

## **The Petrified Men and the Scarecrow: Substance, Body and Self-image in Seamus Heaney's Bog Poems**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Seamus Heaney's poetry was engaged with violence for decades. His artistic exploration of land and fossils revolved around the same questions: to what extent can a human being move himself away from an inherent "tribalism"? To what extent is identity inherited through history and what rights, responsibilities come with it? These questions arose in the author's oeuvre when the horrors of civil war reached their peak in Northern Ireland. The issues of shared community not only played a significant role in the development of self-identification, they also meant the survival of the sectarian conflict. Starting with the first bog-poems, Heaney was keen on producing a mythology to serve identity, and sometimes allowed his political opinion to filter through the images of Stone Age remains from the bog. For scientists, the investigation of archeological finds means relying on methods such as the necessary carbon analysis and careful identification of evidence, as to who these bodies were, when they lived, what characterized their daily routines, and the times they lived in. The same findings, however, had a different impact on Heaney. He used the metaphor of the land of these ancient bodies, and of history, to engage with the question of identity, but criticism made him reconsider what position he should take on the morality of the given past society. At the same time the poet, who voluntarily shared common roots with these long-forgotten forbears, was the one who started deconstructing their moral heritage in the works written towards the end of his poetic oeuvre. In contrast to earlier poems on bog-bodies, "Tollund" from the 1996 collection, *The Spirit Level*, and "Tollund Man in Springtime" from 2006,

reflect a forward-looking attitude in which Heaney left behind an apologist viewpoint for sectarian violence. (JP)

**KEYWORDS:** bog, Heaney, scarecrow, sectarian violence, Tollund man

Seamus Heaney, the first author to dedicate poetic sequences to the bog bodies of Iron Age Europe, which span his collections from *Wintering Out*, *North*, *District and Circle* to *The Spirit Level*, not only makes a connection between the violent deaths in prehistoric times and those during the political troubles of Northern Ireland in the 1970s, but also investigates questions of kinship and sympathy towards the past and present inhabitants of Ireland. Heaney's inquiry raises crucial questions concerning the extent to which identity is inherited through homeland and history, and the rights and responsibilities that come with it. Four poems from the bog-sequence have a clear focus on how the technique Heaney uses to describe the land re-imagines the bog-bodies as living beings, and how Heaney in his lyric analysis turns towards land, matter, and body as mediators of a common kind.

*Death of a Naturalist* recalls the places and experiences of his countryside childhood. In the title poem Heaney meditates about a primary school teacher, who would tell of "daddy frog" and "mammy frog," and eventual frogspawn and their "burst into nimble- / Swimming tadpoles," and how he would tell even the weather "by frogs too / For they were yellow in the sun and brown in rain." The closing lines, however, bring about "obscene threats" of the swarming frogs. "Croaking," "slap and pop" that "sickened" him and made him turn and run away. The "great slime kings" carry a different threat and the speaker admits that "if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it." Nevertheless, in "Personal Helicon" Heaney further

unfolds that “[a]s a child, they could not keep me from wells / And old pumps with buckets and dank moss.”

It is difficult not to consider more examples from his début collection, nevertheless, the recollective exploration, as Terence Gifford concludes in *Green Voices*, “assumes a unity with nature” based on the paradigm “that human life is organically unified with the natural world” (99). Edna Longley, in *Poetry and Posterity*, questions this assumption by referring to the contrast between the poetic attitudes of Heaney and Ted Hughes: “[Hughes] represents man as Nature; Heaney represents Nature as man,” and unlike Hughes’, Heaney’s poetic speaker “patrols, like a farmer, the boundary between domestic and wild” (104). Her arguments highlight what is fundamental in Heaney’s work and, as his oeuvre unfolds, Longley’s remarks appear to be increasingly justified even by the structure of the poems depicting bog bodies. Closely connected to the buried victims, the search for a distinctive border separating the human and the natural characterizes the poet’s approach to the description of landscape as well. In “Kinship,” from the 1975 collection, *North*, Heaney chooses a rather slow pace to map the view which he refers to as home.

