

An Archetypal Reading of the Mythic Representations in Seamus Heaney's Selected Poems

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History</p> <p>Received: January 15,2026</p> <p>Accepted: April 16,2026</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords : Archetype, Mythology, Culture, Archetypal Criticism</p> <p>DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19610353</p>	<p><i>Archetypes reveal the shared roles among universal societies. This archetype may create a shared imaginary which is defined by many stereotypes that have not separated themselves from the traditional, biological, religious and mythical framework. In the same way, archetypal criticism represents that body of many stereotypes including plot structure, symbols, character type, themes that occur in mythology, religion, and stories across cultures and time periods. Heaney poetry has rested on a wide range of mythic patterns and archetypal images, particularly the image of the scapegoat/sacrificial victim and earth goddess. His archetypal images have been identified with the contemporary issues in his country. Therefore, this paper explores the underlying archetypal pattern that Heaney implies in some selected poems. These poems target the mythological heritage of his homeland which he either celebrates or criticized. His poems exhibit the poet's unconscious attachment to the universal archetypes which set social phenomena.</i></p>

Introduction

Archetype denotes universal meanings and the shared human experiences among the diverse ethnic groups. Among the antecedent of the literary theory of archetype was the treatment of myth in the writings of several anthropologists; among whom is James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. This book identifies various modes of myth and ritual which frequently occur in the legends and ceremonies of various cultures. Further, Carl G. Jung gave the term archetype psychological depth as he interprets it as 'primordial images' of the recurrent patterns of experiences in the lives of the generations which lie in the 'collective unconsciousness' of the human race, and embodied in myths, religion, dreams, and private fantasies as well as literature. (Abrams 1993)

Archetypal literary criticism is also considered in Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns of Poetry*. In this treatise, the term archetype represents various patterns of images, characters, narrative designs which are said to be shared in wide range of literary works, myths, dreams as well as ritualized modes of social behaviour. According to Bodkin, these archetypes tend to express a set of primitive, universal and mental patterns which stir the reader's response. However, archetypal critics assert the occurrence of the various mythical modes in literature, basing this on the assumption that myths are closer to the elemental archetypal construct than the artful sophistication of the writers. One of the basic themes of archetype is the death-rebirth which is originally grounded on the seasonal circle of life. This can also occur in the life of kings who is annually sacrificed in the myths, and gods who die to reborn. Other literary writings include the same themes such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The other archetypal themes, characters and images that reoccur in literature are journey underground, the heavenly ascent, the search for the father, the Paradise-Hades image, the Promethean rebel-hero, the scapegoat/ sacrifice, the earth goddess and the fatal woman. (Abrams)

Myth mostly has structured Heaney's poems as a medium of literary and cultural representations. In general, the archetypal myth, in Bodkin's terms, sets the primitive, universal and mental models which are viewed through Heaney's manipulation of the deep-rooted Irish myth. This employment of myth vividly serves the poet in his agenda (whether literary or cultural). Further, the need to celebrate the rich heritage comes in compliance with the authentic unconsciousness that unites the universal archetypes. To fulfill this purpose, Heaney, as a matter of consequence, implies myth by setting its archetypal background to stir the reader's response.

Referring to the image of the goddess earth in Heaney's poem the *Bogland*, Heaney adheres the attributes of the motherhood to his land which he calls the 'bog'. The goddess earth, according to the Greek mythology, is Gaiat who birthed all landscape, planet and creatures. In Heaney's terms, the bog is conceiving all the local creatures of his land, the natural and biological. He identifies his belonging with the land in terms of son-mother relationship. It is an entity which embraces all the implicit and explicit sensibilities of a land that renders an identity. The bog represents his motherland, Northern Ireland, which is a preserver of the cultural and biological treasures. Heaney's nationalistic preference is achieved through the revival of the cultural identity which the bog land represents. Hence, the bog in all its layers is set as a panoramic creation for the poet's cultural record of

