

Past has a negative effect english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



All three of the texts concerned initially present the reader or audience with the ways in which the past continues to have a negative effect on the present. In Seamus Deane's 'Reading in the Dark' we see the narrator's past inhibit his position in society and cause the mental deterioration of his mother. The themes of the past coming back to haunt the present are also prevalent in Brian Friel's 'Translations', Jimmy Jack Cassie is destroyed by his obsession with the Ancient past and Manus' is oppressed by his love for his own country's past. Heaney, however is somewhat more ambiguous in his views, he blames certain parts of the past for problems in the present yet seems concerned with keeping Ireland's past sacred. Seamus Deane, in 'Reading in the Dark', presents the idea of the past acting as a barrier to progress in the present. Deane presents this through the motif of 'bad blood'. This is first seen in 'Haunted' after the narrator's brother warns him to stay away from another character, Grenaghan, because he believes he 'has bad blood in him'[1]. It has been suggested that Deane's use of blood imagery could be used to set the tone for the novel[2]. It could be argued that the tone Deane attempts to set is a tone of hopelessness and futility. This is because the characters in the novel will be forever tainted by their own blood. In this sense the history of the characters is what holds them back from developing and progressing. This idea was reflected in Irish society at the time, as Sean J. Connolly says 'throughout the 20th century the Irish were particularly sensitive to the history of an individual's family'[3]. Furthermore Deane's repeated references to 'blood' in the earlier vignettes could also be used to create a foreboding sense of the violence and conflict that we see in 'After' with the beginnings of the 'Troubles', a

period of bloody conflict between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland between the 1960s and 1990s.[4]Therefore it could be argued that the way in which the narrator is unable to resolve his problems with Grenaghan because of his past could microcosmically represent Ireland, this is because the conflict during the ' Troubles' was a result of deep-rooted differences in the history of the Republic and Northern Ireland[5]which is similar to the conflict between the narrator and Grenaghan. Similarly to Deane, Brian Friel's ' Translations' shares the notion of the past acting as a barrier to progress in the present. Friel demonstrates this through the character of Manus, a lame teacher at a hedge school in the rural outskirts of Ireland, Baile Beag. Hedge schools were illegal establishments which aimed to educate the peasantry by teaching classical subjects in Irish[6]. Despite being offered a better paid job at the newly opened National school, Manus is initially reluctant to accept the offer, ' I couldn't I can't go against him'[7]. One interpretation of the ' him' Manus refers to is that it is Hugh Manus' father. Manus' uses his father as an excuse because his father also says that he is going for the job. However, an alternative interpretation could argue that Manus is actually referring to Ireland as a whole when he refers to ' him'. This is because although the National schools offered better facilities and wages than the Hedge schools they were actually just a way for the British to Anglicise Ireland since, in contrast with the Hedge schools, it was compulsory that all subjects were taught in the English language. [8]Therefore it could be suggested that Manus is reluctant to go for the new job at the National school because he sees them as a threat to Ireland's heritage and wishes to preserve Ireland's past. In the same manner as

Deane it can also be argued that Manus acts as a microcosm for Ireland much in the same way as the narrator does in 'Reading in the Dark', the way in which they cling to the ideals of the past prevents them from making any real progress in the present. However, the ideas of Deane and Friel that Ireland's past is responsible for its lack of progress in the present is not exactly shared by Seamus Heaney in 'Opened Ground'. Instead, Heaney proposes the idea that Ireland is actually held back in the present by its ties with Britain in the past, we see this in poem, 'The Toome Road'. This poem perhaps relates to a childhood experience of Heaney when he was only a young boy. He watched the American soldiers on military exercises in the fields along the roads nearby his childhood homes. The forces were preparing for the Normandy invasion of 1944.[9] However, 'The Toome Road' relates this event to a young boy's encounter with armoured tanks of the British Army. The narrator's tone is full of resentment towards the tanks, 'How long were they approaching down my roads, As if they owned them?'[10]. The use of 'my' is particularly possessive, it implies a sense of violation and deep-rooted resentment, as Neil Corcoran comments, 'The possessives are the signal of the outraged native challenge to the colonizing aggressor'[11]. Furthermore it could also be argued that the use of 'how long were they approaching' refers to the deep historical conflict between the Irish and British since its initial colonization in the 12th century[12]. This idea could be further developed by analysing the structure of 'The Toome Road', 'Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones ... O charioteers, above your dormant guns, It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass, The invisible, untoppled omphalos.'[13] Heaney's use of the ellipsis signals the change in

