

Childhood Memories in Selected Poems by Seamus Heaney

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Growing up as the eldest of nine children of a farmer, and as a Catholic in a predominantly Protestant environment in Belfast, left a deep impact on Heaney as a child.ⁱ His poems are frequently sharp and vigorous recreations of life in a rural community and of memories of boyhood spent in the countryside.ⁱⁱ A further influence on much of his work were the Irish rituals attendant on death, where, being the eldest of his family, it fell upon him to represent them in funerals. Heaney says, “My childhood was full of death . . . the sight of a corpse . . . [was] quite common to me . . . I’m certain of all those funerals and corpses had some definite effect”.ⁱⁱⁱ

II

Heaney’s “Funeral Rights” (*North* 1975) draws on the poet’s childhood experiences. In this poem, Heaney follows a graphic account of memories of funerals in his childhood with an image of funerals on a national scale – the endless “neighbourly murders” of the Troubles – and merges this with a vision of a prehistoric funeral rite snaking “towards the mounds”.^{iv} The poem describes the burial ceremonies of a relative. For the poet “stepping in to lift the coffins” moves him into “manhood”. He “shoulders” a responsibility as the eldest son who must represent the family on such occasions.

The poet then moves to describe the dead with vivid details that clearly show the deep imprint of such experiences left in the poet’s mind. The dead had “their eyelids glistening” and “their dough-white hands\ *shackled* in rosary beads”. (Italics mine) The knuckles, nails and wrists, “*obediently* sloped” are described vividly. (Italics mine) But the two italicized words seem to jar within the context of the poem.

The dead has no power or will and, therefore, needs not be shackled or described as being obedient. Perhaps the dead were rebellious in thought and in

deed and by being so achieved a kind of nobility and peace the poet misses now as he writes.

The poet continues describing the details of the burial ceremony vividly, as in “the flames hovering\ to the women hovering\ behind me.” The first section of the poem ends with the conclusion of the burial, with “the black glacier”, i.e., the black coffin containing the cold, dead body, “of each funeral\ pushed away.”

The second section moves to the present with its violent murders: “Now the news comes in\ of each neighbourly murder.” But the poet resorts to old burial rituals in the prehistoric burial chambers of Newgrange at Boyne:^v “we pine for ceremony, customary rhythms: . . . I would restore\ the great chambers of Boyne”, describing the funeral procession in detail bringing the whole country into harmony as the different then-warring factions participate in the burial of the murdered:

Out of side-streets and by-roads
purring family cars
nose into lone,
the whole country tunes
to the muffled drumming
of ten thousand engines.

The poet repeats the image of the “wavering” women in this section:

Somnambulant women,
left behind, move
through emptied kitchens
imagining our slow triumph
toward the mounds.

The women who are left behind imagine the funeral procession in day-dreams in the same way the women in the first section were “wavering” dream-like. The women’s hovering presence over both funerals, like the candles in the chamber and in the kitchen, are none but Ireland herself, mourning the murder of her sons in funeral chambers or in kitchens waiting for the men to return.

The poet describes the winding procession into the countryside like a snake moving slowly into the prehistoric burial chambers through the Gap of the North. The Gap of the North was a strategic route into Ulster and a major centre of power in ancient Ireland. It has witnessed many invasions, battles and historic journeys and is an area rich in legend. Here, Cuchulainn defended Ulster in the most famous Celtic epic, the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*.^{vi} Again, Heaney resorts to Irish past to try to reconcile the divided present. Cuchulainn, the Irish Celtic hero, defended Ulster as part of Ireland and through this reference the poet says that there is no need for strife over the northern part of Ireland since *it is* Irish and not British.

The shadowy image of a serpent or dragon leads us into the third part of “Funeral Rites,” in which the visionary scene shifts again in time and space, and the poet imagines the mourners in a scene from the Old Norse *Njáls saga*, in which the dead hero, Gunnarr Hámundarson, is seen chanting verses inside his burial mound. Sealing the prehistoric chamber with the murdered inside along with the ancient Catholics and Protestants unifies him with them and closes all into oblivion along with their inherited strife and the murder it leads to. “Funeral Rites” explores the relationship between feud and funeral: can the ceremony and custom of funeral rites ‘placate’ the urge to retributive violence? And the example of Gunnarr seems to suggest that it may: according to the poem, Gunnarr “... lay beautiful\ inside his burial mound,\ though dead by violence\ and unavenged.”^{vii} This reconciliation, not only of the warring present, but the present with the past, is further elaborated in the figure of Gunnarr. The full stop at the end of the last line gives finality to the fact that he dies “unavenged” simply because it is unnecessary, allayed by “ceremony, customary rhythms” to which “he whole country tunes”, as “we” imagine Gunnarr disposed in the tomb and “chanting / verses about honour”.^{viii}

