



<https://www.mairaj.pk>

Mairaj

Vol 2, Issue 1



info@mairaj.pk

Muhammad Asif

Scholar Ph.D. English, NUML, Islamabad

Heaney and Yeats: Embodying the Spirit of Irish Identity

Abstract

Modern Irish nation saw the rise of Two Nobel Laureates from its side who breathed air into Irish poetry and endeavoured to represent the true picture of the Irish people. They shed light upon the atrocities the Irish faced. Yeats yearned for the Irish prosperity and grandeur in a most outspoken manner as a sage even though he was a Protestant, belonging to a generation planted by the British to uproot Catholicism. He spoke against the British tyranny towards the Irish. Heaney, a Catholic following the footsteps of Yeats adopted a different dimension to explain such plights. He gave vent to domestic experiences, deriving poetic inspiration from his surroundings to bring a larger impact on Irish poetry. At the same time, he respects and acknowledges Yeats' eminence and his influence. The current paper shall address the two Nobel Laureates from a comparative angle, particularly in light of their poetic contributions.

Keywords: Yeats, Seamus, Protestant, Catholic, Irish politics, identity, heritage

Identical Emblems of the Irish Pride: Seamus Heaney and W.B Yeats

Heaney and Yeats who were conferred the Nobel Prize are greatly debated in the world of Irish literature for their supremacy in poetic contributions. Both were national poets who dabbled deep in the Irish world in terms of poetic pursuits to explain the grandeur, wounds and atrocities the Irish people faced.

Yeats belonged to the Anglo-Irish Protestant minority which had already controlled the economic, socio-political, and cultural life of Ireland since the late 17th century. Most people of this minority regarded themselves as English people born in Ireland, but Yeats stressed his Irish identity. Yeats stayed true to his Irish heritage, portraying Irish stories and heroes in most of his poetry and plays. As an artist, he was similarly adamant about his identity. Many people accused him of being an elitist as a result of this conviction, yet it did contribute to his success.

On the other hand, Heaney raised in County Derry, Northern Ireland was a Catholic. His environment and the specifics of his childhood have a huge effect on his work. Heaney was particularly touched by poets who drew inspiration from their local and ancestral surroundings. Heaney once said of his time in Belfast that he learnt that his local County Derry experience, which he thought to be antiquated and unimportant to the modern age, was to be believed. They instilled faith and assisted him in expressing it. As a Northern Irish, Heaney used his poetry to focus on the frequently violent power struggles that afflicted the country throughout Heaney's adolescence. In the poetic volumes *Wintering Out* and *North*, the poet attempted to integrate the unfolding Irish problems into a larger historical canvas including the entire human predicament. Whereas a few analysts criticized Heaney for being a theological rationalist and mythologizer, Morrison proposed that Heaney would never diminish political circumstances to false simplicity, and never thought himself to be a political representative (Poetry Foundation).

Yeats thought that art and politics were inextricably intertwined, and he utilized his work to communicate his feelings about Irish politics and to educate his readers about Irish cultural heritage. From a young age, Yeats had a strong attachment to Ireland and his national identity, and he believed that British rule had a bad influence on Irish politics and social life. His early folklore compilations attempted to educate a literary past suppressed by British control, and his early poems were *Odes* to the beauty and magic of the Irish landscape. This work usually included allusions to mythology and legendary people, like Oisín and Cúchulainn.

As Yeats got more active in Irish politics, via his associations with the Irish National Theatre, the Irish Literary Society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and Maud Gonne, his poetry took on the characteristics of political manifestos. Yeats' poems revolve around the Irish involvement in the First World War, the Easter Rebellion and Irish political activists. Yeats felt that poetry could both analyze and comment on political events, as well as educate and instruct a community.

Yeats' devotion to mysticism resulted in the development of a unique spiritual and philosophical system that emphasized fate and archaeological determinism, or the belief that events are prearranged. Although Yeats rejected Christianity early in life, his lifelong study of myths, Theosophy, mysticism, ideology, and the esoteric, demonstrates his keen interest in the divine and how it communicates with humanity. Over the course of a lifetime, he developed a sophisticated spiritual system based on the idea of interconnecting gyres to map out the soul's growth and rebirth. Yeats thought that fate governed history and that fate disclosed its design when the human and divine interacted. His poems are infused with a tone of historically established inevitability, notably in portrayals of human and heavenly connection. This can be seen in *Leda and the Swan*, *The Second Coming 1919* and *Sailing to Byzantium*. The divine, in whatever form it appears, indicates the role of destiny in shaping the path of history.

