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# An Analytical Study of Catholic Sufferings in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

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**Abstract:** *The present paper reflects Seamus Heaney's intense agony and sufferings of the Irish people in his some selected poems. The expression of agony in the form of images and symbols has great poetic significance. Seamus Heaney's concern and commitment are for helping and healing the world and presenting a futuristic vision where the world is not divided by the political boundaries. Heaney internalizes and universalizes the sorrows and sufferings, and miseries and misfortunes of mankind and tries to mitigate these miseries and reduces this pain through the ideal sphere of his poetry.*

Key – words: agony, maladjustments, protestants, catholic, remnants, frets-problems, atrocities, stampede, requiem.

**The main objectives** of this paper are to focus and expose the extreme agony of the Irish people. The poetry of Seamus Heaney places and projects the catholic sufferings as a part of the universal sufferings under social maladjustments. His poor conditioned pictures of the lives of the Northern – Irish population are so impressive and effective that even the hearts of those who inflicted the sufferings and perpetrated pains are moved to the hilt.

**Review of Literature:** To begin with, those Irish writers who embraced Catholicism could give voice to it only as an adjunct of the national character, and those who did not—the majority—conceived of it no less as a formation, an expression, either of national character or imperial oppression. Despite its routine depictions of the features and elements of Catholic ways and practices, Irish literature was profoundly

secular; it alternately absorbed the religious within the cultural-political complex of nationalism or rejected it with the anti-clerical grimace foundational to modern liberalism.

Scholars of Irish literature made no effort to get outside of this polarity. To the contrary, they reproduced it in various forms. In some cases, the possessive individualism to which anti-clerical Irish writers from Joyce and Gerald O'Donovan onward gave voice was simply ratified, and the history of Irish literature came to be told as a collective *Bildungsroman*, wherein isolated artists fought for their artistic and sexual (always sexual) freedom from the “oppressive moralism” (219) of a “Jansenist” and “patriarchal” Irish culture and clerisy. More recent scholars have simply transmogrified the liberal individual's fight for freedom from external moral, religious, and national norms into the battle for “subjects” to fashion themselves in an ethereal freedom that rejects the nasty “essentialism” of the past (including the essentialism of “possessive individualism” itself) outright. Heaney's portrayal of his painful infant years and his dreadful recollections are showed in a variety of ways. Heaney's memories and feelings are always used as a background to his poems.

As he wrote these when he was an adult, he adds a more mature, destructive attitude, showing the comparison between a child's innocent view and a more developed account.

**Methodology:** In this paper, we seek to present a research innovation that might be a valuable tool in meeting this aim. Specifically, we explore the uses of poetry and poetic structures and forms as valuable tools of qualitative social research. Based on practices from expressive arts research and more traditional qualitative methods, the research poem can present evocative, powerful insights that can teach us about the lived experience of social work clients.

**Result:** The final results of Seamus Heaney's agony may be marked and felt in his repeated assertions that the people of Ireland are not unified on the question of Irish Identity - they are divided on the false and baseless considerations of Catholicism and Protestantism.

**Discussion:** Seamus Justin Heaney was a playwright and translator but he was recognized; he was one of the principal contributors to the Irish poetry during his lifetime since W B Yeasts' death. Heaney worked as a professor at Harvard, and also the Professor of Poetry at Oxford. American poet Robert Lowell comments about him,

"the most important Irish poet since Yeats". His notable literary works are *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Beowulf* (translation, 1999), *District and Circle* (2006), *Human Chain* (2011). He was the fourth Irish great leading literary figure who won the Nobel Prize (1995) in literature after William Butler Yeats, George Bernard and Samuel Beckett. As Heaney said to a reporter at Dublin Airport, "It's like being a little foothill at the bottom of a mountain range. He was honored also with many prestigious awards.

