

# Departure, Turbulence, Arrival with *The Haw Lantern*

Jingli Wang

HZNU, Hangzhou Normal University, College of Foreign Language, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310000

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to analyze the poetry *The Haw Lantern* written by Seamus Heaney, a Nobel laureate in literature, from the perspectives of language, cultural background and author's psychology. This paper discusses Heaney's negotiation with contradiction and the compromise and compensation made in the negotiation process. It explores Heaney's use of words as a sword, his journey to reclaim his original identity.

**Keyword:** Cultural background; Conflict; Semantics

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## Introduction

Seamus Justin Heaney MRIA was an Irish poet, playwright and translator. He received the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. Among his best-known works is *Death of a Naturalist*, his first major published volume. Heaney was and is still recognized as one of the principal contributors to poetry in Ireland during his lifetime. American poet Robert Lowell described him as "the most important Irish poet since Yeats", and many others, including the academic John Sutherland, agreed that he was "the greatest poet of our age". Robert Pinsky stated that "with his wonderful gift of eye and ear Heaney has the gift of the story-teller." Upon his death in 2013, *The Independent* described him as "probably the best-known poet in the world".

Heaney was born and raised in Castledawson, County Derry, Northern Ireland. The impact of his surroundings and the details of his upbringing on his work are immense. As a Catholic in Protestant Northern Ireland, Heaney once described himself as someone who "emerged from a hidden, a buried life and entered the realm of education."

Part of Heaney's popularity stems from his subject matter—modern Northern Ireland, its farms and cities beset with civil strife, its natural culture and language overrun by English rule. Heaney's poetry is known for its aural beauty and finely-wrought textures. Often described as a regional poet, he is also a traditionalist who deliberately gestures back towards the "pre-modern" worlds of William Wordsworth and John Clare.

## 1 Poetry and Poems

As Heaney was born in Northern Ireland, a conflict zone between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, he also tried to balance his Irish identity and English cultural background in his poetry. The research on the national identity of Heaney can be roughly divided into two aspects. On the one hand, the relationship between Heaney and the Irish literary tradition is explored. Day calmly sorts out Heaney's spiritual journey from his initial search for the roots of Irish culture, to his pursuit of personal life and artistic creation in the middle, to his imaginative and historical recognition of identity and national culture, and finally to his escape from the moral burden of nationalism. On the other hand, the research points out the hybridity of culture in Heaney's poetry and its conscious transcendence. For example, Du Xinyuan indicated that Heaney, through his own poetry and translated language, transformed the problem of identity into a problem of linguistic signs, surpassing the narrow regionalism in a pluralistic way. Over the course of his five-decade career, his poems reflect the poet's struggles and inner conflicts with heritage issues and his relationship with two cultures. In the midst of this conflict, Heaney was caught between the role of artist and the demands of the public to be their spokesman: whether he should be a citizen of imagination and the world of art, or a spokesman for reality.

Actually, Heaney was already contemplating moral and political issues in the third volume, *Wintering out*, and in the fourth volume, *North*. Moral and political issues dominated Heaney's poetry: the escalation of violence in Northern Ireland, Heaney's move to the south with his family, the balancing act between duty and choice. It was a question that ran through Heaney's three volumes of poetry in the 1980s, *Field Work*, *Station Island* and *The Haw Lantern*. During this period, Heaney continued to explore and excavate the bogs of Ireland, searching for the archetypes and horrors of violence in mythological historical examples. With an attitude of "think again" in the face of violence, the interrogation of conscience and ego continues with him to distance himself from the bigger picture. From *North* to *The Haw Lantern* to *Seeing things*, Heaney has been thinking about the relationship between self and society, poetry and society and even self and poetry in his poems, constantly exploring, taking each poem as a stepping stone to the truth.<sup>[1]</sup>

Looking through the titles of Heaney's poetic collections from the late 1960s to 1980s, those titles are always about transit, which is about transitions from one place to another: *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, *Field Work*, and *Station Island*. The poems reflect the changes in his different stages: from personal experience to communal experience in terms of poetic materials; from geographic

