

Seamus heaney-
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Seamus Heaney is both a personal and political poet. He has written deeply personal poems such as “ The Underground”, “ Skunk”, and “ A Call”, captivatingly political poems, such as “ The Tollund Man” and “ The Forge” or some that lie in-between, such as “ A Constable Calls”. Either way, Heaney has a unique ability to capture a wide audience with his poems which might take place in ordinary settings, but which are extraordinarily imaginative.

One of Heaney’s most personal poems, in my opinion, is “ the underground”. Here he tells of the excitements and fears of married life. It is set in London where Heaney and his new wife are on their honey moon rushing to get to a concert on time. He makes this poem deeply personal by showing us the kind of doubts and fears that no-one else would admit to having, but also the anticipation and excitement of it all. The title in itself gives us a huge insight into these feelings. It could have many meanings, but to me “ The Underground” suggests a journey, in this case the journey of marriage. The fast moving nature of trains suggests a sense of excitement and anxiety and conjures up images of abandonment. The darkness of the tunnels enforces a sense of fear, the fear of the unknown and a fear of failure. The first half of the poem captures the joy, excitement and energy of an early married life. The description of his wife’s buttons as they, “ sprang off and fell in a trail” suggests the joy and abandonment of the young couple.

The use of the present participle in words- “ running”, “ mooning” lends it a never-ending quality and a sense of immediacy. Heaney uses various references of Greek myths and fairytales to convey his feelings of excitement and uncertainty; this gives the poem a sense of timelessness and

universality, opening it up to a wide audience. The honesty with which Heaney writes this incredibly personal poem is to me very admirable. In the last verse he says “ all attention for your step following and damned if I look back”. This is a reference to the underworld and the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, if he looks back he will lose his wife forever and so his tone of determination in these last lines shows us his complete commitment and loyalty to his wife and that is romantic. Eleven years later and Heaney is writing another love poem, but this one is completely different to “ the Underground” in that his doubts are gone and they are still hopelessly in love with each other.

In “ the Skunk” Heaney compares his wife to, yes, a Skunk. This unusual metaphor could only work if their relationship was rock solid and if his wife had a sense of humour. The poem starts of with Heaney describing a skunk he saw while writing to his wife from California. “ Up, black, striped and damasked” The commas and the use of “ and” give each aspect of the tail a separate focus. That first long sentence follows the skunks arrival and movement; it ends with a flourish: “ the skunk’s tail paraded the skunk” The second stanza Heaney masterfully evokes the atmosphere of a California evening: the smell of “ eucalyptus”, the humming fridge, the soft light spilling onto the verandah, and the orange trees in the yard at the edges of its glow. Verse four is very lyrical with all its assonance and sibilance, the Beautiful musical sound gives it a romantic feel. There is a tone of anticipation throughout the poem, he longs for his wife. He creates this with his slow rhythm at parts and hurried at others.

In verse five Heaney describes the Skunk/his wife as “ mythologized, demythologized” this tells us that after eleven years of marriage he has come to understand his wife but that she is still as mysterious as when they first met. This is a deeply romantic poem. Again Heaney sets this poem in a real part of his making it intimate and personal. The setting and basic storyline are very ordinary, but it’s the way he writes, that give the poem its mysterious feel. Not until the final stanza do we know how he made the connection between the skunk and His wife, how it all came back to him “ last night”. The last Poem that I would regard as very personal is “ A Call”. It is exactly what it says on the box, a call, but it is a call between father and son were the realisation occurs that one might not be there much longer. The first stanza opens with dialogue: ““ hold on” she said” this unusual technique makes the poem more personal and lends it immediacy.

In the second stanza Heaney imagines his father in the garden weeding. He portrays his father as a gentle and sensitive man; he removes the weeds from his leek bed, but does so gently, seeming to regret the need to kill these invading plants. His posture though; on “ his hands and knees” gives us the idea of his fragility. The poem is deeply concerned with death and the passage of time. Heaney tells us about the story of everyman who receives an unexpected visit from death. This ancient tale stresses how everyone must face death someday. This thought is amplified by the sound of “ clocks” ticking in the hallway, bringing us ever closer to deaths door. When the father answers the phone, Heaney has an urge to say “ I love you”, but he doesn’t. This offers us a view into the difficulty that fathers and sons have in expressing love they feel for each other. Yet again Heaney’s uncanny ability

to understand human thoughts and emotions, and setting them in everyday events makes for a universally personal poem.

“ The Tollund Man” is one of Heaney’s more political poems. In this poem Heaney sees a connection between prehistoric ritual violence and contemporary violence in his native Ulster. Heaney opens the poem very peacefully with lots of soft sounds: “ mild pods” “ brown head”, he describes the sacrifice of the Tollund man who was given up to the fertility Goddess Nerthus in order to guarantee a fertile spring. Although this might seem irrational and pointless to most, I think that Heaney understands that the Tollund man’s death would have ultimately united the community in which he lived. In contrast he later goes on to describe the murder of “ four young brothers” in Ulster. There is no softness in his description of their brutal deaths; instead the rhythm is staccato like, conveying the frenzy and brutality of these events. The description is detailed and gruesome: “ skin and teeth flecking the sleepers”, Heaney shows the bare hatred and mindless violence of their deaths.

I think that Heaney is trying to find some sort of reason in all this violence, but he comes to no conclusion, he said himself that he has searched for “ images and symbols adequate to our predicament”. The poem ends on a bleak comment on the state of human kind. In his other poem “ The Forge” he also ends on a similar note, but in this instance he sees our culture as lacking substance when a blacksmith looks out at the “ traffic” “ flashing in rows”, the assonance here creates a sad lamenting tone. Some of Heaney’s poems are both personal and political, such a poem would be “ a constable calls” which describes childhood unease and fear. In this poem Heaney is the

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young observer and describes a visit from a constable. Interestingly Heaney does not tell us what the man looks like but rather describes his possessions. This dehumanises him and alienates him from the Heaney family. The pedal of the constable's bike is said to be "relieved" from his boot. This refers to the cruelty of the law.

The constable is described as unwelcome and the enemy, Heaney's father does not even offer to take his hat. The many times "his" is mentioned suggests the idea, that the constable owns the Heaney family. The boy is clearly frightened of the man; he is scared of the consequences of not telling the truth about the "line of turnips". The way he concentrates on the weapon suggests a weariness of the law. This poem is an insight into what it must have felt like growing up in the catholic minority in Ulster. This is the political aspect, but I would argue that it is a more personal poem. We must remember that it is written from the perspective of a small frightened boy and so is more than likely blown somewhat out of proportion. This intimate view into the mind of a child is most personal in my opinion.

Heaney's poetry is always personal, even when it is political. And that is what makes him so accessible to such a wide audience. I have been able to connect with all of his poems that I have read and can really appreciate his talent. We see his ability to be intimate and close with a reader and also address such social problems as the Troubles in the North and the slipping place of true art in our modern world.