

# The Bog Body as the Hieroglyph: Seamus Heaney's "Bog Poems"

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## 1

Irish poet Seamus Heaney fills his poems with lush descriptions of Irish scenery, labourers, and historical remnants drawn from the earth itself. These remnants, including the corpses of the deceased, are presented as hieroglyphs, or, something ambiguous and difficult to understand by just observing superficial objects. Hieroglyphs are the key concept in Heaney's poems. In the poem "Peninsula," from his first anthology, *Death of a Naturalist*, the narrator talks of "uncoding" the scenery (14). The narrator drives to the peninsula during the day, and as he drives home in the evening he considers what he has seen and tries to "decode" a deeper meaning. Heaney clearly feels that even seemingly innocuous objects possess a hidden code that can reveal significance far greater than may lie visible on the surface.

In "Kinship," Heaney describes the historical past through the hieroglyphs recorded in the earth. Indeed, he directly describes the peat bog as "hieroglyphic" (1). What is implied in "Kinship" is that the meaning of hieroglyphs is left open to the ample imagination of the poet who is faced with them.

For centuries, humans have viewed nature as the physical manifestation of a higher being. In the eighteenth century, for example, some critics considered nature as a completed work of God. Romantic poets such as Wordsworth are famous for their descriptions of the mystical qualities of natural scenery. On the other hand, Heaney views nature as relatively

negative and controversial.

Heaney does not perceive nature, human labour and historical remains as the will of God, memoranda of a happy, or innocent childhood. On the contrary, Heaney views nature as the visible record of a long history of violence and suffering. In the face of nature, Heaney sees the memory of suffering and hatred for the British, and the religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants that have wracked Ireland since the 1960s.

Heaney uses the expression "hieroglyphic" to discuss the Irish bog which includes historical past. This image is consistent through Heaney's career. Helen Vendler writes that in Heaney's ninth anthology, he attempts to find "a symbolic hieroglyph for life itself" (143). Unlike phonographs and ideographs, hieroglyphs must be deciphered with imagination. Scenery and remains dug out of the earth have little significance when observed by those who are insensitive to their deeper meaning, but to the poet such things become emblematic of the history of humanity itself.

In his fourth anthology, *North*, the hieroglyphs were "bog bodies," which mean bodies dug out of peat bog in Denmark and Germany. These bodies were popularized by the archaeologist P. V. Glob, who conducted extensive research on their history and significance. The "bog people," victims of murder, were symbolic hieroglyphs for Heaney. For him, bog bodies symbolized the violence that has been prevalent since the Iron Age. Furthermore, he sees in bog bodies other serious problems, such as the cruel mob psychology that seeks out scapegoats in order to keep the peace, as well as the tendency to romanticize those who die in battle.

Here is another reason why for Heaney bog bodies are hieroglyphs. Hieroglyphs are created from the appearance of things. Hieroglyphs allow objects to retain their physical form, while simultaneously elevating them into abstract symbols. Similarly, Heaney's bog poems, based on close observation of the bog bodies, are endowed with symbolic meanings that go beyond their superficial features. To Heaney, the bog body itself becomes a hieroglyph, and the concrete descriptions of the bodies are transformed

into abstract symbols.

Hieroglyphs are closely associated with metaphors, a tool frequently employed by Heaney. Most of his poems, in fact, contain a great many metaphors that connect abstract images with concrete objects. Metaphors give tangible objects more complex meanings while allowing them to retain their physical significance. In other words, metaphors can be viewed as a kind of hieroglyphs.

Heaney's decision to use metaphors to reveal the meanings of objects he has "uncoded" is significant. He emphasizes the importance of the "figure" as well as the "hieroglyph." In "Government of the Tongue," Heaney says that his works should be a kind of "figure" (107). In this context, the word "figure" comes from the episode in the gospel when an adulteress is placed before Jesus, and Jesus says nothing, instead writing "figures" in the sand (John 8. 6). According to Heaney, these figures are a valuable image that the poet should pursue. He writes that "the drawing of those characters is like poetry, a break with the usual life but not an absconding from it" (108).

In short, the metaphors in Heaney's poems are like figures drawn in the sand. They are not direct messages, but rather a form of hieroglyphs. Heaney's poems are not straightforward arguments, such as those made by a journalist. On the contrary, Heaney asks the reader to contemplate complicated issues. Readers are asked to decipher their deeper meaning by using their imaginations.

The following essay will explore two bog poems that rely heavily on metaphors to reveal a deeper meaning. Both "Punishment" and "Grauballe Man" are included in Heaney's anthology *North*, and both poems utilize a variety of metaphors. In fact, of all bog poems, these poems are what uses various metaphors most frequently. This essay will consider how Heaney uses metaphors to make hieroglyphs. Through hieroglyphs, he asks the reader to look beyond the superficial exterior into what may lie symbolically behind them.

