

## Military Imagery in Seamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*

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### Abstract:

*Death of a Naturalist* (1966), Heaney's first volume of poetry, abounds in military imagery. This paper tries to examine all these war images in order to show why and how the poet uses them and why he should be obsessed with war while writing his first volume of poetry and while some thought he was not political at all, did not think of, and did not directly express his ideas about the Irish current conflicts. It clearly highlights war/military imagery and explains how the two important wars, that is, World War II and the long bloody conflicts between the Catholics and the Protestants in Ireland must have consciously or unconsciously affected the poet's mind and art.

**Keywords:** Heaney, imagery, Irish, military, poetry

### Introduction

"Read the poems". This was Seamus Heaney's response to those who urged him to express his beliefs and opinions about different things especially about politics and his role in Irish affairs as the best Irish poet ever writing since Yeats (Morrison, 1982: 16). Of course those who have read even a bit of Heaney know that this response has not been made evasively or in vain because Heaney is really amongst those writers who tend to show a self-image of themselves in their poetry; not because Heaney is arrogant or complacent but because he wants to know himself better and eventually transfer this knowledge onto others. It goes without saying that this knowledge is not merely a personal knowledge. It is a wide knowledge of past generations that Heaney is going to preserve and introduce. That is why he like Narcissus keeps an eye on himself constantly:

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. (*Death*)

*Death Of A Naturalist* (1966), Heaney's first volume of poetry under his own name (not *incertus*), is an important book because it is tied closely to the poet's early life in the rural atmosphere of County Derry and, as Xerri asserts, allows us to scrutinize Heaney's gradual self-awareness and development as a poet (2010: 17). Above all, in an

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interview Heaney says that it is “the book all books were leading to” (Begley, 1977: 169). It abounds in military imagery, too. But why does military imagery emanate from a person who is so “relaxed and genial in manner” (Morrison, 1982: 12)? Perhaps the answer to this question is also an answer to those who accused Heaney of not being political enough to express his views about the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland (at least before he started writing his bog poems and discovered a novel and pristine way through which to expose his political views). War or military imagery in *Death Of A Naturalist* may not be directly related to this conflict in Ireland but it clearly shows that Heaney has been obsessed with politics from the outset of his literary career and by no stretch of the imagination can no one deny the close connection between politics and military affairs:

Heaney, similarly, outlines the contemporary political violence that formed part of the context of his own writing, speaking of living with his own family, in Glanmore, County Wicklow, and listening to the ‘news of bombings closer to home – not only those by the Provisional IRA in Belfast but equally atrocious assaults in Dublin by loyalist paramilitaries from the north (O’Brien, 2003: 171).

Although Regan reports that Heaney has indicated that his poetry since 1969 has made a crossover from “being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament”, (2007: 14), this study shows that even before that time he has been obsessed with it. This obsession is so natural and obvious. Heaney was born in 1939, which is exactly the beginning of World War II, and throughout his life he witnessed violence and bloodshed in his own country. As Meg Tyler says “a question that preoccupies him concerns the role art plays in a land disrupted by warfare” (2005: 6).

Poetry produced by Heaney must have been peppered with military imagery because according to him there should be reciprocal relation between song and place:

The usual assumption, when we speak of writers and place, is that the writer stands in some directly expressive or interpretative relationship to the milieu. He or she becomes a voice of the spirit of the region. The writing is infused with the atmosphere, physical and emotional, of a certain landscape or seascape, and while the writer’s immediate purpose may not have any direct bearing upon the regional or national background, the background is sensed as a distinctive element in the work (qtd. in Tyler, 2005: 52).

In other words, Seamus Heaney “is a poet who writes directly and obliquely about politics, speaking in a clearly personal voice. As an Irishman, many of his poems deal with the horrors which continue to

afflict Northern Ireland” (Carter, 1997: 477). In an interview with Karl Miller, Heaney admits that he is “part of the war machine now” (2000).