Kinned by hieroglyphic  
 peat on a spreadfield  
 to the strangled victim,  
 the love-nest in the bracken,

I step through origins  
 like a dog turning  
 its memories of wilderness  
 on the kitchen mat:

the bog floor shakes  
 water cheeps and lisps  
 as I walk down  
 rushes and heather. (*Opened Ground* 120)

In the opening stanzas, the image of the dog represents a certain instinctive behavior that has changed in the domestic environment. Here, movement carries significance, while the dog is moving inside the domestic sphere, the speaker is moving out to nature. Longley describes this movement as being between “instinct (animism)” and “control (agriculture)” (105). In addition, it is not just the landscape and the bog that Heaney looks at with shared community in mind, but also at the “strangled victim,” a metaphor for all the prehistoric bodies that the land hides. For Heaney, the “strangled victim” is a recurring image, further elaborated in his other poems. For now, they are considered as part of the landscape.

## II

Quagmire, swampland, morass:  
 the slime kingdoms,  
 domains of the cold-blooded,  
 of mud pads and dirtied eggs.

But *bog*  
 meaning soft,  
 the fall of windless rain,  
 pupil of amber.

Ruminant ground,  
 digestion of mollusc  
 and seed-pod,  
 deep pollen-bin. (*Opened Ground* 121)

The dynamism opens up a new aspect of the Boglands, and space is filled with a variety of matter: quagmire, morass, amber, rain, mollusc, seed-pod, pollen-bin.<sup>1</sup> Beside the hidden or secret vegetation, there is also death in the dirty, unhatched eggs, and thus a careful ambiguity is introduced. The speaker proceeds to highlight the features of not just a welcoming, but a cautious and threatening environment. “Cold-blooded” refers to both amphibian animals and the manner in which past and present people fall victim to or perpetuate violence. At the same time, the bog that provides for the present, also preserves past centuries. Several stanzas later comes the first ars poetic statement: “I grew out of all this.” Heaney addresses the bog, the life around it and everything it hides, and in the meantime frames an identity for himself.

Heaney’s preoccupation with homeland was thoroughly influenced by the Danish archaeologist P. V. Glob’s study of the bog bodies of Northern Europe, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*. Heaney possessed a copy, which, especially the photos used as illustrations, had a great impact on him as he later confessed in an interview:

Even if there had been no Northern Troubles, no man killing in the parishes, I would still have felt at home with that “peat-brown head”—an utterly familiar countryman’s fate. I didn’t really “go back” to the book because it never left me. And still hasn’t....(O’Driscoll 157-59)

*The Bog People* is divided into six chapters. The first two, “The Tollund Man” and “The Grauballe Man,” concern two of the best known Iron Age bog bodies to have been discovered in Jutland, Denmark. Examination of the remains revealed that both men died prematurely; they were either murdered as punishment, or sacrificed as ritual victims. Heaney commemorates these men in several poems, but the rhetoric presenting the findings is vastly different in each bog poem. “The Tollund Man,” from 1972, starts in a voice longing for elsewhere with an invocation that echoes Yeats’ “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.”

Some day I will go to Aarhus  
 To see his peat-brown head,  
 The mild pods of his eye-lids,  
 His pointed skin cap. (*Wintering Out* 48)

Unlike in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), the focus, this time, is not only on the land with all its remarkable sights and inviting atmosphere, but also on the Northern European “neighbors” who lived there in prehistoric times. Heaney describes the significance of his personal discovery in an interview, saying that “the Tollund Man seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside” (qtd. in Haffenden 60-61). His description in “The Tollund Man” continues as:

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

Thanks to scientific investigation, radiocarbon dating, and an autopsy, even the last meal of the Tollund Man has been identified. All that has been preserved in the peat—his leather cap, his belt and, especially, the noose at the end of a rope drawn tight around his neck—are evidence of a sectarian murder. These features are all composed in the one entity, however, all are part of the same structure that used to be human, but now consists of stone and carbon. Further, the tone of the imaginary journey tilts closer to that of a pilgrimage than a travel diary.

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

Besides the close connection between a violent past and the present, Heaney's depiction not only creates a reference to an imagined pilgrimage, but also testifies to the humanity with which he turns towards both past and present crimes. A humanity that has been lost over the centuries but may now be regained through poetic imagination. One of the techniques that the poet so eloquently applies is the reimagining of how these "materials" were former human beings; furthermore, he also intends to recreate their human character. The narrative focuses on an abstract image which helps to recognize the remains of another human being concealed in stone and carbon. Consequently, the description proceeds to elevate the body to a transcendental level. According to Michael Parker, the writing of "The

Tollund Man” constituted “a major epiphany for the poet” (108). Certainly, the overall register chosen for the description has a pseudo-religious undertone when the “dark juices” work the Tollund man “to a saint’s kept body.” At this point in his development, Heaney begins to create personal, mythological conventions as his whole bog-sequence operates within this framework.

