

An examination of
"intimate revenge" in
seamus heaney's
"punishment"



The poem "Punishment" by Seamus Heaney was written in 1975 as a part of the anthology *North*. It is a part of Heaney's bog series, in which he describes the Irish bogland, and the different artifacts and remains that have been found within the Northern European bogs. In these poems, the bog imagery is metaphoric of Heaney's Irish homeland, specifically Northern Ireland. Written during the bloodiest year of the Irish Troubles, "Punishment" delves deeper into this metaphor to examine relations during the time period. In "Punishment," the poetic persona observes the body of a bog woman, the Windeby Girl. She has a noose around her neck, and as he looks at her corpse he imagines the context in which she was hanged. Throughout this first section of the poem, Heaney creates a very empathetic tone through the persona's description of the woman and the circumstances surrounding her death. Toward the end of the poem, the persona admits that some part of him does not regret her execution, and almost condones it. In "Punishment," Heaney uses contrasting images of the bog woman and metaphor of the Irish Troubles to create tension and explore the internal conflict between empathy and revenge.

Heaney begins to develop an empathetic tone from the very first beginning of "Punishment." The first three lines read: "I can feel the tug / of the halter at the nape / of her neck." Immediately, the word tug pulls the reader into the persona's experience. Heaney's wonderful use of enjambment in this first stanza also leads to the creation of rousing interest. These features work together to draw the reader into the story of the bog woman simply from the initial image of her.

Heaney continues to establish empathy through the persona's continued imagery. The persona uses very vivid visual analogies to draw attention to the young age and unfortunate situation of the bog girl. In lines 7-8, the wind "shakes the frail rigging / of her ribs." The word frail highlights her weakness and vulnerability. The persona can see her ribs. She is completely exposed. In this, Heaney establishes physical infirmity. Until the fourth stanza, the reader has no perception of age. In line 14, the persona calls her a "barked sapling." A sapling is a young, weak tree. Barking is a practice in which a row of bark is stripped from a tree, inevitably killing it. Combined, these two simple terms create an incredibly evocative image of nature slaughtered by man. They suggest to the reader that this girl's death is an act against nature and is inherently wrong. The persona continues to describe her in this manner, until line 20. Perhaps one of the most puzzling lines in "Punishment," it refers to the noose around her neck. The persona compares it to "a ring / to store / the memories of love" (20-22). A noose generally brings about a negative connotation. However in this context, it is presented with a somewhat ironic and nostalgic tone. At its most basic purpose, the metaphor is alluding to the revelation in the next line. Yet, at a deeper level, the line could represent the persona's understanding and justification of the bog girl's crime. This appreciation is further exemplified by the persona's personal connection to the girl.

Heaney's use of apostrophe creates an especially strong sense of empathy in "Punishment." The persona directly addresses the exhibited woman as a "little adulteress" (23). Once again, the persona draws attention literally to her youth and paltry size through the use of little. However, this is also a

term of endearment, as one would call his or her own child, further codifying the connection the persona feels with the bog woman. In this line, the reader is informed for the first time of the reason for the girl's death. She committed a crime and she suffered the punishment. In the subsequent lines, the images transition from frailty in death to beauty in life. The persona describes her "tar-black face" as once being "beautiful" (27). This stark contrast highlights the tension of her life and death and demonstrates the empathy the persona feels for the girl. The final definitive sympathy the reader observes is in line 28, as the persona addresses the girl as "my poor scapegoat." The possessive adjective my demonstrates the empathy the persona experiences, and the line as a whole shows a great display of sympathy. The implication of the word scapegoat is that she was punished so that others would not be. She is an example, even though the persona recognizes the unfairness of her situation.

In the next stanzas, the persona begins to reveal his personal cowardice and sin. The most poignantly ashamed lines come directly after vehemently expressed empathy. The persona directly addresses the bog girl for the final time: "I almost love you / but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence" (29-31). The images that have been developing empathy and endearment from the first line suddenly dissolve as the persona's sympathy is proven insufficient. Despite his convictions, he does not feel strongly enough to speak out against his peers and save her. If he does, he cannot bring himself to do so for the simplest reason. Some part of him understands why she is killed, and agrees with the punishment.

In the poem, the persona compares the punishment of the bog girl to the punishment of Catholic girls during the Irish Troubles. During this time, cruel punishments for seemingly minor offenses were not uncommon. The Troubles were a conflict between Irish Catholics and British Protestants. In this poem, Heaney specifically references the penalty for fraternization between these two groups. If a Catholic girl was discovered associating with a British soldier, she was "cauled in tar," and shamed publicly (39). This is comparative to a hanging for adultery as public degradation. She is made an example, just as the bog girl is made an example.

The metaphor extends not only to the literal "punishment," but also to the emotional conflict the persona experiences. He is the "artful voyeur" of a murdered girl (32). This demonstrates a sense of guilt as he witnesses the atrocity in front of him, yet he only watches. Equally, he has "stood dumb" as he has watched his own people being punished by his own people (37). He "would connive in civilized outrage," yet do nothing to stop the act. It is through these contradictions that the persona's internal conflict is revealed. The persona can "understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge," yet also feel boundless empathy for those punished (43-44). It is through this conflict that Heaney looks at relations during the Irish Troubles.

As a prominent figure in the Catholic minority, Seamus Heaney was often called upon to make political statements in his poetry. "Punishment" exemplifies betrayal, not between the two sides, but within one. It is not degrading the Protestants, nor is it a rallying cry for the Catholics. Instead, Heaney examines revenge, empathy, and betrayal at their core. Throughout the majority of the poem, the images of the bog woman create a great

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feeling of empathy. Yet, it is also understood that the persona would have done nothing to save her. She executed an "intimate" betrayal, and thus deserved an "intimate revenge" (44). The allusion to Catholics during the Troubles presents an especially personal connection for Heaney. In the intense emotion of innermost betrayal, moral convictions may be set aside for the satisfaction of revenge. "Punishment" examines the ethical dilemma faced both by Catholics during the Troubles and by any person in a situation of war, either personal or intercontinental. The resolution Heaney reaches is uncomfortable. The persona stands in silence and accepts the violence, despite empathy for the victim. The reader's discomfort comes in the understanding of why he does so. It is the question of love over hate, of peace over war, one each person must answer individually. Though Heaney rarely added fuel to the political fire of the Irish Troubles, perhaps through this poem he is asking whether this struggle is worth the pain it created.