

# New Historicism and the Story of Potatoes in Seamus Heaney's Select Poems

**Dr. V. C. PRIYADHARSHINI**

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English  
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi

"What I say is that, if a fellow really likes potatoes,  
he must be a pretty decent sort of fellow."

-A. A. Milne (Lunch)

## Abstract

Food excites everybody in this world. More than being a basic need, for many eating good food is an experience. Potatoes are staple food in many countries and there are over 4080 species. Potatoes are native to the Peruvian-Bolivian Andes. They became a major crop in Ireland during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Hailing from a country where potatoes are famous, Seamus Heaney writes about potatoes and potato farming in his poems which is an important cultural mark in Irish history. Heaney assimilates his relationship with potatoes which helps him to lead his readers towards his past. On the other side, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt in their essay "The Potato in the Materialist Imagination" shed light on the different side of the 'Ur-food'. This paper attempts to bring out the historical significance and the warmth of potatoes from the Irish roots as depicted by Seamus Heaney and also the role of 'batata' in weaving a different history as mentioned by Gallagher and Greenblatt.

**Keywords:** new historicism, roots, story, warmth, home, love.

Potato is a tuber largely cultivated in South America. Surprisingly, potatoes occupy a prominent place in the history of Ireland too. In her book Eveleen Coyle writes, "When the potato was introduced to Ireland in the early 17th century, it changed our whole way of life. Grown from seed potatoes laid in trenches or drills, the potato suited the stony and boggy land in a way that corn and grain crops, so popular in Europe, did not."<sup>(1)</sup> Seamus Heaney represents his history, culture and traditions through his poems. Even though he has written several poems on the social unrest in Northern Ireland and also on the famous archaeological excavations of the Irish Peat Bogs, his poems on potatoes had always been an interesting read. The vivid description of potatoes and the usage of imagery as a literary device make his writings soulful. Potatoes in his poems not only occupy a thematic position but it appears more like a celebration in his poems. Heaney is not the only poet who has used potatoes in his poems. Allen Ginsberg in his "Howl" writes, "who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the

madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy." In these lines Allen Ginsberg discusses Dadaism, an avant-garde artistic movement in France characterized by absurdity and rule-breaking. He uses the potato salad as a tool to break the rule by throwing it on the Professor.

In Gwendolon Brooks' poem "The Lovers of the poor" the lines, "All tumbling children, quilts dragged to the floor, And tortured there over, potato peelings," describe the condition of the poor people and the potato peelings become a part of the narration. But in Seamus Heaney's poems he gives a major role to the potatoes because they are part of not just himself but his culture.

M.H.Abrams writes, "new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluation". Seamus Heaney's poems pave the way to such historical observations. His poems speak about potatoes and bogs which occupy a major part in the history of Ireland. His first major collection of poetry *Death of a Naturalist* was written in the year 1966, a very

interesting period when modernism was seeping slowly into Postmodernism. While modernism rejected traditional ways, postmodernism deliberately included earlier styles. Coincidentally Seamus Heaney's writing is a perfect mix of both modernism and traditionalism. His subject includes his history and tradition but by becoming a writer he chooses modernism.

Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenbalt in their essay "The Potato in the Materialist Imagination" on the other hand show potatoes as a political symbol, a food that differentiates the rich from the poor. They write,

Although bread has this synecdochal function in European Culture (even in Ireland people don't ask God to, "Give us this day our daily potatoes"), the potatoes, introduced much later, is imagined to be the more primitive contender because it comes right out of the earth, haphazardly shaped, like a cloth of dirt, but virtually ready to eat. (113)

This makes one think that, being looked upon like that in the historical context, how does Heaney position 'bread' and 'potatoes' in his poems. In the essay, the new historians also write about how England viewed Ireland as a land without bread. They also discuss the famous myth, which says that when Raleigh, who was believed to have introduced potatoes in Ireland saw the plant growing, tasted the fruit, thinking it to be the edible part of the plant. But, because the fruits were bitter he ordered them to be cut down without knowing that the edible part was to be found in the root. They further add that these ignored roots grew strong under the soil and the writers compare this growth to that of Catholicism that flourished in Ireland. Coincidentally, Seamus Heaney was raised as a Catholic. This again asserts Heaney's bond towards this past.

When one clearly observes the poems of Heaney, both bread and potatoes have a place in his poetry. Knowingly or unknowingly Heaney places words related to bread mostly in his poems that revolve around the theme 'death'. Poems like "Kinship", "The Grauballe Man", "Funeral Rites", "I- Sunlight", "Tolland Man" and "Audenesque" mention bread. Example in the poem "Tolland Man" he writes, 'His last gruel of winter seeds Caked in his stomach'. Even though there is a mention of winter seeds in these lines the usage of the word cake

instead of any other word is highly significant. The poems that mention potatoes are works where he discusses his good old days, especially the one that involves his family. In "Digging" Seamus Heaney goes back in memory lane and describes his grandfather's days in the potato field and he also describes how his father was also a part of potato farming. He begins the poem by giving the readers a picture of his father digging potatoes while he listens to the sound of the process. At this point of time he is not part of potato digging but he is part of something else which he explains at the end of the poem.

