

## Shaping the Transient: A Study of Narrative Voice and Persona in Seamus Heaney's "Blackberry Picking"

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### Abstract

Seamus Heaney's poem "Blackberry Picking" stands as a poignant exploration of human desires, the transient nature of life, and the inevitable disappointment that accompanies the passage of time. At the heart of this masterpiece is the carefully crafted narrative voice and persona, which play a pivotal role in shaping the reader's engagement with the themes presented. It aims to unravel the nuanced relationship between Heaney's personal experiences and the narrative voice, seeking to discern the extent to which the poet's life mirrors the emotive landscape portrayed in "Blackberry Picking." This research article endeavors to delve deep into the intricate layers of the poem, scrutinizing the narrative voice and persona as key elements that contribute to the poem's emotional resonance and thematic complexity.

**Keywords:** *Blackberry Picking, Narrative voice, Persona, Desire, Disappointment, Transience, Emotional resonance*

Seamus Heaney, a Nobel laureate in literature, is renowned for his ability to intertwine personal experiences with universal themes. "Blackberry Picking" is a prime example of this synergy, where the narrative voice and persona act as conduits through which the poet communicates profound reflections on desire, disappointment, and the relentless march of time. Heaney, distinguished as a poet deeply rooted in the intimate realms of personal experience, particularly thrived in portraying the joys of private life, standing out as one of the most content poets of his generation. Born into a Catholic farming family in County Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1939, Heaney's profound connection to his local environment, the rural landscape, and the traditions of the people around him shaped his poetic identity.



While Heaney shouldered various responsibilities, including academic commitments to Harvard and the preservation of Irish culture, his primary allegiance seemed to lie with people who populated his personal sphere.

His renowned works, which catapulted him to literary acclaim, draw from the wellspring of a rural childhood. These poems including notable pieces from his first collection *Death of a Naturalist*, (1966) weave a tapestry of experiences such as potato-digging, milk-churning, thatching, blackberrying, and water-divining. Beyond their surface appeal with euphony, alliteration, and other stylistic devices, these poems resonate with profound themes. They encapsulate a self-awareness, as seen in the lines, “I rhyme to see myself/to set the darkness echoing,” (Heaney, *Opened Ground* 15) and an exploration of the poet’s relationship with his father and forefathers. Among these, the poem “Blackberry Picking” stands out, capturing the essence of Heaney’s poetic prowess and his ability to infuse profound meaning into seemingly mundane yet deeply resonant experiences.

Prior studies on Heaney’s works often highlight the autobiographical nature of his poetry and the profound impact of his rural Irish upbringing on his writing. Thomson contends that, “His poetry is strongly autobiographical; not in the sense that he narrowly confined to his own experience, but rather he uses his own experience as a firm base from which to explore the world” (189). Michael Schmidt asserts that, “In the back of his mind are the rhythms and rhymes of the songs and chants of his childhood. His mature writings relates closely to the Irish world in which he grew up, and the Irish ‘troubles’ are an important theme in many of the poems which probe Irish history and prehistory and his own trouble conscience with considerable candour” (206). It becomes evident that Heaney’s poetic oeuvre extends beyond personal reminiscence, serving as a profound reflection on Irish history, prehistory, and the complexities of the human condition.

Heaney’s debut poetry collection, ‘Death of a Naturalist,’ (1966) skillfully captures the harshness of primarily rural existence with remarkable precision. Through his depictions of rural labourers engaged in their tasks and reflections on natural phenomena, Heaney provides a vivid lens into both childhood and adulthood experiences. His poetry invites readers to not only visualize but also to sense the subtleties of this life. Scholars have also delved into the recurring

themes of nature, desire, and mortality in his works. However, a comprehensive analysis specifically focused on the narrative voice and persona in “Blackberry Picking” is notably absent, making it a significant area for exploration.