Although it has been said that Heaney “looked upon Wordsworth for employing the language of the common man” (Russell, 2008: 63), it could be paradoxically said that of necessity, at least in *Death Of A Naturalist*, he put some distance too between the two languages by using harsh military imagery, which is absent in Wordsworth. For the same token, what Eileen Cahill says seems to be completely true: “Heaney clearly suffers the tension between his personal dedication to a reflective art and his public responsibility towards political action” (qtd. in Purdy, 2002: 97).

### **Military Imagery**

*Digging* is the first poem in the collection *Death Of A Naturalist*. The incongruous military imagery used at the beginning of this poem shocks the reader:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a **gun** (*Death*).

The military imagery is incongruous because the comparison made between ‘gun’ and ‘pen’ is not right. Here is a triangle whose three sides should be ‘spade’, ‘pen’, and ‘gun’. This must be an equilateral triangle but it is not. Heaney’s father digs the ground with his spade. Heaney himself digs with his pen “uncovering layers of Irish history, Gaelic, Viking and pre-historic” (Alexander, 2000: 375). Or as Carter contends: “He digs into his own memory, into the lives of his family, into the past of Irish history and into the deeper levels of legend and myth which shape the character of the people of his country” (1997: 477). Then what about ‘gun’? ‘Pen’ has been likened to ‘gun’. When there is a simile there should be a common ground between the tenor and the vehicle. What is this common ground between ‘pen’ and ‘gun’? It seems to be absent because it is possible neither to dig the ground nor to write with a gun. Morrison puts this incongruity this way: “It is too macho, melodramatically so, and not even the insertion of the adjectives ‘squat’ and ‘snug’ can allay the feeling that the analogy is in any case not right” (1982: 26). Although *Digging* has had a high profile and has become widely anthologized and is generally the most famous of all Heaney’s poems, it is not accidental that the poet himself describes it as “a big coarse-grained navvy of a poem” (1980: 43).

Of course the reason why Heaney exchanges ‘spade’ for ‘pen’ is crystal clear:

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.  
Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it. (*Death*)

Although Cavanagh argues that "If we seek to understand the values of *Field Work* as a repudiation of the values of *Life Studies*", we might recall this poem "with its repudiation of the initial selfish and arrogant 'gunslinging' pose of the poet in favor of the more modest and constructive (and at the same time more sensitive) wielding of the pen as spade" (2009: 136), obviously Heaney is going to break with the tradition of his own father. He has chosen his path and wants to go his own way. He has set himself a higher goal and that is to fight: "The pen, held 'snug as a gun', is also representative of the evolving forms of political conflict in Northern Ireland" (O'Sullivan, 2005: 17).

The second poem, *Death Of A Naturalist* (*Death*), has given its title to the whole collection. In this two-stanza poem the speaker whom we can take as little Heaney the school child, goes to nature in order to gather 'frogspawn' 'to range on window-sills at home, /On shelves at school, and wait and watch until/The fattening dots burst into nimble-/Swimming tadpoles'. As it is clear, this is a common activity for children in primary schools. In the first stanza little Heaney, the naturalist, describes the beauties of nature and 'best of all' is 'the warm thick slobber/Of frogspawn'. The pleasure depicted in the second stanza, all of a sudden, turns into a threat and the poet starts using military imagery to accentuate the situation. The child sees that 'the angry frogs/**Invaded** the flax-dam' and 'Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were **cocked**' as if they were ready to shoot. In addition, 'their loose necks pulsed like **sails**,' which reminds the reader of warships. 'Some hopped: .... / Some sat/ Poised like mud **grenades**'. Eventually, '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'.

Death of this naturalist in fact symbolizes death of innocence because the child experiences that behind beauties in this world unhappiness, panic, ugliness, and noise ambush too. It may helpful to the reader that Heaney in his poetry accords great importance to silence because of his "sense of belonging to a silent ancestry" (Morrison, 1982: 20). Although unlike his ancestors his career requires him to keep talking instead of keeping silent, Heaney wants to pay tribute to this ancestral quality in a way. Then, it is actually because of the noise that the child feels he is being threatened: 'I ducked through hedges/ To a coarse croaking that I had not heard/ Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus'. It is axiomatic of course that the poet uses military imagery to emphasize and increase the level of noise and accordingly to show that the child is under threat from noise.

