

THE NARRATIVE OF VIOLENCE OF THE TOLLUND MAN AND THE NORTHERN IRISH BROTHERS

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ABSTRACT

The poem by Seamus Heaney explores the enduring motif of human aggression, establishing a striking connection between this intrinsic element of our past and the selfless ethos embodied by the Tollund Man, a symbolic individual embodying the ideals of an Irish patriot who prioritizes the well-being of their country over personal concerns. Heaney adeptly employs vivid and emotive imagery to artistically depict the harrowing realities of the violence and suffering experienced throughout the Irish Civil War in the 1920s. The notable characteristic of this work is in Heaney's deep emotional engagement, as he confronts the distress arising from the preventable loss of life that marked this tumultuous era in Irish history. This poem functions as a sobering reminder of the lasting repercussions of violence, prompting us to contemplate the sacrifices made for the betterment of society while expressing sorrow over the profound impact it has on the human race. In this context, Heaney's poetry transcends its role as a mere historical narrative and assumes a timeless quality, inviting thought on the enduring consequences of battle and the complex portrayal of the Tollund Man as a character both noble and sad.

KEYWORDS: Excavations, Irish Civil War, Peat-cutters, Bogs.

I. INTRODUCTION

The poem 'The Tollund Man' is one of the best examples of the excavations of the past in which Danish history takes a new turn. So many stories come out that are deconstructed in their own ways. The poem dates back to the pre-historic times when it was a custom in Ireland to preserve

the bodies in peats. The poet in this poem combines pathos and a series of symbols that provide it a rich texture and invites the readers to dig the text deep to find their own meanings. The rhetorical devices employed in the poem raise it to a highly deeper level where the linguistic devices create a deceptive atmosphere.

When one goes through the poem, one gets the impression that the poet is addressing the reader directly. This leaves many literary critics to talk of rhetorical devices being used in the narrative style of the poet.

Historically speaking, it was the Peat-cutters in 1950s who discovered Tollund man. He was lying in the peat layers and unusually retained its freshness and the explorers took him to be recent victim of a murder. It was P.V. Globe's monumental book *The Bog People* that ignited the interest of Seamus Heaney in writing this poem. Glob came out with his conclusions about the bodies found in the bogs. He opines that the dead bodies are probably the victims of ritual sacrifice offered to fertility goddess Nerthus. As Stuart McLean opines "This has prompted many (though not all) archaeologists to conclude that they met their deaths as human sacrifices, intended to ensure the fertility of the land for the coming year." (https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/architecture).

Heaney's style of writing was not overtly political and hence he avoids the direct expressions against the political set-up of his times. It was through the bogs that he came out with certain instances of violence. This kind of indirect platform provided him an opportunity to develop his poetic sensibility on sectarian violence in Ireland. He enriched his poetic formulations by resorting to myths to depict the contemporary instances of violence.

'In North', Heaney was at his best to develop his bog myth. Poems like Bog Queen, Punishment, Strange Fruit, The Digging Skeleton, The Bone Dreams reflect the Irish views and ideas of life where violence was an inherent part of the culture in which the people lived. As Daniel Tobin rightly observes "In the tragic world of North, the violence of history and the violence of myth merge, and the center itself is stained with the blood of atrocity". (<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=socfBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA248&lpg=PA248&dq=passage>)

Two other important poems The Tollund Man and The Grauballe are rich examples of poet's dealing with different aspects of human life.

Heaney takes his literary inspiration from Irish bogs as it reflects its past, memory and culture. The reservoirs of history carry with them plethora of mysterious memories and ignite the flights of fancy of the writers. Bogs are the places where the dead bodies of humans become the

scars of history and thinkers and writers rewrite the bog stories in such a way that a whole new chapter is added to the Irish history and culture. The bogs indicate at the historical fact that violence and human sacrifices have been the integral part of human civilization through ages. As Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison point out in the book *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* “Refract the experience of the contemporary Irish troubles through suffering of a previous Northern civilization and its sacrificial victims The Bog people, whose ritually murdered bodies preserved in peat for centuries, become Heaney’s objective correlative. “ (13-14). The bogs are oozing with history of various colours and the poet has recognized its importance and has incorporated different aspects of Irish history in his poems. What instigates and enamors him the most is the ruthless dance of violence by humans on humans. The centrality of violence in Heaney’s poetry is best reflected in his essay “The Redress of Poetry” in which he writes “the nobility of poetry ‘is violence from within that protects us from a violence without.’ It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.”⁽¹⁾.