This research employs a close reading approach to meticulously analyze the narrative voice and persona in “Blackberry Picking.” Drawing on literary techniques, linguistic nuances, and contextual insights, it aims to unravel the layers of the poem’s narrative structure and persona construction. The narrative voice in “Blackberry Picking” is characterized by its intimacy and retrospection. Through an examination of the poem’s language and tone, the article seeks to uncover how the narrator’s voice shapes the reader’s emotional response and influences the interpretation of events. The reliability of the narrative voice is explored, along with an investigation into the extent to which it mirrors Heaney’s own experiences.

The narrative voice in the poem assumes a central role in conveying the emotions and reflecting the speaker’s experiences. The voice serves as a channel through which the reader is invited into the poet’s memories. The language and tone employed by the narrator are crucial in shaping the emotional response of the reader and influencing the interpretation of the events narrated. Heaney’s narrative voice is intimate, drawing the reader into a personal journey of recollection. The use of vivid imagery and sensory details, such as “big dark blobs burned like a plate of eyes,” (Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* 20) creates a palpable atmosphere that allows readers to share in the speaker’s experience of blackberry picking. The choice of words is deliberate, evoking not only the visual but also the tactile and olfactory sensations associated with the act.

Heaney employs graphic imagery to shape the transient nature of the experience. He creates a visual representation of the blackberries, describing them as “glossy purple clot among others, red, green, hard as a knot.” The varied colors could signify distinct meanings, adding layers to the metaphor of the changing and ripening blackberries, which serves as a metaphor for the inevitability of growth and maturation. Heaney’s deliberate use of a simile, such as “hard as a knot,” intensifies the emphasis on this transformative process. The poem’s setting, evoked through words like “cornfields,” “milk-cans,” and “wet grass,” paints a pungent picture of a farm. This choice of setting suggests a personal connection to Heaney’s own childhood, potentially reminiscing about a significant moment. The initial stanza, marked by enjambment, reflects the

poet's excitement about the forthcoming blackberry picking expedition, creating a sense of movement that captivates the reader's interest.

The retrospection inherent in the narrative voice adds a layer of complexity to the poem. The speaker, looking back on the events, introduces an element of reflection and contemplation. This temporal distance allows for an exploration of desire and disappointment, as the narrator grapples with the inevitable passage of time. The language becomes a vessel for nostalgia, carrying with it both the sweetness of past pleasures and the bitterness of their impermanence. The reliability of the narrative voice is a pertinent question in understanding the poem. To what extent does the voice mirror Heaney's own experiences, and how much of it is a construct for artistic expression? Heaney, known for drawing from his rural Irish upbringing, likely infuses elements of his personal experiences into the narrative. However, the poem's artistic nature grants Heaney the license to reshape and reimagine these experiences for poetic effect. The reliability, then, lies in the emotional truth conveyed rather than a strict adherence to factual accuracy.

The persona in "Blackberry Picking" is a complex entity, evolving with the progression of the poem. Analyzing the persona's desires, anticipations, and the subsequent disappointments aims to discern the psychological depth of the character. How does the persona's perspective contribute to the overarching themes of the poem? Is there a transformation in the persona's outlook, and if so, what precipitates it? The persona in "Blackberry Picking" is a dynamic and multifaceted entity, evolving in tandem with the progression of the poem. To understand the persona, an exploration of desires, anticipations, and disappointments becomes imperative. The psychological depth of the character is unveiled as the persona navigates the highs of desire and the lows of disillusionment. The use of pronouns such as "we" and "you" imparts a personal touch to the poem, as if Heaney is extending an invitation to the reader to share in his nostalgic memories. This narrative strategy contributes to shaping the transient nature of the experience, emphasizing the communal and shared aspects of the blackberry picking ritual.