Furthermore, he died “chanting verses about honour”: and vengeance would take that honour away from him. The poem ends with the image of candles burning in the room where Gunnarr was when he was killed. He was “joyful” at the moment of death looking “at the moon” with “a joyful face”. Gunnarr was

happy at death and after it. The poet urges mourners not to indulge in the endless cycle of revenge and learn from the dead Gunnarr to accept death honourably in order to end the vicious cycle of bloodshed. The poem opens with a memory and ends with a commentary on and a wish that the torn Irish present may be reconciled. “He is sensitive to the interplay of past and present” and uses them both to achieve his end.^{ix} The hands that are “dough-white” and “*shackled* in rosary beads”, and the wrists, “*obediently* sloped” are the poet’s justification of the needless bloodshed: people in the past did not allow their religious differences to part them. The differences were only formalities acknowledged at the moment of death, and even after death both Catholics and Protestants were buried in the same place. When discrimination on the basis of religious belief was introduced, both Catholics and Protestants of Ireland entered in a vicious cycle of murder and revenge. The dead man’s refusal, as it were, to acknowledge his religious inclination is a foreboding to what would happen if people were too obstinate about it. Both he and the poet try to achieve reconciliation through religious tolerance.^x “*Seeing Things*” (*Seeing Things* 1991) is about the death of the poet’s father. This collection of poems explores themes of mortality, family and spiritual growth. The phrase ‘seeing things’ indicates the way the collection attends to the solid particulars of experience, but also to visionary moments, and the title poem balances precariously between the losses and dangers of life and an assertion of continuity.^{xi} Section one of the poem describes the poet’s experience as a child in a boat going to church on a Sunday morning, how he feared despite the calm sea and engaged in day dreaming as if watching the boat from above.

Section two describes the façade of the cathedral where Christ is depicted being baptised. The child, now poet, says that the façade seemed alive “with what’s invisible:\ Waterweed, stirred sand-grains hurrying off,\ The shadowy, unshadowed stream itself.” The hot air outside the cathedral was like the hieroglyph for life, i.e., a symbol of life. Section three relates an incident when the father refused to take the son to “spray potato” because he was afraid his son might get hurt. Ironically, the horse starts and tumbles the father into the river. The poem ends with a tone of reconciliation and happiness:

That afternoon
I saw him face to face, he came to me
With his damp footprints out of the river,
And there was nothing between us there
That might not still be happily ever after.

It is worth remarking on Heaney's use of the tripartite structure: the first section has a group of people in a small boat in choppy seas; he observes 'How riskily we fared into the morning, / And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads.' The second part is about the way that art can handle such feelings of danger and offer consolation. But for Heaney the danger is not dispelled thus, rather it exists thrillingly alongside the fixity offered by art. Heaney tells us how art stylises the traumas of our lives and consoles us. The third and final part of the poem returns to childhood experience and casually relates an event when the poet's father was nearly drowned. The anecdote comes close to fairy-tale stylisation, especially in its opening, and its close. The enjambment of the final lines is masterful: the penultimate line shows the absence that is often at the centre of even the most intimate human relations, and the final line carefully places an optative statement against that very emptiness. The lines stay poised there, and the poet silently moves away.^{xii} The poem balances between the losses and dangers of life and an assertion of its continuity.^{xiii}

Frank Kinahan remarked in an interview with Heaney, saying:

Now in a way that strikes me as being a very apt description of your own work. It seems to me that your poems might fairly be described as a series of recoveries, with things long buried – people, events – rising back toward the surface again and again, bringing the past back into the present.^{xiv}

True, and one may fairly add that each recovery brings with it more insight, making us *see things*, the poet's childhood experiences, under different, clearer, brighter light.

III

Heaney's "Digging" (*Death of a Naturalist* 1966) shows "Heaney's theory of 'technique' as a necessary process of retrieving images of poetry that lie

submerged in the inner depths of his psyche and can be retrieved through reveries often precipitated by liminal spaces.”^{xv} “It celebrates the skills with the spade of the poet’s ancestors but concludes with the declaration that he will dig with the pen: a pen though which, disturbingly, is ‘snug as a gun’.”^{xvi}

The poet sits at a window watching his father digging in a flowerbed in the present:^{xvii} “Under my window, a clean rasping sound/ When the spade sinks into gravely ground:/ My father, digging. I look down.” This scene sets off a memory of his father digging potatoes and, later in the poem, of his grandfather cutting turf on Toner’s Bog:^{xviii}

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
For the good turf. Digging.

