

Seamus heaney's "peninsula"



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Seamus Heaney is a famous Irish poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 and is considered by many to be the most interesting Irish poet since William Yeats, who likewise won a Noble Prize in his day. Heaney's literature frequently communicates the rather tranquil setting of his home land, Ireland, and in particular the North of the country, where he was born. (BBC News Magazine " Faces of the week", 19 January 2007)His unique portrayal of Ireland's countryside lead to his Noble Prize and the Swedish Academy mounting praise on him " for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth" (New York Times, October 6 1995, by William Grimes).

His love for the Irish landscape is clearly evident to the reader in many of his poems. One such poem, " Peninsula", published in the collection " Door into the Dark", shows his extraordinary use of imagery and word choice to portray the scenery. Perhaps the poem's main theme is the concept of not being able to express yourself. Many great writers need stimuli in order to write, Charles Dickens is one famous example, and one would believe that it was the Irish countryside that helped stimulate Heaney's mind and inspire him to write of its beauty.

It appears, from the very first sentence of the poem that this is a journey that the narrator talks a lot. Like all writers, Heaney needs inspiration from somewhere. " When you have nothing more to say, just drive For a day all round the peninsula" It seems that when Heaney finds himself in a situation of inarticulacy, when he struggles to express himself, he sets out on a drive round the peninsula. One could think that Heaney is supporting Henry Thoreau's famous statement " how vain it is to sit down to write when you

have not stood up to live. " That witnessing this great countryside is Heaney living and it gives him the inspiration to write.

The fact he addresses the reader formally as " you", seems to suggest that he want to instruct them to themselves seek inspiration from somewhere. This message is also communicated in the final stanza with the lines: "...still with nothing to say Except that now you will uncode all landscapes" The word " uncode" here is an interesting choice by Heaney. It suggests to the reader that all the information that has been taken in, all this scenery at the peninsula, is just an image in the mind and only in an inspired and skilled wordsmith can the written word on page come close to realising the true beauty of these spectacular sights. Heaney describes this peninsula as a " land without marks", which really represents Ireland as a whole, with its proud ancestry and peaceful countryside, with endless silent fields. This reinforces Heaney's idea of " uncoding" the scene. This " land without marks" is a silent landscape, which sits dormant, waits to be seen and heard and one must have the skill to read what one sees and hears and form that into words on paper.

Also the fact that in this " land with no marks" one can only merely " pass through" and " not arrive" conveys the land's starvation of its ancestors imprints and creations, so much so that it is difficult to recognise one part from another. One could conclude that it is not just the narrator that is struggling to express himself, but that the landscape itself is also inarticulate. " The sky is tall as over a runway," Heaney's description of the sky here is appropriate. He uses a simile, comparing the sky on the

peninsula to that over a runway. The sky, like that over a runway, is vast as there is nothing really in the way, no buildings, mountains or monuments.

He uses the open and rather isolating feel of an airport's runway, which most people will have experienced, to convey the peaceful and rather cut off peninsula, where one must go to clear the mind. Similarly in this line: " At dusk, horizons drink down sea and hill," The personification of the landscape here is particularly interesting; the horizon appears to be " drinking" the landscape, as the sun sets it appears to be sucking away light from the sights of the peninsula. One too must drink in the atmosphere as a source of inspiration. As the sun fades away, less and less of the land becomes visible as more and more the scene is slowly being swallowed by darkness. " And you're in the dark again. Now recall" The day turning into night and darkness taking over is a metaphor for the gloom before the journey, as beforehand the narrator was struggling for anything meaningful to say, However, he makes reference to his inspiration; " Now recall", this showing the effect of the peninsula still remains stamped in his mind, and he can draw from that, and encourages the reader to do the same.

The poem is broken up into four stanzas, the first of which focuses on the beginning of the journey, focusing on the bigger picture; the sky, the overall impression of the land at first sight. The next two stanzas focus in more detail on the little unique features of the land, the things seen at a glance from the car window, the things to be dwelled on while contemplating new material. While the last stanza focuses clearly on recollecting what there was to see and suggesting that sense should be made from it. It is almost like a step-by-step guide, each stanza another step in finding motivation. In the

final stanza the narrator and the place are reunited with each other. " Things founded clean on their own shapes" are the consequence of the clash between his own mind and the peninsula, where he witnessed " waters and ground in their extremity.

" Seeing these things at the height of their beauty can inspire one to do almost anything. Heaney does seem to be encouraging the reader to seek inspiration from somewhere, by formally addressing them as " you". One may think he is trying to persuade his readers to go out and clear their mind, by having some peaceful time alone, and it is as if he is telling them that this is his secret. This is something that helps him write, helps him create and inspire. He is not writing a poem about how to write, he is writing a poem about how to live and how to express oneself.