

‘Heaney’s simple style as he reflects on personal experiences of life, love and history provides universal appeal’ (2019)

The poetry of Seamus Heaney is fundamentally a combination of his personal memories, self-reflection and his strong national identity. With a camera-like eye for detail, he manages to authentically capture the reality of life, with a sense of relevance and relatability like no other. He flawlessly demonstrates his profound knowledge in poetic form and literary techniques while lacking the monotony that often infiltrates poets of a similar regard. However, the poems that I believe best represent this unique style are "The Forge", "The Skunk", "Sunlight", "The Bogland" and finally "Postscript".

Heaney is often intrigued by how the artistic process is accomplished by individuals who are in themselves, not terribly inspiring as personalities. As "The Forge" begins, it becomes evident that the poet is recalling a memory, offering us the perspective of an outsider looking in on a period of time which cannot be revisited. He lists all of the mundane objects in sight, such as "old axles and iron hoops rusting" in order to bring the scene to life. I believe he employs the metaphor of the blacksmith to represent the crafting of a poem and his personal creative writing process. There is a contrast, however, between the traditional world of the blacksmith presented in "a clatter of hoofs" and the fast-moving mechanical world of modern society "where traffic is flashing in rows." This could be taken to suggest the dying trade, or in my opinion, a fear within the poet himself that his own trade will soon die out.

"The Skunk", similar to "The Forge", is a recollection of a memory, opening with Heaney in California as he is writing his wife a love letter. It seems alien to him to have to write the word "wife", comparing the word to a cask of wine that has been stored away, but is now about to be opened and savoured. This suggests how one can become inured to something, or someone, at the hands of monotony, only realising how much they appreciate them once separated. Later, he recalls inhaling his wife's scent "off a cold pillow", the word "cold", evoking a sense of loss and solitude. Minute details such as his use of "refrigerator" rather than "fridge" emphasises how far

away he is from home. I found his use of colour also particularly striking; the orange looming in the trees and the inky black and white contrast of the skunk padding around in all its "glamorous" mystery, "snuffing" around the veranda. The final stanza transports us back to Heaney's present, sitting beside his wife in Ireland as he listens attentively to the sensual, gentle "soot-fall" of her clothes as she gets ready for bed. The fact that he is "stirred" by this emphasises the tender atmosphere, and as she bends down to get her nightdress, the poem concludes satisfyingly as he is reminded of the skunk "snuffing" around the veranda. This evokes an intense sense of love and gratitude within me, and I believe as humans, we can all empathise with Heaney's portrayal of love, rendering the poem accessible and appealing to all.

Heaney's upbringing in a rural setting in County Derry serves as inspiration for many of his earlier poems, depicting his own personal memories in a simple manner. In "Sunlight", Heaney describes a scene of much nostalgia and familiarity. The poem itself seems to be a tribute to quiet values and work done out of love, as he imbues this place with a kind of sacred quality. The atmosphere in the poem from the outset is one of brightness and warmth. Sunlight "heated its iron", while the "water honeyed". The kitchen scene where the poet's aunt makes her scones is also beautifully evoked, creating a wonderful sense of tranquillity for me as a reader. We can almost visualise her through the window, wearing her floury apron as her hands "scuffed" over the backboard. The lightness of touch in the line "she dusts the board with a goose's wing" adds tangibility to visual imagery. Heaney notices also her whitened nails and her measuring shins. Although I myself have never been here, his acute attention to detail evokes a sense of nostalgia for this place of unbothered beauty within me, as well as undoubtedly for all others who read his work.

"Bogland" is not simply a landscape poem, it is poised between the literal and symbolic, constantly shifting between the two. The form is loose and yielding, mirroring the softness of the bogs. As the poem progresses, it becomes evident that bogs, and the secrets they hold are a source of tremendous fascination for Heaney. He depicts them as storehouses for the past which preserve the culture of the people who came "millions of years" before him. The image of pioneers that "keep striking inwards and downwards" suggests the depth and complexity of racial consciousness, that it is multi-layered and incapable of total revelation. Where the American prairies symbolise the outward-looking attitude that can break down barriers and expand frontiers, the Irish mentality is more inward-looking and restricted, refusing to let go of the past, preserving that which has become mainly useless or 'full of air' like the skeletal elk of the

third stanza. The final stanza seems inconclusive, or 'bottomless'. The stripping away of the layers only reveals more layers which seem 'camped on before'. Here, the poet is using the bog not only as a symbol of the Irish psyche, but also as a symbol of his own search as a poet to find identity and truth. Like a pioneer, he digs into the layers of his subconscious, uncovering the memories and emotions that define him as a person and inspire him as a poet. The sense of history within the poem is undeniable, and the simplicity yet depth within Heaney's writing here is something that I believe everyone can enjoy and appreciate.

"The Postscript", as the title suggests, is merely an afterthought for Heaney. It is not announcing itself as something of importance but rather a gentle reminder of the beauty of the natural world. Heaney suggests that we "drive out west" to County Clare when the tourists have gone and the "wind and the light are working off each other". The light and wind here are two key aspects, colour and movement. I believe if one were to paint a landscape of this poem, it would be a beautiful amalgamation of greys and white. The greys of the limestone and inland lake contrasting with the white of the swans, whose feathers are "rough and ruffling, white on white". Although he uses simple imagery, Heaney's words have a powerful ability to create a sense of intimacy and allow me to imagine his own personal experiences and life. In terms of movement, "The postscript" seems to be in perpetual motion, not just "of wind and ocean" but of the "car" too. It seems to me that the poem is less about the scene itself and more about the impact it has on our imagination. It is a celebration of the fleeting sensation of being "neither here nor there", a celebration of travel and more importantly a celebration of freedom.

In conclusion, it's evident that Heaney's poetry, although simple in style, is incredibly powerful in enchanting us as readers and in taking us into his own personal world of memories, life, history and love, which we saw through the aforementioned poems. The simplicity of the poetic style not only made it easy for me to enjoy and appreciate Heaney's poems on a personal level, but makes it also accessible and appealing to all.