



Heaney's Bog Poems: Encapsulation of the Irish Past

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Abstract: Among many of Heaney's poems, bog poems are different in nature as well as in delivery of meanings. They are more than letters and words; they are more than poetry. The history of Ireland is mummified in the bog poems "Bogland", "The Tollund Man", "Bog Queen", "The Grauballe Man", "Punishment", and "Strange Fruit". With the help of language offered to him by the bog, Heaney has created a bog-like world in these poems, where he encapsulated the Irish past. The incorporeal history of the Irish people has become more alive and more animated here. The present article tries to dig out that intangible history presented in the poems of Heaney in the form of concrete tales.

Keywords: *Seamus Heaney; bog; poem; Irish; history*

Introduction: History of a country can be preserved in many ways. Written documents are the best ones among them. Apart from history books and articles, written documents include various types of literary works. Novels, short stories, essays and poems can also contain history or historical incidents, but in a fictitious way because they have no liability to be cent percent true to history. Heaney's bog poems (poems related to bogs, described later in this article: "Bogland", "The Tollund Man", "Bog Queen", "The Grauballe Man", "Punishment" and "Strange Fruit") encapsulate the history of his own country (Ireland) as well as the life and culture of the related lands around.

The poetic diction and style that match the intention of the poet are carefully manipulated. In these poems Heaney tries to dig the history because the history, in the true sense of the term, was preserved under the bog. While the historians along with the archeologists uncovered the historical incidents and moments by digging the bog, Heaney brought the same in his poems to preserve them for future. It is the readers who are going to uncover them again in the black letters printed in Heaney's bog poems.

Bog and Ireland: What is a bog? Heaney defined it as "Melting and opening underfoot/ Missing its last definition/ By millions of years" [12]. Actually, a bog is a kind of wet soft ground which is formed of decaying plants. It also means an area where the land is wet and marshy. It takes millions of years to form a bog.

A bog is a very early stage in the formation of coal deposits. It has some special characteristics which have made it different from normal marshy land. The bog looks "outwards and upwards, to fulfilment through movement, advance, exploration and openness" [8]. A bog is acidic [1] in nature because it is formed in a place where water is acidic. The colour of the water is generally brown. This type of water comes from dissolved peat tannins. For this reason, when it is dry, bogs can be used as fuel. Bog is a very special piece of land in Ireland. It covers about 6% of the total Irish land. Because of its specialty some rare plants grow here. Bog also plays a very vital role in the economy of Ireland. There are many peat industries that use bogs as raw materials to produce fuel. It is surprisingly true that more than 25% of home heat in Ireland comes directly from this bog. To harvest more peats from bog, a 'peat board' (Bord na Móna) has been established in Ireland.

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Being acidic, a bog can preserve the elements- plants or animals- in the mummified forms. In this way bog has preserved many dead bodies in it for many centuries. By digging the bog, people can discover and study the Irish history of the remote past. Heaney has come to know this preserving power of the bog through some dug-out ancient bodies found in various places in and around the country. He has used the bog as a geographical memory-bank where “we have found many clues to our past and to our cultural identity” [7]. He has skillfully sorted out some of the arresting incidents from that “memory-bank” and encapsulated them in his poems as written history. The importance of bogland to Heaney lies in the fact that it is compared to “the womb of the mother-earth, and the womb stands for creation. Memories are buried in the Bogland, but the memories are not destroyed entirely, and it is being revealed to the present. Memories are the Bog Bodies. It is something real, not imaginary. Therefore, the creating continues with deep meanings” [22].

Bog Poems of Seamus Heaney: Seamus Heaney started his career as a poet in 1963. He began to write under the pseudonym Incertus. He appeared in his own name with his first poetry book *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966. This first book brought him enormous popularity and a lot of rewards. His poems have got acceptance and popularity among the readers because he used entirely different diction with some excellent jargons (such as dig, mud, mold, spade, turf, sod, silt, slime, slicks, etc.) in his poems; and because his poetry had the “lyrical beauty and ethical depth” [5]. His jargons related to agriculture in general, and to bog in particular, presented him as a magnetically different poet in his contemporary period. The images attached to the soil and the ambiguity of vocabulary used to describe soil and earth gave critics a new dimension of food for thought. Obviously, he would choose the bog landscape as a metaphor to satisfy his interest in the Irish psyche.