Works such as “Punishment” in *North* adopt two time-scales: the discovery of a female body preserved in a bog, and a period from the Northern Irish Troubles. There is a consensus that the body Heaney had in mind was Windeby 1 from North Germany, a woman believed to have been executed for adultery.<sup>2</sup> What is significant here is that the poem not only focuses on the mummified corpse, but also on the description of landscapes; Heaney applies similar, detailed mapping techniques for the depiction of both.

I can feel the tug  
of the halter at the nape  
of her neck, the wind  
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples  
to amber beads,  
it shakes the frail rigging  
of her ribs.

The description begins rich in details, slowly moving from bodily segments (“naked front,” “neck,” “ribs”) to a whole feature (“the frail rigging of her ribs”), and eventually there is no

established boundary between the corpse and its environment. In the following stanza the inanimate natural remains and the human body are entangled.

she was a barked sapling  
 that is dug up  
 oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head  
 like a stubble of black corn,  
 her blindfold a soiled bandage,  
 her noose a ring

The mapping of the corpse (if not a landscape) rebuilds the whole body which is later endowed with inner characteristics, too. Her “love” and “sin” were brought back to the surface out of the swampy fields, but they are not detached from the land. This transformation expresses a symbolic merging of homeland, soil and what used to be human.

to store  
 the memories of love.  
 Little adultress,  
 before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,  
 undernourished, and your  
 tar-black face was beautiful.

As he did in “Kinship” earlier in *North*, Heaney attempts to look at the corpse through the same descriptive method that he uses to highlight the barely visible liveliness and vegetation of the bog land. The mediator which allows this direct contact is, again, matter: stone, amber, black liquids, and oily tar. Heaney attempts to get in verbal contact with the victim. Parker asserts in his analysis of Heaney’s *Field Work* collection (1979) that in later works, the poet more consciously “tries to converse with and question the dead” (159). In the next stanza, however, Heaney adopts not the girl’s but the tribe’s unforgiving perspective.

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

...

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.

The speaker's identification with the prehistoric person reaches a halt as a communal, or tribal, aspect is introduced. In the conflict between personal and tribal compassion the speaker first turns to the individual with sympathy and pity, but eventually, in the last lines, he takes the tribe's side.

This conclusion has led to much criticism of Heaney. The coeval reference in the poem creates a parallel between the prehistoric girl and those Northern Irish women who were humiliated by their community for dating British soldiers during the Troubles. With this imagined sisterhood, a continuous tradition of violence that wraps around local history is described. As shown below, Northern Irish critics have accused Heaney of becoming too biased in *North* about the political situation and of expressing a poetic justification for violence in the last stanza of "Punishment." Longley labels Heaney's "rites" as "profoundly 'Catholic' in character" while Ciarán Carson criticizes Heaney's representation of a "world of megalithic doorways and charming, noble barbarity" (150). Carson and Longley both maintain that Heaney, whether willingly or unintentionally, overesthetizes and turns apologetically towards the nature of violence. Heaney as a member of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, felt profoundly uncomfortable in the debate. The problematic word "understanding" seems to painfully justify the communal punishment of the mummified corpse as well as that of Northern Irish girls. For the author tackling this controversial question, whether or not there is an excuse for violent means in a society, it may be worth taking the risk since the such inquiry elaborates on the moral options in the face of the bloodiest period of the Northern Irish Troubles.

Still, the conclusion here differs from that of previous poems. An irreducible gap is opened between individualistic "civilized" opinion and the "tribal" customs of the community. Although the poem points to the moral distance between ancient and modern norms, it eventually reconciles them as being close to each other. This is a problematic

conclusion for many of Heaney's critics. The poet felt he had to reconsider to what extent he should position his own mythology *vis-à-vis* contemporary politics. Criticism helped reconsideration, but tragedies closer to his private life shaped the next appearance of the theme. His second cousin, Colum McCartney, became a victim of sectarian killings in the same year when *North* was published. Almost ten years later, in 1984, Heaney commemorated the loss of his relative in his sixth collection, *Station Island*, where his speaker meets the ghost of McCartney as well as other victims of sectarian violence. During his lyric pilgrimage Heaney remains in search of a universal ground of morality that would highlight the individual's standpoint rather than that of the tribe's. Shaun O'Connell notes in his *Boston Review* critique of *Station Island* that "again and again Heaney pulls back from political purposes; despite its emblems of savagery, *Station Island* lends no rhetorical comfort to Republicanism. Politic about politics, *Station Island* is less about a united Ireland than about a poet seeking religious and aesthetic unity."