## 2

“Punishment” tells the story of the “Windeby Girl,” a young woman whose body was dug out of a bog in Germany. Glob suggests that the girl was executed because she committed adultery. (153) This poem is based on Glob’s assumption. In this poem, the narrator refers to both the ancient German society, when Windeby Girl was living, and Northern Ireland in twentieth century, when the narrator lives. In the 1970s, when this poem was written, Northern Ireland saw a serious conflict between Catholics and Protestants. As there were many bloodsheds, British government decided to dispatch the British Army. Some of the Catholics, who were discouraged by the impotence of police, welcomed this decision. Under such situation, some Irish women went out with British soldiers. Provisional IRA members punished those women, shaving their hair and gibbeting them. This “punishment” occurred in October 1971. Heaney refers to this case in the latter half of this poem. Irish women are considered as similar to Windeby Girl, for the narrator described them as her “sisters” (38).

In “Punishment,” Heaney uses a number of metaphors, comparing the girl’s nipples, ribs, nape, and other body parts to a variety of natural and artificial objects. Above all, Heaney employs the metaphor of the scapegoat. The narrator stands before the naked girl, calling her “my poor scapegoat” (28). Her body is likened to a scapegoat thrown into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the community.

Although this poem has attracted many discussions, critics disagree about the meaning of “scapegoat” in the poem. Some critics, such as Ciaran Carson and Helen Vender hardly refer to this term. Neil Corcoran pointed out several allusions to the Bible in this poem, and “scapegoat” is one of them (73). However he never mentions what kind of sin she carries as a scapegoat. Michael Parker pays attention to the expression “scapegoat” and indicates that the girl may be described with the image of Jesus (138). However, he does not make clear what kind of sin the girl carries. It is

possible that Parker wants to say that the sin she carries is the original sin. However, it is still ambiguous why the execution of an adulteress is identified with the execution of Jesus Christ, who was crucified to atone human being's original sin. In this way, critics disagree about this "scapegoat" image.

This image, throughout the poem as a whole, plays an important part. Various images generated by many metaphors are united in this core image of scapegoat. The main theme of this poem is closely associated with the image of scapegoat. First, the narrator demonstrates that the execution of the girl is similar to the eviction of the scapegoat. The narrator then goes on to associate the girl with Irish women who were punished because they took British soldiers for lovers. By drawing a comparison between the girl found in the bog and Irish women, Heaney demonstrates that Irish women have been punished as scapegoats. Behind the metaphor of the scapegoat lies the society which must depend on the uncivilized rite of evicting scapegoat.

The narrator compares parts of the girl's body with a wide variety of objects:

It [the wind] blows her nipples  
to amber beads,  
it shakes the frail rigging  
of her ribs.

she was a barked sapling  
that is dug up  
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head  
like a stubble of black corn,  
her blindfold a soiled bandage,  
her noose a ring

to store  
the memories of love. (5-22)

While these metaphors initially appear to be strange, meaningless comparisons intended to catch the reader's eye, close analysis reveals that they have a deeper meaning closely associated with the core image of the scapegoat. For example, the girl's nipples are "amber beads" (6), her rib "frail rigging" (7), her naked body "barked sapling" (14), her bones "oak" (14), her skull "brain-firkin" (16), her shaved head "stubble of black corn" (18), and her noose a "ring" (20). Those familiar with Heaney's work may recognize the use of "amber" (6) as a metaphor from another famous bog poem found in *North*, "Kinship." The girl's nipples have the color of amber because of the bog water. However, the narrator does not use this word only because of the color that it brings to mind. Amber is often found with small insects trapped inside, and it is possible that one may interpret amber as a medium that carries ancient objects through to the modern age.

The phrase "brain-firkin" (16) has a similar effect as the use of the word "amber," for the firkin is an object used to carry liquid. In addition to these images of carrier, Oak is well-known as a material for making ships, and "barked sapling" (14) and "stubble" (18) bring to mind wood that can be used to construct ships. In addition, the phrase "frail rigging" (7) is clearly intended to compare the body of the girl, and her ribs in particular, with that of a ship. Ships, carrying objects from one port to another, offer an image similar to that of the scapegoat evicted in order to carry the sins of the community out of the society.

Another crucial metaphor found in "The Punishment" is that of the "ring." (20) The ring represents a circle dividing space clearly into inside and outside. In this manner, the circle can hold something exclusively inside. The content held by the ring is directly expressed through the phrase "memories of love" (22). This phrase functions on two levels: the individual level and the societal level. "Memories" refer both to the girl's recollections of sexual intercourse, and to the memory of love experienced by the members of the community.

Further explanation of the memory held by the community members is

required because “love,” in this case, refers not to the love experienced between legally wed couples, but the immoral love of adulterers. In other words, “memories of love” (22) may refer to memories of potential adultery, the sexual desire one feels for someone other than his or her legal spouse. This is yet another expression closely associated with the image of the scapegoat. Such immoral sexual desires for others can result in consciousness of sin. The scapegoat carries the sin of immoral sexual desire out of the society.

