The culture someone grows up in helps to define that person, for better or for worse. This culture steeps itself into the writer’s work, and helps make the writer into who he or she is. For Seamus Heaney, this steeping was done by the rich history of the Ireland that birthed him. Ireland is closely tied to its historical roots, and Heaney’s poetry reflects this past-focused thinking. While others may choose to focus their writing on things in the present, Heaney mixes together the traditions that make up Ireland and goes about the present through the past. His writing works to weave together the past into the present, and through this connection Heaney does a variety of work. Some of this interweaving is to raise the past, culture and people, to a higher form, and some of it is to lower the present. Heaney’s use of the past, whether through religion, family, trades, or even the land itself, contributes to comment on the present. The rhythm of life, formed through the way the past works through the present into the future, is something that Heaney plays with through his usage of the past in his poems, and therefore Heaney turns what happens yesterday into a comment on tomorrow.

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Often times a country may be associated with a certain geographical feature. While their mountains, plains, rivers, or lakes may define other countries, the Green Isle has her bogs. Ireland has long been connected to its unique landscape, and therefore it is
no surprise that the bogs have an integral part in the poetry of one of Ireland’s foremost writers. Seamus Heaney uses the boglands to explore the country of Ireland’s psyche. Unlike other landscapes, bogs are defined by what goes on underneath the eye’s view. In much the same way, Heaney, especially in the poems “Bogland”, “Digging”, and “Kinship”, uses the boglands as a metaphor to explore the inward and pastward looking of the Irish people. These poems explore the cultural digging of the Irish people that Heaney is replicating in his own poetry.

Heaney’s poetry showcases the theme of family reflection most apparently in what is probably his most famous poem, “Digging”. This poem is looked to as a place in which Heaney connects his writing to the manual labor of his forefathers. The poem interweaves three generations of Heaney men and how they all dig, through gardens, peat, and words. While the poem clearly speaks of the family lineage that Seamus wishes to continue in his writing, it also wraps itself up in the boglands that spread throughout Ireland. Through these bogs, and his family’s relation to them, Heaney connects his writing towards the craft of the Irish.

“Digging” touches on the labor of Heaney’s grandfather, a man who worked as a peat farmer. While Heaney’s parents ran a farm, his grandfather took part in a different rural trade common in Ireland. Workers, called peat farmers, would go out into the bogs and cut out slices. These slices of peat would then be placed in stacks to dry and become usable. This peat, when dried, can be used as fuel, much like coal. Towards the middle of his poem, Heaney illustrates a time when he brought his grandfather milk:

My grandfather cut more turf in a day

Than any other man on Toner’s bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging (Poems 3-4)

The pride shown by Heaney demonstrates the importance of peat farming in the society in which he grew up. His grandfather is not some mere farmhand: he is a master of his “nicking and slicing” trade. The poem notes that Heaney’s grandfather keeps going down multiple times. Through this, the digging, physically for Heaney’s forefathers and mentally for Heaney himself, becomes a habit, not just an one-time thing. This search for “the good turf” is a lifelong process, repetitive and definitive. The bogs provide not only fuel, but also a sense of pride. The bogs, Ireland’s landscape, provides work for its people that is celebrated here by Heaney.

Heaney attempts to place his poetry alongside the standard of excellence his grandfather has set. Since he grew up in a rural part of the country, Heaney tries to make his poetry reach the same sort of acclaim that his grandfather’s peat digging achieved.

Though living roots awaken in my head.
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it. (Poems 4)

Heaney strives to place himself within the Irish scheme of grandeur, and he does this by
placing himself alongside one thing important to the typical Irishmen, the peat. Heaney is not able to join the lineage of farming in his family. While others dig gardens and peat, Heaney focuses on growing the “living roots” inside of himself. His digging is not a physical digging, but a emotional and intellectual one. According to Jiong Liu, “The inward and downward digging of his forefathers is translated into his earliest and most basic poetic stance” (Liu 272). In this way, the manual labor of others transfers itself to the writing of Heaney. His grandfather worked diligently downward through the peat, in much the same way that Heaney’s writing attempts to do through memories and emotion.

Having common ground to stand on helps form the relationship between people, and through this they can build forward. Heaney explores the commonality of the bogs for the Irish in his poem “Kinship”. Bogs and the peat that come from them form some of the most famous parts of Ireland. These natural features help form the common ground for a country that is unfortunately defined by its differences such as the Catholic and Protestant troubles. Unlike religion or nationalist concerns, bogs transcend North and South and connect the often-divided country.

