

Aesthetic And Cognitive Values Of Seamus Heaney's Wintering Out: A Fryean Approach To Selected Poems

Bikram Keshari Rout¹, Manisha Panda², Rebecca Bhattacharya³, , Pranati Mihsra⁴

^{1,4}Assistant Professor, Gandhi Institute for Technology

^{2,3}Assistant Professor, Gandhi Engineering College, BBSR, Odisha.

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study investigates the relevance of the aesthetic values to the cognitive values in the poetry of the Anglo-Irish poet Seamus Heaney 1939-2013. It examines "The Tollund Man," "Servant Boy," "Gifts of Rain" and "Limbo" from his poetry collection Wintering Out (1972), and focuses on their treatment of rebirth imagery and archetypes aiming to address their aesthetic and conceptual features.

Methodology: The study approaches the poetry of Seamus Heaney using Northrop Frye's critical archetypal approach to literature. It is based on examining the mythical aspects and archetypes of the literary text as a way to highlight its value, whether the aesthetic which is concerned with the artistic side of literature or the cognitive which is related to its epistemological value.

Main Findings: The study concludes with the assumption that Heaney's poetry, which is part of the modern poetic tradition, occasionally resorts to mythology as a way of intensifying its both aesthetic and cognitive values. The reason lies in the beauty mythology adds to the poetic creation, and the focus it sheds on the thematic features of the work.

Applications of this study: This study proposes a creative-critical model that can help the scholars of literature, particularly those who study the cognitive value of literature and the literary archetypal theory to employ while dealing with literary texts that utilize mythical archetypes so as to distinguish their aesthetic and cognitive features.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study proposes an application of Frye's theories to Heaney's poetry which forms scholarship on Heaney, and to the best of my knowledge, hasn't examined. Besides, Frye's archetypal theory is applied in a creative way seeking to examine the mythical aspects of Heaney's poetry aiming to emphasize aspects that are not only cognitive and thematic but also cultural and aesthetic.

Keywords: Cognition, Aestheticism, Seamus Heaney, Northrop Frye, Wintering Out, Rebirth Archetypes.

I. INTRODUCTION

This study examines the relevance of the aesthetic values to the cognitive values in the poetry of the Anglo-Irish poet Seamus Heaney 1939-2013, with a focus on his poetry that employs mythical archetypes and imagery of rebirth. It approaches Heaney's poems "The Tollund Man," "Servant Boy," "Gifts of Rain" and "Limbo" from his poetry collection Wintering Out (1972) using Northrop Frye's critical archetypal theory. A great deal of Northrop Frye's critical thought is dependent on the investigation of the use of mythical imagery and archetypes in the literary work. An important site of the significance of the Fryman archetypal approach to literature is the emphasis it places on the aesthetic and cognitive values that mythology brings to the literary work where it is employed, and the inseparability of these two substantial concepts in the literary works that utilize mythology. It is against this background that the Fryean archetypal approach to literature can be purposefully applied to examine and highlight the cognitive and aesthetic significance of

any literary work that relies on mythical symbolism to convey beauty and thought.

Historical background

The aesthetic and cognitive values of poetry have been essential literary features common in poetry overages. They have acquired different names over time. The Roman poet Horace (1989) argues in *Ars Poetica* (c. 10-8 BC) that successful poetry combines particular qualities that make it "utile et dulce,"¹ meaning useful and sweet. Chaucer shows awareness of these concepts in *The Canterbury Tales* (1400) where he states in his hypothetical commentary on the best tale that it is the one demonstrating the "best sentence and most solace,"² in other words, it is the work that best teaches and amuses. Arnold (1882) uses the phrase "sweetness and light," signifying beauty and intelligence, to highlight the essential features of good literature. These views among others have emphasized the importance of the integration of concepts of beauty, related to aestheticism, and knowledge, related to cognition, in works of literature. As part of the global poetic corpus,

Heaney introduces his readers to a realm where “the aesthetic and intellectual experiment attempted in each Heaney poem is a serious one” (Vendler 1998). His cultural, social and political experience flows like the Irish rivers through his poems to engulf them within elaborate artistic forms of aestheticism and fill them with tremendous connotations reflecting on the human world in general, and the Irish condition in particular.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Frye (1970) argues about the inseparability of concepts of admiration of literature resulted from the appreciation of its aesthetic qualities and the experience acquired by the connection the reader establishes with literature’s cognitive values. He states that people’s interaction with literature helps them to admire it in a way that enables them to improve their life. Frye calls the literary scholars to appreciate the value literature brings to their world by concentrating on the structural and conceptual aspects of the literary work.