The ring itself is also important to take note of, because the ring stands as a metaphor for the noose. As a metonymy, the noose represents execution as punishment. It is meaningful that the girl’s death itself involves the formation of “a ring / to store / the memories of love” (20–22). On the individual level, the ring implies that with her death, the memory of adultery has been contained inside her dead body. On a societal level, it implies that through her death, the community’s sins have been erased.

In addition to metaphors, Heaney also utilizes allusions to reinforce the image of the scapegoat. In the second half of the poem, he writes: “I almost love you / but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence” (29–31). In this quotation is a second allusion to the gospel, referring to the point when Jesus says that anyone who has never sinned should be the first to stone the adulteress. Nobody, of course, can claim such purity, and so nobody throws the first rock (John 8. 1–11). It may seem that this allusion is not so unnatural, for Windeby Girl was punished for adultery, and stoning was a popular execution for adulterers in those days. However, this allusion is unnatural because the Windeby Girl’s body bears no visible injuries to indicate the manner of her demise. This allusion can imply that Heaney describes that the Windeby Girl’s executioners and the other members of the community were most likely sinners themselves, and therefore should not have taken it upon themselves to condemn another.

With consideration of strict sexual morals and the scapegoat’s role, such potential sin can be understood without much difficulty. Tacitus writes of his admiration for the Germans’ strict sexual codes in comparison to the loose morality espoused by the Romans. The following quotation shows that marriage in ancient Germany was looked upon as a strict contract. The bond of marriage was strong, and remarriage was rare; indeed, wives frequently

killed themselves upon the death of their husbands. In such an environment, it is natural for adultery to be severely punished. Tacitus describes the execution that one who has committed adultery in ancient German society must face:

Among a people so numerous, there are extremely few instances of adultery, the punishment for which is prompt and in the husbands's power: in the presence of their relatives the husband expels his wife from the home, stripped and with her hair cut short, and drives her with a lash through the entire village. For prostituted purity there is no forgiveness: not by beauty, not by youth, not by wealth can such a woman find a husband. For no one there is amused at vice, nor calls the corruption of others and oneself "modern life." In fact, those communities do better still, in which only virgins wed and the hopes and prayers of a wife are done with once for all. They receive one husband just as one body and one life, so that there may be no thoughts beyond him, no desire that survives him, so that they may love not their husbands, so to speak, but the state of marriage itself. To limit the number of children or kill any offspring born after the first is considered an outrage, and good morals there are stronger than good laws are elsewhere. (85)

At first sight, this strict execution appears to be a justifiable punishment suitable for criminals, having little to do with the notion of a scapegoat. However, this case involves both punishment and the eviction of a scapegoat. The sin scapegoat carries is not a clear one; it is not apparent but potential in the form of repressed desire for adultery. According to the gospel, the desire to commit adultery is just as sinful as the event itself (Matt. 5. 28).

A hysterical punishment such as that endorsed by Tacitus may be difficult to view as just. It is only natural to assume that executions contain a deeper meaning. Renè Girard, the author of the definitive work on the scapegoat, writes of four stereotypes of persecution which can create situations that produce scapegoats. The first stereotype is that scapegoats can be created in times of crises such as plagues, famine, or the invasion of taboos that make the social differences between individuals disappear (12-13). "Invading



taboos” includes the perpetration of sexual crimes such as rape and incest. People “identify” its source at random, and collective violence occurs against him. This is the second stereotype of scapegoat (15).

Girard argues that the invasion of such taboos is contagious, creating a chain reaction of similar crimes. It is important to consider why such mimetic desire occurs in other members of the society. Someone who possesses no hidden desire to invade a given taboo would have no interest in doing so in response to the transgressions of another. On the contrary, in order for such mimetic desire to occur, the desire to invade a taboo must have always existed in a repressed form in the individual’s unconscious. The forbidden is unquestionably alluring, and the desire to invade the taboo infects a society, jumping like a virus from individual to individual. A single criminal can become a menace to the social order, which explains why a scapegoat may be considered the source of all evil in a society. If the scapegoat allows himself to engage in criminal behavior, the chain reaction of imitative crimes may result in complete social disorder.

In “Mycaenae Lookout,” included in *The Spirit Level*, Heaney describes this desire for imitation. In this poem, he writes of people who witness a rape: “No such thing / as innocent / bystanding” (1-3). He goes on to express their hidden desires, saying,

a result  
and shock desire  
in bystanders  
to do it to her  
there and then” (45-49).

Bystanders, Heaney believes, cannot be innocent. On the contrary, they are themselves potential criminals with “shock desire” (46).

The situation described in “Punishment” is superficially different from that in “Mycaenae Lookout” because the crime in “Mycaenae Lookout” is not adultery, but rape, and the people are not executors, but rather criminals. However, the two poems both describe a crowd looking down on a woman whose sexual intercourse has been revealed.

