

## **Element of Irishness in Seamus Heaney's poem 'Digging'**

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### **Abstract**

Seamus Heaney is considered one of the greatest poets of the postmodern era, his name and fame travelled across the Irish borders by winning the 1995 Nobel Prize in literature. Seamus Heaney was born in Ireland; he was the only child in his family to attend the school, His family members were traditional potato farmers. Seamus Heaney broke his family tradition of farming by choosing to become a writer. While growing up to become a first graduate among his family Seamus Heaney's mind was captured by this sense of gloom that he was unable to follow his family tradition of farming. Seamus Heaney promises himself that he will pay rich tribute and let the world know about the hardships of Irish farming life. Seamus Heaney's main concern for writing poetry was to keep alive Irish culture and its heritage alive. Since Ireland was under the colonial rule of England and Seamus Heaney was of the view that colonization is not only a political problem, but it destroys the country's culture and identity. This was the main reason that Heaney's poetry revolves around Irishness, its people and culture. There is an enormous reflection of Irish identity and culture in his poetry. This paper will focus on elements of Irishness in Seamus Heaney's poem 'Digging'.

**Keywords-** Digging, Irishness, Colonization, Farming, Culture, Identity

### **Introduction**

Seamus Heaney has written about the topic related to Irishness by using the cultural element of Ireland, it was for the purpose to carry a resistance against the colonial clutch and for the sake of Ireland's communal unity. The Irish identity has been the central point of concern. Since the poet has grown up in a catholic environment, he could not favor any sect especially regarding the Irish identity. He was aware about the dissimilarities in the Irish social structure, he has reflected Ireland as an overall subject without any discriminatory elements in his artistic creations while there is admiration and expression of Irish romantic tales of traditional times, there is also a presentation with its complexities and hardships. Seamus Heaney in an interview with Brian Donnelly in the year of 1977. He says that the political situations of Northern Ireland spontaneously stress any artist (poet) to:

reveal the roots of conflict and to 'speak up for their own side' and it has forced every one of them, myself included, to request closely and honestly into the roots of one's own sensibility, into the roots of one's sense of oneself, into the tribal dirt that lies around the roots of all of us. It has forced us to look back, and it has also forced us to do something even rarer to look

forward and say not so much 'who am I, who was I? but who really do I want to be, what kind of man do I want to be? (Interviewed by Brian Donnelly, 60).

In 'Digging' Seamus Heaney pays his rich tribute and shows his concern and love for Irish people and their farming life. 'Digging' was Heaney's first poem and it was published in 1966 with themes around the Irish history, culture, heritage, and identity. Such a poem belongs to his first collection of poetry *Death of a Naturalist*, it is an important poem, or we can say it is a magnum opus written particularly for Irish Identity. Seamus Heaney has kept his strong focus on the issues related to identity in association to family which lives a pedantic life. The poet has beautifully captured the pastoral scenes and has adored their ways of hard work with sweat and enthusiasm. The poem 'Digging' with its opening lines addresses his art of penmanship in comparison to his elders who used to work hard with their farming tools like spades. The poem begins with the famous lines:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.  
Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down (*Death of a Naturalist*, 1)

Digging has carried out a comparison between his artistic works and the laborious life of his father. The poem makes a differentiation between the manual work of his father and intellectual work (creative) of the poet himself where the poet puts stress on the mastery and the craftiness of his father while managing to handle his tool, spade in terms to earn his bread and butter for the survival of his family. It is not merely the digging of farmers rather it is a digging of pen on the papers to recapitulate the Irish history and identity. Seamus Heaney in his poem 'Digging' talks about the farming life of his father and grandfather who actually represents the past Irish people of Ireland and their art of digging potato fields. By using his father and grandfather's image as a symbol for the whole Irish community Heaney actually goes from personal to communal in his poem. It is a matter of actual Irish identity which has been preserved in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Seamus Heaney is very versatile in handling his issues and concerns, especially the Irish ones. He himself has made an admission about the artists relation to his motherland, Heaney in one of his essays *Preoccupations* says:

Poetry is divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that ends up being plants (P, 41).

