

Seamus heaney  
punishment  
commentary



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“ Punishment” “ Punishment,” a poem written by Irish author Seamus Heaney, speaks of the discovery of the body of a young bog girl, who as realized later in the poem, was punished for being an “ adulteress. ” (23) On closer inspection and as the poem shifts from past to present the faith of the bog girl is compared with the faith of another woman in more recent violent times, namely The Troubles in Northern Ireland.

In this poem Heaney thus comments, through the use of literary devices such as enjambment, contrast, imagery, metaphors and alliteration and through his diction, on the cruelty of human nature, guilt and on the question of whether we have changed and evolved over time or whether we are still, deep inside, as barbaric and savage as we once were. The first three stanzas immediately transport the reader back in time as the poet describes the body of the young girl.

Contrasting eroticism and vulnerability through the use of the words “ nape / of her neck” (2-3) a very tender image and “ blows her nipples / to amber beads” (5-6) which coincidentally also refers to Irish culture as the Celtic people were very fond of amber beads, the poet immediately sets a tense and somewhat uncomfortable mood. It is clear the poet sympathises with the young girl as he can “ feel the tug of the halter,” (1) that is the pain of the noose with which the girl was hanged, yet the way the body is described is so very detailed and anatomical that it almost takes away all of the emotional attachment.

As a result, the reader is unclear as to what to think or feel. As the poem continues, the fourth, fifth sixth and seventh stanza are used to first

introduce the means of punishment the bog girl received. “ Her shaved head/ like a stubble of black corn,” (17-18) immediately reminds the reader of tarring and feathering as the victims of this horrendous act of violence first have their head shaven and are then covered in tar. The black corn described can thus be considered a metaphor for the shaven head covered in tar.

A further link to the act of tarring and feathering is given in the seventh stanza with the use of the words “ tar-black” (27) to describe the “ beautiful” (27) face of the bog girl. Returning to the fifth stanza, the enjambment used in “ her noose a ring/ to store / the memories of love” (20-22) forces the reader to associate love with death. The ring of the noose can be seen as a marriage ring and so it can be inferred that love killed her. The image of the tarring and feathering and the inferred notion that love killed her, combined, provide the historical link into the present.

The historical link into the present is further explored in the eighth stanza where Heaney presumably addresses the bog girl directly. As a reader however, one can feel a shift in tense, as though the bog girl’s body and her punishment have travelled through time to the present day, both physically and metaphorically. This shift is established through the direct addressing of the bog girl in first person, but also through the literal change in time from past to present. As this shift occurs, the reader realizes Heaney may not be speaking solely of the bog girl anymore, but about a much more recent case of female punishment.

This case involved an Irish lady who was tarred and feathered during The Troubles as punishment for her relationship with a British soldier. Through the use of the word “almost” in “I almost love you” (29) and the use of the words “but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence” (30-31) which is also a biblical reference referring to Jesus stopping the stoning of women by saying “let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” it becomes clear that although Heaney pities the bog girl and the Irish lady, he would not have helped them. He would have stood by and watched them being tarred and feathered.

This is underlined again through both the alliteration in “stones of silence” (31) where the repeating “s” sounds like a hiss of contempt, and through the choice of the word voyeur, which can be defined as someone who gains pleasure from other people’s pain. It seems as though even though Heaney did not agree with the punishments, he stood by and watched, too scared to help in case he would be the next victim. Thus he “enjoyed” watching the women, relishing in the fact he was not in their position. This is where the aspect of guilt comes in as Heaney, to save his own skin, “stood dumb” and said nothing.

In the penultimate stanza the use of the words “betraying sisters,” (38) besides referring to the actual event where the Irish lady was tarred and feathered by her own neighbours, family and friends, also comments on the cruelty of human nature. We punish people, even this close to us for their supposed wrongdoing even if and when we ourselves are not perfect. The biblical reference explored earlier underlines this once more. Continuing on to the ultimate stanza, the poem is essentially perfectly summoned up.

Heaney writes that even though e/humanity would secretly allow for “civilized outrage” (42) at the punishments, he/humanity would publicly “understand” the punishments. Too scared to speak up in fear of their own lives, everyone keeps quiet and pretends nothing is happening; people essentially live their life in denial and that, in combination with the fact that one’s own friends and family might betray and punish one so barbarically, is the essence of human cruelty according to Seamus Heaney. Continuing with the idea of human cruelty, the reader is forced to think about how civilized we really are. How far have we really progressed since the time the bog girl was alive?

We like to think we have evolved and grown, building new cities and producing new products but deep inside, are we not the same savage barbaric people we once were? Do we not still perform barbaric acts of “tribal, intimate revenge?” (44) Can The Troubles in Northern Ireland not be compared to one tribe, the Protestants, taking “tribal, intimate revenge”(44) on another tribe, the Catholics? The bog girl’s punishment and the punishments of the Irish lady certainly are worryingly similar; an idea underlined by Heaney’s continuously used structure of 4-lined stanzas and the consistent use of enjambment to merge all eleven stanzas together.

So have we learnt anything at all or do we act, when push comes to shove, just the same as we did 1500 years ago? Like “Summer 1969,” “Punishment” is very much a reflective poem focusing on the guilt Heaney must have felt “standing dumb” as women, and more generally, people, were being killed for no apparent reason but revenge during The Troubles in Northern Ireland. Unlike “Summer 1969” however, “Punishment” is more

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generalized in that it comments on human nature and the cruelty of human nature, through the use of structure and poetic devices such as enjambment and metaphors, rather than the behaviour of one person.

Through a shift in time and his chosen diction, Heaney effectively compares past barbaric acts with present barbaric acts in an effort to show the reader how we are not as different from our savage ancestors as we would like to think. Important to note however is that although Heaney condemns the cruelty of human nature in “Punishment” and reminds the reader we have not evolved as much as we would like to think, he does not point a finger and blame any particular person. He merely observes the existence of human cruelty and wishes for the reader to be aware.

When reflecting on words spoken by Heaney himself in one of his interviews “Poets can say something about the situation in Northern Ireland, but in the end these poets will only be worth listening to if they are saying something about, and to themselves” it becomes evident that although Heaney is saying something about the situation in Northern Ireland, and the many other places in the world human cruelty is displayed, he is first and foremost saying something to and about himself. “Punishment,” like many of Heaney’s other poems is thus first and foremost a self-reflection written to solve Heaney’s internal battles but as many people in the world presumably share the same hardships, it can be said that Heaney, through his shared hardship is trying to help others overcome their sufferings. \* Used the notes and commentary written in Mrs Cooper’s class as reference, as well as the literature log written in January.