

Amalgamation of Multiple Temporal and Spacial Frames in “Sunlight” by Seamus Heaney

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ABSTRACT: *Time and space are the two dimensions of any work of art. How a writer employs these two decides how good a piece may be. Many writers use it to add depth to their work and so does Heaney, in many of his poems. “Digging” and other such poems are an example of these, what sets “Sunlight” apart from other such poems however is the ease and mastery with which Heaney amalgamates various temporal and spacial shifts in it. This paper seeks to analyze which frames of time and space are created in the poems and how Heaney blends them to merge into each other.*

Keywords: Spacial dynamics, spacial and temporal framing, Seamus Heaney.

Introduction:

Einstein discovered that if matter succeeds in travelling with speed twice that of light, it converts to energy. The energy within the speed of thought however has been a point of debate in the domain of literature for quite some time. Thought can transcend temporal and spacial limits. Keats in this regard writes “Ever let your fancy roam/pleasure never is at home”(225). Theatre often incorporates in it multiple spacial frames, either through the division of stage into different spaces, as does Oscar Wilde in many of his plays or by setting their plays in various places. Modern novels ... especially the “stream of consciousness texts” also do this, but true mastery lies in achieving the effect despite respecting the economy of a text ... such as, in poetry. Heaney accomplishes this feat of mastery in many of his poems like “Digging” and others, but takes this a step ahead in “Sunlight”.

This poem is different from the other poems because here the special and temporal frames merge into each other. While in the earlier poems like “Digging” the reader is well aware of the shift, in these two poems it is not so. Heaney blends the multiple frames so masterfully that a reader often misses the shift and travels through space and time without even a slight clue of the ongoing excursion. The journey as a result is very smooth and it is only at the conclusion when the poet deliberately makes us aware of the shift in time that has taken place that a reader realizes this. This paper seeks to analyze which frames of time and space are created in the poems and how Heaney blends them to merge into each other. In this regard, the focus would primarily be on the subjects of the poems, their relationship with each other as well as with the speaker, the language and how it contributes in achieving the desired effect and how Heaney’s ‘gaze’ shifts and through it shifts the time and space in the poem in question.

“Sunlight” is basically a journey through multiple temporal and spacial frames. While such a journey is a feature of many poems, “Sunlight” is different with respect to how the various frames amalgamate with subtlety. Space in the poem not only changes in physical terms it also changes with respect to the time in which the space is perceived or the space in mind, as Heaney says himself, “...equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind,... it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation” (qtd. in Andrews 46). So, the time—space frames are interlinked. The

temporal frames have various shades. Time in the poem exists in terms of "time of a day" that is, as morning, afternoon and the like and time with a span of more than a day. Time is also framed in reference to clock time, psychological time and time as past and present. So, there are multiple frames created in various ways and yet amalgamated in a relatively short poem of seven stanzas of four lines each, masterfully.

One of the writing devices through which space and time may be examined within a text is the treatment of subjects of that particular text. How the subjects are placed within the framework of the text, how they correspond to each other and how the speaker of the poem responds to them can create a sense of distance between a reader and the text or a sense of immediacy. "Sunlight" begins with an "absence", the lack of a subject altogether. In terms of time and space it creates a distance ... an empty space. Lack of a subject creates an infinite space for a writer to work with and leaves a lot of room for a reader's imagination. Perhaps because, as Heaney himself writes in "Squarings", "The emptier it stood, the more compelled/ The eye that scanned it" (qtd. in Parker 211). The only presence in the scene created through the first line of the poem is that of sunlight. While it puts the action of the poem in a particular time of day, it still does not account for the time in terms of past or present and further creates two frames of time ... time in terms of morning, afternoon or evening or time within the span of a day and time in terms of days, weeks and months. As the poem progresses, a scene begins to be painted.

The first subjects introduced are inanimate objects; "the helmeted pump", "sling bucket" and the like slowly create a space. As a painter may slowly fill a canvas with a scene, in a similar fashion Heaney first presents a stark canvas and then gradually begins to paint it. This he does by introducing non-living, household objects that then transform this bare space into a domestic one.

