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Imagery in the "Bog Poems" of Seamus Heaney

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Living in the entrenched and complex system of colonization, the writers of Ireland had to face one big truth: that they couldn't tell anything outright as they had to face the communist censorship. So the "[p]oems had to work implicitly: not spell things out but slide under the censor's eye, 'say the unsaid' to readers desperate to hear their truth, while pretending it hadn't been said."[1] The blood-soaked and pain-drenched history of the nation impelled its poets to make use of symbols, motifs and images to verbalize those ideas and feelings which were not allowed to be expressed directly through statements. Thus, responding to the political, religious and social conflict that persists even today, particularly in the Protestant controlled North, the writers endeavour hard to fulfill their poetic responsibility by deploying "strategies of silence, secrecy, private reference, and tribal shibboleth rather than 'blabb[ing] out.

Following the legacy of Samuel Ferguson, Clarence Mangan and W.B. Yeats, poets such as Seamus Deane, James Simmons, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon have continued to weigh and scrutinize the relationship between art and life, and art and politics. Realising and recognizing their artistic responsibility, they use their work to convey their experiences and refer to classical paintings, bog lands, historical backgrounds and Irish legends to depict and illuminate the contemporary

circumstances of their land. Thus, from their vast store-house of images, the *Spiritus Mundi* to use W.B.

Yeats's phrase, they attempt to present a picture of the landscape along with the vision of mindscape

Related with this 'Land of beauty and Land of pain' known as Northern Ireland.

Heaney's carefully crafted poetry has been praised for its powerful imagery, meaningful content and compelling rhythms. Moreover, "The deploying of rhymes and half-rhymes, the subtle taking up of hints, the sardonic pitying puns,"speak of Heaney's technical dexterity. His text has the 'silences' and 'gaps' which make the reader imagine and interpret the 'unsaid' and the 'undone' behind the implied and suggested following the dictum 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing'.

His poetry abounds in the images of nature, references to farming, bog bodies and historical and political atrocities and succeeds in presenting a panoramic view of the land of his birth. John Goodby's assertion "If Seamus Heaney had not been born, it would have been necessary for Northern Irish Poetry to invent him" is an acknowledgement of Heaney's inseparable bond with his native land.

Seamus Heaney's all inclusive imagery ranging from the simple rustic joys of the countryside to the bottomless depth of the bogs, and reaching the point of political crisis unraveling the past and the present, is a unique example of the singularity of vision of the master craftsman. His poems constitute a valuable and challenging examination of the overall response to the stifling cries of protest and the ever-running springs of compassion. If one penetrates the surface of contemporary rural landscape of Ireland, one finds the miseries and sufferings of the peasant community with the unhealed wound of the great famine; if one digs down the bogs, the past merges with the present, and if one tries to retrieve the treasures from bogland, even the grains of the wood make us decipher the colonial history of the nation. The poems try to present a picture of the bloody past and the troubled

times of Ireland. But the poet knows that he can voice the feelings of the "disarticulated subaltern" and suffering mankind only with his pen which can prove to be mightier than the sword, but being careful lest he should not be categorized a mere propagandist. Therefore, for him "the problems of poetry [have] moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament."

Heaney's political preoccupations were brought into sharper focus by his reading of *The Bog People*, written by P.V. Glob, the Director General of Museums and Antiquities for the State of Denmark. Writing about the book Heaney tells us:

> It was chiefly concerned with preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled or with their throats cut, disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times. The author, P.V.Glob, argues convincingly that a number of these . . . were ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess. . . .And the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles.

According to Heaney, the bog is a 'memory bank', a "dark casket where we have found many of the clues to our past and to our cultural identity." In fact, 'bog' is an insatiable and consuming ground that swallows all that comes to it and preserves it intact as a kind of treasure trove to be yielded up in time. Referring to the work of archaeologists, Heaney writes:

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before**.**
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.

