

**The Search for and Portrayal of National Identity  
in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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## Abstract

The island that now houses Ireland and Northern Ireland has changed a great deal politically during the twentieth century. Once completely under British rule, the island is now divided into an independent nation, often referred to as the Republic of Ireland, in the south and the still British-controlled region of Northern Ireland. Throughout the shifts of the past 100 years, one constant for Ireland and Northern Ireland has been a search for identity and place. The poetry of William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney offers a look into how two men from different times and different parts of the island searched for and displayed their countries' history, culture, and conflicts in drastically different ways. To examine these two Nobel Prize-winning poets, I analyze each of poet's work independently and then compare them. Also included at the beginning of this paper is a brief history of Ireland in the twentieth century and short biographies of Yeats and Heaney.

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## Introduction

The political landscape of Ireland has changed drastically during the twentieth century. Through being under British rule, to being a Free State, and finally an independent nation, the Emerald Isle has seen plenty of blood shed in its recent history. In fact, some blood is still being split in Northern Ireland based on religious hatred and political differences. The history of this tiny island nation is as complex and interesting as the search for identity that its citizens have been desperately searching for since long before the first bullet was fired or the tri-color flag was first raised.

This quest for belonging, understanding, and national pride during the twentieth century has been at the focal point of two of Ireland's finest poets: William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney. Both Noble Prize winners have experienced radically different times in their nation's history, but have been forced to deal with many of the same issues, such as violence. The methods the two have taken are quite different, but by examining them independent of each other and then comparing them, one can get a better understanding of how Ireland has shifted in its close past, where Ireland has come from, where it may be going, and what it means to at least two men to be Irish.

## **Ireland and the twentieth century**

From 1801 until December 6, 1922, the whole island of Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom and under British control. In 1914, the Irish Home Rule Bill was enacted by the British Parliament, but due to World War I, the effect of the bill was suspended. While the bill would give Ireland a moderate amount of independence, most people in Ireland were tired of waiting for the establishment of a completely independent state.

The Irish volunteers, a group dedicated to the implementation of the Home Rule Act, and the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), an organization committed to overthrowing British rule and its replacement with a republic, took the General Post Office in Dublin and declared Ireland a Republic on Easter morning, 1916. After several days of fighting, the leaders of the Easter Rising, including Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, realized that there was no hope against largest and more powerful British forces and surrendered. After the execution of these leaders, militant nationalists under the flag of the Sinn Fein party and its paramilitary wing, the Irish Volunteers, began to win popular support. The 1918 general election brought a majority of seats to Sinn Fein, whose elected candidates refused to attend Parliament at Westminster and instead set up a revolutionary parliament, Dail Eireann, in Dublin. This decision marked the beginning of the Anglo-Irish War.

From 1919 to 1921, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), formerly the Irish Volunteers, used guerilla tactics to fight the British army and a paramilitary unit called the Black and Tans. Both sides were brutal in their methods and a cease-fire was eventually called. The war ended with the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921. The

treaty established the Irish Free State, which gave Ireland a new system of self-government. It was meant to encompass the entire Ireland, but a proviso allowed Northern Ireland to opt out and remain part of the United Kingdom, which it did.

Following the treaty and creation of the Irish Free State, the country fell into a brief, but bloody civil war between pro and anti-treaty factions in the Free State. Although it lasted less than two years, the civil war took more lives than the Anglo-Irish war and created increased tension in the country.

Eamon de Valera, head of the Fianna Fail party, won a general election in 1932 to become President of the Executive Council, the head of the Irish government outside of Great Britain. On December 29, 1937, the new "Constitution of Ireland" was put into effect. This document changed the name of the Irish Free State to Ireland, gave de Valera the title of president, and created a new, more powerful prime minister, called the Taoiseach. Ireland was still not a country though. The British monarch still held the title of King of Ireland and was in control on the international stage.

It wasn't until April 1, 1949 that Ireland became an independent republic under the Republic of Ireland Act. This act gave the president the powers which had previously been held by the King. Since Ireland declared itself a republic, it terminated the state's membership in the British Commonwealth. At long last, Ireland was its own country ("History of the southern Irish state").

Unfortunately the creation of the Irish state did not mean everlasting peace for the entire island. Northern Ireland, which is not part of the Republic, has remained an area of great contention for varying political and religious factions. The sporadic communal violence that has existed mostly in Northern Ireland since the late 1960s is often referred

to as The Troubles. This violence between the Provisional IRA, British Army, police, and numerous other paramilitary groups is marked as another chapter in the longtime hatred between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. The Troubles, referred to as the "Irish Problem" by British commentators, has been marked by a number of assassinations, assassination attempts, events such as Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday, and numerous bombings. While the Belfast Agreement in the mid-1990s is said to have put an end to this internal conflict which has claimed 3,000-4,000 lives, tension between different religious and political groups in the North still very much exists ("The Troubles").

## Biography of William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin on June 13, 1865 as the eldest son of painter John Butler Yeats. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to London, where it would remain until 1880. Although he studied at the Godolphin School, Yeats spent summers with his grandparents in Sligo, which he always cherished. When the family returned to Dublin in 1880, Yeats was enrolled at the High School, and then in Harcourt Street. While his parents wanted him to attend Trinity College to carry on a family tradition, Yeats, never a strong student, feared he would not be accepted and opted to study at the Metropolitan School of Art from 1884 to 1885, and then at the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1886. It was during this time that he was introduced to a group of mystics, including fellow writer George Russell, that would serve to plant the seed of Yeats's interest in the topic (Boylan 409).

His fascination with mysticism led Yeats to join Madame Blavatsky's Theosophists in 1887 and the Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society focused on ritual magic, in 1891 after he and his family had returned to London. The idea that a mortal might be able to tap into some kind of supernatural wisdom intrigued Yeats. From then on, he was convinced that by using the mind, a person could move past the limitations of science and rationalism ("William").

