

# Meaning through language in heaney's poetry

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Two of Seamus Heaney's poems that rely on the shifts in language to create meaning are "The Strand at Lough Beg" and "Casualty", both from his *Field Work* (1979) Anthology. Both poems revolve around the effects of sectarian violence in Ireland alluding to the fact that many Irish are not political driven and are collateral damage in the events. Through rich imagery and strong symbolism, Heaney utilises language to reflect on the Troubles in Ireland. The two poems "The Strand at Lough Beg" and "Casualty" reflect on victims of sectarian violence in Ireland who known personally to Heaney. In "The Strand at Lough Beg", Heaney tries to give back to his cousin, Colum McCartney, the dignity he lost due to the brutality of his death. McCartney was a victim of a roadside murder as he returned home from a Gaelic football match. Heaney was not actually present at his cousin's death but visualises an imaginary situation where he assumes the role of Dante from *Purgatorio*. Similar to this, Heaney invents memories of Louis O'Neill, the man killed in an Irish Republican Army (IRA) pub bombing. Parallels can be drawn between "The Strand at Lough Beg" and "Casualty" as they both utilise intertextuality in the poems through the language and imagery evoked in order to create imagined scenarios and reflect on the Troubles of Ireland. The early stanzas in "The Strand at Lough Beg" utilise pace and intertextuality to convey the sense of pursuit during Colum McCartney's death. The poem opens with an extract from Dante's *Purgatorio* "All around this little island, on the strand ... grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand" because Heaney chooses to assume the role of Dante in the poem. The first verses, through enjambment, flow with no pause thus creating a slow pace which is similar to how McCartney may have driven at night in a town that

was unknown to him. Heaney writes, " Leaving the white glow of filling stations and a few lonely streetlamps among the fields you climbed the hills towards Newtownhamilton..." the use of language evokes a slow pace within poem which contrasts with the next verse. Heaney uses shorter syllables such as " Goat-beards and dogs' eyes" to increase the pace and sibilance through " snapping and squealing" which contrasts to the stillness of the previous verses. The effect of language in this long opening sentence foreshadows the setting and nature of Colum McCartney's death. The use of language in " Casualty" is similar to that in " The Strand at Lough Beg" as Heaney juxtaposes calamity with violence through changes in the language. In the construction of the death of Louis O'Neill, Heaney writes " But my tentative art his turned back watches too..." referring to the previous discussion about how he and O'Neill would talk about "... lore of the horse and cart or the Provisionals". This discussion uses a regular rhyme scheme of A, B, A, B creating a calm pace especially through the use of phrases such as " at closing time would go in waders..." The calamity is quickly contrasted in the poem as Heaney states that " He (O'Neill) was blown to bits", a very abrupt manner of describing the death. The alliteration is filtered through the stanza with " blown", " bits" and " obeyed" which represents the sudden manner of O'Neill's death. Through the shifts and contrasts in language, Heaney is able to create imagined memories of the sudden nature of sectarian violence in Ireland. Language can be used to make reference to other literary works which Heaney often does to inform the reading of his own poems. As mentioned previously, Heaney uses the Purgatorio in " The Strand at Lough Beg" because he assumes the role of Dante during the

death of his cousin. Literary reference is also made to King Sweeney, an Irish myth about a kind who went mad during battle and turned into bird whilst being pursued by demons: "Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads". The imagery used in "The Strand at Lough Beg" also evokes similarities to the Michelangelo's "La Pieta", the statue of the Virgin Mary holding Christ after he has come down off the cross. During the imagined scene Heaney writes "I lift you under the arms and lay you flat" evoking tenderness that was absent during his cousin's actual death. Although Heaney does not necessarily state the literary or artistic influence, the imagery constructed alludes to other texts informing the reading of Heaney's works. Poets often have a distinct way of writing and parallels can be drawn between Heaney's past texts in "Casualty". It is known that Louis O'Neill was not actually a close friend of Heaney but more an acquaintance. Regardless, Heaney constructs a gentle image of himself and O'Neill on a boat going fishing as this was his profession. The poem speaks of how the two men were "on the water... banked under fog" as "the screw purling, turning" took them out to sea and Heaney "tasted freedom with him". The influence of W. B Yeats' "Fisherman" is seen here and also the influence of Heaney's past work, "The Tollund Man" where Heaney wrote about the body who was found in the 1950's that was a sacrifice to the fertility God, Nerphus. In "The Tollund Man", Heaney states how "something of his sad freedom... should come to me" resonating the language used in "Casualty". Furthermore, the Northern Reticence's which Heaney often speaks is conveyed in "Casualty" similar to how it is conveyed in "The Strand at Lough Beg" and the poem "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing". The recurring

language of the “ sideways talkers”, Irish who “ spoke an old language of conspirators” and spoke in “ smoke signals” is exemplified in many of the texts as Heaney uses symbolic language to mention the North Reticence. The use of recurring language from Heaney’s own work or other literary works is used to enhance the meaning of his poems especially those about the violence in Ireland. Seamus Heaney’s two poems “ The Strand at Lough Beg” and “ Casualty” rely on language to create meaning about the sectarian violence in Ireland. Heaney refers to his own literary works and other texts to inform the understanding of his own poems. Through vivid imagery, pace, sounds and representations, “ The Strand at Lough Beg” and “ Casualty” construct partially imagined situations with Colum McCartney and Louis O’Neill in order for Heaney to comment on the Troubles in Ireland.