

## Topophilia of Space and Place in Seamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist* and Other Poems

Yasha Iftikhar (First author)

Dr. Saima Khan (corresponding author)

Nimra Ajmal

### Abstract

Environment influences art to a great extent. Many theories in literature are inspired by the two-way relationship between literature and its context. Hence, it is impossible to see a piece of literary work devoid of its zeitgeist. Although one immediately thinks of cultural or historical criticism whenever the need to explore a literary piece of work from social perspective arrives, yet the same research can also be conducted via a more profound, aesthetic and substantially even factual and emotionally charged philosophy. Topophilia allows one to map one's homeland exactly how it used to be with all its bloodshed and springs. In this case, Ireland is to be mapped out of Seamus Heaney's consciousness expressed in his famous collection of poems *Death of a Naturalist*. This study aims to establish a backward link between the poet's artistic output with his emotional bond he shares with his place. In Heaney's case, his conscious absorption of Irish architecture, bogs, farm life, Gaelic traditions and Irish timeline act as a prism that refracts his truthful consciousness onto his poetry and through reverse-refraction one can easily predict the emotional geography of Ireland. Hence, the study focuses on mapping Ireland through Heaney's consciousness in his poems.

keywords: topophilia, homeland, consciousness

### Introduction

*Death of a Naturalist* is a collection of poems written by Seamus Heaney, who received the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. The collection was Heaney's first major published volume, and includes ideas that he had presented at meetings of The Belfast Group. The work consists of 34 short poems and is largely concerned with childhood experiences and the formulation of adult identities, family relationships, and rural life. *Death of a Naturalist* is followed by 11 more collections of poetry from 1966 to 2010.

Now, this consciousness would help further the main argument mentioned previously in Heaney's case as he himself responded to one of Eugene O'Brien's questions on poetry and truth in the words which say, "there's such a thing as truth and it can be told – slant" (O'Brien, 2002, p.4)

This might sound resonant of Husserl's definition of consciousness because he accounts for this consciousness as not just everyday consciousness but a refined consciousness which is brought about either by the means of eidetic reduction which puts reality in brackets and the result is pure subjectivity or imagination for instance, one might correlate this with the neoclassical poets with metaphysical conceits or it can be a consciousness where one's notion about consciousness and idiosyncrasies are put in bracket (Suvorova 2011) and the result is pure reality as an organic product of experience. Heaney exhibits the later one as he endorses the very idea:

In *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney contends that poetry has to be "a working model of inclusive consciousness"; truth needs to be oblique, as full understanding is very often beyond our capability, given that we are situated within language, thought and culture, and a transcendent position is all but impossible to achieve, unless we opt for oversimplification of issues. (O'Brien, 2002, p. 212)

For readers who cannot relate to the author's place or have never visited Ireland, topophilia serves to map the whole Ireland. Writers like Charles Dickens and Orhan Pamuk have known to master this technique as they successfully built a city in the reader's mind and not just in a physical sense but with all of its aesthetic, political and social aspects.

Now this brings one to the philosophical basis of topophilia, phenomenology. It was brought about by Edmund Husserl. It studies man as an object and subject of consciousness.

Hence, one can drive the main argument that Topophilia studies the environment using the phenomenological method i.e., through the prism of human consciousness. This paper will examine *Death of a Naturalist* and other poems through topophilic lens. This critical approach provides an insight into Seamus Heaney's emotional and aesthetic sensibility towards Ireland, as reflected in his poetry.

### Literature Review

Ujwall Kr. Panda in his research binds the path of humanist geography and sense of place through Heaney's works. He starts by blaming the phenomenon of globalization for the birth of high modernists' poetry. He mentions Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Larkin to supplement his main argument that the inherent sense of a displaced root and place onsets the desire of reimagining one's place and the emotional attachments with it. For building his theoretical framework, he borrowed the ideology of humanistic geography (Suvorova, 2011, p. 354) and topography from five major theorists. Most prominently, Yu fi Tuan, who would also be referenced in the study as well who believes that the geographical sense of place and space as something devoid of science and mere dots on a map, rather it is a humanistic approach; sort of a behavioral geography (Panda, 2016, p. 8) that tends to focus on one's memory of his or her homeland or birth place as Seamus' was Ireland. From Seth Low, he borrows the idea of *Place Attachment*, Panda (2016) quotes it as, "a symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space of a piece of land..." (p. 8).