Yeats began his long creative career as a romantic poet before evolving into a modernist poet. His poems had a lyrical, romantic tone when he began writing them in the 1880s, and they concentrated on love, longing and loss, and Irish folklore. His early work adheres to the norms of romantic verse, including well-known rhyme schemes, metric patterns, and poetic forms. His adolescent poetry is complex and accomplished while being lighter than his later compositions. Several things influenced his literary development, including his interest in spirituality and the esoteric, which drove him to investigate spiritually and intellectually challenging aspects.

Yeats' unfulfilled romantic connection with Maud Gonne influenced his early work's dreamy romantic idealism to become riper and more critical. Furthermore, his interest in Irish themes grew as he got increasingly involved in nationalist political activities. As a result, Yeats' attention changed from legend and tradition to modern politics, frequently connecting the two to create powerful statements reflecting political agitation and turmoil in Ireland and beyond. Finally, and most importantly, Yeats' link with the fickle nature of literary tradition in the early twentieth century prompted him to adopt some of the contemporary poets' techniques and norms. The modernists experimented with different forms of verse. They were outspoken about modern politics, questioned poetic norms and the literary tradition as a whole, and opposed the concept that poetry should merely be lyrical and glamorous. His poetry became darker, rougher, and more succinct as a result of such inspirations. Although he never left the verse forms that gave the tones and patterns for his early poems, there is a clear shift in style and tone throughout his career.

Yeats distinctively integrated Irish subjects and concerns in his writing during his literary career. He wrote to remark on Irish politics and the self-governance movement, as well as to enlighten and teach people about Irish cultural heritage. Yeats also utilized the Irish landscape as a background to recount myths and legends from the Irish tradition. His poetry took on a nationalistic tone as he got more active in nationalist politics. In a variety of methods, Yeats addressed Irish politics. His statements are sometimes apparent political commentary, and sometimes they are not. He criticizes the British exploitation of Irish soldiers during World War I, in *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*. Poems such as *Easter 1916* and *In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz* highlight people and events linked with Irish nationalist politics, but *The Second Coming* and *Leda and the Swan* incorporate the notion of Irish nationalism subtly.

Even though the poems are not specifically about Ireland, a feeling of cultural upheaval and struggle permeates them. Yeats used the imagery of anarchy, turmoil, and conflict to make an unobtrusive remark on political circumstances in Ireland and across the world. Yeats' strong engagement in Irish politics influenced his poetry, and he utilized it to remark on modern nationalist concerns.

Yeats was obsessed with mysticism and the arcane, and his poetry is filled with a feeling of unearthly, spiritual, and mysterious notions. His interest in the esoteric began as a young man with his study of Theosophy and extended and deepened via his membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical secret establishment. Mysticism is significant in Yeats' explanation of soul resurrection, along with his philosophical model of the helical gyres, which he uses to describe the journey of the soul, the passing of time, and fate's guiding hand. This happens clearly in *The Second Coming*, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *The Magi*. The repudiation of Christian ideas in favour of a more paranormal perspective to mysticism gives Yeats' poetry a distinct taste that influences his discussions of historical, political, and emotional nature.

Yeats' involvement in the Irish political process stemmed from his fascination with Irish legend and lore. Church theology and British authority of the educational system had repressed Irish myth and tradition. Yeats' poetry was utilized to re-educate the Irish people about their ancestry and as a tactic for building Irish patriotism. He retold entire folktales in epic poems and plays like *The Wanderings of Oisín* and *The Death of Cúchulainn*, and made use of pieces of stories in smaller poems like *The Stolen Child* and *Cúchulainn's Fight with the Sea*, which retold part of an epic where an Irish folk hero unknowingly fights with his son. Yeats' poetry was imbued with a deep sense of Irish culture. Even poems that may not overtly address mythic topics have strong echoes of local Irish culture. Yeats frequently drew directly from traditional Irish myth and folklore for word choice, poetic form, and imagery patterns.