In 1886, Yeats left the world of art to focus on his writing, which he had been practicing in the vein of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Edmund Spenser since the age of 17. His first published work, *Mosada*, was a dramatic poem that lacks anything Irish. Soon thereafter, Yeats met John O'Leary, who encouraged Yeats to focus his writings on native subject matter (Boylan 409). This led Yeats to begin working on *The Wanderings of*

*Oisín*, a long poem on Irish mythology, which was published in 1889, the same year he met the woman who would become his lifelong infatuation, Muad Gonne. She was a passionate young woman who shared with Yeats a devoted sense of Irish nationalism and interest in the spiritual world. Although he courted her for nearly three decades and she was the subject of many of his love poems, his affections were not repaid ("William"). Her encouragement, though, led him to create the nationalistic plays *The Countess Kathleen* in 1892 and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* 1902 (Boylan 409-10).

While his 1899 collection of poems, *The Wind among the Reeds*, contain a great deal of occult symbolism, most of his poems that went into his earlier collection, 1895's *Poems*, are much more focused on Irish nationalism. His lush style at this time was much affected by the Rhymers' Club, which he helped found in 1890. Although he would abandon that style, he was always committed to the ideals of the group that pushed rhythm, cadence, form, and style ("William").

His transformation in style to a simpler, more conversational rhythm and diction can be seen in his first three collections of the twentieth century: *In the Seven Woods* (1903), *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910), and *Responsibilities* (1914) ("William"). During this decade, Yeats was also extremely active in the theatre. He led the founding of the Irish National Theatre Society and also was appointed as one of the directors, along with Lady Augusta Gregory and John M. Synge, at the society's home, Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1906 (Boylan 410).

Following the Easter Rising in 1916, Yeats's fire for Irish nationalism, which had fallen somewhat dormant, and poetry was rekindled. He decided to reside in Dublin rather than England and married Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917, around which time he

developed his idea of the pattern of gyres, which are "interpenetrating cones representing mixtures of opposites of both a personal and historical nature ("William"). In the coming years, Yeats published four volumes which are generally considered to be his finest work as a poet. This peak in a very successful career began with *The Wild Swans at Coole* in 1919, followed by *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921, then *The Tower* in 1928, and finally *The Winding Stair* in 1933. In this sustained period of excellence, Yeats focused on themes of memory, political turmoil in Ireland, emotions, and the value of life (Boylan 410).

In the 1920s, Yeats received a number of honors. He was named to the Senate of the new Irish Free State in 1922, and a year later won the Nobel Prize for literature. With George Bernard Shaw, he founded the Irish Academy of Letters in 1932 to promote creative writing in Ireland (Boylan 411).

As his health began to decline in his old age, his poetry turned violent as he raged against death. On January 28, 1939, while vacationing to protect his health, Yeats died in Roquebrune. While he was buried there originally, in 1948, his remains returned to Ireland to be buried in the churchyard of his grandfather's parish at Drumcliffe, Co. Sligo. On his limestone grave marker, he insisted these words be cut: "Cast a cold eye/On life, on death./Horseman, pass by!" (Boylan 411).

## Biography of Seamus Heaney

On April 13, 1939, less than three months after the death of Yeats, Seamus Heaney was born in the townland of Mossbawn, County Derry, Northern Ireland (Buttel 9). He was the first of nine children born to Patrick and Margaret Kathleen Heaney. His father was a Catholic farmer and cattle dealer, and much of the family was involved in farming. It soon became clear the Seamus was going to break from that tradition after he received scholarships to St. Columb's College and then Queen's University (Morrison 13).

While at Queen's University from 1957-1961, he was exposed to Irish, American, and English literature and became fond of the writings of Ted Hughes, Patrick Kavanagh, and Robert Frost ("Seamus"). These poets inspired Heaney's own writing, which was published in undergraduate literary magazines (Buttel 9). After graduating from the university with a first-class honours degree in English language and literature, Heaney began to have poems published in local university magazines, as well as Belfast newspapers (Morrison 13).

Following his graduation, Heaney spent time as a secondary school teacher before returning to Queen's University as a lecturer in 1965. It was around this time that his life took a major turn. In 1965-6, he married Marie Devlin and had the first of his three children and had his first collection of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, published (Morrison 13-4). Then, as a Catholic living in Belfast in 1969, Heaney took a keen interest in the violence erupting in the country between Catholics and Protestants and began to address the situation in his poetry ("Seamus").

After moving from Belfast to Ashford, County Wicklow in 1972, he eventually

settled in Dublin in 1976 as an English professor at Crayfort College (Morrison 14). By that time, Heaney was quite the literary figure, having published *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975), and *Stations* (1975). In *Wintering Out* and *North*, Heaney presents a series of "bog poems" inspired by the excavation of bogs in Europe that contained the bodies of people who had been slaughtered dating from the Iron Age. He used these poems to draw a connect between past violence abroad and the contemporary violence of Ireland ("Seamus"). In the late 1970s and 1980s, Heaney continued to focus on the political tension in Ireland with 1979's *Field Work*, 1984's *Station Island*, and 1987's *The Haw Lantern* ("Seamus").

1991 brought *Seeing Things* and a shift from politics back to more autobiographical themes for the poet. After winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995, Heaney continued exploring emotions and ideals with *The Spirit Level* (1996) and again returns to his youth in *Electric Light* (2001). In addition to his poetry, Heaney has garnered accolades in a variety of other literary fields, such as criticism and translation, throughout his career ("Seamus").

Since 1981, he has spent part of each year teaching at Harvard University, where, in 1984, he was named the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. He also was the Professor of Poetry at Oxford University from 1989 to 1994. Heaney frequently travels and lectures in both America and England. He is still a resident of Dublin ("Seamus").

## Analysis of Yeats's Poetry

The American modernist poet T. S. Eliot once described William B. Yeats by saying, "he was one of those poets whose history is the history of our own time, who are a part of the consciousness of their age, which cannot be understood without them" (Boylan 411). With Yeats's interest and passion for Ireland and its identity, that history was frequently focused around or tied to the Emerald Isle in some way. In an attempt to celebrate the country's history and nationalism, Yeats created an ideal Irish figure of the past and turned the patriots of his own time into modern martyrs, although he did so somewhat reluctantly because of issues that will be discussed later on, by way of his poetry.