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) was the eldest one among nine children of a family whose father owned and worked at a small farm of some fifty acres in County Derry and the Ulster of the Industrial Revolution in Northern Ireland. The poet mentioned that it was a significant tension in his background, something that corresponds to another internal tense and mantle tension also inherited from his parents, as that between speech and silence. Heaney brought up as a country boy and educated at the native local primary school. Being a young child, he watched and wretched under American soldiers on maneuvers in the local fields, in preparation for the Normandy invasion of 1944. The protestant soldiers were stationed

at an aerodrome that could have been built about a mile from his home and once again Heaney had this image into his feelings as a consciousness poised between "history and ignorance" as representative of the nature of his poetic life and development. Even though his family left the farm where he was reared from Mossbawn in 1953, and also his life since rushed a series of moves farther away from his birthplace and the departures had been more geographical than psychological where Heaney's poetry was grounded.

The personality of a poet is governed and guided by the trends, tendencies and tastes of the times in which he lives and also his personal likes and dislikes. His mind and heart are always open to what is confronted by his feelings and senses. The great poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge have already established the concepts of real poetry by producing their theories about perceptions and the making of the poet's personality. So both the poets laid emphasis on the spontaneous overflow of poetry and drew their meaning about the concepts of poetry in primary sensation, perception and then imaginative construction of perceptive reality. Indeed, these perceptions provide raw material to the poet when he transforms the grass into a fine poetic product.

So is the case with the Irish Nobel Laureate poet, Seamus Heaney (1939 - 2013) when he exposes the extreme agony of the Irish people being the part of that complete scenario. The poetry of Seamus Heaney places and projects the catholic sufferings as a part of the universal sufferings under social maladjustments. In this manner he saves himself from being a political stunt. His miserable pictures of the life of the Northern Irish population are so impressive and effective that even the hearts of those who inflicted sufferings and perpetrated pain are moved to the hilt. He has painted and presented the sufferings of the Catholics as the sufferings of the common man. Many of his poems from the poetic collections like **Death of Naturalist, Door into the Dark, Wintering Out, North** etc. are full of Catholic agonies. He presents the picture of the Catholic past and present, and exposes the true Irish identity. We do not find a poet who can claim that he is isolated from his surroundings. Every poet encodes his poetic ideas from those interior chamber and inner wards of his memory, where certain experiences earned through perceptions are stored. Even the greatest poets like William Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, etc. were not free from those influences which figured around them. Different enough, in

order to produce imaginative writings of highest value, they could utilize the material picked from their surroundings and situations in the most skilled manner.

On the other hand, the great critic of the twentieth century T. S. Eliot has advanced his theory of 'Tradition and Individual Talent', which has a different meaning in it. By emphasizing the role of tradition, he disregards the role of poet's personality. He suggests that the tradition, which is being developed and shaped continuously, is from Homer to the present day. Whatever a poet produces is a thing refashioning the continuous flow of tradition and the making of poet's personality is also the direct result of this tradition. Moreover, the environment helps the poet in producing high value of literary creation. Even the poet's personality is refined under the stress of the multifarious influences on him. Hence, if we want to judge the poetic skill and production of a particular poet, it is much necessary to go deep into his poetic creation in order to get a glimpse of his numerous experiences which made him a great poetic personality.

We are going to throw light on the complex character of Seamus Heaney's personality in regular flow of his poetic lines. It was from the very beginning of his childhood that Seamus Heaney himself was the victim of

the peculiarities of the social adjustments, which were frequently floating around him and his family. When we discuss about his family background, his father was a hardworking and responsible person and could perform all the activities related to farming with a great skill. Although Heaney's father was very much sincere and devoted to his work, his circumstances due to his Catholic faith, did not allow him to have much social respect in Northern Ireland. From the very beginning, the poet's father had to face a wide gap and sectarian conflict between the Protestant community and those minority Catholics, who wanted to retain their faith, Moreover, the Catholics were treated as outcasts by the Protestants and even they were not allowed to take the privileges of the basic human rights. They had to suffer at every moment and at every step even in their everyday life and these stories of sufferings were the common tearful takes to the Ulster people. In his childhood, Seamus Heaney was the eyewitness to the cruel dance of brutalities at the hands of the Protestants. The poet learnt through the Christian faith that the children are the finest and fragrant flowers of God.