Frye (1957) classifies the symbols and archetypes derived from mythology and employed in the literature. He analyzes their meaning and common uses in poetry. Considerable attention is given to the archetypes of rebirth needed for the investigation of the poetry of Heaney in this study. Frye points that they are originally part of the fertility myths, and that the concept of rebirth in poetry does not always require the involvement of a fertility god in the literary work, but an allusion to him by employing a symbol or imagery that signifies rebirth such as the revival of nature, the growth of the grain, the bloom of the flowers, the birth of the new year, the running of the river, the rise of the sun and the coming of spring. Frye distinguishes different cycles of life in this regard which the symbols of rebirth form part of. These cycles are those of the year, the day and of water.

Frye (1963) defines the concept of archetype in literature as a symbol or series of symbols used frequently by writers of literature so they become conventional as signs referring to certain referents signifying particular meanings. Archetypes originally generated in mythology as they form the structure of the oldest works of literature; the meaning of later literary works that use those archetypes, therefore, depends mostly on the meaning of the archetypes in mythology. The interpretation of Heaney’s poems that employ archetypes of rebirth will consequently depend on tracing the structural relationships between them and other common rebirth archetypes.

Scholarship on Heaney includes Hart (1989). He argues that Heaney relies on rebirth myths and archetypes in creating the imagery of his poetry. Hart interprets some of the rebirth

archetypes Heaney employs and speculates about their meaning by linking them to the revival of the arid land that signifies the freedom Heaney desires for his motherland Ireland. Hart also focuses on Heaney’s treatment of archetypes related to the rites of sacrifice that form part of the fertility myths and emphasizes the relationship between sacrifice and rebirth in Heaney’s poetry. Hart concludes with an important reference to Heaney’s “bog poems” that form a great part of Heaney’s *Wintering Out*, particularly the poetry that utilizes rebirth archetypes.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study approaches the poetry of Seamus Heaney using the Fryean archetypal approach to literature. Frye’s critical perspective relies on the investigation of the employment of mythology in the literary work. He highlights the significance of the aesthetic and cognitive values found in the literary text that employs mythology through his emphasis on the inseparability of concepts of admiration of literature and the experience acquired by reading it and enjoying its mythical aspects. Frye (1970) argues that the teaching of literature “should lead us, not simply to admire works of literature more, but to transfer something of their imaginative energy to our own lives.” Literature in this respect is a highly instructive medium, and its scholars are invited therefore to focus on its structural and epistemological elements, which are the most relevant to the concepts of aestheticism and cognition respectively, and considered necessary to increase the intellectual gain of the reading activity of literary works.

Frye’s archetypal approach to literature emphasizes the role of the mythical features that exist in the literary piece in creating its structure. It highlights the importance of examining the mythical structuralistic aspects of literature because they are significant in enriching the literary cognition on the one hand, and have the power to connect literature together on the other (Frye 1970). Frye (1963) in this regard states that “every poem must be examined as a unity, but no poem is an isolatable unity. Every poem is inherently connected with other poems of its kind, whether explicitly... or implicitly.” Myth in this context functions as a unifying power that connects the literary texts together. The investigation of literature hereby becomes characterized by the importance of examining every single literary work and the significance of the investigation of the general mythical structures that connect all the literary works together. Works of literature should not consequently be treated separately apart from each other since they are well-connected by a solid

mythical structure no matter how removed from each other in time or space. Frye argues that myth and the language of myth form the 'stubborn' structure that holds literature together (Frye 1970). In consideration of the foregoing, this study deals with Heaney's poetry that employs mythology as part of a larger mythical structure that functions as an enriching source of the aesthetic and cognitive values for his works. The objectives of the study are achieved by tracing the mythical archetypal relationships between Heaney's poetic works and the relevant archetypes in other works of literature and in the classical myths themselves.