*Place attachment* of Ireland is explored through Heaney's famous poems. Furthermore, Fritz Steel's concept of place is "the particular experience in a particular setting" (Panda, 2016, 9). This *spirit of place* is further explored in bog poems of Heaney; how Irish landscapes represent a sense of belonging towards his creative consciousness. Ujwall Kr. Panda (2016) explains it as:

The "place-space dichotomy" is integral to Heaney's sense of place. The place here is the Northern Ireland of his childhood, a particular way of life etc. the space on the other hand is his newly achieved identity which is the construct of his education and learning. (p. 55) From here, Panda moves onto the study's main subject: *The death of the Naturalist*. Here, he explores primal and secondary landscapes inspired by Homi. K Bhabha: primal where childhood is lived through an *Illiterate unconsciousness* (Panda, 2016, pp. 55-56), while, the latter is later on revived via a *literate consciousness* (Panda, 2016, p. 57) and this is where the literature would help the study furthering the idea of topophilia.

But Penna (1991) grabs the very idea through a different approach. He criticizes regionalist and new-Georgian stamps on Heaney's *Station Island*, *Seeming Things* and *Death of a Naturalist*. He argues that Heaney's poetic images do not merely serve the scenic purpose. Instead, he believes, "his use of these images reveals his alertness to the cultural, personal and kinesthetic dimensions of his environment. This sensibility allows external location and self to interpenetrate so that "place" stands forth as distinct from surrounding space (p. 4).

For Penna (1991), composition of Heaney's place is more prominent as it composes his Irish imagery. For affirming this *composition* (p. 13), he quotes Louis Martz to claim Heaney's poetry as *Poetry of Meditation*. He writes, "beginning with a concrete composition of place, Heaney internalizes and analyzes conflicting demands of place until a clarification occurs..." (p. 13).

Penna's primary focus is Irish political place. He alludes and explores Ulster events, Bog killings etc. and correlates them with Heaney's poetry to formulate his sense of *Place*. The fundamental notion of Heaney's place is different from space. Penna distinguishes the two by

calling the former as the emotional bond of one's memory with his or her place and later as the mere geographical location. Penna utilizes Heaney's theme of alienation to hint at the political landscape of Ireland and portrays and composes the place that is not just an imagery but "a child's knowledge of his reality" in *the Death of a Naturalist* (Penna, 1991, p. 22). Hence, this part is where the study would draw upon its aspect of Heaney's truthful and accurate consciousness.

The *Truth* through which Heaney's consciousness has been explored in order to bring about the Irish sense of *Place* is emphasized by Stanca in his book. He uses another term: "vision" for the emotional bond between Ireland and Heaney. Stanca describes it as, "referring to a mental image of a possible situation and, by extension, of the world, or to a vivid, imaginative conception or anticipation of events" (Stance 13). In this way, Stanca attempts to highlight Irish identity in Heaney's poetry. But the book mainly focuses on Yeats' influence on Heaney's poetic sensibilities. However, the book does help the study when it comes to tracing the cultural and poetic identity of the Irish poet. It says, "Both Yeats and Heaney must have felt thrown into a vision of Ireland, into a sense of separate cultural elements..." (Stanca 2009).

These cultural elements are the main subject of O'Brien's famous book on Seamus Heaney. He delves into the Irish Bogs and attempts to unravel the Irishness of Heaney. The first chapter of the book "Northern Exposure: Digging into the Past" numerates several of Heaney's poem one by one and breaks down each metaphor and imagery:

At another level, by stressing the word "dig", that brings the closing line into direct contrast with the "snug as a gun" line, not only is he choosing the pen over the spade; he is also choosing the pen as a means of digging, rather than using it as a metaphorical gun. (O'Brien, 2002, p. 23)

The book helps furthering the study by providing elaborate textual references about topophilia though not under the same term yet effective and substantial. However, one thing that the aforementioned researches lack is the backward tracing of Ireland through Heaney. The study aims to create a link between Heaney's consciousness and Ireland's landscapes through Heaney's sense of place and topophilia and not what previous literature aimed to discover that is the evidences of Irishness and Place in the poetry

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study places the theme of Seamus Heaney's poetry in the larger context of the theoretical framework that is topophilia: as it is quite evident from the title the study revolves around Ireland and Irish topos in the overarching scheme of topophilia.

