

# Disturbing Roots: Land and the Shift from the Personal to the Political in Seamus Heaney's First Four Poetry Collections, 1966-1975

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**DISTURBING ROOTS: LAND AND THE SHIFT FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE  
POLITICAL IN SEAMUS HEANEY'S FIRST FOUR POETRY COLLECTIONS,  
1966-1975**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore and analyze the first four collection written by the famous Irish poet Seamus Heaney, starting from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972) and ending with *North* (1975).

These collections show a key evolution and growth in his poetry, and this will be analyzed here by focusing on the related themes of land, place and roots in some of the most noted poems in these volumes. What will be traced is how the more personal and familial appreciation of the land in *Death of a Naturalist* takes on an increasingly political coloring in the subsequent collections, due to the pressures exerted by the Northern Irish 'Troubles'.

**Key words:** Seamus Heaney, past, memories, digging, childhood, land, Ireland, bog, turf



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# 1. Introduction

Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, born in 1939., has given us many collections of poetry, starting with his first collection published in 1966. He was the most popular Anglophone poet for many years. Heaney did not just write poems, he wrote numerous essays, articles, even some plays as well as done some translation work, his most famous being the prize winning translation of *Beowulf* (2000). His plays were *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (1991) and another play from 2004 named *The Burial of Thebes*.

A central theme in his work is the land that he feels so deeply about, which manifests itself in symbolism throughout his poetry. He has said that his writing starts in the “ground of memory and sensation” (O’Driscoll & Heaney, 2009, p. 88). The motif of the ground is more than just that – the literal earth is for him the past that contains the history, secrets and emotions of his homeplace.

Digging into the ground he uncovers aspects both of the world he lives in that came before him: it is a way in which he articulates his tradition. Writing and creating poetry, for him, is a process similar to literal digging and uncovering the past that takes place in archeology.

In these four collections we can chart the growth and transformation of Heaney’s poetry; from poems located in his memory of his childhood in *Death of a Naturalist* through *Wintering Out*, where he starts to speak about the ‘Troubles’ on to *North* where the bog people poems show him trying to come to terms with the consequences of the violence.



## ***2. Death of a Naturalist***

From the collection *Death of a Naturalist*, which was published by Faber & Faber in 1966, we can get a clear picture of the rural location in which Heaney grew up as this inspired many of the poems here for which he became famous. The key poems in this collection, such as 'Digging' and 'Personal Helicon', describe the poet's life at his family's home in county Derry, in the small village of Mossbawn where he grew up. These and other poems in the collection revolve around his upbringing- his early years and his family's past- and show us the strength of the bonds between him and his family, and between his family and the land they live on. We can still feel the deep connection that he has to his roots through the ways in which he writes of his and his family's connection to the earth itself. That is precisely what defines most of his early poetry.



## 2.1 'The Barn', 'Blackberry-Picking' and 'Churning Day'

The poems 'The Barn', 'Blackberry-Picking' and 'Churning Day' recall Heaney's early childhood, his life on the farm and more generally, the family traditions. Alongside these glimpses into the poet's early days, the poem "Poem (for Marie)", written for Heaney's wife, is a beautiful addition because, bringing his wife into his family now, he is creating a bridge between his new and old family, meaning the adult poet Heaney and the child Heaney merge into one.

The diversity of poems in this first collection show us different aspects of the same period of time in the poet's life. "From the opening poem of the book, 'Digging', to the closing poem, 'Personal Helicon', the poems are driven by the tensions between childhood innocence and insecurities and the adult realities and reconciliations." (O' Donoghue, 2009, p. 21)

One of the poems that stands out is 'The Barn' which is filled with the emotion of a child's fear while staying in a cold, dark place that is the barn. All the farmer's tools, the cobwebs, the large sacks that surround him scare him and the glowing eyes of the bats in the night make him avert his gaze to chase away the fear.

The poet describes the floor as chilly which immediately gives us an unpleasant feeling about this barn. There are cobwebs everywhere "clogging up your lungs", the dark is "musty" and there are no windows which makes it extremely hot in the summer "when the zinc burned like an oven."

The dark gulfed like a roof-space. I was chaff

To be pecked up when birds shot through the air-slits.

I lay face-down to shun the fear above.



The two-lugged sacks moved in like great blind rats.