In his earlier poems that include “Digging”, “Follower” and so on. Heaney uses what the earth could offer him and he unearths mainly the tradition from them. These poems are concerned with childhood, family life, tradition and so on. At the later stage of his poetic life he wrote his bog poems and brought the bog-related elements in his writings as a fixed target. In these poems he truly unearths the past of Ireland. The poetic dimension that Heaney has chosen for his poetry, naturally expects a horizon that would give him multiple benefits. So it was very natural that he would take the bogland as the important elements in his writing. It seems that bog has come alive to him, and he is ready to accompany the bog. The conversation he made with the bog reveals all her mystery and pain, and consequently, he has presented the same in his bog poems.

The bog poems of Seamus Heaney span three of his collections: *Wintering Out*, *North*, and *District and Circle*. “Bogland”, “The Tollund Man”, “Bog Queen”, “The Grauballe Man”, “Punishment” and “Strange Fruit” are popularly known as bog poems. These poems dig and explore the treasured history of Ireland. But the ultimate credit of these poems lies somewhere else. Heaney was capable enough of developing such images and metaphors which can connect the victims of the tribal sacrifice of the past with “the political and social situation in Ireland. This connection to the past allows him to comment on the present in an oblique yet forceful way” [6].

It is worth noticing that Heaney is fascinated by the bog as well as the activities that involve the bog. Consequently, these are tied to different kinds of landscape [9]. Through the natural feature of this landscape, Heaney has discovered the unconscious past of Ireland [10].

Through his description of the land, and the use of mythology, history, religious atmosphere, images of prejudice, violence and intolerance, he brings the past back. “His pastoral style uses images of rural Ireland to suggest greater universal ideas” [21]. It can be said that “Heaney staked out the boundaries of his poetry devoting himself to excavations of his chosen land” [21].

Bog Poems: Individual Study: Heaney was influenced by E. Estyn Evans, a great geographer, whose book titled *Irish Folkways* chronicled the “sequences of landscape and human culture going back several thousand years” [20]. And the writings of P.V Glob about the bog bodies inspired him to write bog poems [11]. It has already been said that “Bogland”, “The Tollund Man”, “Bog Queen”, “The Grauballe Man”, “Punishment” and “Strange Fruit” form bog poems of Seamus Heaney. Now, if they are studied individually, what things do they narrate? The basic thing is that Heaney wrote these poems in response to the discovery of bog bodies in the bogland.

“Bogland” is Heaney’s earliest poem which is “more nationalistic and more about the essence of Ireland” [25]. About this poem Seamus Heaney told that

The title of the poem refers to the bogs I knew while I was growing up and the stories I had heard about the things that could be preserved in the bog such as supplies of butter that were kept there, and about the things that were even more astonishing to a child, such as the skeleton of an Irish elk which our neighbours had dug out. [13]

Among the bog poems, this one can be considered as the introductory bog poem, because, unlike other poems, this one does not discuss the unnatural death of bog people.

“The Tollund Man” is based on the Tollund man found in Bjeldskovdal in 1950. The Tollund man is a political victim. The condition of the body shows the political as well as the religious violence of the contemporary Ireland. Heaney admits, “The Tollund Man seemed like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those mustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish Countryside. I just felt very close to this. And the sacrificial element, the territorial religious element, the whole mythological field surrounding these images was very potent. So I tried, not explicitly, to make a connection between the sacrificial, religious element in the violence of contemporary Ireland and this terrible religious thing in The Bog People” [24].

In “Bog Queen” the speaker is the dead queen herself. This poem is about the geography of Ireland. This also shows the English aggression. The dead body tells here the tale of how she was treated and tortured by the oppressors. It is a story of the rise from the depth. It is, in other words, the rise of the masses. The decay of the Irish past is shown and affirmed here through the decay of the Queen’s body. Heaney expects that the Irish people, like the Queen of the past, will rise from the decay. He implores the people to go back to the past and gain strength through the beauty of the long Irish history. He implores them to claim the dignity by asserting that the strength lies in the history and myth of Ireland. Through her own decaying body, the queen encourages the people of the future Ireland that there is still hope, “there is still dream, and the body is waiting. By waiting, the body is calling everyone to rise up, calling everyone to wake up” [22]:

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,
between heathery levels
and glass-toothed stone [12].

