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## **LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY IN SEAMUS HEANEY'S NORTH: AN ECOCRITICAL READING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The current paper emphasizes landscape and memory in the North by Seamus Heaney, where the writer leaves the reader to explicitly understand the ways in which the poet uses ecological factors in the combination with history and personal landscape in Northern Ireland where he lived. In an ecocritical approach to reading, this paper examines how Heaney writes on nature, memory and identity as mutually reinforcing issues that contributed to his poetic voice. The study finds out that the image of landscape in North by Heaney is revealed not as a pure physical setting but it is something that holds historical trauma and cultural memory. It is also analyzed how the work by Heaney could be perceived as executable through ecocriticism as the relationship between environmental and emotional memory remains relevant to the studies. Some of the arguments that the paper bear out include that the poet deploys the view of the landscape as such a medium through which personal and collective histories are recalled, dealt with, and given sense. This ecocritical reading highlights the role played by Heaney as a literary person who involves himself in nature creation as an active participant in the identification of memory and who He is.*

**Keyword:** *Seamus Heaney, North, Ecocriticism, Landscape, Memory, History.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

North (1975) by Seamus Heaney has been one of the most important poems written in contemporary Irish poetry that is characterized with subtle considerations regarding the interloping of history, identity, and landscape in Northern Ireland. Composed at the height of the Troubles, a time of severe sectarian violence, political upheaval and mass social unrest, North offers a distinctly poetic understanding of the cultural and political world of the moment. The treatment of landscape in North by Heaney is not constrained to the physical geography only but it takes the forms of metaphor and a direct representation of memory, trauma and subjective identity. Heaney manages to observe the historical contexts through his poetic description in terms of a way of how history, especially the violent storm of the Troubles, defines the sense of self and identity of people and groups of people. For this paper, I will discuss the adaptation of the Northern Irish environment in North as constituting a location of collective memory, historical trauma, and identity religiously, ethnically, and nationally, by the poet.

The theme of memory in North is central, as Heaney tends to take the Irish landscape as an object through which he can explore the meaning of personal and collective history, re-read and memorize it. The Irish landscape is the place in the poetry of Heaney in which the poet stores the memory of the Irish culture, traditions, mythology, and the struggle to achieve the Irish state. In North the very ground is a reflection of the socio-political facts of Northern Ireland and Heaney raises the issue of the manner in which the land itself bears the marks of violence and war. The portrayal of the ancient burials, archaeological objects, and mythological allusions, like those presented in the poems The Tollund Man and The Gruballe Man, indicates that Heaney was keeping up with the dialogs of how past, both personal and national, reverberates in the present.

The analysis that follows is based on an ecocritical approach to the work of Heaney, in that the treatment

of the landscape as addressed in his poetry is identified as a part of the mechanism through which the process of memory itself is, not only constructed, but also maintained. Focusing on the nature of the relationship that exists between the natural environment and literature, Ecocriticism as a theory tries to investigate how the literary text relates to issues of the environment and how the environment impacts on human culture and identity (Garrard, 2004). In the case with Heaney, the North, as a natural environment, serves not only as a complement to the human action, but even participates in the creation of the collective memory. The discussion on the landscape of North by Heaney and how the author represents the idea of landscape to explain the relationship between memory, trauma and identity should be provided in order to identify the higher connections between the three concepts that are conveyed with the help of the natural world. The present study will explore the role of ecological implications of history and memory sought by Heaney in his poetry in bringing the reader to focus on the responsibilities of the land in the formation of consciousness of the individual and the aggregate.