Desires, initially presented as innocent and pure, are manifested in the persona's eager anticipation of the blackberry harvest. The language used to describe the berries, such as "lust for picking" and "sweet like thickened wine," not only underscores the intensity of desire but also introduces a sensual and indulgent element. The persona's anticipation is palpable, and the

reader is led to share in the excitement of the impending reward. Heaney vividly captures the sensory delight of blackberry picking, stating:

You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet  
Like thickened wine: summers blood was in it  
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for  
Picking. (*DN 20*)

Unsatisfied with their initial harvest, the children, driven by greed, amassed the berries in the pail rather than consuming them. Heaney's depiction becomes more ominous as he describes the scene, stating:

Until the tinkling bottom had been covered  
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned  
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered  
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's. (*DN 20*)

While the act of blackberry picking initially appears innocuous, associating it with Bluebeard and cannibalism paints a disturbing image of the children engaging in an unhealthy pursuit. The atmosphere in the latter stanza markedly contrasts with the initial enthusiasm. Words like "rat-grey fungus," "stinking" and "sour" convey the transformed, unpleasant state of the fruit, reflecting a shift in mood from joy to dismay. The phrase "I always felt like crying" implies a retrospective viewpoint, linking the narrative to the past, specifically childhood, as crying often relates to that period. The expression "It wasn't fair" further underscores a childlike sentiment, reflecting the disappointment inherent in unfulfilled expectations, encapsulated in the recurring hope that the berries would endure, expressed with, "Each year I'd hope they'd keep (*DN 20*).

The poem takes a poignant turn as the narrative unfolds. The stark contrast between the anticipation and the eventual disappointment is marked by the line, "Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not." The inevitability of decay introduces a sobering reality that resonates beyond the act of blackberry picking. The disappointment is not merely in the decay of the berries but in the ephemeral nature of all things cherished. The psychological depth of the persona is further revealed in the emotional aftermath of the disappointment. The use of words such as "rot," "fermentation," and "ink" suggests a transformation from the vibrant and luscious berries to a state of decay and darkness. The title, "Blackberry Picking," implies a straightforward act, yet it carries symbolic weight. The act of picking fruits may symbolize the fruits of life, and Heaney uses the evolving colors of the berries to convey his past or emotions. The different stages of ripeness and subsequent rotting could symbolize various phases in his

life. Heaney communicates his reflections on blackberry picking through the lens of past memories, utilizing the changing colors of the berries as a metaphor for different stages in his life. The disappointment over the berries not enduring becomes a poignant symbol of the inevitable transience of life's experiences. This transformation mirrors the emotional state of the persona, as the initial excitement gives way to a somber acknowledgment of the impermanence of pleasure.

The speaker's lamentation about the unfairness of the situation – "It wasn't fair" — resonates with the innocence and naivety of childhood. The speaker expresses a sense of injustice, likely referring to the disappointment that the berries, initially enjoyed, eventually rot each year. Christopher Ricks says: " 'It wasn't fair' calls across the years in the accents of childhood- only to be answered by the concluding and conclusive rhyme of 'rot' and 'not', so uncompromising after the half-rhymes of the previous lines" (23). Ricks further emphasizes the impact of this childhood complaint by highlighting the rhyme of "rot" and "not" in the concluding lines. The rhyme is described as "concluding and conclusive," indicating that it brings closure to the poem. The use of an uncompromising rhyme, especially after the preceding half-rhymes, suggests a stark and unyielding realization. The disappointment and inevitable decay of the berries become a metaphor for the harsh realities of life, and the rhyme emphasizes the stark contrast between desire and the ultimate outcome.

The persona's perspective is integral to the underlying themes of the poem. Desire and disappointment, as experienced by the persona, become vehicles for exploring broader themes such as the transience of life and the inevitability of loss. The persona serves as a lens through which these universal themes are brought to life in the specific context of blackberry picking.

Is there a transformation in the persona's outlook, and if so, what precipitates it? The transformation is subtle but profound. The persona moves from an unbridled enthusiasm for the act of picking to a sober recognition of the cyclical nature of desire and disappointment. The shift in outlook is precipitated by the realization that the very act of desiring is intrinsically linked to the acceptance of disappointment. This realization marks a maturation of the persona's perspective, reflecting a deeper understanding of the complexities of human experience.

Exploring the symbiotic relationship between the narrative voice and persona involves examining instances where the narrative voice aligns or diverges from the persona's perspective.