Placing himself between the domestic and exterior world and between the present and the past enables Heaney to project his future as an artist. “Digging” is an apprentice poem in which the poet both aligns himself with the family tradition of digging and crucially breaks from that tradition, declaring himself by poem’s end a poet whose tool will be very different from the spades employed by his father and grandfather. The concrete pen with which the poem concludes, however, is only reached after Heaney digs into his memory, an abstract process that he undergoes through reflectively listening to and seeing his own father digging outside his windowsill, a physically liminal position that enables Heaney to cast himself into a reverie,^{xix} and “go down” into his mind to reach “the good turf”. The poet is remembering and holding in his mind his true heritage – his father’s rhythm – continually available through the poet’s memory. While the opening stanzas convey Heaney’s listening to and viewing the repetitive motions of his father digging repeatedly in “the flowerbeds” of the present and potato drills of the past, the sixth and seventh stanzas articulate a specific memory of the poet’s encounter with his grandfather, a turf-cutter. He deftly and deeply makes

his cut, does not overreach, and then dexterously tosses the turf “Over his shoulder”. In this stanza, Heaney remembers and gains the repetitive rhythm of his grandfather’s turf-cutting as a guide to his own rhythmic art. Since he concludes, “But I’ve no spade to follow men like them”, he crafts an extremely well-made poem, framed with the image of the pen in equipoise “Between my finger and my thumb”. His concluding affirmation, “I’ll dig with it”, suggests that while he will not follow their vocation, his own work will be similarly marked with consistently employed rhythms.^{xx} Typically then this early poem obliquely suggests that the inside of Heaney’s head functions as a sort of sound chamber where the rhythm of various types of digging in the past and present trigger, then echo, the rhythms of his writing the poem in the present.^{xxi}

“Follower” (*Death of a Naturalist* 1966) is like “Digging” in that it shows Heaney looking up to his elders. Composed altogether of nine such scenes, the poem serves as a funerary monument. The father and horse plough appear first, much as would be central figure of a classical frieze,^{xxii}

My fathert worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.
The horses strained a his clicking tongue.

and then supporting scenes encircle them: the father adjusting the coulter, pivoting the team, striding about the farm with his son following.^{xxiii} (269)

An expert. He would set the wing
And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.
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.

As would be expected from the shallow depths of a bas-relief, there is no background, but a sculptural austerity prevails. As if to defy the mystery of death, a raking light captures each detail so it is possible to feel the ploughman’s eye

squint as he lines up his next pass, or his son's slender arm stiffen as he dreams of one day driving the team himself.^{xxiv}

I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
Sometimes he rode me on his back,
Dipping and rising to his plod.
I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm.

The scene provides an ideal opportunity for poetic melancholy. The child, grown up, discovers like the creator of another cold pastoral that he may never enter the world of his beholding. Yet the tone of "Follower"'s initial persona suggests something different from longing or regret: relief, maybe even accomplishment. Homages to the dead can also serve the interests of the living, and it is not unusual for such reminiscences to become a means of containment.^{xxv} The *illud tempus*, or "those times," commemorates the timeless moment when creation moved in perfect harmony with the gods. After the war between heaven and earth, historical beings were forever barred from revisiting this condition, except in the symbolism of sacred ritual.^{xxvi} It is to this forbidden place that the son transports his father, to become one of the ancient giants who towers over the mortals of subsequent ages. This mythical parent acquires the might of a Titan whom creatures, wind, and the earth itself obey. The events of his life unfold with the solemn inevitability of a sacred rite. There is no mention of his thoughts, for all is arranged in accordance with the eternal rhythms of nature. Such mastery cannot exist within human experience, and that is the point. The father, securely entombed in a timeless self-sufficiency, will never climb down from his stone monument.^{xxvii}

Or at least that would be the case were it not for the poem's last lines. "Follower" does not end; it interrupts itself with the beginning of what sounds like a completely different poem.^{xxviii}

But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away.