The term topophilia literally means "love for place". It is extremely rich in semantic meaning and is widely used in contemporary philosophy, psychology, sociology and cultural studies. Although it arose in the field of humanistic geography which is quite an authoritative discipline at the junction of geography and other humanities and social sciences, this term was introduced into scientific usage by the leading expert on humanistic geography Yu Fi Tuan. He proposed a new approach to studying the relationship between man and the environment. But he did not invent this neologism; rather he borrowed it from W.H Auden's poetry and later on turned that poetic image into a scholarly term" (Suvorova, 2011).

Topophilia, a term that combines the Greek words "topos" (place) and "philia" (love or affection), refers to the strong sense of attachment or affection people feel toward certain places. This concept was popularized by the Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his book *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974). The theory

explores how human beings develop emotional connections to specific locations and how these connections influence our identities, memories, and experiences.

In its true sense, topophilia is actually the linkage between people and their places. These places were either once someone's homeland or the places that they frequently visited. This linkage stems from personal, cultural, aesthetic and environmental influences as well as experiences. Topophilia entails that one's surroundings are not just a backdrop in one's life; rather, it is an active participant in how one feels, reacts and turns out to be. Another significant aspect of topophilia is that it can evoke emotions. For instance, if one holds his or her childhood vacation spot dear, then the present and future feelings regarding that spot are not arbitrary but focused on the experience and memory associated with the bond he or she shared with the spot. Now, these experiences and memories may take several turns; melancholy, nostalgia, sublimity or even a potpourri of several emotions.

The ideology also briefly covers the aspect of Identity as well. The places one loves often become a part of one's identity. And anyone, who identifies him or herself with their place, carries it wherever they go. It gets expressed in every action and word. Hence, any outcome coming out of such a person's creative or material impulse can be traced back to the place that conceived it. In a broader sense, topophilia can also contribute to national or regional identity. Landmarks, landscapes, and even certain types of architecture can become symbols of a nation or a culture. For example, the rolling hills of Tuscany are often associated with Italian identity, while the vast outback is a key part of Australian identity. These places become emblematic of a collective sense of belonging, uniting people through a shared love of their homeland. Similarly, when someone returns home after a period of time, he or she might feel a sense of belonging, comfort or nostalgia. These emotions can in turn derive several other impulses one of which is the written expression. The natural beauty, architecture and communal affiliations create a deep connection between landscapes and people, Hence, through one's writing, a whole place can be sketched out easily.

According to Yu Fi Tuan, these could be the tenets or leitmotifs of topophilia:

- psychological notion of identity: it explains the emotional and philosophical sense of belonging of a person to a certain place or location that imparts a particular impression on one's abstract perception of reality of that very place, which we call as Identity. And this identity is not just nationalistic, it could be moral, aesthetic, and social.
- Relationship between environment and values: It tells how the environment plays a vital role in formation of a person's values. How topophilia plays this very role in one's life and how this role is crucial in the context of geopolitics, bioregionalism, interpersonal relations and the sense of home in one's life, broadly.
- Unification of time, space and individual: topophilia is said to envelope around the terms like *genus loci* because it is much broader and covers the leitmotifs of co belonging and cultural or historic memory that brings together time, society and individual and also includes context, history and past altogether, one can say time and scoop it all in one text. And this notion of unification brings one to the next tenet i.e.
- palimpsest; topophilia is palimpsest in a postmodern sense when we say when a certain theme or in this case Irish topos is written over and over by various writers, then such overwriting is fundamentally impossible without overlapping intertextual meanings. so, while studying both, or treating both as a subject, it is impossible to differentiate the outer form the inner or between

the superimposed semantic nuances and the indigenous meaning because the latter consists of the former in the first place. so, it could be understood in such a way that a text gets a history and acquires a memory of its own. Because the memory of the text is actually derived from the memory of the place, in this case the memory of Ireland and this is the fact that a place, its mental construction and intuitive perception is no less important than study of the texts and poets emerging directly out of the very place. Hence, topophilia serves the purpose of mentally mapping a city or a place in literature.

