was sacrificed without paying attention to her right to live and experience affection and joy till the natural end of her life. To the writer, the Irish young women accused of committing adultery with British soldiers had similarly to agonize before their murder which was mainly initiated with their executioners’ hatred for the occupants. Heaney actually resents the feeling that he has ‘stood dumb / when

your betraying sisters, / cauled in tar,/ wept by the railings' (OG, p. 113). It is hard for the poet to tolerate the violence and bloody punishment inflicted on the miserable Irish women whose poverty, powerlessness and frailty were not considered in their barbaric public trial.

Just as North Ireland has been keenly kept inside Seamus Heaney's heart, the impact of this place with all its beauty and harshness, joy and grief, luxury and suffering, as well as attraction and agony is evidently existent in his poetry. This fine Anglophonic Irish poet shows how his works have been steadfast in the Irish soil. Rural life has its impact on a number of poems. As a little child, Heaney tried to store a great amount of the beautiful aspects of nature which encompassed him. Then, when he grew up, he managed to draw on this material so as to use it as an appropriate setting in some of his poems. The political turmoil in North Ireland, moreover, found a distinctive outlet in Heaney's poetic production. Thus, he indicates how innocence and optimism were assassinated at the hands of the sectarian and political conflicts in his country. His poetry also asserts the similarity between the process of victimizing innocent human beings to please the devil of partisan prejudice and that of killing helpless men as features of religious rituals in the past. The need to deduce lessons from history is stressed by Heaney. In all cases, the spirit of the place has apparently managed to dominate this Noble-prize winner and have its prominent voice through his poems.

As it has been elucidated above, Seamus Heaney's poetry tackles affairs taken either from the private or the public life in North Ireland in a way which voices his concern about the troubles which have been grinding his people harshly. Through his attempts to sail back in the history of his mother land and to ponder upon its troubled present, this

noted poet manages to combine the personal with the public. Consequently, the personal memories are employed as a way of reflecting the spirit of North Ireland, its heritage as well as the account of the present life in this country. The man has been obviously keen on keeping in contact with his Irish roots in his writings obviously imbues his poetry. This particular fact about Heaney's verse is actually the essence which provides it with the universal value it has acquired. When a writer digs deep in human nature and expresses people's worries and concerns in a certain place, he touches both the hearts and minds of all men all over the world. Human nature is the same everywhere, and the story of man is the same no matter where s/he lives. The Irish poet, therefore, reached universality through the gate of locality. His verse was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for it exposes the image of humanity by handling the daily affairs of those living in North Ireland with all their joy and grief, distress and reassurance, tranquility and trouble.

## Works Cited

- Ahmadgoli, Kamran and Seyed-Nima Taheri-Azam. ' Dwelling in the "Darkness Echoing": The Poetic Vision of Seamus Heaney and Martin Heidegger,' *Brno Studies in English*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2018.
- Allison, Jonathan. 'A Review of *Seamus Heaney: a Reference Guide*, by Michael J. Durkan, Boston: G. K. Hall, 1996', *ANQ*, winter 2000, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 44-46.
- Andrews, Elmer. *Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All The Realms Of Whisper*, London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1988.
- Auge, Andrew J. 'Surviving Death in Heaney's *Human Chain*.' *The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2016, pp. 29-48.
- Brown, Terence. *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Cavanagh, Michael. *Professing Poetry : Seamus Heaney's Poetics*, Catholic University of America Press, 2009.
- Cusack, George. 'A Cold Eye Cast Inward: Seamus Heaney's Field Work', *New Hibernia Review*, Vol.6, No. 3, 2002, pp. 53-72.
- Gangola, Nagendra Singh. 'The figuring of W.B.Yeats in Seamus Heaney's poems and prose', *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (April 2015), pp 336-349.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Open Ground Selected Poems 1966-1996*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- ..... *Death of a Naturalist*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
- ..... *Field Work*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1979.
- Heininger, Joseph. 'Making a Dantean Poetic: Seamus Heaney's "Ugolino"', *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2005, pp. 50-64.
- Hillan, Sophia. 'Wintered Into Wisdom: Michael McLaverty, Seamus Heaney, and the Northern Word-Hoard', *New Hibernia Review*, Vol.9, No. 3, 2005, pp. 86-106.
- Hughes, Sian. 'This Mortal Coil', *The Spectator*, 18 September 2010, p.42.
- Ingelbien, Raphaël. 'Seamus Heaney and the Importance of Larkin', *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 3/4, Summer 2000, pp. 471-482.
- Kearney, Simone. 'The staying power of poetry: interview with Seamus Heaney.(Interview).' *Irish Literary Supplement*, Vol.27, No.1, Fall 2007, p. 14, retrieved on Feb. 14, 2017 from: <http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.rmit.edu.au/itx/start.do?prodId=EAIM>.
- Mackichan, Mark. *Composed in Darkness: Trauma and Testimony in Seamus Heaney's North*, M. A. Thesis, Ontario: McMaster University, 2012.
- Mallett, Phillip. 'Seamus Heaney.' *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, Autumn 2013, Vol. 29, pp. 7-12.
- Malone, Christopher T. 'Writing Home: Spatial Allegories in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon', *ELH*, Vol. 67, No. 4, 2000, pp. 1083-1109.

- Marklew, Naomi. *Northern Irish Elegy*, Thesis submitted for degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of English Studies, Durham University, 2011.
- McGowan, Joseph. 'Heaney, Cædmon, Beowulf', *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 6, No.2, 2002, pp. 25-42.
- McGuire, Thomas. 'Violence and Vernacular in Seamus Heaney's "Beowulf".' *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 10, No.1, spring 2006, pp. 79-99.
- McHale, Brian. 'Archaeologies of Knowledge: Hill's Middens, Heaney's Bogs, Schwerner's Tablets', *New Literary History*, Vol.30, No.1, 1999, pp. 239-262.
- Moran, Sean Farrell. 'Remembering Seamus Heaney: Poetry and the Historians', *Oakland Journal*, Vol. 25, winter 2015, pp. 7-21.
- O'Brien, Eugene. "Introduction." *The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2016, pp. 1-28.
- ..... *Seamus Heaney: Searches for Answers*, Pluto Press, 2003.
- Peseroff, Joyce. 'Remembering Seamus Heaney.' *Ploughshares*, Vol. 39, No. 4, Winter 2013, pp.6-7.
- Pratt, William. "Review of *District and Circle*", *World Literature Today*, Vol. 81, No. 1, Jan/Feb. 2007, pp. 73-74.
- Quinn, Justin. *The Cambridge Introduction to: Modern Irish Poetry 1800-2000*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Russell, Richard Rankin. *Seamus Heaney's Regions*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.
- ..... 'Seamus Heaney's Regionalism', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Spring 2008, Vol. 54, No.1, pp. 47-74.
- Smith, Malvern van Wyk. 'Tribute: Seamus Heaney in Grahamstown.' *English in Africa*, Vol. 41, No. 1, May 2014, pp 9–12.
- The Wilson Quarterly. 'The Poet of Work and Delight', *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Winter 2007, p. 87.
- Tillinghast, Richard. 'Seamus Heaney's Middle Voice', *New Criterion*, Dec. 1995, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp.77-80.
- Tyler, Meg. 'What We Leave Behind: Poetry, Music, and Seamus Heaney.' *Five Points*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2017, pp.159-167.
- Yadav, Manoj Kumar and Meenakshi Sharma Yadav. ' An Analytical Study of Catholic Sufferings in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney,' *International Journal of Research* , Vol. 05, Issue 07, March 2018.