This analysis aims to unravel the subtle storytelling techniques employed by Heaney and understand how the interplay of these elements contributes to the overall impact of the poem.

The interplay between the narrative voice and persona in “Blackberry Picking” is a masterful demonstration of Heaney’s storytelling prowess. The symbiotic relationship between these elements contributes to the textured and layered narrative, offering readers a rich and immersive experience.

Examining instances where the narrative voice aligns or diverges from the persona’s perspective unveils the intricate storytelling techniques employed by Heaney. When the voice aligns with the persona, as in the shared anticipation of the blackberry harvest, the reader is seamlessly integrated into the emotional landscape of the poem. The alignment creates a sense of intimacy and empathy, fostering a deeper connection with the persona’s desires and disappointments. Conversely, instances where the narrative voice diverges from the persona’s perspective introduce a layer of complexity to the narrative. The retrospective nature of the voice allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the events, as the speaker reflects on the significance of the blackberry-picking ritual in the broader context of life’s fleeting pleasures. The divergence serves to broaden the thematic scope of the poem, moving beyond a mere recounting of events to a contemplation of the universal aspects of desire and transience.

The nuanced interplay between the narrative voice and persona contributes significantly to the overall impact of the poem. The shifts in tone, from the initial excitement to the melancholic acknowledgment of decay, are heightened by the dynamic relationship between these elements. The reader is taken on an emotional journey, mirroring the persona’s highs and lows, and ultimately, the reader emerges with a profound sense of the themes explored in the poem.

The thematic implications of the narrative voice and persona in “Blackberry Picking” are far-reaching, enhancing the exploration of desires, disappointments, and the ephemeral nature of life. The findings unravel the layers of the poem, providing insights into how these elements converge to create a work of profound emotional resonance and thematic complexity. Desire, as articulated through the persona’s eager anticipation of blackberry picking, is not merely a fleeting emotion but a fundamental aspect of the human experience. The persona’s desires presented with evocative imagery and heightened language, become a microcosm for the broader

spectrum of human longing. The disappointment that follows serves as a poignant reminder of the inevitability of loss and the transient nature of pleasure.

The fleeting nature of life is encapsulated in the decay of the blackberries. The inevitability of this decay becomes a metaphor for the broader cycles of life, death, and renewal. Through the persona's lens, the reader witnesses the passage of time, from the initial burst of life in the berries to their eventual decomposition. The narrative voice, with its retrospection, amplifies the impact of this thematic exploration, urging the reader to reflect on the impermanence of all things.

The thematic implications are further enriched by the interplay between desire and disappointment. The persona's journey from excitement to disillusionment serves as a micro-narrative within the larger tapestry of the poem. The cyclical nature of desire and disappointment becomes a reflection of life's inevitable highs and lows. The narrative voice, with its intimate tone, amplifies the emotional weight of these themes, inviting the reader to engage not only with the specific events of the poem but also with the broader human condition.

It lays bare the poet's perspective on nature, offering insights into his social context. The annual ritual of blackberry picking becomes a sensory experience for Heaney, describing the berries' sweetness akin to "thickened wine," tainted with the blood of summer, fostering a desire for more. However, the innocence of this act takes a darker turn as Heaney associates the berries with Bluebeard and cannibalism, portraying the children's indulgence as potentially harmful. The recurrence of the berry ritual parallels the repetition of societal troubles in Northern Ireland, subtly commenting on adult attitudes mirrored in the child's actions.

In conclusion, the narrative voice and persona in "Blackberry Picking" intertwine to create a poetic masterpiece that transcends the specific act of harvesting blackberries. Through meticulous examination, the article as illuminated the intricacies of the narrative voice, analyzed the construction and evolution of the persona, explored their symbiotic relationship, and extrapolated the thematic implications. Heaney, through the union of language and persona, invites readers to partake in a deeply human experience, where desires, disappointments, and the fleeting nature of life are not merely observed but profoundly felt. "Blackberry Picking" stands as a testament to the power of poetry to distill the complexities of the human experience into a few stanzas that resonate across time and space.



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