We are introduced to this place during the day and slowly follow as it turns into a child's nightmare. This poem shows how large of an impact childhood fears can have that some experiences become unpleasant memories and some fears stay with you for many years before you can conquer them, perhaps never completely. In that barn, he had felt abandoned and alone. In the way that the poet is describing the barn, it is visible that he has in no way diminished his childhood fears as an adult. It is as if he is reaching out to his younger self, who has had to survive a terrifying night inside the barn and giving him comfort in knowing that it will pass, and that he will sometimes again experience those feelings of being “chaff/ To be pecked up when birds shot through the air-slits.” but that in the end he will survive.

Another poem from this collection ‘Blackberry Picking’ again talks about an event from his childhood when he picked berries in the summer, specifically in the month of August. The poem begins with a cheerful tone and then as it progresses slowly towards a more disappointed, sad tone. The poem starts with the description of berries ripening and everyone being excited to contribute in some way to picking them and the berries being so sweet “Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for/ Picking.” Moreover, when the berries are picked they produce a fungus that ruins them completely and the poem ends in a sad tone, leaving the child crying and thinking how it was unfair that the berries turned sour.

The contrast between the ripe, juicy gift of nature that are the berries in the beginning and their ultimate rottenness is a metaphor that suggests we need to recognize and pick moments in life when they are at their ripest, at their best.

This poem also shows us the key elements of this whole first collection. It is a collection of firsts for the poet: encountering life in all its different, more and less wonderful moments that all in the end tie together into a bundle of memories. He does not want to make



these moments appear more beautiful or styled, instead the poet invites you to taste and smell everything that he also could taste and smell in that moment; the raw nature of it all.

Heaney's poetry is based on memories that evoke sensations that inspire and are visibly noticeable in his writing. The poem 'Churning Day' is one of the multiple poems in this collection that give us a picture of the family life at the farm. Churning was a part of the poet's childhood where the entire family had to have a part in helping with the making of butter.

"A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast, /hardened gradually on top of the four crocks".

The use of alliteration in the opening line of the poem makes us hear the sounds and visualize what is going on in the preparations for churning day.

The whole process amazed the young onlooker and he sees it as something magical and out of this world, it seems almost as a well-choreographed dance number. Everyone in the family is helping and everyone knows their role in the performance: everything has to be done exactly right so that the finished product, the butter, would turn out perfect.

My mother took first turn, set up rhythms

that slugged and thumped for hours. Arms ached.

Hands blistered. Cheeks and clothes were spattered

with flabby milk.

His mother was dedicated to the work as were the other members, and they all labored for hours despite the pain in their hands. They worked until, finally "gold flecks /began to dance.". The young fellow now identifies the butter with pure gold. This adds the magical



dimension to the poem as well as the great appreciation and admiration for the final product that came from hard work.

Heaney, describing the entire process of making butter, manages to uncover the magic in the ordinary. This process, so mesmerizing for the young poet, gives the reader a complete new insight into butter making and what this experience meant for him, mentioning the produce inside the bowl as being “heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight”. The product was literally melted, golden sun rays.

## **2.2 ‘Digging’**

Talking about deciding that ‘Digging’ would be the first poem in the collection, Heaney said; “I knew it was a strength-giver. Where else could it be placed? It decided its position for itself.” (O’Driscoll & Heaney, 2008, p.82)

Heaney takes us back initially to him observing his father doing work in the garden. He describes this scene vividly in the following lines:

Under my window, a clean rasping sound

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:

My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Bends low, comes up twenty years away

Stooping in rhythm through potato drills

Where he was digging.



The poet is seated in the top floor of his family's house and is observing his father's work through the window. It is a moment of relief and of affirmation for the poet as he realizes what he is meant to do.

The poet recognizes the hardships that his ancestors faced, but comes to know that his task is of a different kind.

If Heaney feels admiration, pride and respect towards the work that was done by his forefathers, he sees that the work facing him might be somewhat similar work but requires a different tool: "Between my finger and my thumb/ the squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it." His pen is equally as important as the tools his ancestors used for cutting turf. Both the spade and the pen are digging tools, and in this way the literal land becomes also a source of poetic inspiration. This helps him conquer his feeling of insecurity about choosing poetry over the long-lasting family tradition of working as a turf cutter.

He connects these two acts by comparing memories to roots and Roots in nature show the origin of a plant and help structure it: roots spread and get more stable as time goes by, serving as a support and foundation. What roots are to plants, memories are to humans. Memories help determine the person we are going to be. Also, the roots inside the author's head are being reborn through how he is recreating the sensation of the land.

