

Religious intolerance explored in bog poems



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Seamus Heaney wrote poems on a wide variety of subjects; from reflecting on his experiences with nature as a child to a period of political turmoil that plagued Ireland in the early 20th century called the “ Troubles.” Some of his poems address many issues together and have recurring themes and ideas. An example is a series of poems called Bog poems: ‘ Bogland,’ ‘ Tollund man’ and ‘ The Grauballe man,’ which share an obvious geographic theme but also show a similar concern towards themes like violence, religion, and terror.

The first poem Bogland is a poem that looks at Bogs more from a nationalistic point of view. Bog lands are wetlands that accumulate peat, a deposit of dead plant material. Bogs are a topographic feature of Ireland and are a common occurrence in countries part of the Northern Hemisphere. The speaker of the poem opens the first stanza with the word ‘ We’, which is a possessive pronoun and conveys a sense of unity with the land. In the opening lines, there is a contrast between the physical geography of United States with the Irish landscape, “ We have no prairies/ To slice a big sun at evening”, and what apparently seems as a negative statement is turned into a positive assertion with words like “ encroaching horizon” and “ unfenced country. Concurrently, the poem sheds light on the unrealized features of bogs, the layers upon layers of the land, enclosed with a rich history and ‘ bog that keeps crusting’ far and beyond. Moreover, the bogs are in layers and each layer is a page from a history book, but like an encroaching sun it at first doesn’t reveal anything, hence giving a feeling of absence. Bogs are also used as a metaphor to show a connection of the present to the past through the constancy of the land, evident from the verse “ Butter sunk under/ More than a hundred years” which “ Was recovered salty and white”.

The conserving nature of the bogs is also discussed in "Tollund Man" where Seamus Heaney takes it one step further by calling the land "goddess". Tollund Man is a poem full of promising things, for one there is the promising pilgrimage, "Someday I will go to Aarhus". In this very first line the tone is willful and expectant, however, there is a presence of aloofness towards the future from the time that is being spoken in. The speaker harkens to see the "peat brown head" of the sacred body, but assume an impersonal tone when noting the physical features of the Tollund man's body. Later; however, he feels a personal connection to the Tollund man when he says "I will stand a long time" only after he exposes his vulnerability to religious victimization. He then again glorifies it, and this time that to the status of a saint. But he uses a more ominous and forceful tone as he does this, he personifies the bog into a deity and equates it to Ireland, feminine in nature and overwhelming "she tightened her torc on him". The kind of language used indicates the powerlessness of the Tollund man in the face of superior and supernatural forces, but then insists on the quasi-divine nature coming into effect and "working/ Him to a saint's kept body", a surrogate Christ perhaps, who is left at chance "trove of the turf cutters" for now and will be resurrected again "his stained face/ Reposes". There is a deliberate attempt at linking religion with the circle of violence for the sake of bringing peace. This attempt becomes clearer in the second stanza where the speaker's tone becomes more emphatic as he breaks the stillness of the last line in the first stanza to boldly confront the violence caused by religion. His boldness is exemplified from when he says "I could risk blasphemy" (that is by averting to Pagan beliefs), in an attempt to resurrect the victims of sectarian violence. As a sacrificial victim to the goddess of germination, Tollund man carries the

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potential of bringing the dead back to life (“gruel of winter seeds”), this may also be an allusion to the “Requiem for the Croppies” where the fighters’ graves sprouted as a result of barley seeds in their pockets as they died. Hence perhaps aligning himself to pagan beliefs and then praying to Tollund, the speaker imagines he may have a shot at reviving the victims of religious violence.

A third and final poem of the series is ‘The Grauballe man’, where bogs act as a metaphysical conceit of history and highlight the recrudescence of religious violence that is associated with Ireland. However unlike Tollund man, this poem is less a myth-making and promising things, the terror in this poem comes from the depiction of the mummy as a grotesque art. The strong imagery in the poem conflicts with the state of tranquility in which Grauballe man is at first described. What seems even more unreal is once again the assumption of an impersonal tone and the absence of a commentary on such powerful images. There is even a lack of human empathy that would normally be present in such a scenario and it seems as if Grauballe man is presented as aesthetically horrific, yet appreciable. There is nothing passive or ‘mild’ about the Grauballe man, his murder has been perhaps described overt at best: “The head lifts/ the chin is a visor/ raised above the vent/ of his slashed throat”. The lines that follow this description show a shift, where now the description ends and the rationale for the description is given, but first as a reflection of his self-discourse with respect to Grauballe being art and then as realization of the actual terror-embedded-reality, “I saw his twisted face/ in a photograph, /a head and a shoulder/ out of the peat/ bruised like a forceps baby”, overshadowing the art. Here

Seamus Heaney uses bogs as a different metaphor to create awareness regarding a clash between myth and reality. In the end, art is looked upon as a reflection of life but with certain limitations. The poem itself is limited in expressing the true horrors of life, however, it makes an attempt by using metaphorical techniques to create strong images of reality.

All in all, it can be noted that in all three of the poems there are recurring topics, metaphors (metaphysical conceit) and explicit use of imagery in order to show Heaney's concern towards the chain of violence which can be connected back to a single source: religious intolerance. Moreover, he tries to discover violence by exploring the victims of Irish pagan cultures in the past and comments on how religious intolerance has been a lost culture of the land that was being revived during the " Troubles".