The *Tollund Man* is divided into three sections. The first part is the description of the stained body of the Tollund man. The poem begins with poet’s determination and willingness to go to Aarhus to see the Tollund man. The autopsy done by Seaney Heaney reveals that The Tollund man had peat brown head and his eyelids are similar to mild pods. The winter-seeds of his last meal are intact in his stomach. The imagery of the next stanza has the sexual undertones as Heaney describes the role played by the Goddess in engulfing the body of the Tollund man. The careful analysis of the first stanza brings before the readers the circumstances that may have led to the death of The Tollund man. The two words ‘Noose and girdle’ do not have the element of innocence around them. The word ‘noose’ shows that the Tollund man may have been murdered ruthlessly. He may have been sacrificed at the altar of the goddess Nerthus or may have been fallen prey to other violent rituals prevalent in those times. The poem combines with it two instances of violence. One dates back to the Iron age and the other one belongs to the recent upheaves in Irish history.

The second stanza of the poem opens with a certain fear psychosis where the poet feels himself trapped on the verge of blasphemy. The second stanza deals with the instances of the violence in the history of Northern Ireland in 1920. The laborers mentioned here fell prey to violence in Northern Ireland in 1920. History is witness to so many instances of bloody violence all around the world and this incident is one of them. Heaney seems to believe that these people were not fighters. They were the people who struggled for their livelihood and became the scapegoat in the civil war in Ireland. So many innocent people were killed in this war. The phrase

“The scattered, ambushed flesh of laborers” is enough to prove the fact that violence has been the inherent part of this particular period.

The next phrase “Stockinged corpses laid out in the farmyards” shows the inhuman treatment meted out to these laborers as they were not given the honorable burial. The next stanza is also significant as far as the violent history of Northern Ireland is concerned. This stanza elaborates the death of four brothers. The history says so that the four young Catholics were murdered by Protestants. The religious fanaticism and snobbery of the Protestants is a clear and crude form of violence inflicted on Catholic brothers. The way they were tortured shows immense hatred of the Protestants for the Catholics. They were dragged along a railway line to punish them in the most severe way. As Heaney describes this bizarre situation “Tell-tale and teeth, flecking the sleepers, of four young brothers, tailed four miles along the lines.” Heaney here seems to draw a connection between Danish Iron age sacrifices through rituals and contemporary political situation in Ireland that led to various instances of violence. The contemporary sectarian violence and the violence in the age of the Tollund man carries with it so many discoveries and interpretations that reject the earlier established reality regarding the instances of violence.

The violence graphically described by the poet shows the violence that was a part of Irish Civil War in the 1920s. Nobody was spared, be it the clergy, or the layman. The description of the hapless laborers or the Catholic monks killed in a senseless wave of violence is enough to send shivers down the spine. Seamus Heaney is deeply disturbed by the needless loss of lives that the Irish Civil War entailed. He goes to the extent of saying that he is willing to be branded a heretic by consecrating the bog where so many were martyred.

In the final section of the poem, the poet plans to visit the museum where the Tollund man has been kept for display. The names of the places like Tollund, Grabaulle, and Nebelgard may not be familiar to him and the language spoken by the people of those places will be unintelligible to him. However, such kind of hindrances will not stop him from feeling a sense of belonging with the place that has gone through similar instances of violence. Heaney seems to come with the belief that the Tollund man was not a saint but a victim because he offered himself for the prosperity of his land. The Tollund man is the symbol of the Irish man who rises himself above his individual self and sacrifices himself for the sake of his country in which he lives. The poem seems to focus on the innate violence that mars the history of mankind. He takes up the

human sacrifices that were probably in practice when the earth was inhabited by The Tollund Man and then comes down to the contemporary scenario and shows the violence that still continues to be a blot on the face of humanity.

II. REFERENCES

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