Heaney reminds us in the poem "Bog Oak" that Ireland had been a downtrodden English colony for centuries starting from the beginning of the seventeenth century when the Scottish and the English Protestants were transplanted in Ireland. Heaney saw in the ancient sacrificial violence of the bog bodies an analogue to the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. In a radio interview he said, "I've tried to make a connection lately between things that came to the surface in bogs, in particular in Danish bogs, and the violence that was coming to the surface in the north of Ireland."

The poem "Bog Oak" focuses on the piece of oak taken out of a bog and prized high because of its usefulness for building barns and cottages. In contrast to the image of this piece of timber runs the sickening image of the corpses being dug out of their graves to appease the hunger during the times of great famine:

A carter's trophy.
Split for rafters,
cobwebbed, black,
long-seasoned rib

Under the first thatch.
I might tarry
with the moustached
dead ,the creel fillers,
……
Perhaps I just make out
Edmund Spenser.

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dreaming sunlight,
encroached upon by

geniuses who creep
'out of every corner
of the woodes and glennes'
towards watercress and carrion.

Heaney's bog-poems are a way-out to dig into the violent colonial substratum of his country. Bog bodies recovered from peat are fairly widespread throughout Northern Europe and around eighty such bodies have been discovered in Ireland itself. According to archaeological survey, these victims have been found blackened but completely preserved with their fingerprints, caps, tunics, skirts and even blindfolds and nooses around their necks. Heaney's description of these bog bodies fits the physical reality of the landscape where the embattled and tortuous history of Ireland lies reposed. In fact, the imagery in the bog poems is so artistic and so realistic that one feels, he can visualize not only the corpse of the dead but also feel the hurt and the torture experienced by the victim.

Heaney's sensuous references in "The Tollund Man" lead to the speculation that some of these victims were probably bridegroom sacrifices to pre-Christian German Earth Goddess Nerthus :

In the flat country nearby
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess

The 'last gruel of winter seeds' are a proof of the fact that the Tollund Man was served proper diet before his sacrifice, and his sacrifice was offered to insure the renewal and fertility of spring. Heaney himself feels confirmed about such practices as his interview with the French Magazine *L' Express* describes: "The man had been killed as a fertility sacrifice. He could have been one of my ancestors. In a flash, I realized the connection between the mutilations of that long-ago epoch with the martyrs of the Easter 1916 uprising in Ireland and all the reprisals and repercussions visited on both communities." These pre-historic ritualistic sacrifices are correlated with the crises and atrocities in Northern Ireland as the poet refers to an incident in which the bodies of four young Catholics were dragged along a railway line in the most brutal manner

Tell tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines.

Burdened with the weight of his country's history, Heaney fancies that if he visits the museum of Aarhus, where the body of Tollund Man is preserved, he will feel a kinship with a landscape that has witnessed similar conflicts and killings as his own country has. That is why he says:

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,

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Unhappy and at home.

Besides its common implication, 'bog' has another meaning. It is a sign of abjection of the Irish generally and the rural folk specifically, and viewed from this context it connotes their 'backwardness'. The image of the Tollund Man as presented in the poem defines the barbarism that persists within the psyche and the culture of the country. And the pain and the suffering experienced by such sacrificial victims is symbolic of the helplessness and subservience of man to the ritualistic traditions as followed in the ancient past.

Heaney's fascination with history and the cyclical nature of time, gets manifested in his 'Bog poems' that form a link between the past and the present showing how conflict rises again and again with the same tribal, primitive emotions. A bog is a sign of abjection, of the Irish generally in colonial discourse, and the rural specifically in urban Irish sensibility, where it implies 'backwardness'. He felt an intense emotion of mythical reverence for sacrificial victims of the past, combined with and compounded by the more recent horrors of violence.