IV. DISCUSSION

Literature, aestheticism, and cognition

Literature is a branch of art distinguished by its employment of language as a means of creating beauty and conveying a thought. Other types of art utilize other tools to serve the same purpose, which is considered the end of art and of literature in turn. A poem that keeps a delightful memory in the mind of the reader definitely owns a great aesthetic value reflected in its everlasting appeal. Imagination plays an important role in creating this effect insofar as "it is supportive of the artistic value concerned with the making of the poem, and of the aesthetic value by adding pleasure to its reading experience" (Alsyouf 2018). Another value language adds to literature is that of cognition as far as language is a way of communicating knowledge. The purpose of poetry in this regard is significantly associated with achieving concepts of knowledge and delight which are traditionally claimed by poets and critics as main characteristic features of successful poetic composition. Knowledge and delight basically contribute to the cognitive and aesthetic conditions of the poem.

One of the highly imaginative modern trends of poetry composition is the resort to mythology. The mythical archetypes and imagery utilized in poetry serve the purpose of intensifying both its aesthetic and cognitive values. Mythology can be a fertile source of beauty and uniqueness because it transfers a great deal of the imagination of the ancients which includes beautiful stories and descriptions created in the ideal world of the past to the modern reader. It is also a rich source of knowledge and thought as it carries the wisdom of the ancient writers and thinkers reflected in the myths the classical poems introduce. For these reasons the use of mythology has become popular in modern poetry and has been adopted by many modern poets around the world. The scholarship that tackles this side has focused on the works of major modern poets as Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and Lawrence. The poetry of Seamus Heaney should also be considered in relation to its significant role

in establishing the aesthetic and cognitive values of modern poetry as it resorts to mythology in a distinct way compared to other modern works of literature.

Heaney the mythmaker

Heaney draws upon mythology as a way of indirect expression of thought to assist him to reveal hidden interests and concerns. It is particularly a technique Heaney relies on so as to reflect his social and political views which he chooses to manifest through his poetic work. As an Irish native, Heaney is troubled by the dominating powers that control his country and suppress its nation. He, therefore, finds in mythology a power of freedom to which he aspires, thus he resorts to mythical imagery while composing his poetry as a way to enjoy that power. The myths of rebirth have obviously exerted a great influence on his poetic creation and on the way he describes the landscape and the ground in some poems. His speaker of "The Tollund Man" expresses his feeling of alienation while existing at home where he depicts his state of being "lost" and "unhappy" though "at home" (Heaney 1972). The feeling of alienation his words describe is an articulation of what Heaney himself feels about his motherland Ireland from which he is spiritually and later physically alienated.

The Tollund Man in the poem is mythologized by Heaney as one of the classical gods of fertility who come to life after death to revive the hopes of people and bring rebirth. Hart (1989) perceives the death of the Tollund Man as an archetype of sacrifice sought to revive the hopes of a prosperous Ireland. The greatest hope of Heaney is "freedom" that the Tollund Man keeps it still even after all those long years of his burial in the bog. The Tollund Man's rise from the bog is indicative of the rebirth of hopes of freedom in the mind of the poet.

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,

Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.
Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes

I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home. (Heaney 1972)

“The Tollund Man” belongs in a group of poems distinguished as the bog poems. They are called so after the bogs of Ireland which impact on Heaney is extraordinary for the ability they have to connect the past to the present (Purdy 2002). Heaney’s bog poems are works characterized by his employment of imagery derived from the bog people who are “ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring” (Heaney in Lloyd 1985). The “goddess of the ground” to whom the sacrifices are made is called Nerthus. In the Irish tradition, Nerthus is an ancient mother goddess of the land for whom the natives used to sacrifice their men as needed by throwing them into the bogs of Jutland where she lives to become her victims and grooms. Nerthus thence “gave their faces her blessing and preserved them through the millennia” (Glob 1969). She would then reward them with fertility given to their land.