the time that the poem is set. The poem makes the transition from the time of the narrator to the time of the initial British invasion into Ireland. This is suggested by Deane's reference to the 'untopped omphalos'. An 'omphalos' is a long standing artefact from Ancient Greece[14] and it could be argued that it is symbolic of the Ireland of old. In this sense it means that the British will never be able to fully colonize Ireland because the spirit of Ireland, represented by the omphalos, will never be destroyed. Therefore it could be argued that this long-standing conflict of the past between Ireland and Britain will continue to prevent any progress for Anglo-Irish relations in the present, we can see this through the way in which Ireland is still partitioned with the division between the North, which remains loyal to the British Crown and the self-declared Republic in the South. It could also be argued that the past does not just act as a barrier to progress in the present but rather it has a clear detrimental effect on those in the present. The clearest example of this is in Deane's 'Reading in the Dark'. This is suggested by the destruction of the mother and the narrator as a result of the burden of the family's history. Deane presents this destruction using cataphoric reference between the two vignettes 'Stairs' and 'Mother'. In the opening vignette, 'Stairs' the narrator appears to be very childlike, unconcerned by his mother's description of the stairs, 'How'll you get down? How do you know? What if it doesn't go?'[15]. The repeated questioning from the narrator creates a tone of childlike innocence. It could be argued that Deane's intention in creating this innocent tone is to fuel the narrator's curiosity for the narrator's past. In turn this creates a relationship between the narrator and the reader which means that the stark contrast of tone

presented in 'Mother' resonates more with the reader. This is because in 'Mother' the destructive effects of the past become much more apparent to both the narrator and the reader, 'but now with a real ghost crouched around her, sometimes crying out in an incoherent noise'[16]. Deane's use of monstrous imagery, 'incoherent noise' highlights the degeneration of the mother between 'Stairs' and 'Mother'. This also creates a sense of pathos for the narrator because as Ann Skea comments, 'the narrator knows that eventually the secrets of the past that haunt his mother will gradually come to haunt him too'[17]. Therefore we can infer that the narrator will suffer a similar fate to his mother when the secrets of the past are passed on to him. In contrast with 'Reading in the Dark' the way in which the past has a detrimental effect on the present is voluntary. Whereas the narrator's mother has the burden of the past imposed on her through no fault of her own, Jimmy Jack Cassie in 'Translations' instead tries to escape to the past an action which ultimately leads to him going insane. Jimmy is first introduced to the audience as the 'infant prodigy, sitting by himself, contently reading Homer in Greek and smiling to himself'.[18]This would not have been unusual for the Irish, because as Brian Arkins states, 'schools, such as the one depicted in Translations, taught Greek and Latin and preserved Ireland's long and fruitful association with the Classical tradition.'[19]At this point, Jimmy's interest in Ancient Greece seems very innocent; particularly the way in which he is seen to be 'contently reading and smiling to himself' would present an image of tranquillity and harmony for the audience. This innocence quickly deteriorates as Jimmy appears to be completely lost in the past. This is best demonstrated by the stage directions

in the third act, ' He attempts the gesture he made before: standing to attention, the momentary spasm, the salute, the face raised in pained ecstasy - but the body does not respond efficiently this time - the gesture is grotesque'[20]. The stage directions present a very disconcerting image for the audience, the use of the oxymoronic ' pained ecstasy' emphasises Jimmy's suffering and the pain he is experiencing. Furthermore the way in which the ' body does not respond efficiently' suggests that Jimmy is no longer there, it is as if his mind has become detached from him. Friel then compounds this image with the next set of stage directions, ' As Jimmy says those last lines he is crying, trying to keep his balance - he slides to the floor his back against the broken cart'[21]. The ' broken cart' is a cataphoric reference to the initial stage directions in the opening of the play, ' Around the room are broken and forgotten implements: a cart wheel, a battle of hay, a churn, etc.'[22]In this sense it implies that the past has such a detrimental effect on Jimmy by the end of the play it has completely consumed him and he has actually become a part of the ' broken and forgotten implements' around him. Heaney also explores the concept of the past having a detrimental effect on the present. However, in comparison with Deane and Friel Heaney does not suggest that the past has a directly damaging effect on the present but rather it is the cyclical nature of the past that damages those in the present. This is best demonstrated in his poem ' Punishment'. In ' Punishment' Heaney writes of the discovery of a young girl's body exhumed from a bog in Jutland[23]. Initially the poem addresses this girl in the past using vivid anatomical imagery ' neck', ' nipples' and ' ribs'[24]. This imagery emphasises the vulnerability of the girl by describing her body parts