A new world emerges. Sudden shadows overtake the scene and a hitherto idealized being turns demonic.^{xxix} As the child was a “nuisance” to his father, the expert farmer, so perhaps the father is now for the sun, the expert poet. The child never grew to be a farmer, as the father can never grow into a poet. Although the events of “Follower” are told in the language of an adult, they are shown as if through the eyes of a child.^{xxx} While the little boy cannot speak for himself, his location, focus, and selection of visual subjects can speak for him.^{xxxi} Deep behind the voice of the poet proudly remembering his father, the voice of child could be heard. Yet another voice can be heard as well: the regretful son who did not fulfill his father’s dream of seeing his son grow up to be an expert farmer, as the father did fulfilling his father’s dream. This poem is not only a celebratory, funerary piece, but a regretful one as well, redeemed in “Digging” where the poet promises to take up his father’s and grandfather’s profession of digging and plowing metaphorically, and to become a farmer of words, grown into poems.

In “Man and Boy” (*Seeing Things* 1991), Heaney uses his memories of his dead father to indulge in a mystical experience of his own. It is a poem about the generations, examining the connections between fathers and sons. It gives us its own sense of rapture, most noticeably when Heaney celebrates the experience of fishing with his father with his own version of the Beatitudes:^{xxxii}

Blessed be down-to-earth! Blessed be highs!
Blessed be the detachment of dumb love
In that broad-backed, low-set man
Who feared debt all his life, but now and then
Could make a splash like the salmon he said was
‘As big as a wee pork pig by the sound of it’.

The poem, which falls in two parts, begins with the man and boy fishing and the father telling an “old, heavy\ And predictable” joke. But the father is too down to earth to immerse himself and his son in life to “take too much for granted”. He would check his son’s spirit “lightly”.^{xxxiii} The wisdom of the old man is evident although it is so commonplace as the fishing itself that it can hardly be distinguished from the “miraculous” that will conclude the poem.^{xxxiv}

In its own way, “Man and Boy” begins in concrete experiences (fishing, mowing) only to ascend to a realm more mysterious and mythic. The symbol is allusive and traditional, but is being used to reintroduce mystery and wonder in a fresh way. In the end of “Man and Boy,” the father and boy are transformed into figures of myth,^{xxxv} Aeneas who bore his old father Anchises out of the burning Troy: “I feel his legs and quick heels far away\ And strange as my own – when he will piggyback me\ At a great height, light-headed and thin-boned,\ Like a witless elder rescued from the fire.” Heaney, now aware of his own aging process and feeling the loss of his father, finds there a deeper mystery. The process of this return to memory resembles Keats’s idea of repeating experience in a “finer tone”; repetition, thus, is itself a sign of entry into the mysterious.^{xxxvi}

On one level both “Man and Boy” and “Seeing Things” are returns for Heaney to the generational themes of his earliest poems.^{xxxvii} “Seeing Things” is Heaney’s late masterpiece. The poem benefits from being read in the context of other poems, especially “Man and Boy.” Here again Heaney offers an uncanny kind of repetition, a return to an earlier experience that has taken on new meaning in the light of maturity, wisdom and loss.^{xxxviii} Heaney turns to traditional symbols and figures from Christianity to understand his own story.^{xxxix} While the religious impulse is very powerful in “Seeing Things,” it does not limit Heaney. The deeply religious symbolism of the second section of the poem is not an end in itself; rather, with its status as the second of three sections, it provides a deeper context for the poem’s concluding movement. That movement resembles the ending of “Man and Boy” in its translation of the personal into the mythic. Heaney uses the fairy-tale formulas (‘once upon a time’ and ‘happily ever after’) to frame the final section of “Seeing Things,” and thus gives a broader perspective for the uncanny memory of the father’s return. This structure becomes another way for the narrator to step outside himself, as the boy seems to do in the opening section, and look down on his experience with sublime contentment.^{xl}

IV

The poems discussed in this paper tackle the some of the poet's memories of death and of his father. "Funeral Rites" takes the poet back in time to prehistoric burial mounds, to times when Catholics and Protestants were buried in the same place when discrimination because of religion had no place, and a funeral he attended which enables him to comment on death because of the troubles in modern Ireland. "Seeing Things" discusses the death of the poet's father. The poet's memories about this incident help him continue life despite all it perils.