The Tollund Man is among Nerthus’s elect grooms and sacrificed victims. “After their brief time as god and husband of the goddess (Mother Earth) - the time of the spring feast and of the wanderings through the villages- fulfilled the final demand of religion. They were sacrificed and placed in the sacred bog” (Glob 1969). The Tollund Man in this sense is used by Heaney as an archetype of rebirth which Heaney desires for his motherland Ireland and for the troubled situations he faces. Morrison & Motion (1982) comment on Heaney’s bog poems stating that they “refract the experience of the contemporary Irish troubles through the suffering of a previous Northern civilization and its sacrificial victims. The Bog people, whose ritually murdered bodies preserved in peat for centuries, become Heaney’s objective correlative.”

The Tollund Man articulates part of the Irish cognitive tradition. He has been recreated in the poet’s mind as a classical god of fertility to be utilized later in the poem to serve as an archetype of both freedom and rebirth. This condition of reinventing the story of the bog and its characters through mythology aims to serve the two traditional purposes of poetry to which Heaney shows adherence, namely cognition and aestheticism. Mythologizing the bog people makes their story exciting and entertaining, hence it increases the aesthetic value of the text. The bog people are also utilized to feed the minds of the readers with thoughts about the rebirth of Ireland that can be achieved by granting it freedom. In this vein, Foley (1989) points that “The Tollund Man” reflects Heaney’s attempt “to consecrate the land, transforming the ‘cauldronbog’ of hatred and

violence into ‘our holy ground’, and praying to ‘him’... to make the victims of the ongoing conflict ‘germinate’ into something new and positive.” Heaney’s utilization of the myth of rebirth has thus allowed him to highlight the presence of the aesthetic and cognitive values of the Tollund Man and has therefore given him the advantage of intensifying the reader’s response to his thoughts and hopes.

Heaney (1972) derives the title of *Wintering Out* from one of the poems of this poetry collection, entitled “Servant Boy.” The boy of the poem is described in its opening line as “wintering out/ the back-end of a bad year” (Heaney 1972). This description signifies resentment and carries the potential of resistance as the boy seems uncomfortable towards his conditions, and seeks to change them. Russell (2016) claims that it is an expression derived from agricultural terminology to convey “an ability to withstand a long winter.” The boy nevertheless does not seem renounced. The lines of the poem connote a search for change and renewal of the boy’s bad year, and allegorically of Heaney’s country’s conditions. The boy is depicted in the poem in a way that urges the reader to wonder about the sort of oppression the boy suffers from and tries to winter out. The suffering of the boy signifies that of the Irish people who are affected by hard social and political situations in Ireland as their country is dominated by an oppressive power. The suffering Heaney particularly experiences has demonstrated the role of the powers of an ordeal in stimulating Heaney’s thought and imagery. Heaney again resorts to archetypes of rebirth in this poem where the cycle of the year is employed. The “end” of the year is the final stage of the cycle supposedly followed by a rebirth of a new year. Imagery and archetypes do continuously serve to create the beauty of the work and to strengthen its ideas and cognitive value.

The aesthetic condition of “Servant Boy” is highlighted by relying on the presentation of local imagery derived from the land where the servant boy spends his time doing hard work to take care of it and of the cattle.

... Your trail
broken from haggard to stable,

a straggle of fodder
stiffened on snow,
comes first-footing
the back doors of the little
barons: resentful
and impenitent,

carrying the warm eggs. (Heaney 1972)

The aesthetic value achieved in the lines, through including sentimental domestic imagery of the countryside like “stable,” “fodder” and “egg,” is accompanied by high cognitive value Heaney creates through mythologizing the Servant Boy as a fertility deity who is “resentful and impenitent” striving to free his land. The freedom of the land is signified by the use of an archetype of rebirth. The Servant Boy cleaves his way across the snow to quicken the death of the year which dies in the snow. Hart (1989) argues that death in Heaney’s poetry is merely a means by which the poet aims to hasten a new rebirth. The Servant Boy then breaks the cold and finds the warm eggs that symbolize the birth of a new year. Tobin (1999) argues that “throughout Wintering Out, the recurrent image of eggs is associated with a dogged endurance and hints at the promise of renewal.” It is in this context that Heaney employs “eggs” in his poetry as a Christian symbol relating to Easter eggs that reflect a sense of resurrection and rebirth. “Servant Boy” has again established the notions of cognition and aestheticism as major characteristic features of Heaney’s poetry that employs rebirth archetypes which he originates to contribute to the themes and structure of his work and to reflect his personal condition.