The differences between the Catholics and the Protestants were so much high that

everywhere the catholic were made to realize that they were not of true British cult. Moreover, they were treated in an insulting manner even in schools and in other social surroundings. Politically enough, the Protestant Community has always been with the British rule over Ireland and has always pleaded for the U.K. governance. On the other hand, the Catholics community has always been in demanding their separate nation, free from the British rule and governance of UK in order to preserve their true Irish character. They have not only voiced and protested orally but also given the written expressive in the form of violent agitations in order to establish the true Irish social ethos and culture. Thus, it was from the very beginning of Seamus Heaney's childhood that he saw and noticed the drama of sectarian conflict, and the incidents of the Catholic people were deeply settled in his mind.

The poetry of Seamus Heaney is full of these continuous flows of Catholic sufferings. Moreover, most of his poetic collections expose all the details of Northern Ireland and include the material from these areas of feelings, which developed in him ever since his childhood. The poet picks up a lot of material directly from his childhood

for his poetic production. Michael Parker explains these facts in these words;

*The locations of his childhood prove to be as important to the later development of the poet as the human landscape.<sup>1</sup>*

The poet's imagination always had the Ulster of his childhood on his poetic map. He never kept himself an unfeeling child among the cruel and callous circumstances figuring around him. His experiences taught his soul the real poetry of humanity. He decided to project a great human cause by taking into account all those experience, of his childhood, which comes like a demon suddenly. Moreover, he forms and shapes his early poetry from his primary experiences of his childhood. Michael Parker further explains it:

*Another feature of the primary experience which has probably taken on greater significance in retrospect was his exposure to the attitudes and costumes and habits of feeling of the dominant culture. One symbol of this was the map of Ulster with its red border, that vestigially bloody marking which hatted the eye travelling south and*

*west, but permitted movement eastwards with its delicate, dotted lines reaching out towards Glasgow Stranraer, Liverpool.<sup>2</sup>*

The early experiences of Seamus Heaney are the results of those farming activities, which were frequently undertaken by his father and his companions and even supplied a lot of raw material for weaving a fine net of poetic images.

The story of Ireland is extremely filled with the deep echoes of agony of the people related to their age long sufferings. The Irish people have always fought for their independent identity but have always remained sufferers as they were always suppressed, depressed and exploited. Ulster, Munster and Leinster are the remnants of the early kingdoms. But the later history of the Irish people is full of the suppression of what Ireland had been in ancient times and Celtic times. The agony of the Irish people is still a chapter of their day-to-day talks as they have still been struggling hard to attain their self-culture and independent identity.

It was in the Sixteen century, when a frets-problem started with the people of Ireland. King Henry VIII converted the Roman Catholic Church of England into the Anglican Church under Protestant leadership. Ireland was still under Catholic

dominance. But the powerful Henry defeated the Irish armies even after Spanish assistance to them. After that it began the story of brutalities, repression and suppression of the Irish people over there. Now Ireland was governed by the English forces directly. The property of Irish people was forcefully snatched away from them and was distributed among the new settlers from English and Scottish regions. The Irish people have not been able to forget what damage was done to their native tradition by the brutal forces of England. The drama of brutalities reached its climax during the times of Oliver Cromwell who was having the direct support of the Protestants.

In order to crush the native pride of the Irish Catholics, several penal laws were enforced in the coming years. The Catholics were not allowed to have a gun, a pistol or a sword. Their basic rights to have well educative and to flourish in professions of their choice were also restricted, and even the entire political voice of the Irish people was being crushed.

Seamus Heaney's poetry is filled up with the deep agony of the Ulster people and there is a valley of blood stained symbols and images. His heart weeps and his whole framework shudders at the imaginative pictures figuring and forming in his mind

about the agony felt by his ancestors in their homeland. He is unable to restrict the flow of these images in his poetry.