To separate Ireland from England in every way possible, which was the goal of the majority of the Irish population in the twentieth century, it was crucial that Ireland pull together a history and identity that was complex and independent. A main method used by many of the Irish Literary Revival writers was to look to what they imagined to be distinctively and authentically Irish. Yeats and others looked to the countryside to find their ideal character. While the writers of the Irish Literary Revival had differences about how exactly to portray ancient rural life in their country, most of them had a common belief that the county people of Ireland were a single entity known as "the peasants." Obviously, this ignored the diverse groups of rural poor made up of small farmers, laborer-landholders, landless laborers, and itinerant workers, and collapsed them into a singular classification as the "Noble Peasant" (Hirsch 1117). The role of this created character was to refute prejudices about Ireland, such as it being land of dim-witted buffoons, and replace them with an "ancient idealism" that represented the dignified, consistent, tradition-based people of Ireland (Hirsch 1120). In doing so, the writers, Yeats

included, believed that they would be able fight off not only the dominant middle-class English culture of the time, but also the crushing move of the world into a cold industrial age (Hirsch 1117 and 1120).

Yeats portrays this idea of a noble rural Irish landscape and culture in poems such as "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," "Those Images," and "The Fisherman."

In one of his early poems, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," Yeats reaches back into the past of Ireland and begs the pagan land of "ancient times" to reappear in the present day:

Lest I no more hear common things that crave;  
 The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,  
 The field-mouse running by me in the grass,  
 And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass;  
 But seek alone to hear the strange things said  
 By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,  
 And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.  
 Come near; I would, before my time to go,  
 Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways (15-23).

The complaint against "common things" shows the speaker's displeasure with the current age, which has become stale and full of desires that consume the soul but never are realized. This leaves the speaker empty and searching. What he begs to find is the Ireland that he believes once existed. In this ancient time, people had a personal relationship with their God, even if it that god may be a pagan one, and apparently cared little for material things. As much as this concept of a union between God and man embraces romantic and

traditional ideals, it also serves to challenge the modern "myths" based on empiricism and logical positivism (Allen 92). Yeats also brings in the idea of learning a "tongue men do not know," which could refer either to a language that allowed these ancient folks to commune with God or possibly Gaelic, in another way of returning to Ireland's past. Of course, knowing Yeats, it is very possible that the speaker could be referring to a language men used to relate with God and Gaelic simultaneously. To Yeats, both of these forgotten "tongues" are symbols of a rural Irish world that was in some way pure. A relationship with someone/something greater than man, a lack of earthly desires, and a mysterious language unfamiliar to present society all represent for Yeats a golden age in Ireland before the British and modernity came to corrupt the land.

"Those Images" is an attempt by Yeats to "call the Muses home" in hopes that they will allow Ireland to return to a simpler time (8):

Seek those images  
 That constitute the wild,  
 The lion and the virgin,  
 The harlot and the child.  
 Find in middle air  
 An eagle on the wing,  
 Recognise the five  
 That make the Muses sing (9-16).

Each of these images represents a separate characteristic that Yeats saw in Ireland's former people and is trying to recall in hopes that they will revitalize Ireland. The lion is a ferocious spirit, the virgin is purity of the soul, the harlot, which seems negative at first,

is mischievousness, the child is innocence, and the "eagle on the wing" represents freedom. The speaker believes that the presence of those traits will return the Irish landscape and people to a simpler, yet more artistic way of being by allowing them to "leave/The cavern of the mind" (1-2). That trapping cavern in the mind of Yeats was British oppression, industrialism, and the crush of modernity. These characteristics fly in the face of all of these and ultimately allow Ireland to embrace its own old wild side.

One of the main aims the Revival writers attempted to achieve by creating the peasant character was to destroy the English stereotype of the Irish buffoon who appeared in British theatre and print (Hirsch 1120). This violent, drunken fool was depicted by the English to be subhuman and incapable of managing in the modern world. Therefore, he needed to be dominated and kept in check. The epitome of Yeats's "noble peasant," and the ultimate counter to this negative stereotype, is the subject of his poem, "The Fisherman."

In the poem, the speaker imagines "A man who doesn't exist,/A man who is but a dream" to be the ideal figure of Ireland's past (25-6). He is dressed in grey clothes from Connemara, a town in the west of Ireland known for its ruggedness, and is freckled. The speaker refers to him as "This wise and simple man" (8). In these and other characteristics, the speaker finds his ideal:

All day I'd looked in the face  
 What I had hoped 'twould be  
 To write for my own race  
 And the reality;  
 The living men that I hate,

The dead man that I loved (9-14).

The man, who is only a creation of the speaker's imagination, stands up in his simpleness and wisdom as the perfect Irish man. He is clever, witty, and cherishes the arts. This is everything Yeats wishes his own audience would be, but has never been able to find due to the erasing of this type of picturesque man by foreign rule and the modern age. His image though has effectually become Yeats's muse, which he draws on to see problems with his own country and race. If only Ireland could find its way back to the hill this man sat on, it would be able to shrug off the trappings and chains which have robbed it for hundreds of years of its true identity, even if it didn't exist: that of simple, humble peasant fishing in a river for beauty and truth.

"The Fisherman" is not only a celebration of Yeats's ideal audience though. While the imagined character of the fisherman in his traditional Irish garb is used as compensation for a lack of a similar modern day audience by Yeats, the fisherman's existence also shows the poet's desire to negate those who he holds responsible for "The beating down of the wise/And great Art beaten down" (23-4). Those Yeats is attempting to negate are those who rioted in 1907 against a showing of John M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre because they deemed it indecent and the Dublin Corporation, which refused to build a gallery for an art bequest by Hugh Lane in 1913 (Ward 145). It is these people that Yeats targets in "The Fisherman," which, importantly, he wrote in 1914:

Maybe a twelvemonth since

Suddenly I began,

In scorn of this audience,

Imagining a man,  
And his sun-freckled face,  
And grey Connemara cloth, (25-30).

Yeats fears that this audience would attack his poetry in an attempt to stifle his creativity, much as he saw them as doing in the past. In reaction to this conflict with his real audience, Yeats creates the fisherman character to bring a personal dream of an ideal audience into public existence in the mind of the reader (Ward 148). By doing so, Yeats is simultaneously refusing those who challenge him in reality and building an imaginary audience in the minds of his readers.

