

Candidate 1

Lit study

Nobel prize winning poet Seamus Heaney themes many of his poems around the ideas of change and the repercussions of this change. Heaney uses nature to illustrate this change, creating compelling, semi-autobiographical, accounts of changes. In his poem "Death of a Naturalist," (DOAN) Heaney describes the awakening of childhood sexuality, evoking this theme by using a seemingly childish voice and references to nature, specifically frogspawn, to illustrate this change. In "Blackberry Picking," (BP) Heaney describes a seemingly innocent event where he and a friend picked blackberries, but with sinister undertones used to emphasise change and designed to further emphasise the clashing ideas of childhood and adulthood. "Personal Helicon," (PH) describes Heaney's personal growth as a poet, indicating how his experiences with wells contributed to his poetic style and how his mind set changed through these numerous experiences. There are several recurring motifs through these three poems which Heaney uses to indicate change as well as several differences which serve to more deeply explore particular aspects of change.

In DOAN, Heaney recounts a particular year where he became fascinated with frogs as well as alluding to the changes which one goes through during puberty, using his experience with frogs to indicate this change. The poem begins with:

"All year the Flax-dam festered in the heart/ of the town land; green and heavy headed/ flax had rotted there."

In this opening Heaney makes subtle reference to the changes that will later be explored through his use of double syntax at the end of the first line and beginning of the second. "Festered in the heart," when examined on its own, without the appended "of the town land," indicates a more personal change than would initially be obvious. The word choice of "festered" is masterfully, giving the impression of a rampant and negative growth. The connotations of a festering wound bring to mind a growing bacteria, eating its host to grow. In this way, Heaney likens the growth of childhood sexuality to disease, eating what was once wholesome. Furthermore, Heaney uses the word "green," which brings with it its own connotations of innocence, though describing the flax dam, the reader attains a sense that this word has greater meaning, referring also to the innocence of the voice. In doing this, Heaney establishes a norm that he will later subvert to great effect as well as foreshowing the coming changes through his use of double syntax. Later in this section of the poem, Heaney refers to the principal literal focus of the poem:

"But best of all was the warm thick slobber/ of frogspawn that grew like clotted water."

Heaney in these lines expertly conveys both the opinions held by the voice as well as causing a opposite reaction in the reader. "But," indicates the change in tone of this sense, having followed a list of more traditionally beautiful aspects of nature, Heaney builds to a climax here, creating a sense that that a more beautiful aspect will be described here. However, the voice's joyous description of the "warm thick slobber," creates a sense of disgust in the reader, counter to the voice's own views. In doing so, Heaney creates a divide between reader and voice so as to further illustrate the changes that come during the transition of child to adult by provoking a disgusted response from the adult to counter the excited tone of the voice.

In BP, Heaney, as in DOAN delivers his narrative by using a childish voice. However, unlike DOAN, Heaney applies a sinister aspect to this voice to further indicate change. The central theme is explored early on with:

“You ate the first one and it’s flesh was sweet/ like thickened wine : summer’s blood was in it/ leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for picking.” In these lines, Heaney portrays a lack of childhood innocence as well as referencing religious ideas. Firstly, Heaney uses several words which contrast with the childish voice used. “Lust,” particularly indicate a level of sinister intent which is not present in the literal narrative, by doing this Heaney presents the reader with the reader, as he does in DOAN, with a clash between a child’s perspective and an adult’s. However, in this case it is far more overt, being included in the body of the main text, unlike in DOAN where it was subtle, requiring the reader to come to this conclusion on their own. Further more, the religious symbolism of these lines is important: “Flesh” and “wine,” through their connotations with the eucharist, make reference to the passion of the Christ. In making this reference, Heaney the voice’s journey that of Christ, indicating the suffering and pain that the martyr received to be analogous with the journey of BP’s voice who suffers in order to attain his goal, he too walking a path of thorns. This is however, masterfully subverted in the concluding stanza of the poem, but this shall be explored more later.

“Personal Helicon,” then title of another Heaney poem which explores change provides the reader with the key theme of the poem. The “Helicon,” is a river present in Greek myth, it was said that he who drank from this river received the gift of poetry. The additional element of “Personal,” indicates that the poem will follow Heaney’s own journey to becoming a poet. The additional suggestion of a river further emphasises the theme of the poem which presents this journey through the use of water. The poem begins with an establishment of the voice’s mind set, presented through said voice staring into a deep well:

“I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky.”

In this line Heaney explores the voice’s love of a pre-defined world, free of any deeper significance. “I loved the dark drop,” refers to the voice’s desire to remain ignorant of his own reflection and lack of desire to witness his own reflection. This is also expertly shown in the somewhat ironic “trapped sky.” The sky, as it is typically envisioned is impossibly massive. By referring to a “trapped” sky, the poet shows the voice to be naïve, believing that a great formless mass can be so easily trapped. This indicates ignorance on behalf of the voice who does not see the depth and richness in life, believing his pre-conceived notions to be abject truth. This changes through the poem and is representative for Heaney’s own mind set which changed through his life.

In the main body of DOAN, Heaney refers to the voice’s naïve view of the world and his ignorance as to the adult world as well as a lack of shame:

“I would fill jam pots of the jellied specks/ to range on windowsills at home.”