By adorning his space with household objects and making it "sunlit" Heaney creates a frame both in terms of time and space. He then zooms it out so that the frame stretches to include other space ... this he does by including "her" into it as well as stretching the singular sense of time by mentioning "each long afternoon". By moving from one particular afternoon – assumed due to the mention of the "sunlit" space and at the same time of "the sun [that] stood/like a griddle cooling/against the wall"- to "each long afternoon", Heaney stretches the temporal frame of the poem. Now it includes more time frames for now the time becomes

time in terms of a single day as well as multiple days. This shift in the time frame indicates that the space has shifted, so that the largest frame or the canvas of the poem now holds a picture in larger focus which stretches to include other space and time frames as well. The readers however, cannot identify this second time-space frame as a totally separate one.

The ambiguity is created through the merging of spaces and times. When the figure of “her” is introduced, her presence creates two effects ... she fills the “absence” mentioned in the first line of the poem and it seems that the focus shifts from the open space of the veranda to some enclosed space like a kitchen perhaps. This effect however, is hardly noticeable in a superficial reading of the text, the movement is as easy as a figure of a woman gliding from one part of the house to another ... only the difference in details of the items now being handled by the subject refers to her change in position with respect to space. Instead of working with the “helmeted pump in the yard” or the “slung bucket”, she works with “the bakeboard and reddening stove” and this on taking notice reveals the shift in space.

Heaney does not document fulfillment of domestic duties gradually or in chronological order. On the contrary, it is just “she” doing one thing and then the next in random order “... she stood/in a floury apron/by the window./Now she dusts the board/ ... now sits, broad-lapped,”. This method of recording creates a cinematic effect of retrieval of chunks from one’s memory. Memory does not allow retrieval of an incident in its entirety. When one thinks of one’s deceased relative for example, one tends to remember only those bits that were either characteristic of the individual in question or dear to the one remembering. Many writers have used this play of memory. James Joyce for one uses this technique in his novel *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of the novel relives a particularly painful memory through a chunk from the incident (the plop plop of a rat). If shown visually, it creates an effect of an “absent-presence”, somebody who is absent physically but made alive through memory. On paper, it propagates multiple effects, it creates an effect of immediacy while at the same time creates more temporal frames through the travel in time and since a surface level reading would not reveal to the audience if the figure described is in actuality present or not it serves to blend different frames. Language is a poet’s greatest tool. It is primarily through the play of words that he creates wonders. As Heaney writes in his *The Redress of*

Poetry. "what Borges calls 'the most physical emotion that comes with each reading' derives from the superfluity of the poems' language-life" (24). One of the ways in which Heaney creates the frames through language is by simply declaring that they exist. In the second line of the poem Heaney mentions a "yard"; this information is further supported with detail. It is stated that the yard is empty in a metaphorical sense, because it is a "sunlit absence". Interestingly though the information is in reverse order, a reader comes to know of an empty space which is later revealed to be a yard, which then is furnished with matching paraphernalia. The movement from the yard in terms of space then is subtle and not declared by the speaker as openly, this creates ambiguity and at the same times an easiness as discussed earlier. The point in the poem when the reader finally discovers that there has been a shift in space again, is at the culmination of the poem when the speaker again provides the information openly and in plain words, we are told that "here is a space/again, the scone rising/ to the tick of two clocks." Under the gaze of art, writes Wilber, "our own egoic grasping in time comes momentarily to rest. We relax into our basic awareness..."(qtd. in Law. Although the message is quite clear yet, the reader discovers only now, when told that he has travelled through two spaces and two times within the span of the poem. This effect is created by remarkable economy, simply by the use of "two clocks", the "absence", "presence" and then the "absence" sequence also embeds the idea, but it is only when one reaches the final lines that one becomes aware of these shifts. So, the absence, presence sequence as well as the presence in absence not only finds itself within the content of the poem it is also in its structure. Heaney openly describes the space, naming it as a "yard" and the time as being "afternoon", but as the poem progresses, does not update the information and only drops hints through the mentioning of things associated with a kitchen, so that he keeps information back while at the same time revealing some of it. This creates the effect of blending different spaces and times together.