Wintering Out from a Fryean perspective

Wintering Out is part of Heaney’s poetic effort that demonstrates his “movement towards a confident poetic” (O’Donoghue 2017). Mythical symbolism has helped twentieth-century poets to address themes relevant to their time. Heaney resorts to mythology in different poems, particularly the archetypes of rebirth, so as to help him to place emphasis on the themes he addresses; hence they enrich the cognitive significance and highlight the thematic importance of his work. Wintering Out furnishes an example of works that employ mythical symbolism to create awareness of concepts of oppressiveness and resistance. Its cognitive value can be strengthened by relating its poems to other works that lie within the same mythical structure, and to the original myth from which all similar literature derives meaningful archetypes and cognitive significance. In his attempts to define the structure of literature, Frye (1969) argues that “literature follows after mythology.” The cognitive content of literature, therefore, claims an ideal significance as it finds its meaning in mythology that is basically associated with the primitive, original and pure state of man’s life and mental interactions.

Fertility myths are among other myths of “the loss and regaining of identity” that, as Frye (1969) explains, form “the framework of all

literature.” Fertility myths are essentially based on stories about deities of fertility that perish and return to life at a later time. Their death and life cause the death and rebirth of the natural world where they live. Rebirth archetypes employed in literature belong in these myths. Mythologies are full of young gods and heroes who go on successful quests and then deserted or betrayed and killed; they afterward return to life, indicating in their stories the movement of the sun across the sky into the dark or the progression of seasons through winter and spring (Frye 1969). The myth of Adonis is central to them. The concept of life and rebirth is accordingly symbolized through the use of natural cycles involved in creating artistic imagery used to form works of literature. This can be demonstrated in cycles utilized to create poetic imagery like that of a year, day or water that runs in a cycle “from rains to springs, from springs and fountains to brooks and rivers, from rivers to the sea or the winter snow, and back again” (Frye 1957).

The cycle of water does evidently acquire the highest aesthetic value among the other cycles for the qualities of beauty and purity that water possesses. Water in Heaney’s poem “Gifts of Rain” moves in a cycle initiated by the beautiful rainfall that pours from the sky to cover the earth and cause the flowers to bloom, then down to the river that begins to play music with the running sound of the water which brings happiness to the speaker.

Cloudburst and steady downpour now
for days.

...

A nimble snout of flood

Licks over stepping stones

And goes uprooting

...

A man wading lost fields

breaks the pane of flood:

a flower of mud -

water blooms up to his reflection

...

When rains were gathering

there would be an all-night

roaring off the ford.
Their world-schooled ear
Could monitor the usual
confabulations, the race
slabbering past the gable,
the Moyola harping on
its gravel beds:
all spouts by daylight
brimmed with their own airs
and overflowed each barrel
in long tresses.
I cock my ear
at an absence -
in the shared calling of blood
arrives my need
for antediluvian lore.
Soft voices of the dead
are whispering by the shore
that I would question
(and for my children's sake)
about crops rotted, river mud
glazing the baked clay floor. (Heaney 1972)

The investigation of the cognitive aspects of the poem would, however, foreshadow decay. The bursting of the rain for several days brings a flood which is an archetype of apocalypse. It embraces the potential of deterioration, for that literary flood is a probable symbol of the end of the cycle of life (Frye 1957). Then the speaker beholds blooming flowers watered by running waters; the scene denotes hopes of survival and positive change. The cycle progresses until the speaker hears the river Moyola³ playing the music of its "gravel beds." The river's music is nevertheless disturbing for the speaker as it reminds him of "the shared calling of blood," and his need for

"antediluvian lore" that carries the "voices of the dead" (Heaney 1972). Flood is therefore equivalent to blood, and the flow of the water is thence parallel to bloodshed that accompanies political upheaval relevant to Heaney's condition.

The scene of the swollen river later signifies its search for some sea to pour in, which is the end of the water cycle indicating death. It also recalls the image of the swollen corpses, and so intensifies the anguish of the speaker who is haunted by terrible scenes and memories of death. The final scene of the sound that rises to please the speaker is, however, an indicator of a positive change.

