

Nature and death in Heaney's 'Storm on the Island,' Clarke's 'October,' Tennyson's 'The Eagle,' Whitman's 'Patrolling Barnegat' and Clare's 'Sonnet.'

Heaney's 'Storm on The Island' begins with a very assertive and terse opening: 'We are prepared:' This bold, even arrogant opening, accentuated by the use of the full colon, draws attention to the militaristic aspect of the poem and the strategies that human beings might employ in order to protect themselves from the might of nature and the threat of impending mortality: 'Sink walls in rock.' We are aware that Heaney's narrator is immersing his world in a vocabulary that initially seems to ward off any possibility of doubt or ambiguity.

The register of the poem emphasises self-protection and perhaps literally and metaphorically 'shields' the narrator and his viewpoint, from dangerous introspection and the ensuing chaos of doubt and unknowing: 'we build our houses squat...' This muscular vocabulary seems biblical in its sense of impregnability. The ugliness of the word 'squat' highlights the practicality of this aesthetically unappealing world, where even the domestic takes on an animalistic aspect.

Interestingly this register of 'absolute' architecture has strange connotations of the story of the three little pigs and this rests uneasily with the macho tone of the opening four lines. For is the narrator constructing his world and words upon a 'fiction,' upon a story of self-righteous pragmatism and territorial rights? Is the poem concerned with the trials of nature or is it also an oblique exploration of the ambivalent political situation of 'Stormont' as home to the Northern Ireland Secretary?

Before we can even begin to address these possible questions, Heaney's narrator utters the evocative word 'lost' and begins to falter in his confidence. As a consequence he starts to become less certain and more abstract in terms of his focus. We realise what a very lonely and isolated place this 'island' is and how ironic it appears that he is expending so much energy on 'defending' it. It is tempting now to elide the island with 'Ireland' and to translate the poem in more obviously symbolic terms.

Significantly the word 'lost' breaks up the line. Its connotations cannot be ignored. It destabilises the vigour and physicality of the opening mindset. The communality of the 'we' at the beginning of the poem gives way to the

more tentative and fragile intimacy of 'you know what I mean.' This is a hope -for- a -dialogue not a promise of reciprocity. 'We' are now reduced to the second person 'you' where there is no guarantee of an intimate relationship. Here, 'You' is more distancing and unspecific than 'we.'

This uneasy distance is further accentuated by the allusion to 'the thing you fear....' How indirect and evasive is this reference to fear? It is this unspecificity that terrifies, as it is nameless and therefore disturbing. It 'pummels your house too.' No matter how many security measures 'you' might take to defend what 'you' believe in and represent, the personal is always under attack. 'You' are far from impregnable.

Even the familiar world may prove dangerous and 'spits like a tame cat/turned savage.' There is no place to hide as 'space is a salvo.' Nature and politics merge in a highly distilled image of conflict. The enemy is everywhere and nowhere and does not differentiate at all in its chosen targets.

When we reach the conclusion of the poem, we see the outcome of the poem's thesis and thought: 'Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.' The simplicity of the ending unnerves us. The shift from the definite, material world of 'slate' and 'earth' to the shattering nullity of 'a huge nothing' rattles our composure and complacency and uncovers a world unprotected by the surety of faith. Heaney's poem is a bleak exploration of our proximity to death whether for political or other reasons. His 'Storm on the Island' is an ironic exposure of man's egotistical attempts at warding off mortality. We are all islands - isolated, alone, and close to our 'death day' as Clarke would say.

This proximity to mortality is also examined in Clarke's poem 'October.' In 'October' Clarke describes the funeral of a friend. The landscape with its bleak, sombre hues reflects the melancholy and upset of the event: 'Wind in the poplars and a broken branch, a dead arm in the bright trees.' The trauma of grief infects the landscape with a surreal, even Gothic aspect.

The 'dead arm' with its disembodied presence is unsettling and anticipates the flat admission at the beginning of stanza two: 'My friend dead and the graveyard at Orcop-.' We realise that it is the viewpoint of the poet (their literal 'I/eye') that suffuses/drenches the landscape with this particular, 'dark' aspect. She has used the space of stanza one to delay the direct admission of stanza two.