Seamus Deane sees Heaney as bringing the Viking dead alive through "an act of ventriloquism" making them speak for contemporary victims in Northern Ireland as found in the poem "The Grauballe Man" which presents the most compelling exploration into the Irish past and its relation to the troubled historical colonial times of the nation. Unlike Tollund Man, the Grauballe Man's face bore an expression of pain and terror as its throat had been cut from ear to ear. Heaney tries to make these dead alive and speak for the suffering ones as found in the following lines from the poem "The Grauballe Man":

Who will say 'corpse'
to his vivid cast ?
Who will say 'body'
to his opaque repose ?

And his rusted hair,
a mat unlikely
as a foetus's.
I first saw his twisted face

in a photograph,
a head and shoulder
out of the peat,
bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies
perfected in my memory,
down to the red horn
of his nails,

hung in the scales
with beauty and atrocity
with the Dying Gaul
too strictly compassed

on his shield,
with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.

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His last meal that consisted of at least sixty-three varieties of grains and herbs, signified the religious significance associated with the sacrifice, implying thereby that these sacrifices were connected to mid-winter solstice celebrations to bring the coming spring. Even Ned Kelly, Keeper of Irish antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland comments in concern with such sacrifices: "My belief is that these burials are offerings to the gods of fertility by kings to ensure a successful reign."

In May 1950, two Danish farmers discovered a 2000 years old body of a girl preserved by the peat bog. In his poem "Punishment", Heaney contemplates the remains of this young woman killed for adultery by her community in Iron Age Jutland. It was buried in a peat bog, and unearthed by archaeologists centuries later. Likened to the woman taken in adultery and to the Catholic women in Northern Ireland abused by their own community for dating British soldiers, the young woman becomes a touchstone for the poet to measure the intensity of barbarism. Thus, emphasizing the fragility and vulnerability of the girl, the poet seeks to make her victimization his own as well as of the whole of mankind. But his comparison of this Iron Age victim to the conflict in Northern Ireland makes him aware of his helplessness in the existing circumstances. The poem explores his position as a writer and as an Irishman in modern Ireland and exemplifies how Heaney seeks to understand the problems of the present in terms of the experience of the past by having a moving connection between Iron Age adultery and a modern political revenge.

The poem "Punishment" is an account of the extreme form of brutality and barbaric attitude of the community itself towards the 'little adulteress' whose body was unearthed centuries later in a state of near-perfect preservation. The image of the poor Windeby girl with "her shaved head / like a stubble of black corn" evolves the image of the contemporary Irish Catholic girls, her "betraying sisters" who got tarred and handcuffed to the railings of Belfast by IRA for seeing the British soldiers. Heaney uses the figure of the girl from the past as a metaphor to evoke the barbarities perpetrated in the colonial times. The execution of this Iron Age girl for adultery is seen as analogous to the ritualistic punishment of women, presumed traitors, in Northern Ireland , who have been shaved and tarred by extremists as an 'example' to others.The image of the poor victimized girl shakes the spirit of the poet against the cruelty of the tribal revenge. The irony of the situation is that the poet understands the pain of all such girls, even as he understands the need for revenge, but finds himself in a strange predicament knowing not what to do:

> who would connive
> in civilized outrage,
> yet understand the exact
> and tribal, intimate revenge.

Taken as a whole, these bog bodies of the ancient victims, offer telling parallels to the prevailing situation in Northern Ireland of 1960s. In one sense, they seem to be art objects like the pipers and figures carved on John Keats's 'Grecian Urn', as if they had been created by the imaginative contemplation of the poet but at the next moment, they stand as symbols of the deep racial and tribal experience of the region of Ireland to which Heaney feels allied as an Irishman. The figures allow the poet to have a further digging into consciousness, which can be conceived as a product of continuous history. Gregory A. Schirmer makes an illuminating comment in the context of his bog images, saying: "Heaney has developed the image of the bog into a powerful symbol of the continuity of human experience that at once enables him to write about the particularities of his own parish, past and present, and to transcend, at the same time, those particularities."

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