The rest of the poems discussed deal with the poet's memories of his father. In "Digging", the poet uses his memories of his father's skill in digging potatoes and his grandfather's in digging turf to help his 'dig' in his own mind for poems using his pen instead of the spade. "Follower" is a regretful poem redeemed in "Digging" where the poet promises to take up his father's and grandfather's profession of digging and plowing metaphorically, and to become a farmer of words, a poet. "Man and Boy" is a poem about the generations, examining the connections between fathers and sons. It is also helpful to read "Seeing Things" in the context of other poems, especially "Man and Boy." Maturity, wisdom, and loss reverberate in the poems and reading one in light of the other help find the connection between the child and the father and the poet and the father. It is this which connection that resonates in Heaney's poems, for his father's ghost is there lurking behind the lines urging the poet to follow, dig, and see past things in the light of his mature experiences.

Notes:

ⁱ <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/seamus-heaney>> (accessed 10/11/2011).

ⁱⁱ Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc., 1973), 1373.

ⁱⁱⁱ Noel Rowe, "Sounds in print, worlds below: Seamus Heaney's deepening words", 13. <

<http://escholarship.usyd.edu.au/journals/index.php/SSE/article/viewFile/551/520>
> (accessed 10/11/2011).

- iv Dillon Johnston, "Irish Influence and Confluence in Heaney's Poetry" in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, edited by Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 197.
- v Paul Simpson-Housley, *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001), 19.
- vi Nora Cunningham and McGinn, Pat. [The Gap of the North: The Archaeology and Folklore of Armagh, Down, Louth and Monaghan](http://www.biblioireland.com/2475/the-gap-of-the-north-the-archaeology-and-folklore-of-armagh-down-louth-and-monaghan/). <<http://www.biblioireland.com/2475/the-gap-of-the-north-the-archaeology-and-folklore-of-armagh-down-louth-and-monaghan/>> (accessed).
- vii Johnston, 197.
- viii Ibid., 158.
- ix Norman Vance, *Irish Literature Since 1800* (London: Longman, 2002), 238.
- x The poem, though written by an Irish poet based on his experience as a witness to the violence caused by religious difference, is a good comment on the violence that took and still takes place in Iraq. Iraqi's should go back to the time when religious differences meant little to Iraqis and try to live in peace and harmony as they used to do.
- xi Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry 1800-2000* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 137.
- xii Ibid., 137-8.
- xiii Ibid., 137.
- xiv Fran. Kinahan, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring, 1982), 413.
- xv Ashby Bland Crowder and Jason David Hall, *Seamus Heaney, Poet, Critic, Translator* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 31.
- xvi Bernard O'Donoghue, "Heaney's Classics and the Bucolic", in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, 108.
- xvii Crowder and Hall, 29.
- xviii Ibid.
- xix Ibid.
- xx Ibid., 30.
- xxi Ibid.
- xxii John Boly, "Following Seamus Heaney's 'Follower': Towards a Performative Criticism" *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Autumn 2000), 269.
- xxiii Ibid.
- xxiv Ibid.
- xxv Ibid., 269-270.
- xxvi Eliade, Mircea, *The Sacred & the Profane*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 80.
- xxvii Boly, 270.
- xxviii Ibid.
- xxix Ibid.
- xxx Ibid., 277.
- xxxi Ibid., 278.
- xxxii Kinahan, 98.
- xxxiii Crowder and Hall, 98.

xxxiv Ellmann and O'Clair, 1373.

xxxv Crowder and Hall, 99.

xxxvi Ibid.

xxxvii Crowder and Hall, 99.

xxxviii Ibid.

xxxix Ibid., 100.

xl Ibid., 101.

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ذكريات الطفولة في قصائد مختارة لشميس هيني

الخلاصة

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة أهمية الذكريات في قصائد مختارة للشاعر الأيرلندي المعاصر شميس هيني. حيث تلعب ذكريات الطفولة دوراً مهماً في هذه القصائد وفي شعره عموماً. والقصائد المختارة هي قصيدة (طقوس الدفن) من مجموعة (شمال) التي كتبها عام 1975 وقصيدتي (رجل وصبي) و (رؤية الأشياء) من مجموعة (رؤية الأشياء) التي كتبها عام 1991. تعالج قصيدة (طقوس الدفن) جنازة شارك الشاعر في مراسمها وهو صبي ويربطها بالصراعات المسلحة في شمال أيرلندا. أما قصيدتي (رجل وصبي) و (رؤية الأشياء) فتدوران حول ذكريات الشاعر الطفولية مع والده وذهابه إلى الكنيسة وكيف تكتسب هذه الذكريات معانٍ جديدة للشاعر بعد بلوغه. أما قصيدتي (حفر) و(التابع) فتعالجان ذكريات الشاعر مع والده وهو يعمل في حقل البطاطا وكيف يستعمل الشاعر هذه الذكريات في كتابة قصائده.