

# The famine and irish identity in seamus heaney's "at a potato digging"



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Seamus Heaney paints a picture of Ireland through his poems, at times describing its culture and at other times its politics. In poems like ' Digging' and ' The Follower' he ascribes a sense of dignity to the act of farming, comparing it to the art of writing poetry. Northern Ireland, where Heaney was born in 1939, was predominantly an agrarian economy. Heaney himself grew up on a farm, which played a large role in making the land a dominant motif in his poems. In ' At a Potato Digging' Heaney strips farming of its dignity, in order to describe a change in the Irish person's relationship with the land due to the Potato Famine of 1845-50. Potatoes were an integral part of Irish existence, forming the staple diet as well as the main source of livelihood; it lay at the root of Irish culture. When the blight struck, acres of farmland were reduced to a pile of rotting mud. Out of a population of five million, one million died and two million immigrated. Potato ceased to be a staple crop, shaking the foundation of the Irish identity. His poem is divided into four parts, the first and last depicting the present which is still haunted by memories of the Famine, the second describing the potato as something beautiful, yet repulsive and the third recounts the famine itself. Heaney narrates the indelible horrors of the potato famine to describe the changed attitude of mistrust towards the land in order to bring out the altered notion of an Irish Identity.

The poem opens with the description of farming in the present as an activity devoid of dignity. Heaney uses the onomatopoeic words " stumble", " crumbled" and " fumble" that also form an internal rhythm to evoke images of clumsiness. The loss of dignity is further emphasised in " humbled knees." " Humbled" implies that there was once pride in farming, which had been

lost due to the Famine. Being forced to bow down is poignantly described in “ like crows attacking crow-black fields”, where an image of scavenging is evoked. The earth is elucidated as something that died in the famine. Loss of faith in the soil is enumerated by the superstition of paying “ homage to the harvest god.” Northern Ireland is mostly Catholic, following a monotheistic doctrine. Paying homage to the Harvest God (a pagan figure) reflects shaking of existing identities due to the horrors of the Famine. The first section of the poem follows a loose iambic meter, which imitates the rhythm of digging. A rhyme scheme of abab distinguishes the present from the past.

The potato imagery acts as a link between the past and the present.

Described in free verse with a loose trochaic meter, the potato is both beautiful and repulsive. Enjambment plays an important role in

distinguishing the two contrasting evocations: “ slit-eyed tubers seem the petrified hearts of drills. Split / by the spade they show white as cream.”

While “ slit-eyed” evokes the image of disease, “ white as cream” is a positive image of freshness inside the potato. “ Good smells” express a sense of fulfillment, distinguishing the tone of the second section from the first. While the first reflects mistrust and fear of the land, the second constructs a sense of reverence through images of birth. This reverence predates the Famine. “ Inflated pebbles” and “ slit eyed tubers” set the stage for recollection of the Famine in the next section by describing disease. The physical description of the potato’s sprouting points as “ blind eyes” and the potato itself as a “ live skull” acts as a transitory line to connect the second and third section.

Repetition of the image of “ live skulls, blind-eyed” evokes images of starvation when it surfaces again later in the poem. This time the highly tactile image holds a metaphorical meaning where it stands for the lives lost in the famine. Rotting is a predominant image that runs through the section, establishing a connection between the rotting crops and the human bodies that wasted away a century ago. Human beings are “ grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth.” Drawing a parallel between the potato and the humans highlights that the crop is an integral part of Irish Identity. “ Grafted” refers to both transplanting of crops as well as immigration of human beings, who left behind their cultural roots and fled for survival. Two million people migrated during the famine. Anger at the earth for letting down the people and rotting away boils through in the description of the “ bitch earth.” It is compared to an unhealed wound which stinks of a “ running sore”, with “ pits turned pus.” The rhyme scheme of abcc is an unusual one, reflecting the unnatural and sudden circumstance of the blight. The slant rhyme in the last two lines acts as a transition to the present, which is still throbbing with the scars left by the Famine.

The Irish Potato Famine shook the essence of Irish identity, scattering the population across the globe. Farming ceased to be an occupation that held dignity. Occupations shifted, as did diets. Memories of the famine haunt the Irish psyche, as the Irish continue to spill libations onto the earth in Heaney’s poem, praying that such a famine never happens again. Though Heaney’s poem is about Ireland, his notion of an identity and human relationships with the land is universal. He portrays situations that are both local and universal, translating one human situation into another almost effortlessly.