He has pictured himself in this scene again, looking at his father working, thinking about all the work that his ancestors have done before him and that gives him strength and motivation.

He is content that he can connect his vocation with the work of his forefathers. He also feels relieved that he can continue this work in a different way and not feel that he has entirely abandoned the family tradition.



## 2.3 'Personal Helicon'

The final poem in this collection is 'Personal Helicon'. In Greek mythology, Helicon was the mountain where the Muses lived and was believed by the Greeks to be the source of poetic inspiration. "The Aganippe well at the foot of Mount Helicon, in Boeotia, which was considered sacred to the Muses, and believed to have the power of inspiring those who drank of it." (Smith, 1869, p.70)

Here the poet has found a source of inspiration in the countryside inside a well, which, for the poet, bears the same importance as Mount Helicon had for Greeks. It lifts the well up to a level of something sacred and out of this world.

This poem, like 'Digging', looks to "pry into roots" and returns us to Heaney's ground of memory and sensation: he is digging with his pen through his roots.

In this poem there is a conversation between the adult, poet, Heaney and the childhood Heaney. The adult Heaney is looking into the well, trying to see into the past, trying to find out what has been hiding in all the child's Heaney's innocent acts. The child Heaney was, at that time, not aware what his curiosity and his constant need to explore the environment will bring to the future, adult Heaney.

There is a shift from first to third person in the second stanza, which might indicate that we all have our own Helicons, our sources of inspiration.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call

With a clean new music in it. And one

Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall

Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.



Some wells were interesting in the way they echoed and produced some sort of a new and unique sound, while in one of them there was a rat that ran over the poet's reflection. This particular scene can refer to looking into the scary unknown, the darkness and being frightened, or perhaps the rat is a warning to still be mindful.

The poet finds a way of conveying to the reader both the act and the feeling of looking inside the well and those two together produce the poetic image.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,

To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring

Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme

To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

Once again we have a link between the adult poet Heaney and the childhood Heaney: poetry is, in many respects, a child-like thing.

"I rhyme/ To see myself, to set the darkness echoing." The delivery of this last line is such a powerful ending to this poem. What the poet is saying here is the reason why he writes poetry is to illuminate the darkness. There is only hope that the poetry will somehow do something to the darkness, not necessarily providing the answers but give an insight into the past or some sort of a sign that will guide him in the future.

"'Personal Helicon' does not resolve the sense of guilt and betrayal exposed in 'Digging', but it does reframe it. Between the first and last poems Heaney turns over in his mind the lessons that he has learned about life, love and language. With each poem we observe a growing awareness of the wonderful, weary and worrisome world clearly presented in the last lines of the book: Ironically, the poet is illuminated by descending into the darkness. The lyric is the light that leads the way." (O'Donoghue, 2009, p. 2)



*Death of a Naturalist* is a collection that introduces us to the world seen, and dug into, by the poet through his childhood memories. 'Digging' stands as a beautiful introduction to this poetic landscape and 'Personal Helicon' finishes by opening up a *Door into the Dark*, the title of his next collection. As Xerri notes (2010, p.17) these "are books that allow us to glean the poet's gradual development and his growing self-awareness as a poet. Heaney admits that his childhood was a very important period in his life and a powerful influence on his poetic career."

### **3. *Door into the Dark***

The same motif of land and earth is to be found in the next collection of poems *Door into the Dark*. In this collection we can see a shift in perspective from *Death of a Naturalist*, with less of a focus on the ground of memory and more concentration on the present. There is also a shift from a personal view on the land to the land taking up a role as the bearer of a broader history. Furthermore, in this collection Heaney assumes many different characters and embodies many personas, as is visible in poems such as 'The Peninsula', 'Night Drive' and 'The Plantation'.

#### **3.1 'Whinlands' and 'Bogland'**

'Whinlands' and 'Bogland' are poems that speak of Irish nationalism and Irish history through the motif of land. The Ireland that he describes is not pretty or attractive but it is ancient, indestructible and ineradicable. The indestructible plant that is whin, and which is celebrated in 'Whinlands', is a powerful image of survival and resistance: "This stunted, dry richness/ Persists on hills, near stone ditches, /Over flintbed and battlefield."