So, the survival of the body of the Queen symbolizes the survival of the people of Ireland. Nothing is lost; there are many things to gain. By digging the poem, readers can gather strength and vigour for the next steps ahead. There is no losing. The Queen says, “I rose from the dark/ hacked bone” [12]. It is Heaney

who has thrown challenges to his countrymen and urged them to be extraordinary against the historical injustices. So, this remembering is an act of “digging” [22].

“The Grauballe Man” is based on the Grauballe Man found in Jutland, Denmark in 1852. Like the Tollund man he also died a violent death. He “first saw his twisted face/in a photograph” but “now he lies/perfected in [his] memory”. [12] Heaney's description of the body in his poem is raw and vivid, and it is more than a body. Seeing the face, ‘gaunt form’ and ‘gnarled fingernails’ of the body, “a strong human connection to the past” [26] can be felt.

“Punishment” is written based on a body found in Northern Germany. According to the online site Tripod, the poem “Punishment” has often been “described as the central point, the climax of the bog poems, as the Winderby Girl is a metaphor for Ireland. It begins with a focus on her body, describing it in anatomical detail” [25].

“Strange Fruit” is written in a different style. This body, like others, is a document of ancient violence: “Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible,/ Beheaded girl” [12].

Bog Poems: Encapsulation of the Past

The common feature of all the dead bodies found in various pieces of bogland is that they were killed or hanged after unbearable torture. Violence was in the centre of all. All the bodies found in the bogland, and subsequently in the poems of Heaney, ran into a death which was the painful result of being stabbed, hanged, hacked or decapitated. No death was natural. Why was no normal dead body found? Why were there only the brutally tortured or killed or sacrificed bodies in the bog? The reason may be that the persons who had normal death were either cremated or burnt. Only the hanged or brutally killed persons were thrown into the then marshy land, which preserved the dead bodies, and were gradually transformed into the concrete mummies in the hard peats of the bog.

Which time of the violent history of Ireland was, then, preserved in the bogland? It is known that farmers in the Neolithic age came to Ireland around 6000 years ago [2, 3]. The wet climate at this time helped deep bogs grow in the forest area of Ireland. Next 2000 years was a period of regular climatic change from wet to dry. So, bogs developed from about 2000 to 2500 years ago with “layer upon layer of spongy vegetation, cotton grass, bog rush, and sphagnum” [4]. Now, it is clear that the time the bogland has encapsulated is around 500 B.C. In bog poems, Heaney has encapsulated the past of the development of bog as well as the history of the ancient track of Ireland. In “Bogland”, Heaney writes, “Our unfenced country/ Is bog that keeps crusting/ Between the sights of the sun” [12].

Bog bodies were first recorded in 1450 when some German peasants found them in the bog. According to the instruction of a local priest, the body was buried following the Christian ritual. But bodies found before 1450 were destroyed by hastily covering the bodies with soil. They thought that the unchanged dead bodies might bring harm for the locality [14]. It is Glob who drew the attention of the archeologists and declared the importance of preserving the bog bodies, and determined their age by carbon and modern tests.

Heaney’s bog poems are a way of discovering the idea of a “sad freedom” of the people of Ireland. As poetry digs and cultivates the human psyche, Heaney’s bog poems explore the bog to uncover the historical and mythological past of Ireland. It seems that the poems are waiting to be dug up not only by readers, but also by historians. Heaney has that urge to dig the bog and find out the forgotten history of Ireland. According to Adnan Lermontov, Heaney “feels an echo of dark and dank Bog-like world deep within him. It is as if, the echo is waiting to come to the surface like the Bog Bodies” [22]. Heaney himself contemplates, “I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a

bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery” [23].