The poem "For the Commander of Eliza" from Heaney's first poetic collection, **Death of a Naturalist**, represents an extended story in the matter of Ireland. The Catholic cries of injustice are reflected in several lines of the poem. In order to seek the true image of the Irish people's atrocities by the harsh treatment at the hands of the British commanders, Seamus Heaney develops his argument from an actual incident of the commander's partial treatment causing the death of many Irish people at board. Andrew Murphy gives a true picture about the back ground of this poem thus:

*Heaney takes up the  
question of where  
political responsibility  
for the tragedy lies.  
Following the work of  
the historian Cecil  
Wood Ham Smith, he  
implicitly rejects the  
view that the famine  
deaths are merely to  
be ascribed to natural  
causes finding  
instead, certain Cal  
polity in the*

*calculated inaction of  
the colonial  
authorities.*<sup>3</sup>

In the poem “For the Commander of Eliza”, the poet pursues the theme of Catholic sufferings at the hands of the British government in Whitehall, London, painting a gloomy picture unrelieved by any chink of light. He describes an incident that exemplifies the poem’s epigraph and illustrates the reasons why a burning sense of injustice might continue to exist within the Irish psyche since long. The initial voice and responses are those of the Commander of the British Coast – Guard Vessel. The poet explains that the Ship’s presence is in routine in the bay and the presence of an Irish rowing – boat unusually far beyond the creek is sufficient to arouse the suspicion. Here the poet presents the challenge addressed in Gaelic, thus:

*Routine patrol off West Mayo; sighting*

*A rowboat heading unusually  
far Beyond the creek, I tacked and  
hailed the crew*

*In Gaelic, Their stroke had clearly  
weakened*

*As they pulled to, from guilt or  
bashfulness.*<sup>4</sup>

Nobody could hear the pitiable cry of the Irish people, who were dying in the scarcity

of food. Even the Commander did not give them food despite their constant begging. His attitude was so inhuman that he could see them dying with ironic gestures as he says:

*I had to refuse food:  
they cursed and  
howled like dogs that  
have been kicked hard  
in the private when  
they drove at me with  
their starboard oar  
(Risking capsize  
themselves) I saw they  
were violent and  
without hope.*<sup>5</sup>

The whole poem reflects the agony of the Irish Catholics and stands for what the people of Ireland were facing in the colonial rule of the British over them. Andrew Murphey further exposes the true picture of the Irish Catholics:

*The lack of  
compassion and  
concern exhibited by  
the authorities in for  
the commander of  
Eliza, serves to  
symbolize the  
consequences of  
Ireland’s colonial*



*experience and the  
suffering which it  
occasioned.*<sup>6</sup>

In the poem “Requiem for the Croppies” from his second poetic volume, **Door into the Dark**, Seamus Heaney tells the story of the 1798 rebellion through the voice of a random dead croppy boy and, therefore, the rebel’s point of view. Here the poet describes the struggle that Irish rebels had to undergo. The poem was born of and ended with an image of resurrection based on the fact that sometime after the rebels were buried in common graves, these graves began to sprout with young barley, growing up from barley corn which the ‘croppies’ had carried in their pockets to eat while on the march. Heaney focuses on the old fashioned weapons – pike, scythes – the rebels used. The rebels also used herds of cattle to stampede into the lines of British soldiers. The poem shows how the rebels used clever tactics to attack the superior army. In this poem Seamus Heaney clarifies this concept:

*The pockets of our great coats full of barley  
.....  
No kitchens on the run, no striking camp.....  
We moved quick and sudden in our own  
country  
The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.*

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*Until ....on Vinegar Hill ....The final  
conclave.*

*Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at  
cannon.*

*The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken  
wave.*

*They buried us without shared or coffin*

*And in August ..... the barley grew up out  
of our grace.*<sup>7</sup>

The setting of the last lines of the poem is Vinegar Hill in Wexford was the site of the battle in which the rebels were defeated. By describing the hillside as “blushing”, Heaney expresses the vast amount of blood that was shed. The rebels who died were buried without care, coffin or even a shroud. The title of the poem has also a religious political significance. ‘Requiem’ means the Roman Catholic service on the dead owns. ‘Croppies’ is named so to honour the united Irishmen of the 1798 Rebellion. The croppies are an American – Irish Band based in Burlington. Thus this poem implies the continuity of the rebel spirit through the image of the sea and this resistance through the image of High Mountain. The War spirit has been continuously documented in Irish poetry for centuries. Hence, writing poetry

on war theme is a part of Irish poetic tradition.