The battlefield, covered in whin indicates not just the persistence of the plant that has survived wars, but it also suggests that the land is healing itself by letting the whin grow all



over it. Even after it has been burned by farmers who want to destroy it, it still manages to grow everywhere. Perhaps it might be a symbol of the tenacity of the Irish in the face of numerous attempts to destroy the country.

Yet incineration like that

Only takes the thorn –

The tough sticks don't burn,

Remain like bone, charred horn.

As Parker notes (1993, pg.85): “Whinlands is ablaze with identity, spikily determined to hold its ground. The ‘small yolk stain’ of each bush, which is multiplied many times over, emphasizes the fertility, resilience and lyric beauty of this particular feature of the Irish countryside.”

‘Bogland’ is the first poem in which Heaney switches perspective from ‘I’ to ‘we’, and he speaks in terms of an Irish collective. The first line of the poem “We have no prairies/ To slice a big sun at evening” mentions the site of exploration in America. But whereas people traveled through prairies that reached far beyond the horizon to establish the USA, the history of Irish people is to be found inside its peat bogs. The bog is crucial because it has stored and preserved Irish history for centuries.

He describes the bog as “kind, black butter/ Melting and opening underfoot”. The bog is so soft, and black that when you walk over it, it starts melting under your feet just like butter would. But when you cut through it, a complex history is unearthed:

“Every layer they strip/ Seems camped on before.”

In this particular line, the poet refers to the Irish people digging through layers and layers of the bog to uncover and acknowledge their history. The layers tell a tale of



colonization and other change of ownership that has been happening on the bog throughout centuries.

### **3.2 ‘Requiem for the Croppies’**

This poem is “an elegiac sonnet commemorating the Irish patriots who died at Vinegar Hill in County Wexford during the 1798 rebellion.” (Hall & Crowder, 2007, pg. 13)

The poet assumes the persona of one of these rebels who were called Croppies and voices this poem in the first person. The Croppies were just ordinary farmers; they were not warriors. They thought about new fighting tactics each day and used every little bit they had to fight.

A people hardly marching... on the hike...

We found new tactics happening each day:

We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike

And stampede cattle into infantry,

Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.

What is very important is the strength that the Croppies found in unity. They were strong because their beliefs and their togetherness made them strong, they had courage and motivation to fight. Their unity is emphasized when the poet compares their movement to a wave:

“Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon. /

The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.”

Furthermore, we can read that they fought with no fear as the opposing forces had cannons and they only had their scythes. Heaney assumes the voice of a fallen man who has



experienced the pain, lived through the battle and died and is now telling their story which is also his own.

With this line “The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.” the ground that the farmers died on was made fertile by their deaths. Their death is the root of the barley that grew from their graves. The barley is now not just a plant, but its roots have become bearers of history.

If the first line noted how “The pockets of our greatcoats [were] full of barley”, the closing lines of the poem tells of how “They buried us without shroud or coffin /And in August... the barley grew up out of our grave.” they were shamelessly buried, nameless and forgotten until the moment the barley from their pockets started growing in August. The barley evolved into a symbol of hope and regeneration. The fact that the barley grew from their pockets and rose up symbolizes the hope that never dies and also shows that the efforts of the farmers were not futile. Even though they died and were buried namelessly, their land, mother nature, which is also mother Ireland, remembers. Even though this poem belongs to the *Door into the Dark* collection, it is one of Heaney’s most political poems.

### **3.3 ‘The Peninsula’, ‘Night Drive’ and ‘The Plantation’**

In a less overtly political vein, these poems concern getting lost but not truly being lost, the search for oneself, for some sort of a meaning. In ‘Peninsula’, for instance, the poet talks about driving and just observing your surroundings:

“When you have nothing more to say, just drive/ For a day all round the peninsula. /The sky is tall as over a runway”.

It feels like he is trying to say that when you're stuck and at loss for words look for inspiration in the environment. Drive somewhere far, and more importantly, somewhere



where you can get lost, somewhere where there are no signs telling you where you ended up in “The land without marks so you will not arrive”, so you will constantly be on the move and never static, never settling down.

“But” he urges “pass through, though always skirting landfall.”: do not halt for too long in these unknown places and do not forget your way home.

“And” ultimately “you’re in the dark again”.

So when the darkness finds you, the still unknown darkness just like in ‘Personal Helicon’, do not be afraid of it. Without darkness there would be no light, so without getting lost you would not be able to find the right way.

And drive back home, still with nothing to say

Except that now you will uncode all landscapes

By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,

Water and ground in their extremity.