Since many of the writers of the Irish Literary Revival, Yeats included, were Anglo-Irish Protestants, they were separated from the Catholic line which "the folk" they wrote about belonged. This allowed Yeats and others to create the peasant as a character of a different past. The ancient archetype they portrayed was pagan and steeped deeply in an ancient folk world, which made the peasant a romantic symbol of Irish past that was cultural, pastoral, and valued personal freedom, rather than goods. The peasant was the character that held up the best of Ireland's cultural heritage and had been able to avoid the contamination of the Irish "racial soul" that had been marred by outsiders and materialism (McCaffery 26) The idea of this collected folk unaffected by Christianity and the individualizing effect of cities turned the peasant character into a figure of roots for all Irish citizens (Hirsch 1122).

At the same time, the separation of faith and ideology Yeats had from his audience could cause some problems for the poet as he wrote numerous poems documenting and commemorating the sacrifices made by the Irish patriots of the Catholic

middle classes. The poet feared that the Jacobites, a group of fanatical Catholics who were aiming for control of the country, were a sharp threat to intellectual and artistic freedom, which to Yeats was just as important as freedom from foreign rule (Torchiana 27). By 1913, he had come to believe that the Irish people were under the control of the pope and were "counting beads as they counted their coin and treating Christ with the same sort of deference they showed their greasy till" (Ward 149). Yeats did not trust the men he saw looking to lead the country, but he also respected their sacrifice and courage. He was simultaneously drawn to the tragic beauty in their sacrifice and fearful how they would carry the banner of Irish nationalism that he had been carrying for decades (Ward 158).

After the Easter Uprising of 1916, Yeats wrote his poem "Easter 1916." In the poem he memorializes the 16 men who gave their lives in the failed revolution, while also pondering what this sacrifice has created:

I write it out in a verse—  
 MacDonagh and MacBride  
 And Connolly and Pearse  
 Now and in time to be,  
 Wherever green is worn,  
 Are changed, changed utterly:  
 A terrible beauty is born (74-80).

By marking down their names, the poet obviously commemorates the goal of the 16 men, he also wrote other poems commemorating their actions, including "Sixteen Dead Men" and "The Rose Tree." It is the final line here that reveals his fear of what will become of

these martyrs' examples. While it speaks of creation and birth, there is a certain duality that comes along with it. Yeats calls it a "terrible beauty" that has come to the country. It is beautiful because of the sacrifice and the hope it brings for an independently-ruled Ireland, but it is terrible to Yeats because of his fear of what that future Ireland may mean for men such as himself.

In line 14 of "Easter 1916," Yeats notes that Ireland was a land "where motley is worn." This multi-faceted and multi-colored country of jest changes by the end of the poem to a more serious and somber place. In this changed land, green is the new color. This shift from a wide variety of colors to uniform green represents two things for Yeats. First of all, the shift in the country's colors shows the unifying effect the death of rebels has had on the Irish people. The sacrifice has brought them all together under a single color. At the same time, the shift symbolizes for Yeats a frightening change in the attitude of the Irish people. Where once the Irish could be described as "motley," now they are simply "green." Variety and creativity have gone by the wayside while the Irish people fight for a single goal of political freedom. For Yeats, who emphasized personal freedom as much as political freedom throughout his career, this is where the "terrible" part of a "terrible beauty" exists.

Feelings such as the ones expressed at the end of "Easter 1916" led Yeats to create what he called "spiritual instructors" in 1917. The "instructors," who Yeats claimed spoke to him and his wife, gave the poet an audience, much like the one he was searching for in "The Fisherman," that did not really exist and was in many way contradictory to his real audience. Despite attempting to realize the same romantic dream Yeats had envisioned in much of his 1890s poetry, the poet could still not accept the men of the Catholic middle

classes who had taken part in the Easter Rising of 1916 as compatriots. After all, these were the men who had protested against *Playboy*, and that Yeats deeply feared and hated for what he saw as their repression of art. At the same time, Yeats could no longer label these men as cowards, because they attempted what he had only dreamed of: the creation of an Irish nation (Ward 145). Yeats turned from this confusion towards the rebels and created the "instructors." Through them, Yeats provided himself an image of two interpenetrating cones which he referred to as "gyres." This structure represented contradiction and conflict in a modern world where opposites not only had direct effects on each other, but were also necessary for existence (Ward 143). The creation of the gyres gave Yeats a vehicle by which he could structure his experience as a poet in a modern world that was contradictory to his own desires (Ward 145). Yeats used these cones to explain to himself how the contradictions he felt with his audience were "inherent in any historical process" (Ward 160). With this explanation in mind, Yeats was able to produce poetry out of the conflicts he held with his modern audience (Ward 160).

After Ireland did gain its independence, Yeats was somewhat validated in his fears of censorship by the new Catholic government. In late 1928, the still young Irish government was all but set to pass the Censorship of Publications Bill, which Yeats took to be an attack on free intellect in Ireland. Yeats condemned the bill publicly for attempting to create a sort of moral utopia out of Ireland and trapping its citizens into a rigid form of perfection where imagination was considered dangerous (Torchiana 31-2). The poet demonstrates the crippling effect he believed this Bill would have on the Irish in his poem "The Choice":

The intellect of man is forced to choose

Perfection of the life, or of the work,  
 And if it take the second must refuse  
 A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.  
 When all that story's finished, what's the news?  
 In luck or out the toil has left its mark:  
 That old perplexity an empty purse,  
 Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.

Here, Yeats is arguing that it is impossible for a man of intellect be free to compose and perfect his craft if he is constantly fearful of being "indecent." Doing so, would cause that man to become a pauper, kept warm at night only by his work. Seeing this as a grave injustice in a land that was supposedly free, Yeats railed against the ideas laid out in the bill long after it was passed into law (Torchiana 32-3).

Moreover, in "The Choice," Yeats is lamenting what he sees on his own part to get the importance of intellectual freedom across to the Irish people. Yeats considered himself a very hard worker and had a great deal of success as a poet, but he still found dissatisfaction at his failure in this area, as is shown by the phrase, "the day's vanity, the night's remorse" (8). Although Yeats had "toiled" during his life, or "day," to create an Ireland which he had dreamed of, as death, or "night" approaches, he feels regret, because his dream was not achieved. While he is not left with an "empty purse," he is left feeling empty as what he sees as a failure in the "perfection" of his life and of Ireland.