Despite the troubles, the Irish agree on Ireland being their home. Home often creates a love of the things that makes it special, the reasons why it is home over anywhere else. Heaney starts “Kinship” with expounding on his love of the landscape of Ireland.

I love this turf-face,
its black incisions,
the coped secrets
of process and ritual;
I love the spring
off the ground,
each bank a gallows drop,
each open pool (Poems 195)

Heaney expresses again and again his love of the land itself. The turf is what he loves; the land he was born into is what makes him loyal to Ireland. These bogs are therefore not just a piece of land that can be used for fuel, but a defining factor in the country’s identity. The language of the poem, the “spring/off the ground”, suggests an upward movement, until the last “gallows drop”. The land is both pushing him up, and pulling him down.

Though the landscape makes up the country, the connection itself by people to the land makes the bogs so important to Ireland. Heaney was born in a farming village, but he still connects himself with the bogs rather than cows or other livestock that would be a greater part of his daily life as a child.

I grew out of all this
like a weeping willow
inclined to

the appetites of gravity (Poems 198)

Again, Heaney combines upward growing and downward movements in this poem. The growth outward from the bogs surface is countered by the gravity-enforced drooping of the weeping willow-esque branches. Therefore the land, the actual stuff of the country, is not just a launching point, but something that attracts its product, or people, back to itself. Through this lens, Heaney notes the way his country has provided him a base from which
to grow, as a writer and a man, but also realizes that as he grows he is constantly being called back.

Bogs, while prevalent in other places such as Denmark, have become part of the Irish identity. In much the same way that “mountains’ majesty” or some other piece of landscape might be connected to America, the bogs have a stronghold on Ireland. In “Bogland”, Heaney explores these connections of the bogs to Ireland:

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evenings—
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,
Is wood into the cyclops’ eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun. (Poems 85)

Heaney became familiar with the American landscape traveling and teaching here. This poem contrasts the American prairie and the Irish bogs, differentiating between the American and Irish psyche. While the American West, with its open range prairies, draws attention, and dreams, outward, shown in the poem’s tales of a land where “Everywhere the eye concedes to/ Encroaching horizon”, the land also draws American dreams outward. The eyes are drawn outward, away from the person. Ireland, Heaney’s “unfenced country”, instead raises, or “keeps crusting/ Between the sights of the sun”.

While the American landscape draws the person outward, the Irish landscape draws the eyes to the bogs themselves.
To the reader unsteeped in Irish culture, it might seem that this digging backwards into the history of Ireland would have an end. For American culture, the act of digging becomes centered on digging for or toward something. However, the digging of Irish culture constantly replenishes.

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,
Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.

The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.

The wet centre is bottomless. (*Poems* 86)

The bogs themselves are “bottomless”. The bogs work as a metaphor for the preservative quality of the Irish culture. Heaney’s focusing backwards and exploring the past, keeps the history alive. Similarly, the bogs work to keep the past of Ireland alive through their preservative qualities.

In much the same way that the bogs revolve around digging out its materials and placing them in the open to be of use, Heaney’s poetry works to dig out the culture of Ireland and place it in the open. As stated by William Pratt, “The bog is quite literally Heaney’s turf, for he has come to join that distinguished line of modern poets who sought the prehistoric and primitive roots of civilization, following the lead of cultural anthropologists who went in search of the origins of all myths and the foundations of all religious beliefs” (Pratt). Heaney joins a lineage, not just of the Irish people, but also of the Irish writers. Therefore, Heaney’s writing, much like the land itself, is a continuation of the Irish tradition. While the landscape of Ireland has many other features, such as
lakes and hills, the bogs are what define Ireland. The bogs themselves need to be dug up in slices of peat to be of use as fuel. In much the same way, the history of a people or a place can be of use when they are dug up. Heaney uses his poetry to that digging of the Irish culture, and he sets the stage for it by his exploring of the landscape of the bogs.

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Modern Ireland is far removed from its origins. Before Christianity was brought to the country, it was mostly Celtic and followed a polytheistic religion. Even before that, the island of Ireland was populated and helped form a rich history on which the modern Ireland continues to build. The histories and stories of these people are kept alive in the folklore of Ireland, and are integrated into the people. The physical evidence of these people is furthered along by the preservative quality of the bogs that cover Ireland. Researchers have dug into the bogs and brought out bodies, not deteriorated by time, and butter that is unspoiled. The concrete reminders alongside the oral stories combine to make the Celt and earlier people of Ireland a part of the contemporary Irish.