In this poem that is written in third person, it still seems like the poet is talking to himself as well as the reader. He is giving advice on what to do when you lose your inspiration and your motivation. He tells himself and the reader that it is okay to be lost and that in order to regain your inspiration you have to lose yourself some more while still knowing where you came from.

This is revisited again in ‘Night Drive’ that talks about driving through France.

The smells of ordinariness

Were new on the night drive through France

Rain and hay and woods on the air



Made warm draughts in the open car.

Through his car window he can smell the “ordinariness” which is the smell of rain and hay and he says that it is something new. Exactly that which we would think is ordinary, the smell of rain and hay is here emphasized as something extraordinary and new in the unfamiliar environment.

The emphasis on the “ordinariness” throughout this poem culminates in the last stanza when the poet says “Your ordinariness was renewed there.” This is referring to his wife, and just as the ordinary smells were new in the different place, his everyday life with his wife is similarly renewed. It is not the difference of France that has captured his imagination and produced awe, but being there has once again renewed his wonder at the magic to be found in the ordinary. As Xerri (2010, p.32) notes:

“In this poem the speaker once again finds himself vesting common things with an aura of novelty, and all this is of course made possible by the presence of darkness. However, it is not just those things that the poet sees on his night drive that appear transformed in his eyes, but even the memory of his very wife feels recreated in his mind, as we see in the last stanza of the poem.”

In ‘The Plantation’ the journey takes the form of walking in a straight line but somehow simultaneously walking in a circle and being stuck inside of a loop.

And having found them once

You were sure to find them again.

Someone had always been there

Though always you were alone.



This is definitely Heaney breaking through the limits of space and time and playing with human perception. You have felt the presence of someone else around you when it was just another version of you going around in circles. What Heaney is showing here is how there are multiple version of oneself. In this poem, there is a sense of being in one place but at the same time being on the move because you are going around in circles but you are always finding yourself on the same path.

You had to come back

To learn how to lose yourself,

To be pilot and stray – witch,

Hansel and Gretel in one.

Once more, in the final stanza, he is reminding us of being lost to be able to find yourself again. We are introduced to the image of Hansel and Gretel, which were also lost in the woods themselves. Mentioning the “pilot” and “stray- witch” he is saying that the control you have over going somewhere is just an illusion. It is good to have both the characters inside of you so that you can get lost but knowing that you are getting lost and letting it happen and then the “pilot” side of you could bring you back home.

*Door into the Dark* can be viewed as a collection in which Heaney took a step forward from *Death of a Naturalist* while also not completely leaving it behind. There are poems in it that revolve around his childhood, but while the poet is still trying to connect to his roots he is moving on from that and is going through that door into the unknown. In my opinion, that is why there is multiple poems about being lost and trying to find yourself because the poet is in that same position. Moreover, he has created many different personas which is just different versions of oneself that we sometimes project into the world to be able to find our true selves.



#### **4. *Wintering Out***

Heaney started writing the poems in *Wintering Out* (1972) while he lived in California, teaching at Berkeley, and there are, as Randall (2011, p. 184) notes, “signs of that loosening, the California spirit, a more relaxed movement to the verse.” At the same time, this was also the period in which the ‘Troubles’ were breaking out in Northern Ireland. Heaney therefore found himself in the middle of anti-Vietnam war protests in the US while hearing of violent events back home. His friend, Thomas Flanagan, who brought him out to Berkeley, also influenced him to look more into himself, trace his roots and write about home. As a result,

“*Wintering Out* manifests Heaney’s sense of loss in a political situation that made him feel the full burden of a poet’s responsibility. Hence *Wintering Out* is more of a collection of questions and dilemmas than a collection of answers, in which guise the poet-diviner presented each of his first two books.” (Xerri, 2010, p. 40)

Northern Ireland had been founded in 1921, as the Protestant community in that region refused to be a part of the newly-established Irish Free State. They feared it would be a Catholic-dominated state. Northern Ireland became a Protestant-dominated statelet, in which Catholics were denied basic rights, such as full voting rights in local elections and in terms of the provision of public housing. In reaction to these injustices, a group of younger, university-educated, people formed various civil rights movement in the mid- to late-1960s. These were regularly attacked by both Protestant paramilitary organizations and the forces of the state, most notoriously when British paratroopers shot and killed fourteen innocent people in Derry in January 1972, an event which became known as ‘Bloody Sunday’, and which killed off the Civil Rights movement. This led to the IRA and other paramilitary groups taking over and the



‘Troubles’ descended into decades-long deadly spiral of reciprocal killings. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement brought this stage of the war to a halt.