Battles and differences with his audience greatly shaped how Yeats recorded Irish history by forcing him to examine a number of sides. Ultimately though, Yeats was a strong believer in Irish freedom and those who pursued it, even if he feared what the new

Ireland would be. The unifying theme in all his work concerning Ireland is the idea of the quest: both for the perceived truth of an ideal that lived in the past and the freedom he hoped lived in the future.

## Analysis of Heaney's Poetry

In 1956, Lawrence J. McCaffrey wrote that Ireland had been blessed in the first half of the century with "an almost miraculous abundance of talented writers" and that with the revolutionary era over, it was reasonable to believe that Irish writing would soon level off (McCaffrey 30). Ten years later, Seamus Heaney showed that Irish writing was still alive and well when he published his first collection of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, and began a career that has shot him into the stratosphere of literary celebrity and respect. Undoubtedly, Heaney is one of the brightest stars in poetry's sky during the latter part of the twentieth century, and has earned his place among the elite by bringing his unique voice to the issues surrounding the past and present of his beloved Ireland.

When Heaney deals with Ireland's history, he often does so by attempting to reclaim a portion of the country's past or original identity, which he believes to be muddled and left blighted by centuries of conflict. By exposing the often brutal history of the country, Heaney invites what many scholars term an "apocalypse" where the dead are brought back to be judged by poetry that also judges the poet himself, along with the culture, for allowing the deaths to continue (Hart 390). Three methods that Heaney most often employs to explore and take back what has been lost by Ireland over the course of time are that of physical digging, a revival of Irish language, and the enlistment of ancient Celtic tradition.

A common place Heaney turns to "unearth" the history and truth in Ireland is the physical land itself. He sees and portrays "the bog bank as a memory bank," which offers up to him as a poet "an inexhaustible metaphor for the unforgiving memory that in Ireland, perhaps more than in any other country, has been each generation's legacy to the

next" (Stallworthy 167). In the land, Heaney not only finds the dead, but also layers upon layers of history, both on a personal and national level. This method of poetic archaeology is a technique that the poet has used since the very beginning of his career.

"Digging" was the very appropriately placed as the first poem in the first book of poetry Heaney published. Not only does the poem's description of a rural lifestyle reveal Heaney's personal family history, but also the poet's desire to delve into the past of the land. After the poet portrays himself as a craftsman with a sedentary trade by writing, "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests; snug as a gun" (1-2), he moves into history and memory by observing his father:

Under my window, a clean rasping sound .  
 When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
 My father, digging. I look down  
 Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
 Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
 Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
 Where he was digging (3-9).

Here, it is the pen that is doing the act of digging by uncovering thoughts of his father in times of more strength and fluidity. In the present, the poet's father is "straining" as he works, whereas when the poet's memory shifts to the past, his father moves with rhythm. This idea of decline continues as the poet uses the pen to cut even deeper into the past:

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
 Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
 Once I carried him milk in a bottle

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 (17-24).

While it is clear in the early lines of the poem that the poet respected what his father could do with a spade, his grandfather seems to hold almost legendary status when it comes to cutting turf. Both of these men of the past were experts of their craft and embodied a sense of honor and pride associated with hard, manual labor. Heaney here is presenting an ideal of what the people of his land once were: skilled, diligent, and connected to the land through work. As the poet straightens up, he finds that this is not the path that has been left for him though:

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 (27-31).

Simultaneously, this shows a shift in Ireland from the past to the present (spade to pen) and displays Heaney's great desire to use his poetry in such a way that it uncovers what lies underneath the surface of what is truly Ireland.

"Digging" is but one example of Heaney's entering into the soil to commune with history. In "The Tollund Man" from *Wintering Out*, the poet fantasizes about going to Aarhus in Denmark to see a corpse found on an archaeological dig. Heaney sees far more

in this discovery than a dead man in a distant country. Rather, he sees in his imagination a Danish victim from long ago which he can relate to and find a place for in Irish history:

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, (9-16).

The noose obviously shows that this man was the victim of a hanging, which would lead one to believe that he was nothing but a lowly criminal. Heaney leads the poem in a different direction though that makes this corpse not only respectable, but holy. By being the "bridegroom to the goddess," this man is in effect married to Ireland, which is often portrayed in myth and writing as being a goddess (Moloney 273). The noose becomes a torc, which is a type of necklace much like a collar that is often worn as a mark of distinction and holds the man up above those who killed him in this way. When the land opens "her fen," which is just another way of saying bog, the man is welcomed in and kept as a saint. Heaney's use of Irish words in this first part of the poem effectively tows the Tollund man away from Denmark and into Ireland. In the final stanza of the poem, Heaney reveals directly his feelings of connectedness to this Danish martyr:

Out there in Jutland  
 In the old man-killing parishes

Unhappy and at home (41-44).

While across the sea from his actual home, Heaney sees in this man's violent death of long ago exactly the same thing his country has experienced for years. In this gruesomeness, the poet finds the truth of the past: Ireland's troubles are far too old and far too common.

Besides "digging" into the soil of Ireland in an attempt to find its soul, Heaney also employs a consistent turn to the Irish language to help establish national identity. By using sounds and words that are distinctly Irish, yet familiar to their speakers, Heaney is able to reach across political and religious differences to show a common heritage of a specific region, in most cases Northern Ireland.

Many words used in Ireland exist in a variety of local forms (Molino 192). For Heaney, using such words in English poetry celebrates Irish literature's oral tradition and separates Ireland from Great Britain, because the lack of specific "institutional existence" for the words keeps them from being fitted into any kind of British language or structure (Molino 193). He demonstrates this idea in the poem "Broagh" from *Wintering Out*:

The garden mould  
bruised easily, the shower  
gathering in your heelmark  
was the black *O*  
in *Broagh*, (5-9)

The idea of the footprint reminding the speaker of the middle of the word connects to the past of Ireland by emphasizing the fact that those who used the word for hundreds of years were "under the foot" of British rule. This idea is further supported by the vision of

the speaker, because to see the "heelmark," the speaker would have to be looking down, which is a classic sign of submission (Molino 193).

its low tattoo  
 among the windy boortrees  
 and rhubarb-blades  
 ended almost  
 suddenly, like the last  
*gh* the strangers found  
 difficult to manage (10-16)

The "low tattoo" of the word makes it a permanent fixture, but also difficult to detect and even more difficult to rule. As the word's sound slides among elements of the land, it becomes a part of the whole. "Broagh" escapes any institutionalization by outside forces in its end because the *gh* sound that is distinctive to Irish language is so difficult to pronounce properly by "the strangers," in this case, the British.