Turning to Heaney, he too treads the same path as Yeats. As an Irish poet, Seamus Heaney has employed a variety of subjects in his poems that are connected to his society. The majority of the topics he has utilized in his poetry are familiar. He does not identify a poem for a certain subject. Heaney's list of subjects in his poetry is not extensive. Every poem does not have a fresh subject notion; rather, he repeats his collection of concerns repeatedly. In reality, his poems have common subject matter; yet, certain poems are conceptually distinct from Yeats. Like Yeats, Heaney's foci are also connected to Irishmen and Irish society, as he is of Irish descent. Heaney is also a fan of rural life, and rural imagery may be seen in his poems.

In addition to what Yeats has done, Heaney reflects the mentality of a cautious mind in depth, much like a psychologist. The most essential aspect of Heaney's poetry is that he is a history buff who enjoys discussing it. Many of Seamus Heaney's poems are from the historical

perspective of Irish society. He loves to depict history, particularly that of Irishmen and their great tales. He is aware of their anguish and sadness. Their sorrows and pains are fresh in his memory, and he feels no shame in expressing them. Seamus Heaney does not generally tackle modern men's concerns but rather depicts what happened in the past. He has been considered indispensable because, when compared to modern poets, he has an uncommon collection of subjects. It is not incorrect to argue that his collection of ideas qualified him for a Nobel Prize.

Much of Seamus Heaney's poetry deals with childhood innocence and psychology, thus taking a further step in terms of what Yeats has contributed. *Death of a Naturalist* is a poem that must be cited here. It exemplifies the subject, which is connected to the erosion of a child's innocence. The poem expresses the child's feelings about the complex trends and mood of society. A youngster who was previously pure and took comfort in nature no longer has the same viewpoint. His thoughts, ideas, observations, and understanding of life have shifted. In this poem, the author discusses the development of a child's mind in great detail from:

...Miss Walls would tell us how
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too
For they were yellow in the sun and brown
In rain. (Heaney)

This aesthetic belief in nature is retained until society distorts his vision of nature, where nature becomes an emissary of vengeance and abomination, making him wary of the romantic side of nature:

Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it. (Heaney)

Likewise, another poem with a similar idea is *A Constable Calls*. The poem also addresses a child's psyche. It is worth noting that this poem was inspired by an incident Heaney experienced as a youngster. The concern of this poem is how a youngster perceives a policeman and how dread grows in his head. This poem expresses a child's vision and emotions regarding his fear of the policeman. Furthermore, the child's terror of the gun resting around the constable's buttocks causes him to think adversely:

Arithmetic and fear.
I sat staring at the polished holster
With its buttoned flap, the braid cord
Looped into the revolver butt. (Troubles Archive)

A single visit by the police officer exhorts all Irish youths to fear. Likewise, from the perspective of a mind of a youngster, Seamus Heaney wrote *Blackberry-Picking*. These poems illustrate that not only does Seamus Heaney comprehend the psychology of children, but he also can convey it through words. In many of the poet's works, it is therefore a repeating motif. As stated earlier, Seamus Heaney is a history enthusiast. He talks about Irish society in boggish terms. He enjoys rewriting history through poetry. However, there is nothing new about it as he narrates the same occurrence, which many have already seen, but his manner of writing forces readers to reconsider.

The Tollund Man is a poem where the reader gets along with the people of the bogs. It's not just the bog people's history symbolically but also the Irish people's history. The poem relates the narrative of a guy who, in a traditional rite, sacrificed his life but that is not valuable enough to Seamus Heaney, who deems it a waste. However, the poem is about a true incident that took place in the Iron Age, and it is reworked by Seamus Heaney. *Grauballe Man* also constitutes historical poetry. It is also based on bog folk like *The Tollund Man*. It has the same type of subject and was written in linear terms.

Aspects of terror and fear should also be remembered here, although less common, but is a most essential subject. Heaney as an Irish understands his fellow men's sufferings and afflictions. Much has been straining for the Irish people. Seamus Heaney kept their sorrows fresh in the memory, and until he wrote about them, he could not find rest. *A Constable Calls* and *Blackberry Picking* are poems in which the poet portrayed the anxiety and angst of the Irish. Although these poems were created on a child's views, the attractiveness and subject matter are universal. After seeing cops and opponents in each poem, the poet showed tremendous childhood dread. This, as well as other elements, the issue of dread and anxiety, must be considered when reading Seamus Heaney's poetry.