### Discussion

Heaney fulfills the purpose of topophilia which is to help the reader mentally map an Ireland that he witnessed. He “took an embankment path” (Heaney, 1996, p.18) to fulfill this purpose as he writes in the poem “An Advancement of Learning”. According to psychogeography, writers may adopt the “flaneur” (Suvorova, 2011, p.32) way of lifestyle; “flaneur”. It is a French word which means strolling aimlessly. In English, it means “to stroll aimlessly through a city in order to perceive and capture the feelings and ideas evoked by concrete landscapes. Merlin Coverley in his book *Psychogeography* writes, (in) ‘the aimless wandering, the fact that there is no direction, you follow your own impulse’ (Suvorova, 2011, p.32). This impulse is what takes Heaney to his childhood farm, sometimes to the island and sometimes to the shipyard that helped impregnate his poetry with a bildungsroman-ish nuance. He comes of age through the poems “Churning Day”, “Blackberry Picking” and “The Early Purges” to “Ancestral Photograph” chronologically in the collection. It also imparts meaning to the title, *The Death of a Naturalist* which means the dying of the child; the flaneur, the naturalist which Heaney wanted to tame; as he writes in one of his poems addressing his wife “love, I shall perfect for you the child who diligently potters in my brain” (Heaney, 1996, p.46). Heaney’s marital relation with Marie Devlin is also important in this context since he wrote a number of poems about her in this collection and explored his Irish identity through this prism as well because she also “took the embankment walk” (Heaney, 1996, p.46) with him in the poem “Valediction”.

Heaney’s oversimplification of the issues (O’ Brian,2002, p.33) is the direct result of his perception of truth i.e., his stream of experiences of Ireland that he himself went through. His first collection; *Death of a Naturalist*, was published in 1966, nearly around and in between the major periods of Irish history i.e., The Troubles. This collection employs a vast panorama of Irish imagery that is particular to the historical events of The Troubles. For instance, the first poem of the collection; “Turkeys Observed” starts with the lines; “one observes them, one expects them” (Heaney, 1996, p.37) . It hints at the arrival of British protestants in Ireland, an event known in Irish history by the name of Ulster Plantation. Moreover, the famous Irish potato famine is also a topic of Heaney’s poem “Digging” and “At a Potato Digging”. But most importantly, Heaney’s hostile tone against the favored protestant group in Ireland in the poem *Docker* majorly depicts the Irish social troubles. Although he is known as a non-political poet, historical criticism always finds its way.

Along with political evidence, there is several textual evidence found in the poems regarding the Irish geography that establishes an Irish underlay in Heaney’s works. Evidences are categorically arranged. Mud and Bog related morphology is found in words like Sods, flax dams, hey etc. in “Digging”, “At a Potato Digging”, and “Death of a Naturalist”, Irish architectural places are found in verses like, “We may let the scaffolds fall/Confident that we have built our wall” (Heaney, 1996). Maritime metaphors like:

Throat of the river-Trout

like villains dropped screaming to justice  
in Waterfall and in Synge on Aran.  
you might think that the sea is company...turned savage  
in Storm on the Island. (Heaney, 1996)

Barn and Farm related lexicology is found in "Cow in Calf", "The Barn," and "Churning Day". The references of Gaelic wind are found in "Synge on Aran" and "Storm on the Island". Barrel and gun-barrel in "Trout" and "Cow in Calf". Also, in "We are bombarded by the empty air//space is a salvo-storm on the island//, and Pottery bombs" (Heaney, 1996) in "Churning Day."

The purpose of these textual evidences is merely not to highlight how rich these poems are with Ireland topos but actually to explore Heaney's prism of consciousness that perceived Ireland as a phenomenon, as something unfolding before him throughout his childhood, as if he lived through it and not just with it. It is through these mud, wind, and barn that we mentally map a whole new Ireland while sitting here in the exact time frame when Heaney was there and this is the whole purpose of Topophilia. Ireland is the "instinctively faithful" (Heaney, 1996, p. 56) impulse of Heaney as he writes in one of his poems that compels him to paint an Ireland which bestowed him with words, imagery, identity, passion, thought and most importantly poetic impulse. For instance, in the poem "Digging" and "The Diviner" he uses the metaphor of "finding the good turf" (Heaney, 1996, p.36) equivalent to writing a good poem and this metaphor is so enriched in its indigenous sense that he is able to remember the "cold smell of the potato mold" (Heaney, 1996, p.13) and "tragic chorus in a gale" (Heaney, 1996, p.41) on the island, "rhythm of potato drills" (Heaney, 1996, p. 15) helps rhymes his poetry, he compares his pen to the spade his father used while digging and says that the pen is resting in his hand "as snug as a gun" (Heaney, 1996, p.17); ready to open fire against the usurpers. All this hints to the very tenets of topophilia which covers the bioregional as well as geopolitical aspects of Ireland.