In reality, the word "broagh" displays the cultural diversity of Northern Ireland. The word is not used by Catholics or Protestants exclusively, and is not used to only by those of Irish origin, but also Ulster Scots. It is a native term in a district of Ulster to whomever lives there (Molino 193). By playing with such a word, Heaney is attempting to unite those who live in Northern Ireland in the present day through a common history of language.

Heaney also uses language as a form of "digging" in a poem like "Toome":

My mouth holds round  
 the soft blastings,

*Toome, Toome,*  
 as under the dislodged  
 slab of the tongue  
 I push into a souterrain  
 prospecting what new  
 in a hundred centuries'  
 loam, flints, musket-balls,  
 fragmented ware,  
 torcs and fish-bones, (1-11).

As the speaker says the title word over and over, the ground melts away into the past to reveal remnants of battles, simple life, and riches. Because of the title, every word of the poem speaks of the past. Toome Bridge was the site of the Irish rebellion in 1798 and also an archaeological site (Molino 194).

Another way in which Heaney attempts to reclaim a part of Ireland's past is by enlisting the power of ancient Celtic tradition. He attaches his poetry to this tradition by interweaving it with actual historic events and people. One such poem in which Heaney does this is "Ocean's Love to Ireland" from *North*.

The poem, through a great deal of historical allusion, is meant to be a companion piece to Sir Walter Raleigh's own "Ocean's Love to Cynthia," which was the Englishman's show of favor to Queen Elizabeth. While Raleigh's poem displays him as a lover longing for the queen, Heaney's shows the villainous side of Raleigh, who came to Ireland to squash the second stage of the Desmond Rebellion that was attempting to dissolve English plantations in southwestern Ireland and left the fields in complete ruin.

His victim in the poem is an Irish maid meant to represent the goddess that is Ireland (Moloney 274-5).

In the opening section of the poem, Raleigh displays his power:

Speaking broad Devonshire,  
 Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree  
 As Ireland is backed to England  
 And drives inland  
 Till all her strands are breathless:  
 'Sweesir, Swatter! Sweesir, Swatter!'  
 He is water, he is ocean, lifting  
 Her farthingale like a scarf of weed lifting  
 In front of a wave (1-9).

To Raleigh, the pressing soldier trying desperately to advance his position in the court, the maid's skirt, here symbolic of Irish sovereignty, is as inconsequential as a bit of seaweed. As a wave, he simply pushes it aside and continues to move inward with his rape of Ireland that leaves the country frenzied under this attack of physical strength. The second section reveals Raleigh's real intentions:

Yet his superb crest inclines to Cynthia  
 Even while it runs its bent  
 In the rivers of Lee and Blackwater.  
 Those are the plashy spots where he would lay  
 His cape before her. In London, his name  
 Will rise on water, and on these dark seepings:

Smerwick sowed with the mouthing corpses  
 Of six hundred papists, "as gallant and good  
 Personages as ever were beheld" (10-18).

Obviously, Raleigh's real desire is to grow in the favor of Elizabeth. Soldiering around in Ireland gave him the opportunity to be noticed by the queen. It apparently worked too, since within a year of his return from Ireland, he was her favorite (Moloney 279). Also of historical significance in this section of the poem is the mention of the "six hundred papists," who represent the 600 Basque and Italian soldiers that Raleigh helped to slaughter when they came to Ireland under a papal flag (Moloney 280). After all this rape and death, the third section brings some resolution that speaks favorably to the spirit of the goddess that is Ireland:

The ruined maid complains in Irish,  
 Ocean has scattered her dreams of fleets,  
 The Spanish prince has spilled his gold  
 And failed her. Iambic drums  
 Of English beat the woods where her poets  
 Sink like Onan. Rush-light, mushroom-flesh,  
 She fades from their somnolent clasp  
 Into ringlet-breath and dew,  
 The ground possessed and repossessed (19-27).

The maid has returned to her mother-tongue as she "complains in Irish" in line 19, and although she is complaining, this return to speaking Irish as opposed to breathlessly suffering shows that the assault is over, at least for now. Meanwhile, the poets flee to the

woods, as they did to avoid the persecution of Raleigh, but are eventually destroyed as they "sink" under the "ocean" that is Raleigh (Moloney 283). Despite this, the last line does offer hope in a form of cycle. This reclaiming not only serves to take back the physical land, but also the history behind it, which here Heaney tells from the often ignored side of the oppressed. While fragile in its history, Heaney shows here, that if the Irish goddess of ancient Celtic tradition can survive an assault by the "ocean," than she can survive anything.

While attempting to do so much to reclaim Ireland's history, Heaney is not beloved by all as being an accurate, or active, recorder of his own time. Some critics are harsh of him for not being more politically active in his poetry and fighting along the lines of his Catholic identity. At the same time, he has also been accused of being far too political in his writings. In a 1989 article for the *New Yorker*, Helen Vendler noted that Heaney's writings are often viewed by varying critics as being that "of cowardice (being insufficiently political) and of propaganda (being too political), of complicity in violence (by seeing sectarian murder as endemic in the North since the Vikings), and of complicity in the status quo (by refusing to lend his voice to sectarian politics)" (Vendler 103). Being a poet who comments on political matters, but refrains from becoming a political mouthpiece is something that Heaney has aimed for throughout much of his career.