Many of the bodies thrown into the bogs were part of ritual sacrifices, and therefore they bear the markings of the violent lives they lived. Seamus Heaney, most clearly in the poems “The Tollund Man”, “Grauballe Man”, and “Punishment”, chooses to use these images to critique the actions of contemporary Ireland. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Heaney recognizes that the violence prevalent in these prehistoric countries is not something that left humanity with the dawn of industrialization.

One of the earliest bodies that was pulled out of the bogs was around the town of Tollund. The man was the human sacrifice to some long forgotten goddess, and therefore would be seen as a holy man in his time. On the other hand, modern Irish would have
seen his involvement in a pagan ritual a sign of heathenism, but Heaney elevates him to a level of contemporary piety.

Naked except for

The cap, noose and girdle,

I will stand a long time.

Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him

And opened her fen,

Those dark juices working

Him to a saint's kept body (*Poems* 125).

Heaney’s comparison of the man and his goddess in wedding imagery closely mirrors the common Christian symbolism of Jesus and the Church as a couple. As Andrew Foley notes, “Heaney skillfully interweaves concepts of Iron Age religion with those of Catholicism, and details of the Tollund man’s death with those of Irish sectarian atrocities” (Foley 3). Alongside this leveling of Christianity and the pagan religion of the Tollund man, Heaney compares the man to a saint. Catholic tradition holds that one of the signs of sainthood is that the body of a saint will not deteriorate. The Tollund man, with help from the preservatives of the bog, passes this test. By bringing the two religions together, Heaney works to break down the lines between the past and the present and open the reader to the final stanza.

Heaney often wrote against the violence that came along with the Troubles. The brutality was enacted by both sides, and was not reserved to any group of people. However, the public still looked down upon the murderous tendencies of the pagan rituals...
that were being drawn up out of the bogs. Heaney uses the bog’s history to indict the people of modern day Ireland.

Out there in Jutland

In the old man-killing parishes

I will feel lost,

Unhappy and at home. (Poems 126).

Heaney’s word choices in this passage continued the theme of connection between the brutality of the pagans in time past to the brutality of the Christians Ireland now. Heaney names the groupings of the earlier people “parishes”, paralleling the Christian term for a church’s people. Then in his final line, Heaney allocates himself as a member of a parish much like the pagan ones. He notes that he will “feel at home” in a parish that kills old men, and thereby accuses the parishes of contemporary Ireland for doing so.

Most societies punish marital infidelity. Codes of sexuality are a part of almost any religious code, and often entail some of the harshest punishments. In “Punishment”, Seamus Heaney notes the similarities between the punishments for contemporary women and the women of the pagan age of Ireland.

Little adulteress,

before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,

undernourished, and your

tar-black face was beautiful.

My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,

the stones of silence (Poems 193)

In this section, Heaney notes how the adulteress pulled out of the bog connects to famous adulteress in Christianity. In the Gospel of John 8:1-11, there is a story about a woman caught in the act of adultery being brought to Jesus for punishment. Jesus tells the crowd that the person who has not sinned can cast the first stone, and therefore leads the crowd to let her go free. By choosing the phrase “cast, I know,/ the stones of silence”, Heaney connects this adulteress, who was not killed by stoning, to a woman who lived under the codes of sexuality in which of stoning to death was the crime for adultery.

Heaney further connects this pagan adulteress to the contemporary by placing her alongside Catholic women who faced the same sort of shortsighted punishment in modern Ireland.

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauld in tar,
wept by the railings,
who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge. (Poems 193)

This section touches on one of the common punishments for women during the Troubles. IRA soldiers would tar and chain to the railroad tracks Catholic girls who were found to date British soldiers who had been sent over to keep rule over Northern Ireland. These
women, much like the woman who was pulled out of the bog, faced the punishment of their neighbors for the choices they made regarding love. Heaney points out the similarities between the brutality in himself and his contemporaries to these Catholic girls, and the brutality shown to the adulteress in pagan times.

The practice of tarring is one of the more outwardly cruel punishments shown by the people of Ireland to each other during the Troubles. Hot tar burned the skin, and marked the receiver for life. In “Grauballe Man”, Heaney connects tarring of today’s people to the bog’s effects on a man who was pulled out of it.

As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep
the black river of himself. (Poems 190)

While the man who was pulled out of the bog, neck cut for his long forgotten crimes, was not tarred, he closely resembles his contemporaries who are tarred. By connecting the tar from time past to the present, Heaney shows how little has changed. This man found near Grauballe faced the same brutal punishments that people were facing during the Troubles, some thousands of years later. The substitution of tar instead of bog water does not point to a large improvement in society, and Heaney, through this comparison, notes the violence that had become commonplace in Ireland.