Bog bodies are widespread covering the Irish as well as Danish and German bogs. Ireland affirmed 80 bog bodies found in her bogs. Though they were found blackened, their physical conditions and apparels (such as hair, necks, caps, skirts, nooses, blindfolds, fingers etc.) were almost completely preserved under the acidic and anaerobic peats of the bogs. The bog bodies are thought to be the Iron-age victims— either murdered or sacrificed. Heaney has presented it as a poetic sketch in his poems:

As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep
the black river of himself. [“The Grauballe Man”, 12]

Apart from the accidental or natural deaths, the notions connected to the bog bodies assure that they were murdered, or sentenced to death. There may also be some bridegroom sacrifices among the deaths. In “The Tollund Man” Heaney makes a kind of sensuous reference to the deaths:

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,
She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint’s kept body... [12]

According to Glob, the last meal of the Tollund and the Grauballe man consisted of at least sixty three varieties of grains and herbs that include clover, rye-grass, buttercup, lady’s mantle, black nightshade, yarrow etc. These seeds found in their stomachs were connected to the contemporary religious rituals [11]. This ancient ritualism is described by Heaney himself:

It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the whit and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our wet clothes...somehow initiated [13].

Apart from the rituals, there might have sacrificial violence also. Heaney, in a radio interview, stated that he had 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” [7]. So, it can be said that he had a deep and emotional reverence for the myth of the sacrificial victims of the past in the Northern Ireland. Heaney made a comparison of this violence with the one in the modern time [15]. He finds himself present among the torturers of the past. Thus, as audience, he has bridged the past and the present situations, for nothing except the time (minutes and years) has changed:

I almost love you
but would cast, I know
the stones of silence.

I am the artful voyeur
of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs. ["Punishment", 12]

Heaney brought the Viking dead alive in "The Grauballe Man" to speak for the contemporary victims in Northern Ireland [9]:

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 [12].

The bog as historical repositories is bottomless. Digging back into history preserved in the bogs is limitless. When one layer is stripped, the other one becomes ready to be discovered. This creates a sense of place:

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless. ["Bogland", 12]

The sense of place is part of individual consciousness, "inseparable from biography formation and the becoming of place" [16]. Regarding the bottomless bog, Heaney stated, "They said it so often I firmly believed it, and in a different way I believe it still. As a child I used to imagine my helpless body whistling down a black shaft forever and ever; now I imagine the imagination itself sinking endlessly down and under that heathery expanse" [7].

It is bog with which Heaney can "step through origins" [17] into a bog which is "Missing its last definition/By millions of years" [12].

Patrick Kavanagh, in his novel *The Green Fool*, writes that bog is "a history of the world from the time of Noah" [18]. T.P. Flanagan, Heaney's artist friend, investigated that the bog has a "connectedness with a pre-Christian primeval past" [15]. Heaney admits these origins of the bog in his poem "Kinship", where he refers that the bog is-

Ruminant ground,
digestion of mollusc
and seed-pod,
deep pollen bin [12].

"Ruminant ground" may refer to the bogs as the archives of history [19].

Heaney finds a connection between Ireland's bogs and the ocean itself: "The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage/ The wet centre is bottomless" ["Bogland", 12]. This stepping back to the origins, Heaney seems to be aware of the bottomless sea which makes the bog a "repository of history" [10]:

Earth-pantry, bone-vault,
sun-bank, enbalmer
of votive goods
and sabred fugitives.
Insatiable bride.
Sword-swallower,
casket, midden,
floe of history. ["Kinship" 12].

To Heaney, the bog is a nesting ground which provides him with effective metaphors to communicate his message of the past through the bog poems. This is the "feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a share oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both; it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation" [13].

Conclusion: The political aspect in the bog poems is inevitable. Ciaran Carson's says that "with the bog poems the poet became 'the laureate of violence' and 'an anthropologist of ritual killing' who seems to be offering his 'understanding' of the situation almost as consolation...as if he is saying suffering like this is natural' so that it is as if such acts are removed to 'the realm of inevitability'.

History as a subject of poetry seems to be more prominent in the poems of Ireland. Many poets including W.B. Yeats have written poems showing the struggles and pains by which the Irish people were able to achieve that 'terrible beauty'. Poets use written documents of history as the source of remote history. Heaney seems to be exceptional in this regard. For historical incidents and evidence he does not depend on the bookish information, rather he chooses such a source where history has preserved itself in the shape of concrete form or in the form of its original appearance. Hence, Heaney's poetry, specially the bog poems, is full of images which are related to death and dying of mummified and historical bodies preserved in the bogland. These bodies have been encapsulated in the form of words and letters in the bog poems of Seamus Heaney.

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