In *An Advancement Of Learning* (*Death*) the speaker was crossing the bridge over the river. He 'hunched over the railing' and 'considered

the dirty-keeled swans'. All of a sudden 'something slobbered curtly, close,/ Smudging the silence: a rat/ Smiled out of the water...' The speaker panicked and broke out in a 'cold sweat'. He mustered his courage 'to stare .../at my hitherto snubbed rodent'. For one moment these two, the speaker and the rat, made eye contact but instead of saying it this way, the speaker uses a military imagery and says: 'He [the rat] **trained on** me', as if it were a soldier who wanted to shoot at the speaker. Again the military imagery augments the state of panic. In this poem just like in *Death Of A Naturalist*, when 'silence' is smudged or broken the situation becomes unpleasant and panicky.

*Churning Day (Death)* is a full description of the day in which the family makes farm-made butter. Apparently making butter has no bearing on the military but the poet adeptly uses an arresting military imagery:

A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast  
Hardened gradually on top of the four crocks  
That stood, large **pottery bombs**, in the small pantry.

'Crocks', some large pots, have been likened to 'pottery bombs'. The common ground is twofold. It may signify the similar shape of 'bombs' and 'crocks' and it may refer to the transformational quality of the two containers. If a bomb goes off, it will transform the environment and similarly, crocks transform milk into butter.

In *Dawn Shoot (Death)* two boys set out at dawn broke to hunt. Through the use of military terms and images, Xerri contends, the poet projects himself and his friend into the paradox of a situation that oscillates between condemnation and acceptance because they shoot dead a snipe but they leave it where it is (2010: 21). One of them is the speaker whose language is too sophisticated for a boy to use. The description is full of military imagery and a warlike situation is depicted from the outset that even clouds launch a mortar attack against the world to make it gloomy and depressing like a battlefield: 'Clouds ran their wet **mortar**, plastered the daybreak/Grey'. Additionally, rails like soldiers aim on the bridge and do not miss: 'The rails scored a **bull's-eye** into the eye/Of a bridge'. The two boys are trespassing nature and nature in its own turn, begins to challenge them heroically. Birds play the role of scouts:

A corncrake challenged  
Unexpectedly like a hoarse **sentry**  
And a snipe rocketed away on **reconnaissance**.  
Rubber-booted, belted, tense as two **parachutists**,

And now 'The cock would be sounding **reveille**' to wake up the rest of the nature's soldiers and in this way to have loudly declared war on the hunters. At last one of the boys 'emptied two barrels/ And got

him'. A rabbit is killed but the hunt is totally abortive because 'the prices were small at that time'. So they leave it there in the battlefield and get back. Somewhere in the poem the speaker belies himself when he says: 'Our ravenous eyes getting used to the greyness' because the expression 'ravenous eyes' shows that they are not hunting for need but for play and because children of this age are fond of exaggerations and tend to give serious considerations to matters and to show them off as dangerous in order to absorb people's attention, military imagery serves the speaker well to intensify the situation.

It is harvest time in *At A Potato Digging (Death)*, "an elegiac poetry of far-reaching political and historical significance" (Regan, 2007: 12). Xerri, too, believes that this poem deals with the political and religious strife that has existed for centuries in Ireland (2010: 39). It is a bad harvest and widespread 'famine' is threatening the hungry harvesters: 'In a million wicker huts/beaks of famine snipped at guts'. In actuality, according to Regan, the description of modern agriculture with its "mechanical digger" turns into an elegy for the victims of famine or the Great Famine in the 1840s (2007: 12). The hungry 'labourers' have been likened to hungry soldiers at war: 'Some pairs keep breaking **ragged ranks**...', as if these starving soldiers are standing in queues to get their scanty lunch. Military imagery has beautifully been extended throughout the poem. Look at the beginning lines:

A mechanical digger wrecks the drill,  
Spins up a dark shower of roots and mould.  
Labourers swarm in behind, stoop to fill  
Wicker creels.