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Ireland’s rich history has been deeply marked by the struggles of its people. At the center of the longest running of these struggles is the battle between Catholicism and
Protestantism. These two sects of Christianity have dominated the religious devotions of the Irish since the Reformation, but have spent much of that time warring with each other. The Catholic versus Protestant battle can be widened to North versus South, Green versus Orange, nationalist versus loyalist, and country versus city. All of these combined to help form the Ireland that we have today. These struggles reached their high points in the late-20th century in which Seamus Heaney was doing the majority of his writing. Although its combating factions often define Ireland, religious devotion is at the country’s heart.

Heaney was born in Northern Ireland and was raised Catholic, and this foundation provides the base for much of his writing. While many of his poems do not directly deal with the North and South Troubles, Heaney incorporates the language and imagery of his Catholic childhood throughout his poetry. The ritual of the sacraments that provides the backbone of the Catholic faith show in many of his poems, most often the rituals of funerals, and these rituals help place his poems within the national context of Ireland. Heaney, especially in the poems “Funeral Rites”, “Freedman”, and “Ministry of Fear”, uses Catholic symbols to help connect his poetry to the rich history of Ireland, and the hearts of its peoples.

Funerals spread across all religions. All around the world, different people mark death with ceremony. In the Catholic Church, a funereal is not a sacrament in itself, but takes place in the larger construct of the mass or celebration of the Eucharist, the main sacrament of the church. One of the trademarks of the Catholic Church is its uniformity in its celebrations. While the Troubles between the North and the South continued in Ireland, more and more funerals took place. These funerals, which for the northern half of
the country occur mainly within the Catholic Church, began to mold together for Heaney. In “Funeral Rites”, Heaney combines his own experiences of funerals from his family to the funerals taking part across Ireland for those killed in the fighting.

Sometimes ritual and religion move from being caused by a devout heart to being required by religious doctrine with no regard to the aspect of piety these endeavor to promote. Some rituals have nothing to do with the religious significance, but become an essential part of the ceremony itself. Heaney explores a couple of these in the lines “the temperate footsteps/ of a cortege, winding past/ each blinded home” (North 71). The first line, an allusion to the cortege from the traditional walking from the funeral service to the grave, is a widespread tradition; however, the second is not. The “blinded home” in the poem refers to the Irish tradition of shutting the blinds and leaving the house in complete darkness for the period of mourning after death. Heaney’s word choice may point to a deeper meaning. While the blinds may point towards window dressing, they also may be referring to the blinding nature of pain and revenge that these nationwide killings are causing. Once a family is drawn into the violence by losing one of its own, they are less likely to look at the North and South struggles with an eye towards peaceful resolution, and more likely an eye for revenge.

Rituals build comfort. The reliability of something in an unstable world provides for a sense of reassuring, especially true in times of death, where we are shown to be our most fragile. In “Funeral Rites”, Heaney explores this fascination with the rituals of funerals.

Now as news comes in

of each neighbourly murder
we pine for ceremony,
customary rhythms: (Poems 71)

While the funerals are not happy events, the ceremony itself is welcome. When death comes, everything is moved into a strange realm of newness and discomfort. These rituals comfort for those left behind, the ones for who the ritual acts as “customary”. Everyone has been to a funeral, the behaviors and ceremonies are well known, and therefore it can be a comfort to get to a part of the grieving process in which they already know what to do. This stability that rituals bring, especially in a time that is not easily understood, is what the pining is for.

But rituals can often become empty. While Ireland’s lines of North and South may be drawn with religion in mind, the religious differences of the Catholics and Protestants have little to do with the fight that they are taking up. In much the same way, the Catholic imagery that is found in Heaney’s poetry is offset with the reality that Heaney himself has left the church. Heaney uses imagery that does not resonate with his personal feelings. In his poem “Freedman”, Heaney expounds on his departure from the church that helped form the foundation of his childhood.

Religion, unlike race or gender, typically cannot be immediately seen outwardly. Catholics on Ash Wednesday are one of the rare exceptions for exterior religious markings. Ash Wednesday, the start of the Lenten season for Catholics, encourages its church members to ask for repentance. In much the same way, the members of the church are reminded of their mortality through the placing of ashes on the foreheads.

‘Memento homo quia pulvis es’.

