ZELEK Sebastian 23/03/2015

CA: Heaney

Poem: “In the Attic”

As we go through life, our bodies tend to become increasingly more and more frail, we start to be more and more distant from the world, and we start to look back. This is what we can see in Heaney's poem: his account of coming of age and his recognition that he's getting old. He links his journey through life with the story of “Treasure Island”, a famous novel by Robert Louis Stevenson, narrating a tale of pirates and treasure. Helping himself with links to Treasure Island, Heaney looks on how he's moved through his life and how it shaped him, progressively recognising his increasing physical frailty.'

The poem commences with a re account of what seems to be a critical moment of Treasure Island: Jim Hawkins, the main character of the novel, just killed Israel Hands, a crew member that attempted to kill him. With nothing but “green water and clean bottom sand”, Jim has nowhere to move: he's already at the top of “the cross-trees”. He seems trapped there by some unknown force, while he's right next to the exoticism of a tropical island, showed by “green water and clean bottom sand”. But the impact of the “nothingness” is reduced when we learn that Hawkins' ship is “aground, the canted mast far out”, limiting the stretch of the danger Hawkins is in. But it seems that the recent killing still weighs on him: the reality of “striped fish pass in shoals” is contrasted with “when they've passed, the face of Israel Hands”. Hawkins is chased by guilt and with the repetition of “pass/passed” he starts to see nightmares in the real world: the face of Israel Hands is revealed after the fish pass, which “appears to rise again” to haunt Hawkins. It looks like he's balancing between the reality and the nightmare, but we are brought to the ground: “(Israel) was dead enough,' / The story says, 'being both shot and drowned.'” The reader and Hawkins is reminded that these are pure illusions. However, this passage could hint that Heaney himself is chased by his thoughts, and his progressing age. With that in mind, Heaney moves away from the story of Treasure Island and carries on with his own story, linking the masts of the Hispaniola to the attic, both being the highest vantage points, hinting at his old age, and possibly at the knowledge he could have gained throughout his life, which could be reinforced by the image we usually have of an attic: a dusty room, with old things that we just stashed away. Heaney's age is also reminded with the “birch tree planted twenty years ago”. To further emphasise his old age, Heaney says he's “marooned/ In his own loft”, playing upon the stereotype that old people are often abandoned by their children. Just like the lonely observer at the top of the masts, on the lookout for things that could be dangerous to the ship, Heaney is a lonely observer, linking to Jim Hawkins, he in the masts and Heaney in the attic. In addition, Heaney is shaped by his life, by what he lived: “Shipshaped” and “Airbrushed” link with the wind to show how Heaney was shaped and eroded by his life. But what is worth noting is that “airbrushed” could be used to show how appearances can be changed, how life can change someone over time. In these first 2 stanzas, Heaney shows how life can change and shape us.

In the last 2 parts, Heaney focuses more on the damage that comes with old age. To do so, he initially comes back in time to his younger days. Part 3 shows Heaney when he is young, coming out from a cinema where he saw a movie adaptation of Treasure Island. The old setting is suggested with the “ghost-footing”, “hallway linoleum” and the image of Heaney's grandfather. He relives this moment, and reminds himself how his grandfather asked him “'And Issac Hands,' he asks, 'Was Issac in it?”, forgetting that his name was actually Israel. With this anecdote Heaney tries to show one of the many deteriorations that can come with age: weaker and weaker memory. And when he comes back to his present self, Heaney also finds himself in the same situation: “As I age and blank on names, / As my uncertainty on stairs / Is more and more the lightheadedness”. Heaney starts to also suffer from gaps in his memory, and the frailty of his body. However, he seems to treat it dismissively, linking it to a presumed lack of confidence. It could be also seen how he's struggling to keep his balance on the ship of life that is encountering some stronger weather. But he seems to realise that loss of memory is just one of the parts on the cycle towards his “memorable bottoms out, / Into the irretrievable,”. Heaney realises that he's approaching his death quite fast. It doesn't stop him from using the phrase usually heard from old people “It's not that I can't”: it further emphasises Heaney's old age, but it also serves to show that he might be more and more frail physically, but his creativity is still strong. He ends his poem with “As a wind freshened and the anchor weighed.”, suggesting that he might be going soon on his last adventure, but with a much bigger load on his back: the memories of his life represented with the anchor.

To sum up, the reader can see that Heaney wants to show him what age can do with someone: notably leave him frail, yet full of experiences. With the constant allusions to sailing, we get the idea that life is in fact like a boat that we sail, feeling each bump and each storm leaving marks.