In one of the very last poems of the collection; *Ancestral Photograph*, Heaney closes the poem by saying "closing this chapter of our chronicle" (Heaney, 1996, p. 26) meaning whereby associating his families' microcosm with the Irish macrocosm and making the text and the place a palimpsest; both having their own memory and past, through the symbol of his uncle's portrait.

In addition to that, Irish identity in Heaney's work is not just limited to the imagery and text but also covers the literary as well as geographical influences. A quincunx (O' Brian, 2002, p. 22) drawn by another Irish playwright, Eugene O' Brian of Heaney's works and what he makes out of Irish architecture in the bigger structure of what and whom influence it represents, can be modified. This quincunx is Seamus Heaney's symbolic representation of his complex lyrical sense of Irishness. It is shaped like a diamond with five towers, each representing a different aspect of Irishness. The central one is a representation of Irish culture, and it is shaped like an island home from before the invasion. The Protestant tradition is represented by Louis MacNeice's Carrickfergus Castle in the north; the colonizing English tradition is represented by Edmund Spenser's presence in Cork in the south; the Celtic revival tradition is represented by Yeats' magical and mythical tower in the west; and the modernist perspective on Irishness is represented by Joyce's Martello tower in Dublin (O' Brian, 2002, p.22). One may further modify this diagram by pointing out the textual evidence from the poems entailed in *Death of a Naturalist* that are indigenous to certain areas of Ireland. For instance, the use of the phrases */sleek pint of porter/* (Heaney 41) and */roman collar/* (Heaney 41) represent the Celtic nuances in the predominantly Celtic region of Ireland in the west. Similarly, according to Brian's model, the north represents the traditional Ireland and thus Heaney's poem; "The Personal Helicon" opens with "as a child they

could not keep me from wells” (Heaney, 1996, p.58) informs of a very native imagery, south represents the colonial nuances as represented in “To the Commander of the Eliza” while the east is filled with modern architecture such as “scaffoldings” in the poem “Scaffolding”. The center of the diagram is noteworthy because it contains the indigenous words/phrases that are part and parcel with Irish landscapes and are seen in nearly all the poems aforementioned, hence levitating the traditional roots over later foreign influences. The very core of Heaney’s poetry reflects his conscious experiences of Ireland and, through Heaney, Ireland comes out to be a very organic assemblage of its constituents including chronicles, landscapes, politics and literary influences.

#### Conclusion

In a nutshell, this study emphasizes the deep connection between Seamus Heaney's poetry and his emotional bond with Ireland, demonstrating how his work serves as a reflection of his intimate relationship with his homeland. By exploring the concept of topophilia, the research reveals how Heaney's depiction of Irish landscapes, traditions, and history, in *Death of a Naturalist*, creates a vivid, emotionally charged representation of Ireland. Not only does this study underscore the inseparable link between literature and its socio-cultural context but also illustrates how a poet's personal attachment to their environment can shape and define their artistic output. Through this lens, Heaney's poetry becomes a medium for understanding and mapping the emotional geography of Ireland, offering a profound insight into the ways in which a writer's surroundings and experiences influence his creative expression.

#### Bibliography

- Heaney, S. (1966). *Death of a Naturalist*. Oxford University Press.
- O’Brien, E. (2002). *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*. The Liffey Press.
- Panda, U. K. (2016). *The Sense of Place: Divergent Responses in the Works of Seamus Heaney and Phillip Larkin*.
- Penna, C. (1991). *Knowing Place, Keeping Place: Approaches to Place in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*. University Microfilms International A Bell and Howell Information Company.
- Stanca, N. (2009). *Duality of Visions in Seamus Heaney's Writings*. Constanta.
- Suvorova, A. (2011). *Lahore; Topophilia of space and place*. Oxford University Press.