In this episode the labourers keep behind the machine because they expect it to 'spin up' more potatoes and in this way to protect them against hunger and this should remind the reader of soldiers at war who keep behind tanks to protect themselves. The labourers 'take their fill' 'down in the ditch' and this is the same thing that soldiers do; they eat their food in the ditch they have already dug. Parker believes that 'potato' becomes an emblem for people's suffering (1994: 69).

*For The Commander Of The 'Eliza' (Death)* relates a real military event. 'Eliza' is the name of a British warship whose 'patrol off West Mayo' was 'Routine'. One day the crew discovers a 'rowboat' in which there are six starving Irish men who urgently demanded food:

We saw piled in the bottom of their craft  
Six grown men with gaping mouths and eyes  
Bursting the sockets like spring onions in drills.  
Six wrecks of bone and pallid, tautened skin.

There was 'shortage' in Ireland but not on 'Eliza': 'We'd known about the shortage but on board/ They always kept us right with flour and

beef'. Above all, they 'had no mandate to relieve distress'. So 'I had to refuse food... And cleared off. Less incidents the better', the commander says, leaving the men to fend for themselves and die. At last the commander reports this event to the 'Inspector General', 'Sir James Dombrain' who apparently 'urged free relief/ for famine victims... And earned tart reprimand...' from the authorities:

Let natives prosper by their own exertions;  
Who could not swim might go ahead and sink.

In *Turkeys Observed (Death)*, which "was inspired by seeing a row of Christmas turkeys in a butcher's Shop" (Parker, 1994: 49) the reader comes across Heaney's queer imagination. He makes a strange comparison between slaughtered cows and turkeys when they are displayed in shop windows at Christmas. He believes that a cow when slaughtered retains part of its dignity or glory because: 'The red sides of beef retain/ Some of the smelly majesty of living'. But a slaughtered turkey loses its glory: 'But a turkey cowers in death... He is just another poor forked thing,/ A skin bag plumped with inky putty'. In the last stanza in a striking contrast the poet compares the dead turkeys 'in their indifferent mortuary' with abandoned and useless squadrons whose different parts are dilapidated:

I find him ranged with his cold **squadrons**  
The **fuselage** is bare, the proud **wings** snapped,  
The tail-fan stripped down to a shameful **rudder**.

In *Trout (Death)* an extended military metaphor shapes the poem. The fish metaphorically is 'a fat **gun-barrel**'. The first stanza signifies lack of movement in the fish: it 'Hangs, ... deep under arched bridges/ or slip like butter down/ the throat of the river'. However, as a 'gun-barrel', 'his muzzle gets **bull's eye**' and is ready to aim on the target or victim. The trout is destructive just like a torpedo: it 'picks off grass-seed and moths/that vanish, **torpedoed**'. The fast movement, which is the true quality of the bullet shot from the gun, begins and from the shallow parts of the water the trout all of a sudden attacks its victim: 'over gravel-beds he/is **fired** from the shallows'. When the hunt is finished, the fish immediately gets back to its hiding place 'between stones'. Its speed is so high that it leaves its trace in the water: 'darts like a **tracer-/ bullet** back between stones'. The bullet-like trout remains diligent and energetic: 'A **volley** of cold blood/**ramrodding** the current'. The poet uses military imagery to point out to the trout's high speed and destructiveness.

In *Valediction (Death)* the 'lady' has left the house and the man is complaining. The relationship seems to be female-centred and the man is heavily dependent on her. This poem perhaps reminds the reader of some of Sydney and Spenser's sonnets, courtly love, and the most famous



poem with the same title *Valediction Forbidding Mourning* by John Donne. In most of Renaissance poems the lady is a star or guide without whom the man's ship of life goes astray. Almost the same situation exists in Heaney's poem but this time the 'lady' is the commander of the ship and therefore the poet has recourse to sea military imagery to intensify the situation. Of course, it goes without saying that this is a modern version of this kind and in the first line the lady is introduced in her modern dress. Because the lady is absent the man's mind is hurt and he is not able to concentrate. But 'In your presence/ Time rode easy, **anchored**/ On a smile'. Then, in her presence the ship of life is securely anchored, that is, it is fixed firmly in position and does not move. Conversely, 'absence/ Rocked love's balance, **unmoored** the days'. So in her absence the ship has lost balance and is unmoored or not at anchor. At last the poem ends this way:

Need breaks on my strand;  
You've gone, I am at sea.  
Until you resume **command**  
Self is in **mutiny**.

