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SCAPEGOATS OF THE MARSH: A POLITICAL READING OF SEAMUS HEANEY'S BOG POEMS

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Abstract

Much has been written about the bloody Northern Irish Troubles in books of history and fiction. This historical civil war is still remembered as a traumatic era in Irish history, which is still fresh in the memories of those who have been abused, displaced and suffered the loss of loved ones. Irish writers endeavoured to denounce the Troubles and the absurdity of the violence and chaos as it deepened the chasm in the religious and social fabric in Northern Ireland. This study deals with Seamus Heaney's 'Bog Poems,' and the way he addresses the predicament of sectarian violence in his native Northern Ireland through the preserved bog bodies of victims murdered barbarously in ancient tribal rituals in Iron Age times.

Keywords: Bog, Heaney, Irish, sectarianism, Troubles, victims, violence

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Introduction

The Northern-Irish Troubles

Ireland had suffered from a long period of British occupation which left its bad effects on nearly all aspects of Irish life. This occupation led to a division in religion and class structure. Religious intolerance between the Protestants and Catholics had been a marked feature of Irish life over the centuries. During the second half of the twentieth century, tensions between the Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland turned into a violent sectarian conflict which expressed itself in the murders of some members from both factions. This era, which is historically known as the Troubles, lasted nearly for thirty years, starting around 1968 and ended with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. However, it particularly intensified in 1972 (For more details see Rose 2001).

Though the Southern part of Ireland (the Republic of Ireland) had achieved independence from England, the six Ulster counties in the North are still under British hegemony and are part of the United Kingdom. Politically, the Irish Protestant Unionists endeavored to keep the Northern counties within the United Kingdom, while the Catholic Republicans aimed to join the Irish Republic. British troops were deployed as security forces in 1969, but they were biased as they supported the Unionists against the Republicans who were considered a terrorist organization (McKernan 2005). Backed by the British authorities, the Royal Ulster Constabulary attempted to suppress the Republicans and this marked the beginning of riots, curfews, internments and police brutality (Taylor 1990).

The Republicans formed their paramilitary forces, the Irish Republican Army (IRA). They planned guerrilla attacks against the Unionists and the British security forces to defend the Catholics in the North. The conflict escalated to violent operations, sectarian abuse and bombings not only in the North but also in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland (Ryan and Amy Hackney 2004).

During the conflict, thousands of people were killed, injured, and displaced. The districts of both Catholic and Protestant communities were separated by peace walls to maintain order. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 led to the declaration of a historical cease-fire. Negotiations between the two conflicting factions and the disarmament of the paramilitary IRA and loyalist groups put an end to three decades of political unrest (Scanlan 2006).

Seamus Heaney's Bog Poems

Seamus Heaney was one of the distinguished humane voices, who protested the bloody thirty years of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. He found in *The Bog People* (1969), by the Danish archaeologist, Peter Vilhelm Glob (1911-1985), the best source of inspiration to deal with this horrid era in Northern Ireland. This illustrated book, as Heaney asserts in "Feeling into Words," memorialises the "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" (1980, 57-58). This source, Seamus Deane opines, helps Heaney "explore the repercussions of the violence on himself, and on others, by transmuting all into a marriage myth of ground and victim, old sacrifice and fresh murder" (1997, 69). These prehistoric victims, exhibited in museums in Denmark, are witnesses to man's ritualistic violence and the tendencies to kill in the name of religion and tribal laws. The mummies rescued from the bogs in modern times are pathetic icons, as Heaney explains, of the "atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles" (1980, 57-58).

In his 'Bog Poems,' published in different anthologies: *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975), he implicitly denounces violence and sectarianism during this era in Irish history, making use of ecological and archeological images. He found in the Irish and Scandinavian bogs rich areas and adequate means to deal with this national predicament in the North and to demonstrate his empathy with "the victims of Irish political violence" (Corcoran 1998, 34). These wetlands are places full of mysteries and preserved remnants from the dark past. Thus, "the bog," as Daniel Tobin affirms, "is both a preserver and a witness to history" (1999, 91). It is both a provider and destroyer: it provides the Irish and Scandinavian peasants with fossil fuel for fire, and simultaneously, it took the lives of many victims in ancient times. These victims were sacrificed in pagan rituals; their bodies, which were preserved in the acidic waters of these bogs, were found and taken out in contemporary times.