Ireland to psychological Ireland in terms of places in his writing. So how about the collection of poems with nouns as the title, such as *The Haw Lantern*?<sup>[2]</sup>

Heaney's preoccupation with the role of language in the construction of social and political identity is a significant issue which he considers in the collection *The Haw Lantern* (1987). Helen Vendler claims that "*The Haw Lantern* is a book of strict, even stiff, second thoughts". It's easy to see that Heaney embellishes the collection with parables, allegories and satires on the social, political and religious aspects of Irish life. He deploys these strategies to define the marginal status of Northern Ireland as within the colonial divisions created by the rules of the British Empire and the Protestant church. To repair the fractured identity of Irish people, the poet uses his poetry as a medium to provide compromises and compensations

## 2 The Haw Lantern

Heaney is really a master of verbs, nearly each verse has exactly the right verbs, such as *scrutinized*, *flinch*, *pecked-at*, etc. Most of the key words he used are polysemous. Actually, it is obviously that his talents are revealed in the ways of using words. His writing skills involve both the simplicity and deep meaning.

For example, "*Crab*", when it is used as a verb, it means to complain about peevishly or to make sullen sour. Then go back to the second line, the atmosphere has changed into a sluggish way, which makes burning wintry haw also a redundancy at that time.

Then, "*plumes*" is usually used as measure word, like a plume of smoke, dust, fire, etc. Most are used to describe a small wisp of something, which gives a sense of ethereal obscurity. In this line, it is used as a noun, here referring to things that rise, but also pollutants in particular. This shifts the mood of the poem from sluggish to gloom. We can see that the verb before "*plumes*" is "*breath*", verbs and nouns like these, when combined, make a sentence feel so immersive that the reader furrows his brows in resistance.

Word "*twig*", usually refers to the very small thin branch. When used as verb, it means "find out or suddenly comprehend something". This change of phrase is like a small lantern shot through the cracks, causing the dark heart to shudder and yet lose its curiosity.

Heaney also mentioned a person named Diogenes, who was an ancient Greek philosopher. He regarded everything, including social and cultural life, as unnatural and insignificant except the needs of nature, which must be met. He emphasized ascetic self-satisfaction and encouraged the abandonment of comfort. An ascetic practitioner, he lived like a beggar in a barrel. Every day he would walk the streets with a lantern "looking for honest people".

To Heaney, the winter red haw first transforms from fruit into lantern, and then transforms into "roaming shape of Diogenes", looking for the only honest man in the world. Like Diogenes, he hopes to seek the justice and truth in the world and to prick blood to "test and clear" himself.

## 3 Conclusion

In Heaney's view, poetry is not a game of word arrangement, but a revelation to itself and the restoration of a culture to itself. Poetry is a kind of digging to find the discovery and the discovery is a hidden thing that already exists.

Seamus Heaney's started his career as a poet of personal memory, investigating the possibilities of language in expressing his thoughts. Because of the demands of his surroundings, and because there were many struggles in all aspects of life, he found himself obligated to dedicate his art to the difficulties of his people and to be their clear voice. However, holding this public role with him did not last long, as the poet decided to revive again, the Prosecutor of the Child, who was first introduced to the public, but this time he was no longer the curious child he had once been in his early poems, trying to understand the world around him. He's grown up, matured, and aware of the artistic needs he needs to satisfy. Therefore, he must go through a journey that begins with his awareness of the dilemma and his liminal position, and he must travel back, between the two worlds he is called upon to represent and celebrate.<sup>[3]</sup>

Heaney also examines a number of cultural, political, and economic issues of colonial exploitation. Heaney drew on Irish legends to associate himself with the rural environment. He extolled the past and gave it "dignity, glory and dignity" in an effort to break the hegemonic image of Ireland.<sup>[4]</sup>

## References:

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