In "Punishment," not so clear as in "Mycenae Lookout," the narrator implies the potential crime of adultery by including such phrase as "memories of love" (22) and Christian morals of sin and forgiveness. Adulterous behavior such as that described in "Punishment" is frequently repressed. However, repressed sexual desire can appear on a conscious level at the moment that the crime is revealed. The task of the community is to prevent the crime from becoming a chain reaction and completely destroying society. The adultery described in "Punishment" has the power to endanger society as a whole. In the modern age, society has laws in place to prevent chain reactions of criminal behavior. However, there were no means by which to prevent such an effect during the time that the poem describes. We must remember Tacitus's argument that "good morals there are stronger than good laws are elsewhere." (85) In order to prevent the awakening of forbidden desires, one must transfer them away from negative outlets. The girl in "Punishment" fulfills this mechanism by taking on the role of the scapegoat, carrying the potentially adulterous behavior of the other community members away from the society.

According to Christian morality, potential adultery is just as detrimental as adultery that has actually been committed. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that adultery has been committed if one's wife expresses sexual desire for another man (Matt. 5. 28). Therefore, the phrase "memories of love" serves as an indictment against an individual's adultery. By killing the girl, such potential adultery, or, awaken desire for adultery, disappears; they will be repressed again. The sin of desire is driven away from the community along with the girl.

The situation in Northern Ireland in 1971 was highly similar to the environment in ancient Germany described in "Punishment." Northern Ireland was an ideal climate in which to breed scapegoats in an effort to prevent repressed desire from breaking free. Since the late 1960s, Northern Ireland has witnessed serious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. Ed Moloney describes the situation as follows:

With the Troubles now nearly a decade old, law and order had broken down in many nationalist districts and established value systems had been upturn-

ned. Crime, vandalism, and joyriding were endemic, and there was a demand for a policing system. Rather than see the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] back in their areas, the IRA began to dispense its own system of rough justice and to mete out punishment shootings, beatings, and expulsions. (153)

The legal system in Ireland ceased to function, and provisional IRA soldiers became police officers, judges, and executors, keeping the “peace” by means of lynchings. This situation is similar to that found in ancient Germany in that both places were lawless, punishing criminals using harsh and primitive mechanisms.

In this situation, the “punishment” occurred, which the latter part of this poem describes. Irish women who were punished for going out with British soldiers are described as “your [Windeby girl’s] betraying sisters, / cauled in tar, / wept by the railings,” (38-40).

In “Before the Taliban, There Was the IRA,” Jim Cusak describes the situation in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s:

Between 1970 and 1972, according to local accounts and contemporaneous newspaper reports, some 14 women in Catholic west and north Belfast were kidnapped and beaten by IRA units whose specific task was to ensure that fraternizing with British soldiers stopped. A number of young women who went out with off-duty soldiers were “tared and feathered” [- - -] had their hair shaved off, were doused in black paint and covered in feathers from a pillow. They were then tied to lampposts with placards hung around their necks proclaiming them as ‘soldier lovers’ for public humiliation. Most of these young women had to leave the areas they lived in and never return.

Their “crimes” were not crimes in the legal sense. The background is anti-British feeling in Catholics. Philip Jacobson’s article “Victims of McGuinness’s Derry Brigade Killers” described the case this poem deals with. This article clearly shows that Catholics’ anti-British feelings were strong:

The anti-British atmosphere in Londonderry was so intense that when

Rifleman Joseph Hill of the Royal Green Jackets was shot and killed during rioting in the Bogside area in October 1971, IRA supporters clapped and cheered as his body was taken away. A month later, three young Catholic women were tarred and feathered before jeering crowds in the space of a few days. Their "crime" was going out with British soldiers.

Public humiliation serves as an effective punishment only when the majority of the community members recognize that the individual being punished has done something wrong. It is understandable that these strong anti-British sentiments made going out with British soldiers serious taboo.

The relationship between Catholic women and British soldiers became infectious. Irish people were confronted with a situation filled with tension and repression, facing the continual danger of terrorist attacks. Personal conduct was held in check by a political ideology reliant on nationalistic and religious ideals. In this tense, anxious environment people tended to repress their personal desires, their freedom restricted by the invisible ropes of nationalism and Catholicism. Certainly people wished to be free from these bindings, but nationalism and Catholicism were not so easily discarded, creating a situation of extreme repression.

In this repressive environment, if sexual intercourse between British soldiers and Irish Catholic women became public knowledge and one of the strongest Catholic taboos was invaded, repressed desires would be freed. What people can do to prevent this from happening is collective violence on the criminal. Through the creation of a scapegoat, people could once again repress their evil desires.

Punishments in ancient German society and lynchings in Northern Ireland are, therefore, essentially the same. What drove people to hysterical executions was not a desire for justice, but rather a need to repress their own evil desires. If people did not themselves possess these hidden desires, the methods of execution would not be so brutal.

Criminals should be held responsible for their crimes, but they should not be accountable for the repressed desires of other members of society. However, these criminals found their punishments increasing in severity because they were taking on the sins of the community. Criminals became

scapegoats, absorbing punishments strong enough to absolve the community of its evil desires.