For Heaney, the example and principle of Yeats teach that real poetry has political power without having to be explicit or polarized. It also teaches the dual-mindedness and conflict by which poetry is enhanced that a person produces rhetoric out of a struggle with others, but poetry is produced when a person comes to struggle with himself. Maybe no author meant more than to Heaney by Yeats' famous judgement. In his English-Irish origin and upbringing, and his contradiction between work and life, he sees the concept of dual-mindedness in Yeats, in the formal qualities of his poetry, in his ambiguous spirituality, and in the manner in which he perceives and embraces Ireland.

Moreover, Yeats holds himself to the stature of a sage as he witnesses the calamities of the Irish people. This has, as mentioned earlier marked him as an elitist and sometimes alleged him to be alienated from the atrocities faced by the Irish firsthand. *The Tower* sheds light on his attire of sagacity in terms of the following expressions,

I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundations of a house, or where
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;
And send imagination forth
Under the day's declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,
For I would ask a question of them all (Poetry Foundation).

While Yeats secures a vantage point from the tower to observe all that passes over the Irish nation, Heaney in my understanding, endeavours to develop himself a step ahead by coming up with some of the closest firsthand accounts he observed and producing them poetically from an Irish lens.

Luo Lianggong comes up with an interesting perspective while observing the two poets in parallel. He asserts that while Heaney is well acknowledged as a poet in the Irish legacy since Yeats, "he suffers the anxiety of influence from Yeats" (p.31). His anxiety is originated from his inability to resist Yeats' influence. Lianggong observed that Heaney took it as an obligation to accept his influence. Nevertheless, this would have endangered his subjectivity. Heaney admired Yeats' poetic contribution to liquifying the prevalent English colonial culture and using the

developments in English poetry to consolidate the base of Irish literature (p.34). Still, he could not permanently retain the Yeatsian influence, provided that both belonged to different eras. The lapse of generations and the advancement of age, made Heaney realize that there are distinctive scenarios between him and Yeats, to which the latter would not have been able to provide a resolution. Yet, shedding the Yeatsian mantle strengthened the split of anxiety in him making him the defender and at the same time the breaker of his donned legacy (p.35).

To converge the whole discussion, I shed light on Cavanagh's reflection concerning the differences the two poets held. In his paper, *Tower and Boat: Yeats and Seamus Heaney* he demarcates between them saying, "The backgrounds of the two poets--geographic, ethnic, religious, and educational--are vastly different. Their temperaments and styles, Yeats's presumptive and outspoken, Heaney's tentative and tactful--also set them far apart. Yeats' political views were antidemocratic and extreme; Heaney's are tolerant and moderate" (p.19). He further develops his comparison by observing that both Heaney and Yeats have a lot in common despite their differences. They attracted remarkably little attention to their similarities. They are undoubtedly the result of like-mindedness but also of a purposeful self-modelling, possibly semi-conscious in nature, on the side of Heaney. Yeats was somewhat well-known and had a long public career. He felt political, but he held his nation and the public accountable and felt pressure – while he fought it – to take a political stance in his poems, linked with politically oriented individuals. He was concerned with the seemingly contradictory needs of art and civic life. Throughout his career, he became preoccupied with brutality and pondered over the role of poetry and the arts in a society where cruelty seemed to have the upper hand (p.19). Heaney has written extensively about poets but none so in a partisan manner as about Yeats. Yeats has been addressed as a meridian in Heaney's three books of criticism. He has devoted no less than six essays on the magnificence of Yeats. In doing so he shows his desire to be recognized as a lyrical and national poet in the Yeatsian light.

References

- Cavanagh, M. (2000). Tower and Boat: Yeats and Seamus Heaney. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 4(3), 17–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20646302>
- Heaney, S. (n.d.). *A Constable Calls*. Troubles Archive. Retrieved March 10, 2023, from <http://www.troublesarchive.com/artforms/poetry/piece/a-constable-calls>
- Heaney, S. (n.d.). *Death of a Naturalist by Seamus Heaney*. Poetry Foundation. Retrieved March 10, 2023, from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57040/death-of-a-naturalist>
- Lianggong, L. (2013). Yeats and Heaney: An Anxiety of Influence. *The Yeats Journal of Korea*, 42, 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.14354/yjk.2013.42.31>
- Poetry Foundation. (n.d.). *Seamus Heaney*. Poetry Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney>
- Yeats, W. B. (n.d.). *The Tower by William Butler Yeats*. Poetry Foundation. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57587/the-tower-56d23b4072cea>