I would kneel to be impressed by ashes,
A silk friction, a light stipple of dust—

I was under that thumb too like all my caste. (Poems 216)

The first line of this stanza is Latin for “Remember, O man, that you are dust” from the book of Genesis. However, Heaney’s focus turns to the social implications of the ash on his forehead. The lowercase “that” references a thumb not from God, and in this vein, Heaney sees the ashes as a marking that has little to do with piety and is instead used as a marker to show who is in charge. Later on in the poem, Heaney notes that “I sought the mark in vain on the groomed optimi:” and this further allocates the ashes for the people of the church rather than the church as a whole. Heaney sees the ritual of Ash Wednesday as nothing more than a way for the clergy, or “optimi”, to place their flock further under control. As a further example of this double standard, Elizabeth Cullingford argues that “Confirmed in his inferior political status, Heaney’s speaker is also ‘subjugated’ by the mark of ashes ‘impressed’ on his forehead by the priest on Ash Wednesday...The mark of the speaker’s service to holy Rome designates him a political untouchable in the eyes of the unionist establishment” (Cullingford 230). For Cullingford, the divide carries far greater ramifications than just a separation between the clergy and the community. Instead, this divide stands in for the lack of power that Heaney and other Catholics felt in the political realm of Irish society at large. The same issues that Heaney has with Ireland, that the power is allocated in the hands of the few and that the community is put “under the thumb,” is carried over to the Church. Then, the rituals become tools to move away from what the Church, or the country, is trying to do.

Regardless of the level of devotion, Catholicism became a marker during the Troubles. Doors were shut or opened based on religious affiliation, and the widespread
amount of this religious prejudice formed the backdrop in which Seamus Heaney grew up. Unlike many Catholics, Heaney was given the opportunity to be educated and go to a well-respected university. This placed him within daily contact with those who sided against Catholics and those experiences helped form him into a poet. In his biography written by O’Driscoll, Heaney notes “I’m certainly not saying that the simple fact of belonging to the minority made me into a poet; but I am saying that, once a literary aspiration developed, it took account of the hurtful conditions” (O’Driscoll 65). Heaney’s upbringing gives him material for the confessional poetry that he writes. While this prejudice may not be the only reason for his development into a writer, it definitely factored into his work. In much the same way that he deals with Catholicism in his poetry Heaney, in “Ministry of Fear”, touches on the reactions toward Catholics by non-Catholics.

Similarly to the way that rural students are sometimes written off as rednecks, Catholics in the city schools of Ireland were often deemed rubes and behind their Protestant counterparts. Obviously, the religious affiliation of a person has nothing to do with his or her ability to achieve in school; however, Heaney and many of his contemporaries dealt with these prejudices during their educational careers.

Have our accents

Changed? ‘Catholics, in general, don’t speak

As well as students from Protestant schools.’

Remember that stuff? Inferiority

Complexes, stuff that dreams were made on. (Poems 219)

His entire life, Heaney was told that his religion meant that he could not measure up. The
Catholic school system of St. Columb’s repeated this message to the boys, hoping to inspire them. Instead these messages lead “inferiority complexes”, and became another obstacle birthed by prejudice due to religion for the boys to overcome. Heaney, what Russell calls “an Irish writer writing in English, as a minority Catholic living in the first part of his life in majority-Protestant Northern Ireland, and thus builds a transcendent literary community with earlier poets” (Russell 103). Russell notes that Heaney’s minority status does not prevent him from literary acceptance; in fact it helps Heaney to achieve this “community”. Heaney’s religion works to place him as a minority, and his poetry endeavors to wrestle with this minority placement.

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While the urbanization of countries often leads to many positives such as increased jobs, more opportunities, and improved quality of life, it also lends itself to a movement away from the rural values that are the foundations of many communities. In much the same way that Ireland moved from its rural foundations to the city, Heaney himself moved from his country origins to a more urban environment for school and his writing life afterwards. Heaney touches on his country roots in order to form poetry that celebrates the tradesmen that are the backbone of these rural Irish communities. In “Casualty”, “The Forge”, and “Thatcher”, Heaney explores some of these trades, and through this he touches on the country foundation that is Ireland.

Thatched roofs, which were once the common rooftop, are a surface that people are moving away from in developing countries; however, these roofs were still common in the rural Ireland of Heaney’s youth. Thatching consists of a mixture of straw or other dry plants combined with a sort of sedge or mud to form a mixture that results in a roof.
These roofs have obvious drawbacks such as flammability and upkeep, but are especially appealing for their low cost. The weave of plants draw animals such as birds looking to nest, and therefore holes and infestations are some of the most common problems resulting from thatched roofs. To combat these problems, people have thatchers come.