Heaney may have indeed taken the first step away from justifiable sectarianism, but it certainly did not mean the end of reconciliation with the homeland's past. The phantoms of history, which Jacques Derrida describes in *Specters of Marx*, visibly haunt the present and, as Eugene O'Brien suggests, are traceable in Heaney's works. Hauntology in the words of Collin Davis stands for "replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (373). This phenomenon radiates through Heaney's bog-bodies with a twist: matter is addressed (if not treated) almost as a person in Heaney's interpretation. The poet was preoccupied with the recognizable presence of the past in Irish culture. In 1976, just one year after *North* was published he presented his ideas about the relationship of tradition and innovation in Irish poetry in one of his lectures:

In Ireland, in this century, [poetry] has involved for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past, and I believe that effort in our present circumstances has to be urgently renewed. But here we stray from the realm of technique into the realm of tradition: to forge a poem is one thing, to forge the uncreated conscience of the race, as Stephen Dedalus put it, is quite another and places daunting pressures and responsibilities on anyone who would risk the name of poet. (*Finders Keepers* 27)

Heaney's careful analysis of the Bogland attempted to excavate not just a personal, but a communal past for those who lived on Irish ground. Although he had visited Copenhagen in 1973, where he met P. V. Glob, author of *The Bog People*, and from where he traveled to Jutland to see the exhumed bog bodies, Heaney in 1994 paid another visit to the iconic land of Tollund, Denmark. In the following year, he published a poem which readdressed this first-hand experience in *The Spirit Level* collection (O'Driscoll 20). The poem "Tollund" would be quite difficult to imagine as part of *North*, almost twenty years earlier, since the political atmosphere in the 70s would not have provided the ground for its milder tone. In 1996, however, closer to the time of the Good Friday Agreement and two years after the IRA ceasefire declaration, the general outlook for home affairs, both mental and physical, appeared to be taking better turns.<sup>3</sup> This hope for a brighter continuation echoes through *Tollund*.

That Sunday morning we had travelled far.

We stood a long time out in Tollund Moss:

The low ground, the swart water, the thick grass

Hallucinatory and familiar.

...

It could have been a still out of the bright

"Townland of Peace", that poem of dream farms

Outside all contention. The scarecrow's arms

Stood open opposite the satellite

Dish in the paddock, where a standing stone

Had been resituated and landscaped:

With tourist signs in *futhark* runic script

In Danish and in English. Things had moved on. (*Opened Ground* 443)

The same recognition of familiarity, so common in the previous bog-poems, appears again in the opening lines, but then the mysteriousness that was closely associated with the land begins to dissipate in a shift of register in the following stanzas. Especially, when Heaney's careful selection of words situates the poem in the present: the satellite, as a modern way of communication, is set in opposition to those rune glyph replicas that are no longer mementos of a troubled past (Viking raids), but are used as decorations to attract and involve visitors. Due to the new setting, Tollund seems like a pilgrimage site turned into a vacation spot. Furthermore, the peaceful farmland contributes to an almost bucolic scene. Strangely, the stanzas lack any description of prehistoric bodies, which was so crucial to Heaney in his previous poems. Instead he creates distance between his present and the past with no mention of any bog body or the, possibly, inherited custom of violence and sectarian killing.

Instead, the bog as a landscape becomes the dominion of a different "bog-body." The only sight that resembles a human is a lone scarecrow which greets the visitors with a friendly gesture, its open arms. The dummy, which is made of the material of the land, rises over the

landscape, unlike the bog-bodies that lay underneath it. This feature changes the point of view of the previous poem from underground to overground. The scarecrow itself stands as a symbol of hope in a copious harvest, a fine future. The following stanzas reinforce the prospect for a better future built upon the changes in the present:

Where we stood footloose, at home beyond the tribe.

More scouts than strangers, ghosts who'd walked abroad

Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning:

And make a go of it, alive and sinning,

Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad.

The tribal status, to which Heaney attributed great significance earlier, has disappeared and is almost rejected. Instead of the “dark juices” that transformed the bog-bodies, the last stanza exposes the speaker and his companion to the light. The reference to “ourselves” changes and now designates a different people “beyond the tribe,” new kinds of ghosts which are ready for a fresh beginning. Thus Heaney creates a palimpsest out of his own references: the “tribe” had carried different connotations in “Punishment” and stood for controversial moral justifications. This time, however, Heaney’s prospect leaves no room for “intimate revenge,” nor for the haunting morality of the past. Instead, his new found epiphany resonates with his religious undertones from the previous bog poems. Helen Vendler remarks that “Tollund can stand for a poem of *Afterwards*, . . . marking one’s response in a post-catastrophic moment” and later concludes that the whole collection “enquires into that sustaining of life in an *Afterwards*” (156).