The narrator reveals the psychological mechanisms of repression and sacrifice that lay behind the punishments. He can do this by observing closely the girl's body. He confesses that "I am the artful voyeur" (32). What this "artful voyeur" (32) first sees is the girl's body, but he does not see mere flesh and bone. When the narrator describes the girl, he does not simply list her superficial characteristics. Close analysis of the metaphors embedded in the description of the girl reveal her role as a medium, carrying the potential adultery of the community members out of the society. In fact, the longer the narrator looks upon the girl, the more clearly he sees the repressed psychological desires of the community.

In "Punishment," the narrator makes clear the problems of society, which must depend on violent rituals of evicting scapegoats to keep order. He further points out that such rituals of eviction have been practiced since the Iron Age. Through a wide range of metaphors, Heaney supports his argument that behind the execution, the scapegoat mechanism functions to carry the sins of the community away from the society as a whole.

### 3

Another of Heaney's bog poems, "Grauballe Man," describes the corpse of a body dug out of a peat bog in 1952. According to P. V. Glob, the Grauballe Man was executed as a sacrifice to the earth goddess Nertus (163). Heaney spends a large part of the poem describing the Grauballe Man using a variety of metaphors. In the end, Heaney compares him to the Hellenistic sculpture of the "Dying Gaul" (43). In the last stanza, he describes victims of Northern Ireland conflict.

The key to understanding "Grauballe Man" lies in the metaphors that Heaney uses to describe the bog body. The Grauballe Man is compared with a variety of things, including plants, animals, armour, sculpture, and a foetus. Indeed, nearly three quarters of the poem is spent describing the Grauballe Man using metaphors.

Critics do not agree on how to interpret these metaphors. For example, Neil Corcoran writes that comparing the Grauballe Man with animals and plants makes him a symbolic icon of beauty and artistry (71). On the other hand, Michael Parker writes that the metaphors used in this poem prevent a movement of transcendence (136). According to Parker, the usage of natural metaphors is intended to emphasize the close relationship between the Grauballe Man and nature. Helen Vendler offers yet another opinion of the meaning behind this controversial poem. Vendler aligns herself with Corcoran, writing that the metaphors used to describe the Grauballe Man indicate that he is philosophical and artistic (45). However, she goes on to confess that she may not fully understand this poem. Because of Heaney's incomparable descriptive abilities, his poem, Vendler believes, has "infinite nuance" (45).

The lack of agreement on how best to interpret "Grauballe Man" is important because the interpretation of the metaphor has been closely associated with the relationship between victims in Northern Ireland and the Grauballe Man. Corcoran contrasts the artistic and beautiful Grauballe Man with the miserable Northern Ireland victims. On the other hand, Parker believes that the Grauballe Man, simultaneously artistic and painful, is essentially the same as the victims in Northern Ireland. Vendler hesitates to state her position definitively, but appears to agree with Corcoran's assessment of the poem.

In this part, I try to interpret this controversial problem of the meaning of this poem's metaphors. My supposition is that metaphors in these poems do not, as Vendler indicated, have infinite nuance. It is not expansive with infinite nuance, but may have the core image, and the poem's various metaphors are based on it. In this sense, my supposition is a trial to give an answer to this complicated problem. Besides, this approach can be meaningful, for critics in general do not pay enough attention to various metaphors. By analyzing various metaphors closely, I believe, we can find the core image on which various metaphors are based.

I will begin my interpretation by analyzing the various metaphors found in “Grauballe Man” in order to reveal the image that each metaphor is based on. The poem begins by describing how he “lies” (2) on the turf of Denmark:

As if he had been poured  
in tar, he lies  
on a pillow of turf  
and seems to weep

the black river of himself.  
(1-5)

The narrator next begins to describe body parts of the Grauballe Man with many uses of metaphors;

The grain of his wrists  
is like bog oak,  
the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg.  
His instep has shrunk  
cold as a swan’s foot  
or a wet swamp root. (6-12)

This lengthy part lasts until the very end of this poem, where the narrator sings that the Grauballe Man’s hips are “the ridge / and purse of a mussel” (13-14), his spine is “an eel” (15), his chin is “a visor” (18), his wound in the throat is “the vent” (20) under the visor. His slashed throat is further described as “The cured wound / opens inwards to a dark / elderberry place.” (22-24) His hair is “rusted” (29), and similar to “a foetus’s” (31). He was “bruised like a forceps baby” (36) in the process of digging. The image that these metaphors all cohere around is not immediately apparent, so it is easy to see why critics cannot agree on Heaney’s meaning.

Michael Parker points out that all of these metaphors serve to integrate the Grauballe Man into the natural world (136). Parker writes that this results in the transcendence generated by the Grauballe Man's artistic beauty. According to Parker, these metaphors counteract the positive imagery found in words such as "cured" (22), "elderberry" (24), and "foetus" (31). In this manner, Parker finds contrast, conflict, and tension in the series of metaphors, locating the dual vectors of aestheticism and realism.