The same war tone against the British feudalist greed for Irish peasant land is evidently seen in the poem The Wife's Tale:  
*The hum and gulp of the thresher ran down  
And the big belt slowed down to a standstill, straw*

*Hanging undelivered in the jaws.*

*There was such quiet that I heard their boots  
Crunching the stubble twenty yards away.<sup>8</sup>*

In the poems of the next poetic volume titled 'North', Seamus Heaney continues to explore the themes of Northern Irish origin. Heaney provides poly perspectives of Irishness in the collection. The first section of 'North' contains poems which are rich in mythology and history and the poems in the last section discuss the political conditions and the poor plight of living in a divided, colonized society. Heaney, through his poetry, provides a transparent window to the Irish past and present. He gives a mythical version of history. To lay bare the past, he borrows imagery from archaeology, linguistics and anthropology. His mythical versions set the contemporary Irish history, especially the violent campaigns of the I.R.A. against the background of the early Iron Age. The main impetus behind the bog poems were the photographs and the

descriptions of the bog people in Glob's The Bog People:

*Through their sacrificed deaths.....were themselves*

*Consecrated for all time to North's goddess of fertility, to*

*Mother Earth, who in return so often gave their faces her*

*blessing and preserved them through the millennia<sup>9</sup>*

Another poem of Heaney is "The Other Side" in which the poet throws light on a situation of conflict between the Catholics and Protestants who have lost trust in each other. In the poem, "The Other Side", Heaney recalls a neighboring Protestant farmer, who though friendly, was bemused by Catholicism. Here we can see the poet's agony by the distrust of centuries between the two communities and this distrust cannot be crushed aside so easily. In "The Other Side", Heaney says:

*For days we would rehearse*

*Each patriarchal dictum:*

*Lazarus, the Pharaohs, Solomon*

*And David and Goliath rolled*

*Magnificently, like loads of hay*

*Too big for our small lanes,*

*Or faltered on a rut –*

*Your side of the house, I believe,*

*Hardly rule by the Book at all;*

*His brain was a whitewashed kitchen*

*Hung with texts, swept tidy*

*As the body O' the Kirk.<sup>10</sup>*

The agony of the poet is that these happenings are not concluding a respectable solution to make a true Irish identity. Seamus Heaney's agony may be marked and felt in his repeated assertions that the people of Ireland are not unified on the question of Irish identity – they are divided on the false and baseless considerations of Catholicism and Protestantism. Peculiarly enough, the following comment has been presented by Michael Parker about the better and brighter possibilities of rapprochement between the two communities as conceived by the poet here:

*“The possibility of rapprochement is the subject of ‘The Other Side’, a poem which does not duck the difficulties of improving cross – community links, but rather faces them squarely with good honor.”<sup>11</sup>*

**Conclusion-** Thus, it can be clearly seen that Seamus Heaney's poems reflect intense agony and sufferings of the Irish people. The expression of agony in the form of images and symbols has great poetic significance. The whole exercise provides a psychological relief to the heavy heart of the poet. He weeps at the ill-fated incidents occasionally happening with the Irish people. As a poet from Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney used his poetry to reflect upon the “Troubles”, the often violent political struggles that polluted and plagued the country during Seamus Heaney's young adulthood. Moreover, the poet “has written poems directly about the ‘Troubles’ as well as elegies and monodies for friends and acquaintances who have lost their lives in them; he has tried to discover a historical framework in which to interpret and expose the current unrest; and he has taken on the mantle of public spokesman, someone looked to for comment and guidance”, noted Morrison. Seamus Heaney's concern and commitment is for helping and healing the world and presenting a futuristic vision where the world is not divided by political boundaries. Heaney internalizes and universalizes the sorrows and sufferings, and miseries and misfortunes of mankind and tries to mitigate this misery and reduce this pain in the ideal

sphere of his poetry. This poetic compensation of Seamus Heaney may be viewed as the poet's tribute to Ireland in particular and to entire humanity at large.

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