

"at a potato digging" by seamus heaney essay sample

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“ At a Potato Digging’ by Seamus Heaney Essay Sample

“ At a Potato Digging” written by Seamus Heaney uses the natural activity of growing potatoes to portray a much deeper, more complex and involved meaning. The whole essence of this poem uses nature to depict and describe past situations. Heaney uses a normal aspect of farming to discuss and evaluate other issues such as the vagaries of nature, the Irish famine of the 1800’s, mankind’s relationship with nature and optimism for the future built on a sober respect for a bitter and tragic past.

The first stanza places the emphasis on the arduous (strenuous) work that the labourers had to endure whilst gathering the potato crop. Labourer’s... swarm... stoop... Fingers go bad in the cold... ” These words are associated with the past and the pain and suffering that the labourers had to endure each day. “ Fingers go dead in the cold” This statement is filled with irony when read in the full context of the poem. The phrase is used to convey the numbness caused to the hands by the intense cold, yet the somber irony is that during the Irish famine this hyperbole was a grim and literal reality.

Heaney continues to describe the figure of the labourers describing a visual image as though he is observing them from a distance. “ Like crows..... This simile has a deeper significance as crows and the colour black are associated with death. This, along with the sentence concluding stanza one, seems to be offering a subtle yet obvious reminder of the past where death was all too frequent. Crows are also an unpleasant species and using them to describe the labourers portrays an unattractive image and it is as if Heaney

is dehumanizing them. In the fourth stanza Heaney mentions the actual famine for the first time and he interweaves this idea with the view of the land as a God and the dual nature of the people's view of the land is explored.

As with the God of the Old Testament the people show two emotions. The first of these emotions is fear because of the punishing and deadly force against them in the past with the prolonged famine. Secondly they also show homage because of the initial fear. Deep respect is also shown as he could turn on them once again. In the preliminary section Heaney has gradually explored and expanded his meaning from the everyday gathering of the potato crop to highlight its deeper significance when he wants to explore the issue of the Irish famine which still continues to hold scars for the Irish people.

During this poem Seamus Heaney shows the level of ferocity and the undisputed power of nature together with the direct and influential impact it can have on people. However in Gillian Clarke's poem "A Difficult Birth, Easter 1998" she uses nature as a symbol for something else. She depicts a ewe giving birth to show the difficulties encountered in instigating peace treaties. Clarke uses the ewe giving birth to develop wider issues such as the Good Friday peace deals, the suffering of the Irish people and the need for peace, hope and optimism for the future.

This poem has links with "At a Potato Digging" as they are both based on types of birth and show elements of both positive and negative... the dual

aspects of nature. Gillian Clarke begins her poem describing her ewe and how she had never previously managed to become pregnant and how it was thought that she was unable to conceive, "... we thought her barren.... " This phrase has a dual meaning. The obvious meaning is that of the ewe when her owners had believed she was unable to conceive. Whereas the deeper meaning is connected with the Irish Peace Deal.

Peace in Ireland was an old trouble and had been out of peoples grasp for a long time, people had tried on many occasions unsuccessfully. It seems to me that Clarke may be suggesting that it seems that peace is barren, that it will never happen, " We strain together" This again uses nature to have dual meanings. This can be seen as a reference to the Peace Agreements as they were also a difficult process. The poet may also be referring to herself and the ewe as they struggle together during the birth. In the concluding stanza of " A Difficult Birth, Easter 1998" the ewe finally gave birth after much deliberation of her chances and her struggle.

After the ewe has given birth to her first lamb she then has her second lamb, however the second birth is much different to the first, " second lamb slips through" This phrase has another meaning as well as the obvious. Clarke believed that once one peace talk was overcome a tremendous obstacle had been removed and that it would be easier for peace to progress. That it would open up the gates for further peace negotiations. The content of Gillian Clarke's poem has similarities with that of Seamus Heaney " At a Potato Digging".

They both are concerned with Ireland and the history of the 1800's. However one of the vital differences is that in one poem the poet is dealing with suffering caused by nature and the other suffering because of people.

Another difference is that " A Difficult Birth, Easter 1998" is more optimistic than " At a Potato Digging" because Heaney believed that in the future there was always a chance the potato could turn bad again. Two other poems which have both direct and indirect links to these two poems are " Patrolling Barnegat" by Walt Whitman and John Clare's poem " Sonnet".

In " Patrolling Barnegat" Walt Whitman uses the natural world to show the absolute power and awesome majesty of the sea. However John Clare uses the natural world to fully express his continuous love of nature by using a much calmer method than Whitman. In " Patrolling Barnegat" Whitman attempts to recreate the sounds of a storm. Using this he conveys the vagaries of nature. This links with " At a Potato Digging" because they both deal with disasters inflicted by nature. In both poems nature is presented as cruel and fierce.

In part of Heaney's poem he describes how he feels about the earth, ' bitch earth' A statement from Whitman's poem conveys a similar meaning, ' demoniac laughter' Both the poems present the mercilessness of nature and the purpose of these statements is to convey the awesome ferocity and majesty of nature. However " Patrolling Barnegat" the poet focuses more on nature itself rather than using it to expand on a larger theme.

In " At a Potato Digging" Seamus Heaney uses a detailed description of the potatoes and uses a multi-sensory approach as he tells us what they are like, Flint-white , purple... knobbed and slit eyed... good smells exude... whose solid feel, whose wet inside ... promises taste of ground and root... " These references to four of the five senses creates a vivid description of the potato crop. Therefore it comes as a shock when we read the concluding line of this stanza " piled in pits ; live skulls , blind-eyed. " On the surface, this is a mere description of the many piles of potatoes that have been harvested but also a phrase that can also be used when referring to mass burials.

The ironic thing about this is that the piles of healthy potatoes that will provide a nutritious diet for the Irish people are also a reminder of the fact that in the past many people actually died of starvation during the Irish famine. " live skulls" is a drastic description of the dreadful situation the Irish people found themselves in during the potato famine they were like walking skeletons and although harvest time is a time to rejoice it is also a time to remember less fortunate times in the past.

In the 11th stanza the effective use of a bi-labial plosive is repeated, where the alliteration of ' p' conveys the poet's sense of anger and outrage. The phrase " pits turn to pus" gives us a powerful and revolting image of the decay, misery and decline of the Irish people. The idea nature is continually used throughout this poem but almost always having a dual meaning often referring to the Irish Famine. During Heaney's poem he uses para rhyme which is the opposite of rhyming couplets as the rhyme lacks in harmony but does fit in with the purpose of creating a jarring effect.

This is a direct contrast with John Clare's poem as he uses rhyming couplets throughout to create a flowing rhythm and the sound also reflects upon the theme of his poem. John Clare in his poem uses a sonnet form to convey his love of nature and the poem as a whole has a much calmer ambience than Whitman's' poem. In this poem nature is the focus here, as in Whitman, but in contrast with Heaney and Clarke who expand on the themes of nature to provide an Irish dimension.