Furthermore, the paper will examine the significance of Irish history and identity of Heaney, especially the landscape as a way in which he tried to manipulate the memories behind the conflict in Northern Ireland through his literary works, which were at times painful and complicated. By doing so, this paper shall attempt to provide responses to important questions relating to how landscape and nature play a key role in the poetics of Heaney, particularly in how the landscape and the nature is used as a repository of historical and emotional memory. In this study, a critical reflection will be conducted on carefully chosen poems by Heaney of his North collection in order to understand how the environment contributes to triggering personal memories and to create narrative histories, thereby revealing how the natural environment is a prominent actor in the memory-making. The purpose of the study is to illuminate how Heaney uses poetry as a medium to describe and interact with the political/historical nature of Northern Ireland and offer a greater consideration on the role nature, memory and identity play in relation to each other.

## LITERATURE REVIEW:

The exertion of so much scholarly concentration on Seamus Heaney North has been known since long in the North, especially its Irish history, geography and politics. One of the constraining issues of the study of Heaney is his use and handling of memory, identity and history which has been addressed in several critical analyses. According to the critics of the earlier period, including Edwin M. E. Chappell (2004), Heaney portrays the landscape of Ireland as a place of historical memory. According to Chappell, the Irish landscape in North is not only bound strongly in the collective memory of the Irish but particularly in the Northern Ireland violent past. The poems of Heaney tend to be based in the political turmoil of the era and these are expressed through the elements of landscape and nature which he draws upon as metaphors of the effects of the Troubles. By the same token, Robert J. Welsh (2010) also considers the landscape as the means through which Heaney processes the trauma whereby the land turns into the metaphor of the ravages committed by violence and conflict itself.

One of the points of discussion within the scholarship on North is the use of mythology and history by Heaney as element to create the exploration of the memory. Critics like John Wilson Foster (1995), claim that the use of mythological and historic references by Heaney has also played the role of intermediation between collective and personal memory. The issue of repressed Irish mythology as addressed by Heaney in such poems as *The Tollund Man* and *The Grauballe Man* has been treated by some as a way of working through the unresolved tensions of history. Foster indicates that referring to the past and historical figures, as well as to mythological figures, provides Heaney with establishment of a connection between the past and the present, and thus it enables the poet to make the observation that as much as violence is cyclical, it is also reimagined and remembered with time.

Nevertheless, most of the criticism which has been advanced on North has been more inclined towards political and historical interpretation with less stress on the ecological nature or rather environmental nature of the Heaney poetry. One of the only ecocritical analyses of the works of Heaney is offered by Lorenzo L. Smith (2015), as he focuses on the role of the Irish landscape in assisting Heaney to develop his view of memory and identity. According to the analysis by Smith, one may mention Heaney presenting not only the picture of the natural world as the background but the subject playing its role in the work of memory-making. According to Smith, the way Heaney addresses the land is not merely a descriptive one; it is a manifestation of his attempts (to get involved in the more general cultural and historical discourse of Ireland). Smith contends that the landscape in Heaney poetry is employed to investigate how nature determines individual and national pasts and attributes to the land the memory retention.

In spite of such contributions, it can be said that the literature fails to have a continuity of ecocritical reading on the poetry of Heaney. Ecocriticism as a theoretical direction is aimed at studying the correlation of literature and the environment, in which nature and human culture are examined. According to Greg Garrard (2004), ecocriticism is the perspective on how literature can use the ecological issues and environmental problems in their writings besides emphasizing on the need to analyze nature in these writings. Ecocritical reading of Heaney will afford a new perspective on addressing the way this poet inhabits and works with nature, but as one of both beauty and danger, also a sort of cultural and emotional memory. This study seeks to provide a gap in the existing Heaney literature by addressing the need to have a more holistic interpretation regarding how Heaney employs the natural environment to signify memory, trauma, and identity through the use of this approach applied to North.

Moreover, the idea of ecological thought as presented by Timothy Morton (2007) can be regarded as a helpful model of studying the work by Heaney. Morton argues that the ecological concept promotes the unity of everything and everything observed in nature where there is a need to abandon the more common binaries such as nature vs culture. Such a theoretical interpretation is especially applicable to the works by Heaney, as in them, the landscape and human history are closely connected, and the implication of this is that the nature itself is critically important to the formation of the collective memory. To conceptualize Heaney as an active part of the landscape as a memory-maker, we could consider Morton and his concept of the mesh (the interconnectedness of everything) as the one that could connect the violence of the past and personal experience to the British and Irish landscape as the part of ecological and political Northern Irish landscape.