It is as if the ship's commander is absent and discontent among the crew has led to the outbreak of mutiny and unless she comes back the man will not be able to lead a perfectly normal life.

Heaney dedicated *Poem (Death)* to Marie his wife. We should divide the poem into two parts. The first part, which includes the first three stanzas, speaks about farming activities and the second part, which includes only the last stanza, speaks about 'new limits'. Heaney begins the poem with: 'Love, I shall perfect for you the child/ Who diligently potters in my brain...' and promises his wife to perfect himself ('the child') for her through performing his farming activities but at the end of stanza three he comes to the conclusion that these activities would be abortive and he is like a soldier who is not able to defend his farming bastions: 'But always my **bastions** of clay and mush/ Would burst before the rising autumn rain'. However, in the last stanza he changes his tune and wants his wife to 'perfect for me this child' and support him to succeed in his 'new limits', that is to say, in his academic, literary life because he plans to break with his family's tradition.

*Storm On The Island (Death)* implies the inevitable, things that man cannot control. The first line indicates fake safety: 'We are prepared: we build our houses squat,/ Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate'. So man assumes that 'This wizened earth has never troubled us'. But what about the sea or what about space? Don't they threaten man? The rest of the poem proves that safety is completely a figment of man's imagination. Sometimes it is impossible to control the storm: 'when it blows full/ Blast... it pummels your house too'. The poet



employs military imagery to magnify man's lack of control. In fact, Nature wages a full-blown war against man:

We just sit tight while wind dives  
And **strafes** invisibly. Space is a **salvo**,  
We are **bombarded** by the empty air.

Accordingly, wind is an invisible aircraft flying low and attacking man with bullets or bombs. Space is also no exception. The sea is uncontrollable too:

You might think that the sea is company,  
**Exploding** comfortably down on the cliffs  
But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits  
The very windows, spits like a tame cat  
Turned savage.

Heaney wrote *In Small Townlands (Death)* in praise of Colin Middleton, the painter. He speaks about Middleton's personal style of painting saying that he explodes his colours like 'a bright grenade'. As if instead of brush or other painting paraphernalia, the painter is holding a gun and shooting at the earth: 'The spectrum bursts, a bright **grenade**,/ When he unlocks the **safety catch**'; until the earth is completely destroyed and a new world comes into existence:

..., fire  
This bare bald earth with white and red,  
Incinerate it till it's black  
And brilliant as a funeral pyre:  
A new world cools out of his head.

### Conclusion

As we know, the symbiotic relationship between text and context leads to the production of meaning. In other words, to have a better understanding of the text we need to closely take into account the world in which the text was produced and received. Historical, cultural, social, and even personal environments must be taken into consideration because undoubtedly, they can have an effect on the values and meanings of the content. Of course, we should be cognizant of the fact that a complete understanding is usually impossible because we would not know where context ends and text commences. Additionally, we, as readers and critics, should not forget our own knowledge, experiences or representations of the world that are consciously or unconsciously filtered through and colour what we say, see, or do. Heaney's poetry has a deep affinity with the Irish culture, nature, and history. Although his loyalty to his rural environment and experience, his farm lingo, his depiction of Irish violence have long been the centre of attention, his obsession with war has not been taken into account amply. However, as

it was said, because of the situation of his country, Heaney's obsession with war was inevitable and above all there is a strong reciprocal relation between song and place and Heaney's poetry is the reflection of the place in which he lived. The abundance of military imagery in *Death Of A Naturalist* shows a close relationship between Heaney's poetry and his place of writing, that is, Ireland. In other words, relationship between text and context.

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