As in Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* where the gargoyle in the churchyard 'spat' a 'persistent torrent' of water into poor Fanny Robin's grave, so in Clarke's 'October' we feel the threat of the 'sharp shower' from the 'stone face of the lion.' Indeed in stanza two, it is the mourners who have become parodies of the gargoyles with 'our faces stony, rain, weeping in the air.' This correspondence between the two stanzas reveals a world relentlessly drenched in mourning. There is something profoundly upsetting about the delicacy and fragility of the reference to the 'hare-bones on men's shoulders.' The distillation of grief through the focus upon the 'hare-bones' ironically seems to convey the de-humanising reality of terminal illness. However, as hares are often associated with movement and agility, then it is quite possible that the reference also communicates a certain sense of liberation, specifically from suffering.

A sense of despair is generated initially of course by the very title of the poem. 'October' is autumnal, a month of decay and change, a place where nature undergoes significant 'losses'. These losses are reflections of the poet's own losses, and the evocation of these different losses, actually brings about the speaker's recognition of her own mortality and makes her awareness of time urgent and keen. Writing is the poet's way of defending herself from the onslaught of time and reference to the 'wind's white steps over grass' again transforms an idea in the previous stanza into something else. The 'hare' has become reconstituted as writing itself.

This technique is similar to Heaney's as it is the expression and 'voicing' of the event/description that makes the poet re-evaluate their own role in life and the 'scheme of things'. Clarke ends the poem with the recognition that she must write and commit her thoughts to paper as they, unlike herself will survive. Dramatically Clarke shifts from ten syllable lines to a closing eight syllable line, emphasising an encroaching awareness of her own mortality and ironically exposing the fallibility of her 'winning ground' from death.

By contrast Tennyson's short poem 'The Eagle' describes the predatory even seemingly 'diabolical' figure of the bird of prey. Like an angel of death, 'he stands' and 'like a thunderbolt he falls.' This unusual poem conveys the separateness, the intense individuality and loneliness of the bird, as it searches for a means to survive.

The human 'mortal' world is described as alien and foreign, far from the eagle's world and 'words': 'The wrinkled sea below him crawls'. The human is thus rendered serpent-like and even repulsive and deceitful, tempting the eagle into a action that yields no sustenance for life. This perspective on the human world is dramatic as it is so alternative and challenging to the 'human' reader and thus makes the natural world of the eagle more heroic and poignant than anything the 'wrinkled' corrupt, degraded and finite world of man might offer.

Whitman's poem 'Patrolling Barnegat' again confuses viewpoints deliberately in order to suggest the tension between humanity and nature. Whitman employs a form of perceptual bewilderment in order to challenge the understanding of the reader. Humanity is seen as 'dim, weird' and even perhaps as 'demoniac,' which alters the perspective and message of the poem dramatically. We are not sure where 'man' is in the poem and we are not sure whether this confusion emanates from mankind's insufficiency and diminishment in the face of 'wild nature' as even God seems to have been appropriated or usurped by the 'wild, wild' storm.

The Whitman poem seems to enjoy the freeness of the verse- the freedom of the storm emphasised in the heavy investment in the present participle. This contrasts markedly with the abrupt, terse language Heaney employs in 'Storm on the Island' , where his use of the full colon inhibits the flow of the poem and highlights the difficulty the poet has in controlling his subject matter. Indeed in 'Storm on the Island' although the colon seems initially for emphasis on man's strength, fortitude and resolve, by the end of the poem it seems more a sign of his fear, anxiety and unsettling thoughts.

Finally, although Clare's 'Sonnet' appears to be devoid of any explicit references to the possibility of death, I think it is interesting precisely because of this omission and would suggest that Clare's evocation of 'summer' is predicated upon the deliberate exclusion of death. The seamless flow of the poem works to ward off any hesitation in terms of the poem's affirmative thesis. He constantly idealises nature throughout the poem: 'I love to see the wild flowers come again' and underlines its powers of healing and resurrection.

Yet there is something imbalanced or naïve about this world where even the 'blobs stain' and the 'bright beetles;' are evoked in affirmative ways.

In another poem we are only too aware that such images would generate far more unsettling outcomes. (For example a beetle is by nature a scavenger and symbol of death and decay yet in this poem the beetles 'play' rather than feed off dead things. Stains usually suggest an imperfection or blight that may be impossible to remove or alter. In this poem they are valued as 'gold'.)

Hence, Clare's 'Sonnet' is a poem that masks mortality behind an over-investment in 'perfection' and pleasure. The reader is aware that this is only a temporary respite and that all things, no matter how perfect, are in the process of decay. The beetles and stains will have their day!

Each poem in excitingly different ways, offers a reading of life's transience and fragility. Their perspectives are refreshingly challenging, and often unsettling, never far in the end from Clarke's 'short ride to the hawthorn hedge.'