Parker's point of view effectively accounts for the common characteristics between the Grauballe Man and the victims in Northern Ireland. As he notes, "the savage fate suffered by the Grauballe man compels him towards a heavier conclusion. No-one in the North can or should escape the burden 'of each hooded victim / slashed and dumped,' and the evidence of his eyes" (136). Parker believes that the Grauballe Man is far more than merely a beautiful, artistic being.

On the other hand, Neil Corcoran, referring to pictures of the Grauballe Man being dug out of the peat bog, focuses on the image of the "foetus" (31). According to Corcoran, the image of giving birth transforms the Grauballe Man into a symbolic icon. Heaney succeeds in including the human victim in the form and order of poetry (71). Corcoran holds that the description of the Grauballe Man represents his artistry, and does not, like Parker, perceive conflict and tension in the poem. He writes that the vector towards aestheticizing the Grauballe Man is overturned by the miserable imagery of the "slashed and dumped" victims in Northern Ireland (48). Corcoran holds that the poem at last "falls from artistic repose into realistic image" (71).

Vendler does not offer a clear interpretation of the metaphors used by Heaney in "Grauballe Man." She praises Heaney's metaphors, writing that they show "artistic and philosophical meditation" (44), and that the victims who are "slashed and dumped" (48) are "affronting" (45) this meditation. Vendler's attitude is similar to Corcoran's, but she also confesses that her reading is "undigested" because of the poem's incomparable descriptions (45).

Critics hold that a thorough interpretation of the various metaphors found in "Grauballe Man" is critical to an understanding of this poem, but



they clearly disagree on the effect of the metaphors. In order to resolve this complex problem, I will begin by grouping these metaphors into three categories: natural objects, artificial devices, and other items. The majority of the metaphors fall under the heading of natural objects: “bog oak” (7), “basalt egg” (9), “swan’s foot” (11), “wet swamp root” (12), “mussel” (14), “eel” (15), and “elderberry place” (24). Artificial devices include “visor” (18), “vent” (19), and “rusted hair” (29). Other items used as metaphors include the “foetus” (31) and the “black river” (5). This wide variety of metaphors is the key to understanding Heaney’s poem.

First, let us examine the natural objects. Corcoran indicates that the birth imagery is critical. Corcoran discussed on the basis of pictures in *Glob’s Bog People*, but there is a clue in the poem; the Grauballe Man is described as a “foetus” (31). It is important that the Grauballe Man is described as a “foetus” (31), a son of Mother Earth. The earth grows plants, and nurtures the animals that feed on them. Oaks and basalts are borne out of the earth. Basalts are generated when magma solidifies on the earth’s surface. The bog can be compared with the sea or a lake, as it holds water. Mussels, swans, and eels are also metaphorical sons of Mother Earth. From these points, it is clear that the Grauballe Man is depicted as if it were son of the mother earth through these metaphors of natural livings. Metaphors of natural livings can emphasize the characteristics of the Grauballe Man’s being earth’s son.

The argument that the Grauballe Man is the son of Mother Earth and is therefore closely connected to nature is, however, weakened by a close analysis of the second category: artificial devices. The metaphors included in this category allude to the Grauballe Man’s artificiality.

In addition to the contradiction between nature and artificiality, a second problem remains: merely pointing out the Grauballe Man’s close relationship with nature is not sufficient. What meaning does this close relationship have in the context of the poem as a whole? The key to solve this problem lies in an interpretation of the word “foetus” (31).

Grauballe Man is described not just as a baby, but as a “forceps baby” (36), an infant driven forcibly out of his mother’s womb. This birth by means of forceps is symbolical. “Forceps baby” (36) is symbol of unification of art and nature; In other words, it is the symbol of unification of artificial

being and natural being. Birth itself is a natural process, but in some cases when the birth is not proceeding as expected, alternative means may be used to ensure that the baby does not die before it is born. Birth by means of forceps therefore symbolizes the union between artifice and nature, between the artificial being and the natural being.

Based on this image of a “forceps baby,” Vendler’s notion of “infinite nuance” becomes more understandable. Vendler writes that the Grauballe Man is “almost vegetative, almost bronze” (44), but this contrastive image shows the unification of art and nature, symbolized by forceps baby. On the one hand, the Grauballe Man is closely related to nature; on the other hand, he is intimately tied to artificial processes. This may seem to create a sense of ambivalence and tension, but in fact the metaphors gather around the core image of the “forceps baby” (36), symbolizing the unity between nature and artifice.

Next, we will examine how the unification of artifice and nature symbolized by the forceps baby develops in the latter part of the poem. The unification is going to be completed as an image which includes Grauballe Man and victims in Northern Ireland. The poem ends with a metaphor of scales that indicates that the Grauballe Man and the victims in Northern Ireland are equal:

But now he lies  
 Perfected in my memory,  
 Down to the red horn  
 Of his nails,

Hung in the scales  
 With beauty and atrocity:  
 With the Dying Gaul  
 Too strictly compassed

On his shield,  
 With the actual weight  
 Of each hooded victim,

Slashed and dumped. (37-48)

In the preceding stanza, the narrator says that "I first saw his twisted face / in a photograph" (32-33), but in this stanza the narrator says that "now he lies / perfected in my memory" (37-38). At first, the narrator views the Grauballe Man as just one of the many bog bodies described in *Bog People*. Now, however, the Grauballe Man has taken on a symbolic meaning, and is closely related to the victims in Northern Ireland. The narrator creates an image of a scale, with beauty weighed against atrocity.