With “Tollund” as one of the closing poems from the bog-sequence, Heaney reconstitutes his viewpoint on present-past relations as the speaker suggests a transition “things had moved on” (stanza four). With the progression and the loose intertext between the poems of the bog-sequence, their arc reaches a climax that provides a long-awaited liberation. The double reinforcement of “again” preceding both “ourselves” and “free-willed” in the closing line carries the significance of , a regained consciousness and self-consciousness. The elevated state of mind even allows closing the built-up tension with a playful remark on the satisfactory progression, “not bad.”

the motif of the bog body appears once again in *District and Circle* (2006). “Tollund Man in Springtime” describes the familiar bog body in a revitalized form in an urban environment. The narration strictly follows a first person singular perspective, unprecedented in earlier poems on the bog bodies. Consequently, viewpoint gains new significance when the Tollund Man meditates on the circumstances which led to his demise, but later brought about his recovery.

They strengthened when they chose to put me down  
 For their own good. . . .

Until a spade-plate slid and sloughed and plied

At my buried ear, and the levered sod

Got lifted up; then once I felt the air

I was like turned turf in the breath of God,

Bog-bodied on the sixth day, brown and bare,

And on the last, all told, unatrophied.

. . .

I smelled the air, exhaust fumes, silage reek,  
 Heard from my heather bed the thickened traffic  
 Swarm at a roundabout five fields away  
 And transatlantic flights stacked in the blue. (*District and Circle* 57)

The bog body now transitions between a natural and a modern world, the rural and the urban, the living and the dead as Heaney attempts to capture a universal transition that generally describes the human condition at the beginning of the new millennium. Most importantly, this philosophical engagement redefines a new environment in which the reimagined individuality of the Tollund Man is given a place, but the tribe that killed him does not receive this privilege. Seasonal rejuvenation helps the buried man overcome death, and the poem also stands as an allusion, a deeper motif that refers to all bog poems, which lies at the heart of Heaney's investigation. The question is whether a new beginning is possible after spending too much time in cramped, suffocating darkness.

Heaney commented on this change in an interview with Sam Leith in 2006: "Like everybody nowadays, [Tollund Man] is a bit in and out of the city. A bit in and out of the world" (2). A decade after the Good Friday Agreement "the imprint of the 'national question' is no longer so marked in Heaney's writings." Instead, in the meantime, Heaney's "satellite," which stands opposite the scarecrow in "Tollund," has been consistently "turned to foreign stations, . . . not simply as a means of extending his poetic range but in order to enrich his understanding of others' history" (370). Recognizing Heaney's masterful redefinition of the bog body, McDonald further argues that "[*District and Circle*] shows, too, how genuinely new poetry can escape from the clutch even of the poet's reputation, to become original, moving, and necessary all over again" (371). Heaney's final bog-poem is preoccupied with the exploration of an aesthetic quality but only in the preserved body. Although he places the

renewed Tollund Man in a modern environment, the moral conventions that led to his execution are not raised with him. Consequently, there is no need for the poet to take the tribe's side over the individual's.

Heaney's examination faced a new challenge in the image of bog bodies when he attempted to guide readers through the marshes of both the living and the dead. Bog bodies kept him preoccupied with their familiarity and at the same time formed a reminder of the political realities of the time. The poem in its slow, but steady tempo returned to the surface, to a "new beginning," to the "satellite" of the living. By the time the poet reached Jutland, not as a pilgrim, but as a visitor, the land stood open, bright and welcoming, while "the tribe" was left out of the circle of associations. In "Tollund" and "The Tollund Man in Springtime," Heaney concludes that the bog bodies may have been part of the landscape since the arrival of the first settlers, but the rites of the past (or present) that punished and sacrificed innocent people cannot be part of a new beginning; such customs had better rest buried, undisturbed.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the opening line of the third section the "centre holds," unlike in W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1922).

<sup>2</sup> See also, Erik Martiny, "Punishment." *The Literary Encyclopedia*.

<sup>3</sup> Both the agreement, and the IRA ceasefire contributed to a political compromise which closed almost thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland. The civil war cost approximately 3,000 civilian lives from Catholic and Protestant communities combined.

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