While being both a citizen and poet, he aims to address the separation of societies in Ulster and the problems of violence and repression which have created and perpetuated an underclass of Catholic citizens. At the same time, Heaney does not want to encourage or support the violent acts of the IRA's Provisional wing (Molino 181). At times, this conflict between political and poetic has led him to keep certain poems that he considered

to heavily charged out of collections (Molino 182). Most of the time though, Heaney approaches the issues surrounding Ireland from a realistic, and somewhat sympathetic, point of view. For example, in the poem "Funeral Rites," the speaker claims, "we pine for ceremony/customary rhythms" (35-36). This desire for an end in which both sides would bury their grievances together, is just that: a desire. The feud is ancient and likely to remain as long as the stones that commemorate the dead (Hart 399). While Heaney is displaying a want for an end of all violence in the poem, the use of the word "pine" and the visiting of ancient graves at the end of the poem show that he is also realistic about both the unlikely end of current problems and the less than ideal past of his country.

A good deal of Heaney's poetry does focus on the violence in Northern Ireland, but rather than carry a banner of revolution or dissent, he chooses to act as an observer and holds up the subjects of his poetry to be examined and judged. In poems such "Punishment," which tells of a girl who is shaved, stripped, tarred, and handcuffed to a railing for sleeping with a British soldier, Heaney shows a victim. The girl being punished is put on display to either be an object of sympathy or scorn for the speaker and the reader, and sometimes both. Heaney's way of presenting the incident shows a tortured speaker who can feel both sides of the conflict, but ultimately stands silent:

My poor scapegoat,  
I almost love you  
but would have cast, I know,  
the stones of silence (28-31).

The speaker carries an "almost love" of the victim out of mostly sympathy that she is being punished in such a way for what could be perceived as following her heart. At the

being punished in such a way for what could be perceived as following her heart. At the same time, the speaker is quieted out of a fear of being seen as a sympathizer. The speaker has been reduced to a mere spectator of the atrocities:

I who have stood dumb  
when your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railings,  
who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge (37-44).

These final lines rationalize the silence of the speaker by relating the girls he has seen tied to railings to victims of tribal revenge in the past, as is done earlier in the poem by connecting the current victim to a "bog woman." At the same time, the speaker is held up to not only be judged, but also blamed for his inaction. The word "connive" is crucial here. Simultaneously, it means to feign ignorance of a wrong and to plot a misdeed. In this way, the speaker is portrayed to be just as guilty of the plight of the girl on the railing as those who put her there. Here, Heaney is in no way advocating silence or inaction, but rather displaying the internal struggle his role as a poetic yearning to avoid becoming a political mouthpiece has caused. Just as in "Funeral Rites," Heaney here shows a desperate want alongside the inability for his country to achieve that want due to the atmosphere of violence and forced silence.

The pressure of being so even sided all the time can be a great source of pain for

many. At times, the urge to fight back or take sides is simply overwhelming, even for a poet who has hidden away poems in the past that he himself deemed to politically provocative (Molino 182). Heaney demonstrates this desire to "cast the stone" in

"Weighing In" from 1995's *The Spirit Level*:

To refuse the other cheek. To cast the stone.

Not to do so some time, not to break with

The obedient one you hurt yourself into

Is to fail the hurt, the self, the ingrown rule (25-8).

The quiet forced by passivity and good will towards men is seen as damaging here. To not fight back at some point at what is seen as injustice is considered to hurt the individual. Not only does it leave those who feel wronged with a sense of regret, but it also creates a form of resignation where wrongs against a certain group are never righted because that is simply par for the course. At this complacency, the speaker lashes out by begging, "Still, for Jesus' sake,/ Do me a favour, would you, just this once?/ Prophecy, give scandal, cast the stone" (34-6). To put it simply, something must be done, at least once. Talking, negotiating, pleading have all failed at this point, and the speaker shows what must now be done when he says, "At this stage, only foul play cleans the slate" (48). Now is a time for action and dirty dealings. The balancing act detail in the early stages of the poem accomplished nothing as far as leveling the sides. Only an attack will allow the complacent side to regain its edge and start of even ground. For Heaney, this poem demonstrates his great frustration at fighting off feelings of revenge and action. The only victims portrayed here are those who allow themselves to fall into self-pity and not act. Despite efforts to peacefully deal with the Troubles, violence and injustice continue in

the prolonged pain in Northern Ireland. More likely though, he is holding up his own practices of passivity and painful silence to be judged by his audience.

While the conflict remains, Heaney makes an effort to see both sides and fight escalation, however much it pains him. This may leave some of his writing on unstable ground and open to interpretation by both sides, which can often be a very good thing, but what is clear throughout his writing is that he carries a belief that history can unite people and create identity by showing cycles, similarities, and wealth in a people's culture. By tapping into those ideas, Heaney is attempting to bring Ireland to the light, even if deep down he does not think it will ever get there.

## Comparison of Yeats and Heaney

When attempting to compare how Yeats and Heaney represent Irish history and identity it is important to take into account the how drastically different Ireland was for the two men. Yeats never experienced Ireland while it was an independent country, while Heaney has only published books of poetry during a time that the Republic of Ireland has existed separate from his home country of Northern Ireland. Yeats knew the fight for freedom, while Heaney knows the fighting during the Troubles. These and a number of other personal factors led the two poets to portray Ireland and its people in much different ways.

It is important to note that while Yeats was an influence on Heaney, he was not one of his first inspirations. Instead, Patrick Kavanagh's poetry, revealed to Heaney and other Northern poets of the 1960s by the teachings of Philip Hosbaum, served as an alternative entry point into the world of Irish writings, rather than the traditional door for most Irish poets: Yeats (Hirsch 1129). Heaney saw the work of Kavanagh to be more closely and personally attached to the majority of the Irish people than most of what Yeats wrote (Hirsch 1129). Indeed, while Yeats wrote of and helped to create martyrs for a country attempting to find its feet, Heaney frequently chose to focus his attention elsewhere: the victims and innocents. This difference can be seen in a comparison of Yeats's "Sixteen Dead Men" and Heaney's "The Strand at Lough Beg."