Ireland. His attachment for his land is expressed through defining the rich components of the bog land which carries all these biological treasures in its womb. With vivid endeavour, the layers of the bog are represented as a mother's womb and indicator of the Irish heritage and a safe for all the treasures of the nation. Noticeably, this poem was written after Ireland got independent from the British colonization, which is read as postcolonial rhetoric. The poet is proud of the rich heritage which has been devalued by the colonizer, "They've taken the skeleton of the Great Elk out of the peat". The bog is opened to reveal a record of the unseen treasures of the hidden culture. History of hundred years enfolds the various components of the Irish culture such as the elk, butter, coal, fir, which specifically creates an identity which is still surviving through the rich culture. The bog, according to the poet, is of endless bottom which uncovers the deeply-rooted heritage and the levels of history of the land; it appears like pregnant mother who conceives history of the nation. Depicting the regional entity of the Northern Ireland seems to be dynamic medium employed by the poet to retrieve consciousness of nationalism. Enthusiasm enriches the poem to figure out the depth of history in his motherland which is a landmark of glory. In other words, the hints here seem to record that the history of the colonized land and people are older and richer than the colonizer's.

The attachment to his own culture is fundamental but still his views towards it are characterized by love-hate association. He blends this depiction with a responsibility to glorify the history of Ireland; and sometimes with a tendency to criticize the radical practices of the past. That is to say, this blending creates a tendency to establish a view which underscores an archetypal mental rendering fused with fascination of the land; and tendency to awaken historical awareness. This portrayal relies on a considerable poetic use of mythology, primitive religion, history fused with the Irish geographical entities. However, Heaney's poetry mingles criticism of the violent past, commentary on the local issues, but still adoration and fascination of the past never dismiss any tendency to criticize lots of brutal rites which will be tackled later.

Heaney's means to spot light on his cultural identity vary but the focus is reserved. With the same inclination to shape an association to identify and unify the people of the land, Heaney finds a kinship that relates the parts to the whole in his poem *Kinship*—it celebrates the grandeur of the land. The regional identification is prevalent in the bogs which confirm its relevance to its people. The adherence to the bog is as if maintained by a biological (mother-son) relevance that links the land with its people, i.e., the Irish identity is deeply rooted into several natural ingredients such as the landscape and the bog that relate all—regardless differences—to the mother Ireland, the source of fertility, the embracer of seasons, and nature elements,

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 (Heaney 1980)

The archetypal recurrence of the image of the scapegoat/sacrifice in the mythological pattern has delineated two of Heaney's poems, particularly, *Punishment* and the *Tollund Man*. This image coins a multiple senses as Heaney appears in some these poems a critical, pitiful and preoccupied with the troubling thoughts of the past which casted a shadow on the political present. His medium to report his political message lies in the archetypal recurrence of the image of victimization. According to O'Donoghue, the legendary primitive customs seem to raise the poet's resentment towards the violent past which implies a sacrifice of a man for the goddess. Vividly, the poem is not a mere verbal figuration of decaying rites but it is a wide range of criticism of the violent history of Ireland in which the old and current religious sectarianism dominated society. Nevertheless, his criticism is loaded with contemporary political criticism. (2009)

Heaney in *Punishment*, designates an image of an executed girl (the victimized) who is put to death due to her violation of the old traditions of the Irish culture. Senses of pity and sympathy dominate the poem. The old cultural conventions which were based on religious fundamentals arouse a question in the poet's mind—Does the civilized man give up his brutality? In other words, the old conventions, which were approved by the societal law, were oppressing and victimizing man; and, therefore, one never wonders for the modern brutality. According to Heaney, the societal past and present are sharing distinctive characteristics (Dix 2007) which are manifested in the atrocities of the human violence. It is evident that Heaney condemns these irregular selfish doings in spite of being common in the indigenous culture. However, Heaney's references are not mere cultural but also political as the victimized girl of the past hints to the modern Irish girls who are murdered for mere involving in passionate affairs with a Britisher. He writes,

Little adulteress,
before they punished you
you were flaxen-haired,
undemourished, and your

tar-black face was beautiful
 My poor scapegoat,
 I almost love you
 but would have cast, I know,
 the stones of silence (Heaney 1980)
 In this respect O'Donoghue comments,

One of the first issues to arise out of a review of Heaney's career is the matter of his Irishness. The heady figurative and thematic discoveries of *Wintering Out* and *North* coincided so closely with and responded so eloquently to the news worthy collapse of civil order in Northern Ireland that the poet's nationality has often been seen in the wider world as a key to his success, as a stroke of fortune that gave him an advantage over writers from less headline-dominating parts of the globe . (2009)