Heaney could not ignore what was happening and the ‘Troubles’ intrude in different ways in this collection. Here, for instance, his childhood places such as ‘Anahorish’, ‘Toome’ and ‘Broagh’ take on a subtler political coloration.

#### **4.1 ‘Anahorish’**

Firstly, the poem “Anahorish” represents something so special and important in Heaney’s memories.

This poem, as well as ‘Toome’ and ‘Broagh’ are language based poems, and this is seen to strengthen the poet’s connection with his own roots. There is something special in repeating the names of these places; it creates a sense of belonging to a certain group of people, even though their religious beliefs, Catholic or Protestant, create a divide between them. Even though the poet is trying to reference a time before the Protestant colonizers arrived to Ireland, he does not seem to have anything against them being there because, after all, they do all belong to Ireland. The role of a language as a part of one’s identity is very significant, and the shared experience and sound of pronouncing ‘Anahorish’ unites them as people.

As with ‘Digging’, this poem takes us back to the poet’s childhood. In the very first line of the poem he refers to the hill in Anahorish as:

“My ‘place of clear water’, / the first hill in the world”.

Looking through the eyes of a child, the hill in Anahorish seemed to the poet as to be the first hill in the world because it is the first hill he had ever seen. This is followed by



“where springs washed into/ the shiny grass” which shows us an image of a beautiful landscape, and is a use of onomatopoeia that helps us delve into the atmosphere of this place.

Furthermore, saying “my” when describing the place shows us the emotional connection with it, that is still strong even though the poet is miles away from it.

“Anahorish, soft gradient /of consonant, vowel-meadow” draws attention to the word itself; it makes you want to repeat it because it is such a phonetically appealing word. The “consonant, vowel-meadow” is a wonderful poetic image: Heaney has masterfully made a connection between nature and language. The word rolls off of our tongues effortlessly, even though at first glance it does not look like it would be so. This word sounds as soft as a meadow it names looks. Crucially, saying its name conjures it into being and gives one a hold on to the place.

In a very similar manner, the other poems ‘Toome’ and ‘Broagh’ also link the sound of the places they name with notions of belonging there. What these and ‘The Backward Look’ do is give us a history lesson via the names and pronunciation of these places.

#### **4.2 ‘The Tollund Man’**

The most famous poem in this collection is ‘The Tollund Man’. Heaney learnt of this man, who was discovered in the 1950s in a peat bog on the Jutland peninsula in Denmark, which had preserved his body for centuries,

“...when he read in 1969 *The Bog People* by P. V. Glob, a study of what seem to be ritual killings in Iron Age Jutland. Glob’s book was illustrated by dramatic photographs of the victims of the killings, whose bodies had been preserved in the bog water. The first Heaney poem to reflect on these images was ‘The Tollund Man’ in *Wintering Out*, in which he imagines visiting Aarhus where the bodies are kept.” (O’Donoghue, 2009, p. 110)



In this poem, we can notice again the prevalent theme, coming all the way from 'Digging', of the poet being a historian and digging through the bog and finding information about his ancestors, his homeland, his tradition and generally the past.

Firstly, he describes the state in which he found the Tollund man in; "his peat-brown head, / The mild pods of his eye-lids, / His pointed skin cap." Then we learn something of how he ended up in the bog:

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...

The land is a goddess who has worked to keep him preserved through all these years. The man was probably chosen to a sacrifice to this goddess of the earth. This renders him, Heaney says, something of a saint.

Moreover, there is a big internal conflict happen in the poet's mind:

I could risk blasphemy,

Consecrate the cauldron bog

Our holy ground and pray

Him to make germinate

He wants to do something for this poor man and he wants to pray for him, so that the earth listens and turns the Tollund man's death into a death that caused the fruitfulness of the bog.



However, there is a clash as the poet does not want to commit blasphemy and pray to a different pagan god to save this man's soul as the poet belongs to a different religion.

It is similar to the barley in 'Requiem for the Croppies', where the land was made fruitful through deaths of many individuals. Moreover, it is just like in the 'Bog Queen', the earth and bog play the role of the protectors of the bodies buried inside of them. The natural processes inside the bog are working to preserve the bodies and the final step of that is regeneration which manifests itself in the fruitfulness of the land.