In "Sixteen Dead Men," Yeats memorializes those who were executed for their leadership in the Easter Rising of 1916. First off, he expresses a feeling of loss now that they are gone:

O But we talked at large before

The sixteen men were shot,  
 But who can talk of give and take,  
 What should be and what not  
 While those dead men are loitering there  
 To stir the boiling pot? (1-6)

So inspirational were these recently fallen men, that Ireland has now gone silent. While this may seem like a type of resignation on the speaker's part, the final stanza reveals that it surely is not:

How could you dream they'd listen  
 That have an ear alone  
 For those new comrades they have found,  
 Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone,  
 Or meddle with our give and take  
 That converse bone to bone? (13-8)

Here, the speaker sets the modern day rebels with a pair of eighteenth century Irish revolutionaries who also died for attempting to free their country. Instantly, the "sixteen dead men" are elevated to a type of legendary status reserved in Ireland for those who stood up against the Crown. The final two lines show that this sacrifice has done the complete opposite from what is eluded to in the first stanza. Rather than being lost or torn apart, there is power brought to the Irish people as their modern day leaders sit next to Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone in the great pantheon of Irish rebels. Now that they have these recent, personally identifiable martyrs to follow, the Irish people will bond together like never before.

In contrast, Heaney emphasizes everyday deaths, rather than those that would inspire and lead the people. In the case of his poem “The Strand at Lough Beg,” the death that the poet details is very personal, that of his cousin Colum McCartney, who was ambushed and shot in a sectarian killing. Rather than focusing on anger, revenge, or making a false hero out of his cousin, Heaney instead presents the confusion and grief surrounding his loss.

Early in the poem, the speaker ponders what really happened the night his cousin was killed “What blazed ahead of you? A faked roadblock?/ The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling/ Engines, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?” (9-11). Not only is this speaking to the confusion surrounding this particular event, but also all the deaths in Northern Ireland that center around differences of religion. In Heaney’s mind, this death is mysterious, just like all the others he has read about in newspapers. No real reason can be even imagined.

Upon finding his cousin dead in the field, the speaker does not show immediate signs of vengeance, but sorrow:

To wash you cousin. I dab you clean with moss

Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.

I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.

With rushes that shoot green again, I plait

Green scapulars to wear over your shroud (40-44).

Instead of preparing to go kill for revenge, the speaker prepares his cousin for the ground. He puts his cousin at peace, even though his country is not. This is no martyr. This is

simply another victim in what the speaker sees as a pointless, painful battle that does nothing but take away loved ones, day after day.

Heaney also disagreed with Yeats's idea of an ideal peasant somewhere in Ireland's past. In fact, with the founding of the Field Day Theatre Company in 1980, Heaney and other Northern Irish poets, began their attempt to help with the dismantling of the crisis in Ireland at the time by analyzing what had become established ideas and stereotypes of the Irish people that they saw as being both a sign and reason for the persistent conflict in the country (Hirsch 1117). Heaney feels that what Yeats was attempting to find in the country's past never really existed and portrayed an unachievable ideal to the Irish people. In Heaney's opinion, the noble peasant of Yeats's dreams and poetry ("The Municipal Gallery Revisited," "The Fisherman," "The Fiddler of Dooney," etc.) is a creation that holds Irish culture back by relying on the what Seamus Deane calls "the mystique of Irishness" rather than bringing current problems into the light by writing about them, which is what Heaney seeks to find in his poems like "Punishment" (Hirsch 117).

In "Punishment," Heaney pulls together the modern and the ancient when detailing a woman handcuffed to a railing in modern day Northern Ireland for keeping company with British soldiers with the corpse of a woman who had been ceremonially killed during the Iron Age and found in a bog on the European mainland:

I can see her drowned  
body in the bog,  
the weighing stone,  
the floating rod and boughs.

Under which at first  
 she was a barked sapling  
 that is dug up  
 oak-bone, brain-firkin:  
 her shaved head  
 like a stubble of black corn,  
 her blindfold a soiled bandage,  
 her noose a ring  
 to store  
 the memories of love (9-22).

This connection of a new victim with an old one sets forth what much of Heaney's poetry aims at: the places, reasons, and dates may change, but the victims all continue to look the same. Where Yeats looks for the ideal character in the past that represented the beauty that used to exist in Ireland, Heaney shows that the specific beauty is an ideal that not only never existed on Irish soil, but also never existed among humanity.

One thing that Heaney and Yeats do agree upon is that there is an apocalypse in the future for Ireland. However, what each poet thinks will come of it is quite different. While Yeats seems to think of the coming apocalypse as an eventual rebirth, Heaney sees it much more as a continuing death (Stallworthy 169). This difference of opinions can be seen by comparing Yeats's "The Second Coming" and Heaney's "Kinship."

In "The Second Coming," the speaker details a destruction at the center of order:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity (3-8).

While this seems like a brutal end, it is really only a beginning since there is birth in the final line of the poem. Heaney contradicts this idea in Section IV of "Kinship":

This centre holds,  
 and spreads,  
 sump and seedbed,  
 a bag of waters  
 and a melting grave (IV, 1-5).

This time the center is a symbol of disorder that flows over the land and consumes all that is in its path, pulling it down into a watery grave. There is no rebirth here, just death.

Ultimately, all of these differences show a singular theme that separates the work of the two poets. Yeats feels that there is an ideal that can only be achieved by way of sacrifice. Only through death, will Ireland find its freedom and man find the truth.

Heaney disagrees by saying that the truth is already there: Ireland has not and will not be free from death until the fighting stops. For him, that is the ideal.

## Conclusion

Ireland and Northern Ireland have been through a great deal during the past 100 years, and Yeats and Heaney have written about a great deal of it. Through their writing, they have each attempted to establish a sense of past and identity for themselves and their brethren. For an island that has seen so much turmoil and change, that is something much easier said than done, but each poet accomplishes this in his own way. The methods and techniques each poet uses is shaped both by the state of affairs in Ireland and Northern Ireland and his personal beliefs. While Yeats viewed Ireland as a country nobly sacrificing its men in hopes of gaining independence, even though it may not have been the kind of liberty he personally hoped for, and regaining an ideal past long forgotten, Heaney sees a country in turmoil that has been for ages and ages. The end in his mind is not in sight, and his ideal of peace will only come when Protestants and Catholics learn to live peacefully side by side. The theme that unifies the two poets though is not the set of solutions or opinions they came up with, but that they both went in on a quest for answers and identity in the first place. To be Irish for both of them is to know pain and search for a solution, even if the belief that it will come does not exist.

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