Heaney explores the wonder that a thatcher could cause with his skill in the poem “Thatcher”. This awe starts with how the thatcher shows up: “Bespoke for weeks, he turned up some morning/ Unexpectedly, his bicycle slung/ With a light ladder and a bag of knives” (Poems 50). There is a certain type of excitement around the Thatcher’s arrival, he has been expected and wanted for a while, and these expectations are part of what makes him so mystical. He is not only a master of an uncommon trade, but his arrival is spoken for and waited for by everyone in the family, a sort of handyman Santa. Unlike the impersonal manner of the industrialist manufacturing, where assembly lines take the place of men, the thatcher arrives in the flesh. Once the thatcher has arrived to work on the roof, the narrator follows the thatcher’s craftwork closely:

Couchant for days on sods above the rafters
He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together
Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,
And left them gaping at his Midas touch (Poems 56)

While a more modern roof with tiles could be replaced quicker and more effectively, the thatched roof leads to a greater sense of wonder. Nails and sheets of tile can get the job done quicker for the more standard tile roof, but the thatcher plants himself in the middle of the rafters and begins to weave the roof back together. Instead of merely getting a job done, this process inspires wonder. It seems doubtful that the simple nailing would
inspire a “Midas touch”; however the Thatcher’s intricate patching does. In much the same way, the effectiveness of urban Ireland may lead to more progress, but it also removes the wonder the tradesmen creates.

Thatchers are not the only tradesmen that are the subject of a Heaney poem. While thatchers move from town to town applying their trade, the blacksmith’s forge becomes a center of small town life. A blacksmith’s job requires the molding and changing of metals, and in much the same way that life is required to mold and change. In his poem “The Forge”, Heaney refers to the outside traffic of the shop changing from horses to cars, all the while the blacksmith hammers and works the iron to new shapes. While the market for horseshoe making that was the backbone of the blacksmithing trade slowly dried up, the role of the blacksmith in small town society continued. The smith’s work rings out into town and becomes apart of everyday life for the entire town, not just the smith. In his biography Heaney relates a story about the anvil, “the one I would have heard a mile away when I was a youngster” (O’Driscoll 91), and is just one example of the way that the smith becomes a part of daily life for the town. The blacksmith works through the change outside and, for the most part, ignores it, as much of the processes of blacksmithing are the same today as they were a hundred years ago, even though his market is slowly drying up. Similarly, the rural parts of Ireland keep working onward through the changes and fighting that plague the country.

This consistency of the small town life is carried onward into the poem itself. One of the most striking parts of the poem is the reclusiveness it gives to the forge itself. “All I know is a door into the dark. /Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;/ Inside, the hammered anvil’s short-pitched ring” (Poems 49). The completeness of focus that the
forge requires draws the reader inward and isolates this reader from anything else. Even though there is a world outside, junk fills it. It merely has rusting hoops and old parts. On the other hand, the interior has the music and action of the blacksmith and his anvil. Instead of only looking outside the country and its small trades for goodness and progress, the poems relates the musical quality of the shop itself. Where the ringing of the smith provides the backbone of the shop, Heaney works to form a poem, a lyrical work, about manual labor, something that is not particularly musical.

While some may see the main things in life outside of the dirty and dark shop, in terms of blacksmithing, the trash is outside with the rusted pieces while the treasure is inside among the sparks and fire. Even the anvil is given a higher place than its typical functional use.

The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,
Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,
Set there immovable: an altar
Where he expends himself in shape and music. (*Poems* 49)

The blue-collar efforts of the blacksmith are given an almost religious significance, and in this elevating the reader sees the common folk raised alongside with the smith. Like Henry Hart notes, “The blacksmith’s anvil resembles a mysterious omphalos at the center of space and time” (Hart 4). The word choice of unicorn, mythical and unreachable, and altar, place the anvil and the smith himself on a much higher plane than what is typically given to manual labor. This language points to the blacksmith as priest, a role that is reigns high above the common people, and stands somewhat outside of the realm of the understandable.
Alongside the priestly responsibility, the blacksmith becomes a social commentator. The blacksmith’s opinion of the progress of the outside world is given preeminence over anyone else’s, as his is the only voice that is heard.