with promote sensitivity and vulnerability. The poem then makes the transition from past to the present when Heaney appears to address the troubles within Ireland. He compares the punishment of the bog girl to Irish women during the troubles, ' in Ireland Irish girls who married British soldiers were brutally killed by Irish Revolutionary Armies'[25]. Heaney also adds a third layer to the poem, comparing the brutal punishment that he rejects with such abhorrence to the crimes of the IRA against British sympathizers in Ulster. He relates the powerful, difficult emotions of injustice with the sense of brutality created by the conflict of The Troubles. In an interview with the Paris Review, Heaney stated that ' It's a poem about standing by as the IRA tar and feather these young women in Ulster. But it's also about standing by as the British torture people in barracks and interrogation centers in Belfast. It's about standing between those two forms of affront'[26]. Therefore it could be argued that in Punishment, Heaney presents the reader with the question of whether anything has actually changed since the ancient girl's death, and therefore whether or not it is the cyclical nature of the past which has caused this damage. Although at first it does seem that all three of the writers suggest that the past does have a negative effect on the present upon further analysis all three of the texts can also be interpreted alternatively. For example, Deane's ' Reading in the Dark' can also be depicted as suggesting that the past can educate those in the present. This is demonstrated by the way in which the Church attempts to oppress the narrator's knowledge in an attempt to prevent him from undermining their authority, ' they wouldn't teach us even if they could.'[27]This line can be understood in two different ways. From a view critical of the Church it could

be argued that the narrator's thirst for knowledge of the past is what enables him to gain a better understanding of his family's problems, however the Church endeavour to prevent certain teachings of the past in order to keep the Irish people less educated so that they don't challenge their authority. This idea is also suggested by the way that the narrator refers to the Church as 'they', this suggests the narrator sees the Church as a collective body and that the narrator is against the Church rather than a part of it. It could be argued that Deane is referencing events that were happening when he was growing up. For example in the 1960s the Catholic Church came under scrutiny after it supported the reinforcement of public censorship and maintained its own list of banned literature until 1966[28]. Unlike Deane, an alternative exploration of Friel's 'Translations' suggests that the past cannot be erased. Friel presents this idea through the way in which the English attempt to Anglicise Ireland by translating the Irish place names into English. However, Owen, a native from Baile Beag whose job it is to translate the names for the English repeatedly, although almost unaware of it, makes mistakes in his translations, 'what sort of a translation was that Owen?, Did I make a mess of it?'[29]. It could be argued that the way that Owen mistranslates Lancey is to questions the assumption that the English make that a country's past can simply be erased. Friel's use of dramatic representation summarises this notion during the conversation between Yolland and Owen in Act Two, 'They explode with laughter, Owen pours drinks, their lines overlap.'[30]It could be argued that the way in which their lines are seen to 'overlap' suggests that the English will never be able to wipe out Ireland's past and Ireland's culture but rather they should respect it

and try to reconcile with it. From Heaney's poem ' Bogland' the reader can gain an alternative insight into Heaney's understanding of Ireland's past. In Bogland we see that Heaney views the land as central to an understanding of the Irish nation on the whole. It could be argued that Heaney is suggesting Ireland's past is sacred; layers of history are laid down upon layers, like peat in a bog. ' Our unfenced country, Is bog that keeps crusting, Between the sights of the sun'[31]. The bog acts as a metaphor for Ireland's history, Heaney implies that Ireland's history is a deep, dark, and long one. This is suggested by the final lines of the poem which portray Ireland's history as infinite, ' The wet centre is bottomless'. This suggests that Ireland is a strong nation with strong history and it will continue to persevere, this notion is summed up by Karin Sanders who suggests that Bogland is ' connected to persistence in the Irish psyche'. This is also suggested by the reference to the ' the Great Irish Elk', the elk is commonly referred to in Irish folklore and is symbolic for the strength and power of Ireland.[32]Furthermore it could be argued that the history of Ireland will continue to give the Irish people their strength, this is suggested by the line, ' The ground itself is kind, black butter', and the use of butter could suggest that it nourishes the Irish people. Therefore using ' Bogland' as an example we can argue that Heaney feels that Ireland's history is sacred and that it needs to be forever preserved. To conclude, I would argue that Deane, Friel and Heaney agree that the past has a negative effect on the present. All three of the writers emphasise a need to move on for the past, by concerning ourselves too much with the past we lose a grip on reality and our own lives. However, we can still learn from our mistakes in the past rather than repeating them, and ultimately,

the past can never be erased. Word count with quotes: 3235/3000
Word count without quotes: 2807/3000