The metaphor of the scale is significant when considering the characteristics of the Grauballe Man. In order to reveal the meaning of the scale, it is important to find the essential similarity between the Grauballe Man and the victims in Northern Ireland. First, however, it is necessary to consider the comparison that Heaney draws between the Grauballe Man and the "Dying Gaul" (43).

The metaphor of the "Dying Gaul" (43) further develops the idea of the unification of artifice and nature, revealing the unique characteristics of human beings. The "Dying Gaul" is a Hellenistic sculpture that realistically depicts the pain and suffering experienced by a dying man. In this context, "artifice" does not refer merely to artificial objects, but to fine art. This metaphor reveals the human tendency to look for the beauty in an object or event, to represent this beauty in artistic form, and to extract beauty from the artistic representation of the object or event.

This process of artistic representation reveals the close relationship between art and nature found in "Grauballe Man." The pain and suffering that one feels prior to death reveals the presence of nature. On the other hand, the ability to find beauty in a depiction of suffering is a quality unique to human beings. Of course, the Grauballe Man is not a piece of artwork, but a man. However, his suffering has a kind of artistic beauty that transcends the pain of a single individual. Here, the phrase "the scales / with beauty and atrocity" (41-42) becomes important. Unity of art and nature is, at the same time, unity of beauty and atrocity. Pain and suffering, the result of nature, are associated with atrocity, and the reaction to physical beauty is associated with art. The unity of art and nature found in the first half of the poem develops in the latter part into the unity of beauty and

atrocities.

The unity of art and nature as well as beauty and atrocity that is characteristic of "Grauballe Man" is also found in the "slashed and dumped" victims in Northern Ireland. Although these victims do not have the Grauballe Man's beauty, they have a different kind of appeal. To prove this, it is essential to first consider what type of victims the poem is referring to. Paramilitary groups such as the IRA have instigated terrorist acts throughout Northern Ireland, resulting in a great many civilian and soldier casualties. It is impossible to determine which casualties the poem refers to, but it is likely that Heaney is writing about the soldiers who sacrificed themselves for the good of their country. In "Feeling Into Words," Heaney points out that dying for God is an "archetypal pattern" (57), and that sacrifice to the earth goddess is more than just a savage ritual, rendering these individuals political martyrs. Therefore, it is not strange that the victims in "Grauballe Man" are associated with martyrdom, with the aestheticism of sacrificing oneself for the public welfare. Traditionally, such heroic actions have been connected with beauty, as shown by the Latin phrase "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*"

The victims in Heaney's poem fought and died for their country. For this reason, these victims exemplify the unity between art and nature. Humans are animals, but have developed artistic abilities that tie them to the civilized world. Such works of "art" include nationalism, one of the primary forces driving the political conflict in Northern Ireland. The unity of art and nature therefore develops into the unity of beauty and atrocity. Slashing and dumping soldiers is clearly an atrocious act, but also an act that reveals the traditional beauty of sacrificing oneself for the good of the country.

This work does not try to criticize such martyr, like Wilfred Owen's and Sassoon's. The unity of art and nature completes itself in the metaphor of the scale with beauty and atrocity. Furthermore, the image of the scale is closely related to aestheticism and mythology. Pain and terror are instinctive reactions, and in that sense they are natural reactions. Feeling beauty towards them, whether in the form of artwork or discourse, is the result of art. What, then, does Heaney consider to be of primary importance? In this poem, he reveals that he views both art and nature as equal, balancing each other out on the metaphorical scale.

Human beings will never be able to discard the natural elements of life. The atrocity of war is symbolically represented by the fact that political victims cannot die humane deaths. The victims in Northern Ireland are “slashed and dumped” (48), and the Grauballe Man is described as neither a living human nor a dead human: “Who will say ‘corpse’ / to his vivid cast? / Who will say ‘body’ / to his opaque repose?” (28). The Grauballe Man is dehumanized, deprived of the dignity of the living and the peace of the dead. Too much of an emphasis on beauty may result in the ignorance of atrocity, but human beings cannot totally discard the value in art. Sacrificing oneself for nationalistic purposes cannot be completely denied. Too much beautification must, needless to say, be avoided. It is true, however, that many complicated political and religious problems have yet to be solved. One should never declare that those who have sacrificed themselves for the common good have died for nothing. To some extent, these deaths have a positive impact, and are in their own way rendered “beautiful.”