The effect of creating the presence of the subject – "her" has also been achieved by Heaney through the use of tenses, which is in reverse order. Usually, to show something in the past, past-tense is used. But here, Heaney has used past-tense for things which are in near focus. By saying that "there was a sunlit absence", he takes his readers immediately into the space that he creates, so that the space created initially becomes a most immediate reality. As he starts introducing subjects into it, the space becomes three dimensional and tangible, so that when he says,

“Now she dusts the board/with a goose’s wing,/now sits, broad-lapped it not only increases the pace by increasing the rhythm, it also creates a sense of distancing as if the speaker is trying to grasp something which is otherwise intangible ... a ghost perhaps, “When you write about the dead, you are expiating your connection with them, you’re cleansing it. And that means that they are also present” (Montague qtd. in Parker 211). The effect is heightened through the image of the female subject as well. She is shown to be “in a floury apron” and “with whitened nails”, opening another portal into a different dimension ... the spacial dimension of the memory and the temporal dimension of the ethereal, unreal or a memory. So that while the clock time remains that of afternoon, conveyed through the word “sunlit” and later “afternoon” as well, a journey through psychological time takes place. This is often done in the stream of consciousness texts. Virginia Woolf does it often in her novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Heaney does this with remarkable ease and just by saying “of each long afternoon” initiates the journey. This duality of time and its experience is also conveyed through the “ticking of two clocks”. The two clocks while stand as a metaphor for two time frames, they also stand for the two kinds of times – the clock time and the psychological time.

Another effect that the use of tenses creates in the poem is that of bringing the past to the forefront or clear focus. This is done by assigning continuous tenses to the subject. The subject, presumably a lady who is comparatively old and a retrieval from memory, is told to be “doing” her chores instead of having done them once in the space described. When Heaney describes her doing a duty there is an automatic sense of immediacy, this is due to the word “Now”, “Now she dusts the board/... now sits, broad-lapped,” and then continuing with the same tense even though the action moves to the present. So that, even though a span of time has been spent, still “the scone [is] rising”, the time frame changes but there remains a unity of action. This again merges the two space and time frames but still does it subtly. The speaker on the other hand seems to be quite aware of the shift and as if summing up this oscillation of time and space declares “love” to be the binding force which serves as an adhesive and makes the unity of various frames possible.

Unitary speaker makes various frames hold out too, for it is under the guidance of this speaker that the reader moves through the text. As the speaker’s gaze shifts, so does a reader’s attention, such that the speaker’s gaze behaves as does a camera in a visual and becomes the “look of the

camera". Daniel Chandler defines it in his article "Forms of Gaze" as "the way that the camera itself appears to look at the people (or animals or objects) depicted; less metaphorically, the gaze of the film-maker or photographer". It also zooms in and zooms out like a camera and the image blurs or is sharpened as the need maybe. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker appears to be a somewhat distant observer, looking at things indirectly, through another medium – a window possibly. So although, the vision is zoomed in, yet it is somewhat blurred. We get this idea through the choice of "There" as the descriptive in the very opening. Although the reader is launched into the space created immediately, as discussed earlier, yet a certain distance is maintained by the use of "that" as the descriptive, this also creates ambiguity regarding the time-space frame that the reader is moving through. As the details are filled in, the speaker's gaze seems to be shifting to different things, other than the "absence" which is most dominating in the first line. While the poem progresses, the focus narrows down further so that it now solely rests on the only living subject of the poem. Here too, the analogy of the camera for the speaker's gaze works. The focus is sharpened even though it is somewhat zoomed out, as the journey is made into the past. The entire focus becomes this figure, its demeanor and how it moves about. The style however, becomes slightly contemplative along with descriptive, the line "of each long afternoon" sends across the idea, and it strengthens as the poem draws to a close, particularly during the closing comment on "love" being the binding force, this creates the sense of the vision being rather blur. This play of the "gaze" also makes the effect of the amalgamation of time-space frames possible and gives it strength by providing it with a backbone through guiding the reader's attention as suits the purpose of the poet.

There is multiplicity and then there is unity too in Heaney's "Sunlight". This juxtaposition of techniques and at the same time their complimentary nature makes this poem a lingual feast for its readers "in that simple awe struck moment, when great art enters you and changes you, ... spirit shines in this world just a little more brightly then it did the moment before" (Wilber qtd. in Law). So does the afore-mentioned poem. It creates worlds and times for its readers and yet blends them so, that we move through them without the slightest of efforts, this is where the mastery of the poet lies in this particular poem and this is where the pleasure for its readers lie also.

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