The Tollund man may not have been sacrificed and buried on Irish soil, but to Heaney he is a universal symbol of suffering and also just a victim of circumstances. He was sacrificed because the village people believed that the goddess required a sacrifice for the fertility of the land. Many of the people who were dying in the 'Troubles' were also common folk, villagers, farmers, workers and they were victims of the circumstances just like the Tollund man was in his time.

In the third, and last, part of the poem, the poet imagines himself following the same path that Tollund man walked on many centuries ago and he sympathizes with him as he observes "Watching the pointing hands /Of country people, /Not knowing their tongue."

Despite not understanding their language, he finds familiarity in this whole killing ritual,

Out here in Jutland

In the old man-killing parishes

I will feel lost,

Unhappy and at home.

The poet tells us that this land is also a land where there was a lot of bloodshed in the past just like in his homeland. This feeling of being at home described in the last line is



definitely not a positive one. The poet is deeply saddened and disappointed that these feelings remind him of home. Home is now a more problematic location compared to his recollections of the place of his childhood in the earlier collections.

The Tollund man is the first of the ‘bog people’ poems that are also to be found in his next collection named *North* where they are again used as symbols that allude to Irish experience.

## 5. *North*

*North* was published in 1975. and marks a continuation, in many respects, of *Wintering Out*. But if Heaney did not address the events of the Irish Troubles directly in that collection, in *North* he writes much more openly about these issues. In Xerri’s words (2010, p. 40):

“*North* builds upon the ideas, techniques and imagery of the previous three books and thus it should be considered as an apex in the early stages of Heaney’s career. It consolidates the various preoccupations that were not fully pursued in his first three collections and it is also the first work by Heaney in which a unifying vision is created. In *North*, Heaney tries to understand the complex nature of Northern Ireland’s conflict and to a large extent he comes to share Auden’s belief in the ineffectuality of poetry in the political arena. The accomplishments of *North* allow us to peer into the future of a poet, who lived through the conflict, expressed something strong and cogent about it, but then moved on.”

As this suggests, *North* seems like a combination of the first three collections; it includes everything from some of his fond childhood memories, the bog body poems that reflect his attitude towards the current political situation and the mythological and historical stories that remind us of the importance of learning lessons from the past. A lot of the poems in this collection deal with the past but this time it is not the poet’s past; it is the past of a people.



## 5.2 'Bog Queen', 'Grauballe man' and 'Strange Fruit'

My reading of this collection will focus entirely on the group of bog body poems in this collection which are 'Bog Queen', 'Grauballe Man', 'Strange Fruit' and 'Punishment'.

Unlike 'The Tollund Man', 'Bog Queen' was written in first person. The queen describes how she now lays inside the bog, her corpse slowly rotting away while she is patiently waiting for someone to uncover her so she can tell her tragic story to the world.

through my fabrics and skins

the seeps of winter

digested me,

the illiterate roots

pondered and died

in the cavings

of stomach and socket.

She is also much like the Tollund man a victim who was killed and buried in the bog. It seems as if the bog is a resting place for unfortunate souls like the queen. But if the bog is a seems to function as a symbol of a sanctuary, the queen tells us how she was violated during her life and now while she rests, she does not rest in peace; she is still being violated, devoured by the bog, and "was barbered / and stripped / by a turfcutter's spade". She is like a spirit that cannot rest until it has found resolution.

Furthermore, the queens "diadem grew carious" while the "gemstones dropped/ in the peat floe/like the bearings of history." Her crown started to fall apart and the gemstones were



slowly dropping into the ground meaning she is also letting herself become one with the earth so she can survive longer and be prepared for her ultimate salvation that is coming.

She was unexpectedly discovered and was “barbered /and stripped /by a turfcutter's spade”. There is a definite display of anger in these lines, as if she was not to be disturbed by the “wrong hands” of a turfcutter that also damaged her already almost completely rotten, physical body. Luckily she was put back into the ground and then finally in the last stanza she rose up from the bog.

She was buried in the bog and has become part of it, the bog became a sort of a womb and now she is finally being reborn again “The plait of my hair/ a slimy birth-cord/ of bog”, her hair being the umbilical cord that has provided her with the necessary nutrients for her to survive that long until her rebirth.

and I rose from the dark,

hacked bone, skull-ware,

frayed stitches, tufts,

small gleams on the bank.