Along with the stream of the imagistic representation of recurrent archetypes and the mythical past, the *Tollund Man* focuses the attention on a prehistoric practice in the ancient Ireland which denotes a sacrificial ritual to satisfy the goddess desire, Nerthus. Here, the mental archetype image of victimization proposes a representation of a contemporary phenomenon. The poet intermingles between the implied pride of the very long history of his motherland and resentment towards the idea of victimizing man to a supreme power like the deity, Nerthus. The bog land is still a narrator of the multi-layered history and a land where the Tollund man fell a scapegoat; and it speaks of his violent ordeal. Violence is criticized in the terms of denouncing the victimization of the Tollund man who is sympathized and categorized as symbol of sacrifice. Though the primitive religion is sacred but still its brutal outcome is condemned. It is clear that Heaney's references again are not distanced from the contemporary political and sectarian disputes. Basically, the poet stands liberal in his attitudes towards the contemporary sectarian disputes (Hufstader 1996)

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 (Heaney 1980).

However, Ashby et al. refer to this point,

Heaney's poetry has dramatically noted the Irish cultural legacy, and he has noted these divisions, but he has largely kept his vision tied to the hearth, to the den-life that is the final arbiter of human suffering and the contending discourses that articulate a culture. (2007)

The archetypal recurrent theme of death/rebirth shapes Heaney's poem *Digging*. In the same respect, Heaney takes the responsibility to dig out the unseen history by his pen. The dead forefather's heritage gets reborn with the grandsons' activities. The dead forefathers are seen as if alive and given rebirth due to the spiritual power of literature(writing poetry), or the inherited the profession of the grandsons. *Digging* wraps itself within the realm of the bogland and Ireland. Thus, this suggests the fusion between the image of earth goddess who still rebirths identical versions of the enthusiastic forefathers and the circulation of the death/rebirth the poem *Digging* suggests. The physical practices of digging enthuse the mental energy to write about the pride of the forefathers. In Heaney's terms, poetry can be as the same excellence as the history of the land. A sense of pride is awakened while writing about the forefathers' peasantry roots—digging potato is parallel to digging into the self to celebrate the identity roots. Agriculture is the nation's traditional profession which is successively inherited among generations. The poet's public career, agriculture, in a rural setting is affirmed; it identifies the Irish culture. Noticeably, the poet exhibits the power of the pen in articulating the silenced past and uncovers the buried heritage. He stresses the significance of the pen which is compared to a gun. This hints to the role of the postcolonialist in retaining and reconsidering the distorted identity of the colonized land. Heaney fuses the past (the forefathers' profession), the present (his father's inherited profession) with his responsibility as a pen holder to trace and proudly highlight the history of a family and a nation. Heaney is aware of the fact that the responsibility of the pen in uncovering the buried history of a nation which is as much significant as digging land to survive. Though the family profession is primitive but still it signifies man's attachment to his land and its cultural associations. He proudly celebrates his father's and forefathers' traditional jobs, who were hard-working and tough men; and whose jobs signify resolution and strong will. (Spacey 2019). The forefathers have circulated alive again with the activities of the grandsons.

Conclusion

As it is a means of universal presentation, archetypal myth has moulded the mythic implication in the poet's poems. It is identified that Heaney's poetry is basically framed with a body of myth that symbolizes his

fascination of his country history and the underlying stream of archetypal awareness that Man of various races and cultures shares. The mythic patterns Heaney implies fuses his fondness of the Irish mythological culture and criticizing some political incidents which involve a contemporary indications. Heaney ,as well, mingles the employment of myth as representation of his local concerns of the deep-seated history, and the unconscious archetypal layer which serves as an indication of the universal mythical patterns. However, this collection equips Heaney's poetry deeper resonance and insight in understanding his connotative purposes. The mythic representation is not only a reflection of the cultural phenomena but it also exhibits deep psychic meanings. Further, these references are not free from impact of the collective unconscious which moulds the frame of myth in the mentality of the human race which Jung refers to. The return to myth to highlight belongingness and contemporary incidents is a vivid manifestation to this unconscious associations Man of various races is bound to. This is stately shown in the presentation of the images of earth mother and scapegoat/sacrifice.

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