Sometimes, leather-aproned, hairs in his nose,
He leans out on the jamb, recalls a clatter,
Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows;
Then grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick
To beat real iron out, to work the bellows. (*Poems 49*)

Instead of showing only the importance of work that is being done, the poem explores the relativity of progress. While the outside world may seem to be racing past and moving from horses to cars, the blacksmith keeps beating out the iron. He keeps plugging away and working on his trade. The passing world only merits a grunt, and in this simple dismissal, the blacksmith speaks for those who are not impressed with the movements of the society that is coming up in this progress. The fighting over religion and country allegiance are nonissues to the blacksmith and others like him. They are merely focused on their trades and eking out a living.

One of the trademarks of Ireland’s recent history is the violence between the Catholic and Protestant contingents. In a unique way, these conflicts transcend most lines of politics and economic status. Heaney explores the widespread impact and collateral damage these conflicts cause in his poem “Casualty”. The poem traces the relationship of the narrator and a local fisherman, from early trips on the boat and good-natured ribbing of Heaney’s intellectual status to the fisherman’s death. Unlike the other poems in which Heaney looks at the blue collar tradesman, this poem clearly connects these people to the
conflicts over religion that have helped define the country.

Heaney sets the stage for this connection through his development of the narrator’s relationship with the fisherman. In the introduction Heaney makes clear that he and this man have had many interactions.

In the pause after a slug
He mentioned poetry.
We would be on our own
And, always politic
And shy of condescension,
I would manage by some trick
To switch the talk to eels (*Field Work* 13)

These two seem incompatible on the surface. A hardened blue-collar drunk and Heaney, the well-educated local boy who made good, are paired up together. The discomfort of these two, marked by “pause” and “trick/ to switch”, work as a metaphor for the discomfort for the two groups they represent. Heaney, as the example of the educated city, and this fisherman, as the example of the working class, move toward an uneasy truce through their shared affiliation in religion and bar choice. However, this truce is not replicated by the society at large.

Like many relationships during the Troubles, this uneasy friendship is brought to a sudden end. The man ends up being killed for the drinking that Heaney associated him with. After Bloody Sunday, the Catholic “tribe” decided to stay out of the Protestant side of town under penalty of death. Being found in the Protestant side, the fisherman was shot and killed. While Heaney relates the fisherman’s funeral, he combines it with
memories of the fisherman on his boat:

I tasted freedom with him.

To get out early, haul

Steadily off the bottom,

Dispraise the catch, and smile

As you find a rhythm

Working you, slow mile by mile, (Field Work 16)

In the end, through his work the fisherman found his freedom. Not in the rebellions and fightings of North and South, but through the daily labors of his life. This appreciation of the rhythms of manual labor is something that Heaney continuously calls to in poems from “Funeral” to “Human Chain”. The daily beat of life is found in this simple act of fishing. While the man never made a ton of money or fame, he found something that all the fighting in the Troubles never did. The fisherman in “Casualty” is wise in his own, unrecognized by society, way, and Heaney’s poem points to this rural wisdom.

While each of these poem’s central characters have different trades, they all represent the rural working class that makes up the majority of the country of Ireland. Heaney’s usage of these blue-collar types intentionally moves them into the focus of Irish life in his poetry. While he could have just as easily written poems about writers or politicians, Heaney chooses the tradesman to explore and celebrate. These main characters’ poems are mostly nonpolitical, and instead focus on the wonderment and nurturing that they caused in young Heaney’s life. When they do become political, they call for an end to violence rather than the relative merits of one side over the other. Heaney’s usage of these tradesmen connects his poetry to the core of the people who
make up Ireland, and the values and principles that they hold dear.

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While there can be many factors in a person’s past, family has some of the largest impact on that person. While homelands can be left, jobs can be retired from, and religions can be converted, family continues onward regardless. For some, the family bound goes deeper than others, but it remains a factor nonetheless. In Seamus Heaney’s case, his family creates the foundation of many of his poems, especially those within the 2011 book of poems *Human Chain*. Throughout this text and others, but especially in the poems “Album”, “The Attic”, and “Human Chain”, Heaney wrestles with his family’s influence on the past, and on his present. Heaney grew up in a rural farming Catholic family, and it is this foundation that has steeped into Heaney the poet. Heaney’s family, like his religion and the history of his homeland, influences his writing.

Reconsidering the past is what gives people the clearest picture of the present. That is why photo albums are so popular. Even though any picture cannot measure up to the real experience, through photos people can relive the past. This experience of reviewing what has already happened can be especially useful for someone like Heaney who uses the past in his work. Photos capture a moment in time, and Heaney uses these photos to see what is going on behind the original moment. By seeing deeper, Heaney can wrestle deeper with the past, and gain meaning from it. In his poem “Album”, Heaney uses pictures from a photo album to look at his relationship with his parents, and their relationship with each other.