When a writer describes his past in his writings, he either misses it now or he wishes to go back in time to that moment. In "Digging" Heaney thinks about his past and writes a poem about the potatoes. His writing skills, memories of his past and the life of his grandfather and his father, are all connected to one single hero, the potato. In this poem the potato is not just a food but it is a symbol that connects Heaney with his ancestors. Heaney lets the reader to experience it through this imagery,

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.

When a reader reads these lines he is transported to the potato farm and he experiences the wetness of the field and the raw smell of the potatoes dug out. "Digging" looks more like a beginning story of the potatoes. Heaney clearly describes how his connection with potatoes started. Unlike his forefathers, Heaney lives the experience not through digging the potato fields but by digging his mind and memories. Heaney's mind is the field and his poems are the harvest or the potatoes. While "Digging" is the beginning of the story, "At Potato Digging" describes the dark side of the life of the Irish potato. Henry Hart writes, "The poem is a pastoral elegy for the famine victims of 1845 that places the human deaths into the larger context of nature's ineluctable, regenerative rhythm. It commemorates the toil and death of past farmers" (28)

The Great Famine of Ireland in the 1840's left an unforgettable mark in the history of Ireland. After so many years people still talk about the famine. People suffered poverty and they starved to death. The poem begins with the harvest of the potatoes and this description again takes

us to the field where the readers enjoy the warmth of the potatoes along with the poet. All of a sudden there is a twist in the story and the poet introduces the reader not to the 'cold smell of the potatoes' (Digging) but to the 'stinking potatoes' (At Potato Digging) that 'fouled the land.' The life of the potato takes a turn at this point of time, the writer takes the reader to a deadly past from the present day. Floyd Collins writes, "The poem marks Heaney's first attempt to extract a vital myth from a national tragedy. In light of historic events, he sees the potato as a *memento mori* peculiar to his native soil."<sup>(44)</sup>

The story of the potato thus progresses further and in 'For the commander of the Eliza' he describes the effect of the famine on the lives of the people. Heaney through both these poems reminds the Irish people of what will happen if they ignore or take their culture for granted. In "At Potato Digging" Heaney uses phrases like 'bowing to the land to pick the potatoes' and also words like 'altar' and 'famine God' he attaches religious connotations to the field and food. This reminds one of Greenbalt's idea of calling the bread as the food of the god as seen by a few 'potato debaters'.

In "For the Commander of the Eliza" Heaney does not directly use the word potato but the below lines can symbolically mean the real absence of the potatoes in the lives of the Irish people during the famine and what it did to them,

Six grown men with gaping mouths and eyes  
 Bursting the sockets like spring onions in drills.  
 Six wrecks of bone and pallid, tautened skin.  
 "Biadh, biadh, biadh," in whines and snarls their  
 desperation  
 Rose and fell like a flock of starving gulls.

In "A Constable Calls" the poetic persona feels strange and uneasy when his father lies about potatoes to a police constable. The small boy does not know why his father lied about growing potatoes while it was actually turnips in the fields. Even though it might seem to be a small lie the fear it sent into the boy's heart clarifies the effect of the absence of potato.

After a warning, Heaney again takes the reader to a warmer side of the potatoes. Warmth is a very emotional term because often it is connected with 'home'. Home for

some might mean a physical place, but for many it is an ardent connection to something or even someone. Sometimes even when a person lives in a physical home of his own, he or she will still feel lonely or experience ennui. Seamus Heaney experiences warmth while writing about potatoes in his poems. Ironically Heaney uses words like 'cold', 'wet' and 'Soggy' only to denote the warmth of the potatoes.

In "When all the others were away at mass", Heaney depicts beautifully the warmth that the potatoes can provide to his life. In this poem he describes his relationship with his mom. The poet's mom is on her deathbed and lots of people are attending her and at that moment of time the poetic persona's heart takes him back to a time where his mom and him spent time together peeling potatoes. That warm memory provides him comfort today when his mom is on her deathbed. In most of his poems Heaney takes the readers on a journey to his past or history and brings them back to the present, thus bringing out a connection between the two. Heaney places most of his poems with his cultural narrative as a background which makes his poems authentic and warm. Heaney's poems cannot be fully understood without these historical references. New Historicism advocates this interrelationship that exists between a text and the context in which it originated.

His other poems also discuss the bogs of Ireland which is also a historical symbol of Ireland. Heaney in his essay "Feeling into Words", writes that he was very much influenced by P.V.Glop's *The Bog People* which surprisingly is not a book of literature but an archaeological study of the bog people. This again proves Seamus Heaney's ardent love for history.

Heaney feels at home when he writes about potatoes and one observes that potatoes have become a part of his life and also a part of himself. The reader too transcends into that experience while reading his poems. Heaney makes use of potatoes as a tool to discuss his history and brings out the significance of potatoes of Ireland and hence his poems cannot be studied in isolation ignoring the history of Ireland.

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