Seamus Heaney had a unique propensity to parallel the two segments of time in the same direction; he has contrasted the past happenings with his current state of mind to bring out the significance of past which is impossible for one to erase from the subconscious. His poetry covers the insatiable quest to find his ancestors and their simplicity of life. His poetic genius employs no spade to dig the soil rather he takes his pen to dig his past on the surface of papers. The title of the poem 'Digging', itself connotes his quest of times which are now gone. His poetry can recall the past even though it is impossible for man to reverse the time. 'Digging' is a kind of poem where the poet digs deep down the layers of time to bring the visuals of his own father — an Irish farmer who used to dig the farms with his spade to pull out the potatoes from the drills. In a nostalgic state of mind, the poet further recalls his grandfather who was of Gaelic times; a heroic figure of his times who was much efficient in his pedantic pursuits. Such a recapitulation of the two-time segments of past with its respective figures is basically an influence of Heaney's own times in which he lived. The poet carries

a feeling of alienation from the tradition and rural ways of life as he is educated now and lives a city life. there are number of poems throughout his collections which express a sense of guilt and alienation in his mind. This alienation and guilt of Heaney is commented by Ian Hamilton in the book entitled oxford companion to twentieth century poetry, "Beyond the rustic homage can be glimpsed Heaney's anxiety about how he can best keep faith with the values of his tribe and ancestors while not lapsing into their grunting curtness and silence" (Hamilton, 191).

The poet moves further and lands back to his present and meets a startle of change from physical to psychological; alongside this he seems proud of his penmanship due to which he can call back any lost segment of time. The poet is intended to search for his roots as every Irish was doing so, though he can never be like his ancestors, he is much alien to use the spade to dig but he has the pen which can do so. Heaney writes:

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I have no spade to follow men like them.  
Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it. (*Death of a Naturalist*, 2)

Seamus Heaney has regularly tried to blend his individual memories with the visuals of the landscape of Northern Ireland by reversing his mind to the time of his childhood when the people of Ireland were living happy and peaceful life. His poetry carries the adoration of the Irish pastoral atmosphere its tradition and culture. A critique, Lloyd mentions:

The extent of Heaney's critical and popular successes has been significantly dependent on the acceptability of ideas of Irish identity in critical and journalistic currency, and The Northern Irish Troubles have added a *frisson* to this by seeming to present a drama of confused and tragically conflicting identities to which art like Heaney's might minister. (*Pap for the Dispossessed: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity*, 11)

The poet prepares a poetic document of communal as well as personal losses of Ireland. It is an undeniable fact that the advancement of technology and industrialization are forming a pressure and destroying the simple and agrarian ways of life. The poet tells his readers how the Irish farmers were living their life with utmost closure and harmony with nature. The disturbing ways of modern life are disturbing the equilibrium between people and nature which has been evolving from centuries. Though Heaney cannot reverse the time, he is an artist, and it is his duty to preserve that life (history) in his verses of poetry. He traverses through the horizons of Irish history and traces out the pristine format of life of Irish farmers. Helen Vandler in her book *Seamus Heaney* has disseminated her comments beautifully:

Heaney's commemorative lyrics on the longstanding farm practices of his family, his neighbours and his ancestors (...) are testaments to his, first preservational instincts. He makes himself into an anthropologist of his own culture and testifies, in each poem, to his profound attachment to the practices described while not concealing his present detachment from rural life. The early 'poems of anonymity' are always elegiac: Heaney will not write from 'inside' or from a present tense perspective, as though he were still living in the archaic culture he describes. (Vandler, 18)

As we know Irish culture, tradition and history has fully been influential to his works, however his poetry transmuted into a political poetic expression due to his language. For Heaney, the poetry and national politics has a strong relation, while talking about his childhood experience, about his roots it has the connotation to one's identity, and that is why his sense of selfhood is not only about the identity of the poet rather is the question of the identity of whole nation which is Ireland. He is the poet, so he is the voice of his time within the national parameters of Ireland. It is obvious that his poetry must be the carriage of Irish political situations especially of Northern Ireland. The poet regarding the Irish identity has expressed a lot both as a poet and a person as well.

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