In the last stanza, the queen has finally been dug out, released from the bog and finally saved.

The queen is the personification of mother earth as well, perhaps, as mother Ireland. She was put down to rest by others, and she was spending her days quietly suffering inside the bog waiting while “dawn suns groped over my head /and cooled at my feet”. The bog was keeping her body safe, the best natural way it could, until she was reborn.



‘Grauballe Man’, is a poem about another bog body, but it is more focused on the way the corpse of the Grauballe man has been mutilated and damaged. It is a poem that is meant to make the reader feel uncomfortable with the description of the corpse, as it goes into more detail with every line.

Like many before him, the Grauballe man has found his resting place inside the bog where he almost fits perfectly in: “As if he had been poured/ in tar”.

The poem describes his arms and legs, his hips and his head, comparing body parts to roots, plants and even eggs. He also mentions that the man’s throat had been slashed.

Who will say 'corpse'

to his vivid cast?

Who will say 'body'

to his opaque repose?

The poem is asking a very important questions; Who will be the person to judge this poor man? Is there anyone who will not be touched by this poor man’s death? How can you look at the state of the Grauballe man and not feel remorse and sympathy?

Moreover, it is a question of terminology. How could anyone refer to the man as being simply a body or simply a corpse when he is more than just those words. This man is more than just what they have defined him; he shares a mutual past with many others like him and it is important to understand that when observing the Grauballe man lying in his peat bog one must understand how cruel and gruesome the way he died was.

The Grauballe man “lies.... / hung in the scales /with beauty and atrocity”, and can now be found displayed in a museum, serving as a warning in his combined beauty and atrocity.



Unlike the bog queen, the Grauballe man is lying in the bog where he found his resting place. It is a contrast between the tragedy of the ending of his life to the serenity and peace of the afterlife. He is not there to return, but he “lies/ on a pillow of turf /and seems to weep/ the black river of himself.”

He has gradually merged with the bog; he has become one with it. And the Grauballe man is sad, he weeps a black river, his tears have become dirt. Not only is the man crying over his tragic fate, but the crying also reflects and emphasizes the poet’s feelings towards this man, especially right after “he first saw his twisted face/in a photograph” and the man looked “bruised like a forceps baby”. The poet feels sad about the brutal ending of this man’s life and just like with Tollund man, he feels connected and somehow obliged to tell share his story with the readers.

The next poem, specifically a sonnet, ‘Strange Fruit’ takes a look at yet another bog body, this time a young female. This sonnet was inspired by a girl’s head that was exhumed from a bog in Denmark in the 1940s. ‘Strange Fruit’ is also the name of a famous song sung by Billie Holliday about racist lynchings in the southern states of the US.

The poem begins by describing the “Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible /Beheaded girl”. Her “head like an exhumed gourd. / Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth.”

There is a certain beauty and innocence that is radiating from this girl.

In the last stanza, the poet seems to be going in the same direction as with all the bog bodies; he wants to lift them up to a level of a saint but this girl has a different message for him. She does not accept any sort of worship for her, she wants to be left as she is. Just like she once defied the axe she is now defying any sort of “beatification”.

Throughout these bog poems, there is definitely a feeling of the poet being a historian and uncovering the secrets and the histories that lie inside the bog. The bodies talk about the



land as much as the land talks about the bodies. It is a strong relationship and precisely through discovering this bond between the bodies and the earth, he uncovers the history of a people, of the Irish collective. In the first collection, and throughout the part of the second, the poet has dug through the roots but those were the roots in his memory and now in the third and fourth collection, especially with the bog body poems, he has managed to merge the literal and metaphorical digging into one. His pen is a shovel.

## **6. Conclusion**

This analysis has traced the evolution of Heaney's work in his first decade as a published writer. His poetry is greatly influenced by his childhood and early upbringing which is visible from the poems in all the four analyzed collections. In the last two collections, *Wintering Out* and *North*, his poems get a new, subtle political dimension which evolved from his strong personal connection to his homeland.

These four collections give us an insight, firstly into the private aspect of the poet, and then finally adding a public dimension to his poetry when he decided to speak up about the ongoing horrors of the 'Troubles' in his homeland. All of the poems tie into the concept of finding inspiration in the ground of memory and sensation. He has realized that all the memories that he has of his home are exactly the means needed to inspire his creativity and are what has determined his path as a writer.



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