The tawny guttural water
spells itself: Moyola
is its own score and consort,
bedding the locale
in the utterance,
reed music, an old chanter
breathing its mists
through vowels and history.

A swollen river,
a mating call of sound
rises to pleasure me, Dives,
hoarder of common ground. (Heaney 1972)

The river is employed differently by Heaney as an archetype of rebirth in his poem "Limbo." Heaney utilizes the river in his poetry to assist him in forming the cognition of his readers and solidifying the connection between the Irish rivers on the one hand, which Heaney presents as national symbols of Ireland, and his readers and fellow citizens on the other. The poem employs striking imagery evocative of the ancient ritualistic sacrifice of drowning in the river seeking the revival of the land. It is reminiscent of the sacrifice dedicated to the Egyptian fertility goddess Isis. The people of ancient Egypt used to sacrifice their females in a ritualistic manner as worship of the fertility deities Isis and Osiris who are expected to flood the Nile River and give fertility to their orchards and crops.⁴

"Limbo" introduces a woman drowning a baby in the river, an action that recalls the ancient

Egyptian rites of sacrifice for the gods of fertility to obtain rebirth. The behavior of the woman in the poem cannot help the reader to distinguish whether she is treating the baby with care or with cruelty. The act of drowning is obviously violent; the freezing wrists of the mother, however, signify the pangs of pain she feels for her action.

Fishermen at Ballyshan

Netted an infant last night

Along with the salmon.

An illegitimate spawning,

A small one thrown back

To the waters. But I'm sure

As she stood in the shallows

Ducking him tenderly

Till the frozen knobs of her wrists

Were dead as the gravel,

He was a minnow with hooks

Tearing her open.

She waded in under

the sign of the cross.

He was hauled in with the fish.

Now limbo will be

A cold glitter of souls
through some far briny zone.
Even Christ's palms, unhealed,
smart and cannot fish there. (Heaney 1972)

The title of the poem is suggestive as it relates indirectly to concepts of sacrifice and rebirth. The limbo is "an intermediary state between Heaven and Hell where people go who have not received Christian baptism" (Hexham 1993). The drowned baby in the poem seems to be at the limbo as his drowning suggests two situations relating to life and death. The first is indicative of baptism as the girl is "ducking him tenderly" and is producing "the sign of the cross" (Heaney 1972). In this condition, the drowning of the child can be interpreted as a ritualistic sacrifice to the river aimed to invoke rebirth. The woman, however, wades while producing the cross sign; her

hand is all drowned underwater, and the baby is "hauled in with the fish." These lines demonstrate that the boy is drowned to death. The boy in this context can be argued to be a national symbol of the Irish nation who dies in the river signifying sacrifice for the land; the river is thus an emblem of Ireland. "Limbo" in this condition tends to evoke the national sense and works to highlight the importance of reviving the memory of the nation with experiences of sacrifice and integrity, which is the ultimate cognitive value Heaney pursues through writing poetry.

V. CONCLUSION

The examination of Heaney's poetry has demonstrated the importance of the employment of rebirth archetypes and imagery in adding significant aesthetic and cognitive values to the literary work. These values have proved to be related to each other as their achievement in the poetry of Heaney is an integrating comprehensive process. Heaney has occasionally resorted to mythopoesis to create his own version of mythology that carries the distinguishing features of his country and nation. This trend has helped him to highlight the cognitive aspects related to the Irish condition, and to treat different themes associated with the Irish cause. The use of Frye's archetypal approach to literature can help the scholars of modern poetry to read beyond the lines, and to experience the greatness of the aesthetic value that mythical archetypes and imagery add to the literary work. Besides, the Fryman critical thought has obviously demonstrated its usefulness in figuring out the cognitive value of literature as it deals with the literary text comprehensively in relation to other texts that share the same conditions and values.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

The application of the Fryean archetypal approach to literature requires a thorough knowledge of mythology besides studying the works of Frye so as to achieve a comprehensive examination of the targeted literary works. This would be hard to achieve as mythology forms a tremendous body of writing.

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