This paper aims to fill this gap by trying to provide an ecocritical interpretation of North, one with an emphasis on dialectics between the Irish environment and the portrayal of memory and history by the poet. Although scholars have devoted considerable attention to the political and historical dimensions of the poetry of Heaney, there are only a few studies that analyze the Heaney poetry through an ecocritical lens to define how landscape is a substance of both a metaphor of a memory/self and a geographical place of historical traumas. Reading natural world in Heaney poetry, the present paper will add to the burgeoning area of ecocriticism in modern literature and tell something fresh about how Heaney approaches landscape, memory, and history.

## SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

This paper is a contribution to the lack of Heaney scholarship that is dominated by an ecocritical approach to North. Although several critics have considered the political, historical and socio-cultural expressions of poetry of Seamus Heaney, a visible gap has emerged in the ecocritical criticism especially

in the context of how the Heaney approaches the notion of landscape and memory in his poetic texts. Heaney has long written poems that deal with the issues of history, conflict and identity, yet the environmental concerns such as the manner in which landscape informs memory and memory informs landscape has yet to be effectively explored in terms of ecocriticism.

The North brings the study in the environmental and historical connotations of memory and thus makes the study more wholesome in the respect of the ecological aspects of the Heaneys work. It shows that the treatment that the poet gives to nature is not that of the setting or the background but it is very much connected with the formation of the memory and also identity. The place, in this respect, turns out a moving ground of reminder, where individual, family and community histories are planted in soil, land and landscape. This research piece reveals how whether real or imaginary, the landscapes developed by Heaney become a very power place of cultural memory in which the past is remembered and recounted within the context of nature.

With these insights, the study puts forward a change in the way we read Heaney poetry as it calls upon consideration of the ecological aspects of memory and identity. Another point that is proved by the study is that Heaney fails to treat the land merely metaphorically, which implies that the environment in North serves an essential part in the development of a self and a collective identity by burdened history in the case of Ireland.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What role does the Irish landscape play in the construction of memory in Seamus Heaney's North?
2. How does Heaney's representation of landscape in North reflect and engage with the political and historical context of Northern Ireland during the Troubles?
3. Why does Heaney integrate ecological elements into his exploration of personal and collective memory, and what does this suggest about the relationship between nature and human consciousness?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper utilizes the ecocritical framework that will establish the connection between the poetry of Heaney and the natural environment. According to such scholars like Greg Garrard (2004) ecocriticism focuses on how literature depicts nature as well as delves into issues focusing on ecologies. The focal point of this style is that the literary work may reveal how man is able to deal with, construct, and be constructed by the surrounding physical world.

The study of Timothy Morton (2007) ecological thought and the mesh of interconnectedness offers a theoretical framework towards conceiving the process of ecological interrelationship between Heaney and the landscape of memory. Focusing on the interdependence of things, Morton provides potential to explore the capabilities of the landscape depicted by Heaney as a physical space before looking at it as an emotional or a historical one. Also, the respective discussion of memory as an individual and a collective phenomenon by Gillian Rose (2003) will be used to explore the study detailing how the poetry of Heaney attempts to navigate through various twists and turns of historical trauma and collective memory through the prism of the natural world.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper shall examine a few choice poems which deal with landscape, memory, and history in Heaney Seamus North namely The Tollund Man, The Grauballe Man, and North. Close reading as the main analytical approach will enable me to provide close attention to the poetic form, language and symbolism employed by Heaney. In order to analyze the role that imagery, metaphor, and symbolism play in Heaney