In Heaney's bog poems, the bog and history become one as each layer of the bog has its historical significance: "every layer they strip/seems camped on before" (Heaney 2001, ll. 25-26). The bog, thus, becomes a natural museum of the past, as the remains of the ancient bog bodies survived time and natural elements. C. Z. Llena states that these bog poems represent Heaney's "Irish sense of place linked with an ancestral past and immanent in the bottomless centre of the bog" (2010, 141). Heaney's bog poems, Denis Donoghue adds, "contains and preserves the human past in forms deeper and more secret than history" (1988, 189). In addition, the bogs preserved the remains of some extinct species like the Irish extinct elk and are, thus, symbolic of the land as a preserver of culture and history. According to I. G. Nordin, in these bog poems "the relationship with the land can be seen in a political context, associated with territorial rights and national identity" (2010, 244).

"The Tollund Man"

In "The Tollund Man," which appeared in *Wintering Out* (1972), the speaker wishes to embark on a pilgrimage to Aarhus in Denmark, where the mummy of an unnamed victim, known as the Tollund Man, was found preserved in a bog. The Tollund Man was ostensibly offered as a sacrifice to Nerthus, the pagan earth goddess of fertility, in a primitive ritual "to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring" (Heaney 1980, 57). Scapegoated for an absurd reason, this victim symbolises society's crimes against humanity. Heaney emphasises the innocent features of this victim, sleeping peacefully, "Naked except for/ The cap, noose and girdle" (Heaney 1972, ll. 9-10).

In an interview with James Randall in 1979, Heaney declares that his empathy with the Tollund Man was so deep that he identifies with this victim as if he were one of his ancestors. This motivated him, as he tells Randall, "to make a connection between the sacrificial, ritual, religious element in the violence of contemporary Ireland and this terrible sacrificial religious thing in [Glob's] *The Bog People*" (1979, 18).

Heaney condemns man's willingness to commit acts of violence and crimes which he attributes to unorthodox religious rites and beliefs, since both the victim in the poem and the victims in Northern Ireland were killed for religious and sectarian reasons:

The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth
 Flecking the sleepers
 Of four young brothers, trailed
 For miles along the lines. (Heaney 1972, ll.25-32)

The survival of the Tollund Man's body is significant to expose these crimes committed in the name of religion. Being away from his country and the Troubles during his visit to Aarhus, Heaney shares with this victim the same feelings of sorrow, isolation and despair; yet, he also has the same sense of "sad freedom," being isolated from his people's wrongdoings and sectarian killings:

Something of his sad freedom
 As he rode the tumbril
 Should come to me, driving,

 Out here in Jutland
 In the old man-killing parishes
 I will feel lost,
 Unhappy and at home. (Heaney 1972, ll.33-44)

"The Grauballe Man"

Another bog body that Heaney observed in the museum in Denmark was that of the Grauballe Man. Like the victims of the violence in Heaney's North, the Grauballe Man was a victim of ritual violence:

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. (Heaney 2001, ll. 41-48)

This horrific image of pagan sacrifice is reminiscent of the brutal violence against innocent civilians in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Michael Parker comments: "No one in the North can or should escape the burden 'of each hooded victim/ slashed and dumped,' and the evidence of his eyes" (1994, 136).

"Bog Queen"

In "Bog Queen," Heaney describes the bog body of a queen, waiting "to be brought back to some form of life" (O'Brien 2002, 33). It is a poem that focuses on the decay of the queen's corpse which was mixed with the land until it was found and excavated. In "*Bog Queens: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney*," Patricia Coughlan emphasises the symbolic significance of "the imagery of woman-as-land-and-national-spirit from the tradition of Irish nationalist political rhetoric" (1997, 186). Discovered in a bog near Belfast in 1781, the body of the Irish queen of the title becomes an emblem

of the mythical figure of the Irish queen Kathleen Ni Houlihan, an icon of martyrdom and sacrifice for the Irish nationalists and a figure that has always been linked to Mother Ireland (Vendler 2000, 45). Still, her real identity remains unknown. Michael Parker finds in her an “incarnation of Nerthus, the earth goddess, to whom the Tollud Man was sacrificed” (1994, 135).