This refers to the voice’s propensity for trapping tadpoles and proudly displaying his spoils. The use of tadpoles however is a veiled reference to spermatozoa, as noted by Camus in his critique of DOAN. This serves the purpose of showing a child’s lack of shame, proudly displaying the fetid substance on a window sill for all to see. This subtle metaphor used here establishes the lack of self consciousness

which a child has of his own bodily functions, this later changing in the poem's concluding section where the principle changes explored by Heaney become more obvious.

In the middle of BP, makes further use of religious symbolism to enhance his poem:

"Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots."

This makes further reference to the passion of the Christ, with a link between the crown of thorns and the "briars," this indicates suffering, in context referring to a pursuit of goal. However, though Christ's ambitions are noble, the voice's are far more self serving, a idea which later comes into play. Further more: "wet grass bleached our boots," metaphorically refers to the purification brought with penance. By suffering through the scratching briars, the voice hopes to be cleaned of all stains, continuing in hopes of redemption. Further connections with the story of christ are present, with the washing of the feet at the last supper, done to show humbleness and to cleanse sin. By making this reference here, Heaney further his display of change through symbolism. By portraying the journey taken as a penance, Heaney indicates the voice's desire for change. As in DOAN, the poet makes use of veiled metaphor to communicate this as well as inter textual references as in "Personal Helicon," though instead of Greek mythology, the poet here uses the bible to illustrate his point.

In PH, Heaney uses two contrasting set pieces to illustrate his change from that he views as a normal person into a poet. The first well, visited in the second stanza, is an urban well located "in a brick yard." This well, the voice says: "Is so deep you saw no reflection." The most important aspect of this line to note is the use of the pronoun "You." Heaney uses this to distance the reader and the voice to emphasise the difference between them. The reflection in PH is symbolic of the poetic mind and the ability to utter the ineffable. By using "You," in relation to a lack of reflection, Heaney shows the reader as incapable of reaching his level of poetic mastery. Though not done with prideful intent, Heaney serves to indicate the changes in his path of life compared to the readers which made him a poet.

Heaney later goes on to illustrate these changes in no uncertain terms, referring to his visit to a more rural well: "When you dragged out long root from the soft mulch/ a white face hovered over the bottom." Further use of the pronoun "You" indicates a change, in this case, the non-descript reflection, in combination with "you" shows a level of superficial mastery. In addition, "a white face hovered over the bottom," serves to show a increment on Heaney's transition to becoming a poet. The white face, devoid of features metaphorically indicates his lack of depth in exploration of himself, only seeing his pure side, conveyed by the word choice of "White." As with both DOAN and BP, Heaney uses nature to show this change with; "Long roots from of mulch." This refers to the voice's personal journey towards poetry, where, although he saw nothing an urban well, he sees a reflection of himself in the more rural well.

In the concluding section of DOAN, Heaney shows the loss of childhood innocence through an encounter with seemingly hostile frogs: "the slop and plop were obscene threats. Some sat poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting. I sickened turned and ran." The use of alliteration here serves to create a tone of disgust, evoked both by the voice and by the reader. Furthermore, the use of "Farting," a word considered humorous by children, in such a serious context indicates the voices realization of shame. Unlike earlier where the poet referred to the voice

proudly displaying his "Jellied specks," the poet here shows the child's self consciousness and realization of shame, completing the change thematic to the poem, the death of innocence.

In the concluding section of BP, Heaney depicts the voice's reaction to his ruined black berries: "I always felt like crying, it wasn't fair... Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not." The childish tone use in "it wasn't fair," contrasts with the previous sinister undertones illustrating change in and of itself as well as a shared fear of the death, expressed through the rotting blackberries. Furthermore, Heaney ties to get his his religious symbolism with: Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not." In the passion, Christ ensure eternal life through his suffering, however, through his suffering, the voice achieves only disappointment a memento mori. This illustrates the human condition and is perhaps symbolic of Heaney's own crisis of faith. They use of "hoped" brings to mind the principle of faith in religious practices, the further use of "Knew they would not" depicts this faith as misplaced. However, continued struggle is implied, making PH the odd one out in the three explored poem, with a significant profound change taking place in DOAN and PH, but no change taking place in BP.

In the final section of PH, Heaney refers to the voice's personal realization of poetry: "To stare, big eyed narcissus into some spring/ is beneath all adult dignity." The poet here comes to terms with the negative aspects of him self shown in his true reflection. By referencing Narcissus, a Greek figure who fell in love with his reflection, and saying that to mimic his behaviour is below his dignity, illustrates the changes the voice has gone through. The now more tonally adult voice indicates that his past forays with wells and his desire to see his reflection are folly. The poet then continues with: "I rhyme to set the darkness echoing." By saying this, the voice is stating that it now relies on poetry to see itself in a truer light. Furthermore, change is further illustrated by the contrast of "To set the darkness echoing," with the beginning o the poem: " I loved the dark drop." The voices maturity is shown by the fact that he is no longer content with formless darkness, he now wants to explore this formless mass, rather than simply looking and appreciating its majesty, thus is the poet, according to Heaney.

In conclusion, the poet shows changes in the three previously explored poems which deal with different aspects of said change. DOAN shows the loss of childhood innocence through nature. BP does something similar, showing a loss of object permanence, using both nature and symbolism to accomplish this. PH also shows change, using nature, as in DOAN, and symbolism, as in BP, to show the voices transition towards poetry. In conclusion, Heaney uses several aspects to convey change in his poems with several recurring motif such as nature and inter textual references present in both.