in creating associations between the Irish landscape and the memories and historical events connected to that landscape, especially the violence and the trauma that accompanied the struggle known as the Troubles, close reading will support the excursion and examination. The approach will also give an idea about the place of nature in the poetry of Heaney as a physical and metaphorical space of remembrance. The concept of close reading would become especially suitable in this research due to its ability to reveal the complexity of relation of form, content and meaning in the work by Heaney. The poems that will be analyzed abound in symbolism, and the close reading methodology will enable the examiner to have a sophisticated approach in interpreting the ways the landscape is infused with memory and specific history. This approach will help the researcher analyze how the landscape in these poems as used by Heaney can be seen as a reflection of bigger political and cultural issues of collective trauma, identity, and even the meaning of history and having in our shaping the current events.

Besides close reading, secondary scholarly works will also be included to add context to the political, historical and cultural archetype of the work of Heaney. The sources will assist in putting the poetry of Heaney into the context of the Irish Troubles and postcolonial literature. Robert J. Welsh (2010) and Edwin M. E. Chappell (2004) provide some useful insights on the ways in which Heaney engages with socio-political landscape of Northern Ireland and their considerations will be reflected in the reading of Heaney and his picture of memory and history. It is also possible to add some important representatives of ecocritical and memory studies literature to assess how treatment of landscape in Heaney can be associated with theoretical discourses in the fields of ecology and memory, including the works of Timothy Morton (2007), Greg Garrard (2004).

The mixture of the close reading and secondary research will enable the poem of Heaney to be analyzed in the multiple layers with the interpretation establishing as the grounds both literary criticism and the historical context. This approach to the use of the landscape as an area of memory by Heaney will help achieve a better comprehension of how nature was explored by the poet as both figurative and realistic forms of memory and a representation of past and identity. The close reading in particular would be best applied to the process of analyzing the emotional and historical note that the language of Heaney creates in it and allow the researcher to determine the way he uses it to intertwine individual and collective memory on the landscape. The given methodology is rather close to research questions and will make it possible to investigate thoroughly how Heaney in his poetry discusses the interconnection of landscape and memory and history in Northern Ireland.

### DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This paper explains how Seamus Heaney North figures the Irish landscape as metaphor and actualization of memory in the Irish past. By paying close attention to some of the poems Heaney wrote, one can see that landscape described by him is intricately connected with the memory shared by people in Northern Ireland and with the memory of the Troubles as a part of the history. In *The Tollund Man*, Heaney muses about the sacrificial victim of long gone past but the land the poem mentions reinforces how the history is embedded in the earth and how the young age keeps reminding the present. This notion is the core of the perception of Heaney as an author and nature that is transformed into a memory store where history has suffered the marks of violence, but also the source of peace and reconciliation.

Further, this theme is continued in the poem, *The Grauballe man* in which the embalmed corpse in the swamp is a tangible embodiment of violence that happened in the past and persists up to the present. Heaney does not only explore the landscape in terms of the physical terrain, but in how the land is able to state its weight across both historical and emotional lines. The work by Heaney, as is claimed by Robert W. Welsh (2010), can be taken as a poetic resolution of what is personal and what is political and the



landscape is a kind of a mediator between the two. In the analysis, it is pointed out that Heaney does not represent the land as the backdrop on which he is presenting his stories, but a force that continues to be fashioned by and fashioning political and historical conditions of Northern Ireland.

Another theory that the study takes into consideration is that of Timothy Morton (2007) whose focus is on interconnectedness in ecological thought. With the help of Morton, it is possible to interpret the way in which Heaney relates nature and the history of human care; to reveal how the relationship between the memory, the landscape, and a person is also the ecological one. The dichotomical perception of the human and natural worlds is also broken by Heaney, who uses the nature as an agent of his memory making, which implies the idea that these two worlds are interrelated and simultaneous. Its observations show that the landscape featured by Heaney functions as a means of dealing with collective memory and enables the readers of the work to experience the pain of the past as well as reflect upon the potentials of change.