Unlike the other dead bodies in Heaney’s bog poems, the bog queen is given a voice to speak of her decay, and symbolically, the deterioration of the Irish nation as its citizens in the North were driven into inhuman acts of violence triggered by centuries of English colonisation. Like the mythical queen Kathleen Ni Houlihan who waits for a hero to help her defend the nation, the bog queen is waiting for someone to unearth and rescue her from the dark bottoms of the bog:

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,
between heathery levels
and glass-toothed stone. (Heaney 2001, ll.1-4)

The refrain “I lay waiting” might suggest the long history of colonisation the Irish people endured and their patient anticipation for an end to their postcolonial struggle. As an icon of the colonised nation, the queen has tolerated the elements of nature and time that disrupted her body:

My body was braille
for the creeping influences:
dawn suns groped over my head
and cooled at my feet,
through my fabrics and skins
the seeps of winter
digested me. (Heaney 2001, ll. 5-11)

She also laments the decay of her diadem, the emblem of her royal rank:

My diadem grew carious,
gemstones dropped
in the peat floe
like the bearings of history. (Heaney 2001, ll. 25-28)

Heaney uses the image of the decomposed body of the queen to stand for the situation in Northern Ireland, which is torn by the bloody sectarian conflict. Despite her undefeated voice as an icon of history, the decay of her corpse is emblematic of colonisation and its negative consequences on Irish culture. She complains of being robbed of her hair, the symbol of her beauty and femininity, by a turf-cutter who discovered her body in the bog:

My skull hibernated
in the wet nest of my hair.

Which they robbed.
I was barbered
and stripped
by a turfcutter's spade (Heaney 2001, ll. 39-44)

Then, the queen's hair was sold to the wife of an English colonizer who

..... bribed him.
The plait of my hair,
a slimy birth-cord
of bog, had been cut (Heaney 2001, ll. 49-52)

Nevertheless, there is an element of hope in her resurrection from the dark, which is brought to light by the talking corpse in the last stanza: "and I rose from the dark" (Heaney 2001, l. 53).

6. "Punishment"

In "Punishment," an excavated bog body of a girl is used as a metaphor for Ireland. The poem condemns violence through this pathetic icon of punishment from the past. This preserved corpse of the girl from the Iron Age, known as the Windeby Girl in *The Bog People*, was strangled in tribal punishment for adultery and thrown into a bog. Found intact with a halter around her neck, she symbolises humankind's capacity to commit vicious acts of violence (Glob 1969, 116).

Heaney laments the unjust death of this "poor scapegoat" and finds himself guilty of remaining silent for contemporary similar punishments. She stands for many Northern Irish women, the "betraying sisters" as described by Heaney, humiliated and punished by the IRA for indulging in love and marital relationships with British soldiers during the Troubles (O'Driscoll 2008, 159). In retribution for these acts of betrayal, they were tarred and feathered by being confined to street railings:

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. (Heaney 1972, ll. 37-44)

The poet's sympathy with this vulnerable young victim is obvious in the line "I can feel" (l. 1) as he imagines the way she was publically humiliated and helplessly dragged and dispatched.

My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
But would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence. (Heaney 1972, ll. 28-31)

“Strange Fruit”

In “Strange Fruit,” the last of Heaney’s ‘Bog Poems,’ the body of a murdered bog girl is also presented as a symbol of human cruelty, exemplified in the description of the horrible girl’s face:

Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd.
Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth.

.....
Her broken nose is dark as a turf clod,
Her eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings.
Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible (Heaney 2001, ll. 1-11)

This bog-decapitated head, Glob opines, belonged to a woman offered as a sacrifice (1969, 100). In the very deformed image of this helpless girl lurks the poet’s outcry against violence and the meaninglessness of sacrificial or ritual killing.

Conclusion

In his elegiac ‘Bog Poems,’ Heaney protests the act of killing innocent and powerless individuals in primitive rituals. He makes use of exhumed ancient mummies of bog victims to refer to the many lives lost during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Heaney implied criticism extends to his community’s silence and passivity in their reaction to the punishment of Irish women, an act which is not much different from the savage punishments of women in ancient tribal cultures. This emphasises the ignorance and narrow-mindedness of some people in the past and present and the negative effects of colonisation on Irish society. Heaney’s identification with these victims is explicit in his pathetic description which elevates them to the rank of martyrs, sacrificed for sins which were not their own.

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