Many times a child does not grasp that there are more aspects to a mother or a father than the parenthood that binds them together. A kid, in his or her egocentric nature,
focuses on how scenes impact his or her own feelings. They do not comprehend the emotional state of their parents until much later in life. In “Album”, Heaney considers this phenomenon.

Seeing them as a couple, I now see,
For the first time, all the more together
For having had to turn and walk away, as close
In the leaving (or closer) as in the getting. (Human Chain 4)

The past is never fully understood until it is reconsidered. In this poem, it is his parent’s relationship that is being reconsidered. Heaney remembers his parents dropping him off at boarding school, and in their retreat being drawn closer together. The past actions, such as dropping a son off at school, are what bring people together. When this moment happened originally, Heaney did not see his parents as a couple; he saw them as his parents. In the reconsidering Heaney recognizes the true meaning of the past.

While albums are easily accessible, the past can be stored in other ways. In his poem “Attic” Seamus Heaney explores another storage place of the past. Two-dimensional replicas of the past, photos, do not store the past the same way as an attic. Attics store the thing itself. In much the same way, Heaney’s poem does not merely recall the past; he unearths the past in the present day, much like the attic of the title. Unlike his poem “Album”, where he revisits scenes with his parents, in “Attic”, Heaney sees his grandfather in himself. Like a homeowner exploring the attic upstairs, Heaney finds the past in the present day.

Attics store the past and are a place a person returns to in order to find what he or she has put there. In “Attic” Heaney looks into the attic of his past at an interaction with
his grandfather in order to show the way the past repeats itself in the present.

His memory of the name a-waver too,

His mistake perpetual, once and for all,

Like the single splash when Israel’s body fell.

As I age and blank on names,

As my uncertainty on stairs

Is more and more the lightheadedness (Human Chain 83)

Heaney slowly sees himself turning into his grandfather, the “His” in the poem. While a younger Heaney was annoyed and frustrated by the simple mistakes in pronunciation by his grandfather during a post movie conversation, now that he has grown to around the same age, Seamus understands the slip in “cool” that his grandfather achieved is unable for Heaney himself to avoid. Not only is he unable to escape the mental decline, to begin to “blank on names”; he also sees the physical ramifications. Stairs are not just a uncertainty when he has not been there been before, but result from his body betraying him. Through his own aging, he begins to appreciate the past and see its value.

One of the biggest impacts of family is the sense of a continuation of a thought. Families progress from generation to generation and grow together. A family allows a person to no longer act as one, but as part of a longer line. In his poem “Human Chain”, Heaney shows the forward progress of generations of family through paralleling it to a work crew. Crews pass loads onward, creating the human chain that the poem and the collection of poems are named after. Through the image of a human chain, Heaney shows the type of connection that makes up families, and society at large.

Connecting the past to the present is where its true value lies. Heaney uses his past
as something larger than just one instance; he lets it grow into a strand from the past to the present onward to the future. In this poem, Heaney personifies this connection from generation to generation in the image of a work crew passing a load from person to person into a truck bed.

On to the trailer, then the stoop and drag and drain

Of the next lift. Nothing surpassed

That quick unburdening, backbreak’s truest payback,

A letting go which will not come again.

Or it will, once. And for all. (Human Chain 17)

The movement from person to person is what is the foundation of generations. The multiple generations, round of family to next round of family, work together to a greater end much like a work crew passing burdens onward to one another. This “drag and drain” shows itself in the efforts of each generation to further the family. Heaney uses this work crew image to show the production of the many working as one. In the end, it is, through the example Heaney uses; death is merely an unburdening of the load of generations one last time “for all”, this final unburdening of life resulting in death. Family, along with the rest of the past, lays the foundation from which a person grows.

Through his poetry, Heaney works to build this foundation out of, not only family, but also things like religion, the land of Ireland itself, and the trades that make up the country. These aspects of the past form the rhythm of the world in which his poetry takes place. His poetry works across time to form something bigger than poems about the Troubles or other singular points of history. Heaney’s words blend together to form an almost musical way through which to view things as far as part as the brutality of the
Troubles or non-Christian human sacrifices and the quiet rituals of religion and country trades. Each of these factors work together forming the larger arc of Heaney’s poetry usage of the past. Heaney does not use his poetry to merely comment on the present. Instead, the past, in Heaney’s hands, becomes a tool with which to reconfigure and rethink the present.


Russell, Richard Rankin. "Reading Poets From The Past: Seamus Heaney's Poetic Evolution."