The metaphor of the scale demonstrates that art and nature are equal, and that one cannot completely discard either. Additionally, the metaphor of the “dark elderberry place” (24) implies that the unity between art and nature, beauty and atrocity, will continue to exist forever. The slashed throat of the Grauballe Man appears to be “cured” (22), but it opens into this “dark elderberry place” (24). The word “cure” most likely refers to the hardening of a leather-like material, rendering it tough and durable. Although we should not dismiss the positive connotations of the word “cure,” as it may also refer to ridding one of a disease, the usage of the word “dark” ironically rebuts this positive imagery.

The elderberry also contains a great deal of symbolic meaning. The elder can symbolize both death and rebirth, as there is the legend that Christ was crucified on a cross made of elder (Gifford 132). The elderberry tree may therefore appear to imply something positive, but in this case the image is ironically negative: what is reborn is not Christ, but a tragic legacy of violence. Furthermore, “berry” implies that an object that brings forth seeds and replicates. Since the Iron Age, such sacrifices have been taking place, and they will keep on taking place for all eternity.

All of the metaphors in “Grauballe Man” center on the core image of the unity of art and nature. The developed form of this image is the unity of

beauty and atrocity. This image includes not only the Grauballe Man, but also the victims in Northern Ireland. This structure gives the poem coherence, and leaves the reader contemplating the serious themes of art and nature.

## 4

Metaphors play a significant role in both "Punishment" and "Grauballe Man." Although the metaphors in these poems may seem inconsistent, close analysis of the metaphors as hieroglyphs reveal how Heaney "uncodes" bog bodies. In both "Punishment" and "The Grauballe Man," the narrator does not show the clear conclusion. In "Punishment," the narrator can not do anything while he understands mob psychology which creates scapegoats. In "Grauballe Man," the narrator recognizes the aesthetic of martyrdom and the cruelty of war, but cannot do anything to prevent such atrocities. If one tries to find Heaney's political argument or justification for the IRA in these poems, it is impossible and useless. Instead, one must again consider the episode in the Gospel of John that Heaney finds so significant. Heaney did not wish to produce a clear political message, but instead strove to make his readers think about these issues for themselves. Both poems have "open" endings because they ask the reader to develop a personal interpretation of the hieroglyphs contained within them, considering the essential problems such as mob psychology and beautification of dying for the country.

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## SYNOPSIS

The Bog Body as the Hieroglyph:  
 Seamus Heaney's "Bog Poems"  
 Shigeru Ozawa

Irish poet Seamus Heaney fills his poems with lush descriptions of Irish scenery, labourers, and historical remnants drawn from the earth itself. These remnants, including the corpses of the deceased, are presented as symbolical hieroglyphs, waiting to be analyzed by the poem's narrator. Heaney clearly feels that even seemingly innocuous objects possess a hidden code that can reveal significance far greater than may lie visible on the surface.

In his fourth anthology, *North*, the hieroglyphs were "bog bodies," which mean bodies dug out of peat bog in Denmark and Germany. These bodies were popularized by the archaeologist P. V. Glob, who conducted extensive research on their history and significance. For him, bog bodies symbolized the violence that has been prevalent since the Iron Age.

Hieroglyphs are closely associated with metaphors, a tool frequently employed by Heaney. Most of his poems, in fact, contain a great many metaphors that connect abstract images with concrete objects. Metaphors give tangible objects more complex meanings while allowing them to retain their physical significance. In other words, metaphors can be viewed as a kind of hieroglyphs.

This essay deals with two bog poems that rely heavily on metaphors to reveal a deeper meaning. Both "Punishment" and "Grauballe Man" are included in Heaney's anthology *North*, and both poems utilize a variety of metaphors.

"Punishment" tells the story of the "Windeby Girl," a young woman whose body was dug out of a bog in Germany. This poem is based on Glob's assumption that she was executed because she committed adultery. In this poem, the narrator refers to both the ancient German society, when



Windeby Girl was living, and Northern Ireland in 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the narrator lives.

In "Punishment," through the use of metaphors, the narrator makes clear the problems of society, which must depend on violent rituals of evicting scapegoats to keep order. He further points out that such rituals of eviction have been practiced since the Iron Age. Through a wide range of metaphors, Heaney supports his argument that behind the execution, the scapegoat mechanism functions to carry the sins of the community away from the society as a whole.

Another of Heaney's bog poems, "Grauballe Man," describes the corpse of a body dug out of a peat bog in 1952. All of the metaphors in "Grauballe Man" center on the core image of the unity of art and nature. The developed form of this image is the unity of beauty and atrocity. This image includes not only the Grauballe Man, but also the victims in Northern Ireland. This structure gives the poem coherence, and leaves the reader contemplating the serious themes of art and nature.

Metaphors play a significant role in both "Punishment" and "Grauballe Man." Although the metaphors in these poems may seem inconsistent, close analysis of the metaphors as hieroglyphs reveal how Heaney "un-codes" bog bodies. In both "Punishment" and "The Grauballe Man," the narrator does not show the clear conclusion. Both poems have "open" endings because they ask the reader to develop a personal interpretation of the hieroglyphs contained within them, considering the essential problems of humanity.