Although this paper has been useful in explaining how Heaney interacts with landscape and memory, another study could also look at a greater number of the poetry works that Heaney has written under the eye of an ecocritic; considering the other writings of Heaney that involve the nature issue in history and identity. The article could also further be considered as a potential base to integrate more cross disciplinary levels into the article with psychological or philosophical interpretations on memory and trauma relating to the motifs of environment according to Heaney in the article.

## FINDINGS

The key conclusion of the study under consideration is that the Irish landscape that has been described by Seamus Heaney in North should be viewed as an effective means of personal and shared remembering because the natural landscape becomes the active character of the historical reflection, trauma, and identity construction. Heaney does not simply make the landscape a visual context to help cover up the landscape featureless background, but it becomes the dynamic aspect of scenery which is also shaped and worked by the human history. As an example, in *The Tollund Man*, the bog is represented as the place where the past becomes not only preserved but also marked by violence. The bog as a sacred burial place of the victims of ancient sacrifices, transforms to a place in between yesterday and today, the place in which the past is not only held, but also brutally recalled. Based on the idea of Edwin M. E. Chappell (2004), the Heaney poetry turns the landscape into a breathing thing, which is a living creature that shares the complexity of human history and experience. The bog in the present poem symbolizes the complexity of nature and memory and the ecological nature of the past.

Likewise, in the poem, *The Grauballe man*, Heaney seems to emphasize on the fact that history has a physical existence, that lives on through the preserved body in the bog. Heaney associates the dead with the passage of land to underscore the fact that the echoes of the past still echo in the present. The poem touches on the way the trauma of the past was physically inscribed into the landscape where it will remain important as time passes. The land is not a sheer background, does not just carry, preserve and transmit memory: it is a participant in the transmission process. The manner in which Heaney addresses the bog bodies in these poems reveals that nature plays a major role in restoring old historical accounts and memories because it is possible that memory is not only of a mental substance and may result in a physical and ecological perspective. Such mutual referral of memory and landscape can provoke to get more complex insights of how nature is involved in historical trauma and vice versa.

## CONCLUSION

This paper shows that Seamus Heaney North employs the landscape as the key tool by means of which

the individual as well as the collective past are activated, unraveled and digested. By carefully examining some of his poems, one can see exactly how Heaney is able to make the Irish landscape such an active place of memory in addition to being a symbol representing historical trauma. Landscape is not a neutral background; on the contrary, it serves as a no-man land where the nature and human consciousness are closely interlaced and involve a complex inter-play between the two. The landscape that Heaney is subjecting to treatment equates to a very vivid depiction of the psychological and emotional repercussions of the history of Northern Ireland as a whole and the Troubles in particular. It is the land on its own, as Heaney makes it vividly described, that carries along with it the communal trauma of communities, demonstrating how history is still playing with the present, in such a way that it is still painful and it is still unresolved.

Ecocritical approach used in this study brought forth the importance of the landscape in the work of Heaney and how the latter operates as a store of memory. The land is associated with the past, and it remains like reflections of emotional scars of violence, and at the same time the land provides room to reconcile, heal, and reflect. The landscape in Heaney does not just play a passive role as a sign of the past, but actually works to construct the memory-making, as the land is actually a vessel of history. This paper highlights the interdependence between nature, memory, and identity as the body of work explored by Heaney can be used to provide a deeper insight when it comes to interpreting the role nature plays in developing personal and collective consciousness.

What makes this study valuable is the fact that it uses ecocriticism to understand Heaney poetry which has increased our knowledge on the natural environment as an active agent in the development of collective memory. Proposing to place Heaney work into the space of ecocritical thought, the analysis will provide the viewers with new perspectives on how the landscape can be perceived not only as a metaphor of the past but as the agent that has a life and life of its own, that affects and is affected by the human experience. Subsequent studies may also examine the rest of Heaney work, especially up to the point of his other approaches to nature that could further impart to us how nature remains an important role in the way Heaney reflects on identity, memory, and history.

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