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Analysis of The Tollund Man The Tollund Man, by contemporary Irish poet Seamus Heaney is written in response to the communal violence in Ulster. The poem bridges the modern-day murders in Northern Ireland with the ritual killing of Tollund Man in Jutland, highlighting the violent conflicts in a timeless context. Comparisons and analogies are employed through the poem, and the sacrifice of Tollund Man becomes Heaney’s representative or symbol of Irishmen who died in the Irish Troubles (Kakutani 6). The tone of the poem is altered from section to section, and this allows reader to gain an insight into poet’s internal struggles and shifting emotion. To further appreciate the poem, it is necessary to understand the context of the poem and relevant...show more content...Heaney conveys a pilgrimage at the beginning of the first stanza: “Some day I will go to Aarhus” (line 1). A determined tone is revealed in the line, yet the future tense creates remoteness and distance from time the poem speaks of. As the poem continues, readers are able to know that the speaker goes to a worship “to see [Tollund Man’s] peat brown head”, “ The mild pods of his eye-lids”, and “his pointed skin cap”(lines 2-4). A thorough description of the Tollund Man was presented by speaker’s impersonal voice, and he seemed detached from the experience of the Tollund Man. This tone, however, slightly alters in the fourth stanza. As the “Bridegroom to the goddess”, the Tollund Man is vulnerable and powerless when he faces greater power: “ [goddess] tightened her torc on him.” The voice becomes pitiful even indicates the sadness of the speaker. The second part of the poem dramatically shifts the previous tone as Heaney personifies the bog to Ireland and reflects the death of four Catholic brothers. The stillness of the tone suddenly shifts to agitation: “I could risk blasphemy, /Consecrate the cauldron bog” (lines 21-22). The speaker believes that violence associated with religion. The Tollund Man will not die if people don’t believe in Nerthus, and beliefs in religion directly cause the sacrifice of people. In a similar way, religion also causes conflicts. IntroductionThe Tollund Man lived during the late 5th century BC and/or early 4th century BC, during the period characterised in Scandinavia as the Pre-Roman Iron Age. He was buried in a peat bog on the Jutland Peninsula in Denmark. Such a find is known as a bog body. He is remarkable for the fact that his body was so well preserved that he seemed to have died only recently. On 6 May, 1950, the Højgård brothers from the small village of Tollund were cutting peat for their tile stove and kitchen range in the Bjældskovdal peat bog, 10 km west of Silkeborg, Denmark. As the two brothers worked, they suddenly saw in the peat layer a face so fresh that they could only suppose that they had stumbled on a recent murder. They immediately notified the police at Silkeborg.The Tollund Man lay 50 metres away from firm ground, his body arranged in a foetal position, and had been buried under about two metres of peat. He wore a pointed skin cap on his head fastened securely under his chin by a hide thong. There was a smooth hide belt around his waist. Otherwise, he was naked. His hair was cropped so short as to be almost entirely hidden by his cap. He was almost clean-shaven, but there was very short stubble on his chin and upper lip, suggesting that he had not shaved on the day of his death. There was a rope made of two leather thongs twisted together under a small lump of peat beside his head. It was drawn tight around his neck and throat and then coiled like a snake over his shoulder and down his back.Underneath the body was a thin layer of moss. Scientists know that this moss was formed in Danish peat bogs in the early Iron Age, therefore, the body was suspected to have been placed in the bog approximately 2,000 years ago during the early Iron Age. Subsequent C14 radiocarbon dating of Tollund Man’s hair indicated that he died in approximately 350 BC. The acid in the peat, along with the lack of oxygen underneath the surface, had preserved the soft tissues of his body.Examinations and X-rays showed that the man’s head was undamaged, and his heart, lungs and liver were well preserved. He was not an old man, though he must have been over 20 years old because his wisdom teeth had grown in. The Silkeborg Museum estimates his age as 40 and height at 161 cm, comparatively short-statured even for his time. It is likely, however, that the body has shrunk in the bog.He was probably hanged using the rope around his neck. The noose left clear marks on the skin under his chin and at the side of his neck but there was no mark at the back of the neck where the knot was found. Due to skeletal decomposition, it is impossible to tell if the neck had been broken.The stomach and intestines were examined and tests carried out on their contents. The scientists discovered that the man’s last meal had been a kind of soup made from vegetables and seeds, some cultivated seeds and some wild: barley, linseed, ‘gold of pleasure’, knotweed, bristleglass, and camomile.There were no traces of meat in the man’s digestive system, and from the stage of digestion it was obvious that the man had lived for 12 to 24 hours after this last meal. In other words, he had not eaten for a day before his death. Although similar vegetable soups were not unusual for people of this time, two interesting things were noted:1. The soup contained many different kinds of wild and cultivated seeds. Because these seeds were not readily available, it is likely that some of them were gathered deliberately for a special occasion. 2. The soup was made from seeds only available near the spring where he was found. At first, Tollund Man was believed to be a rich man who had been ritually sacrificed, but recent analysis suggests that he may simply have been a criminal who was hanged and buried in the peat bog.The body is currently kept in the Silkeborg Museum in Denmark.ITollund Man’ is the best example of Heaney’s approach in his poetry. It was perhaps his first attempt at conflating (blending) his sense of Glob’s Jutland rituals with his own sense of mythic and modern Irish history. Heaney had read Glob’s book The Bog People’. The ‘Tollund Man’ is one of the recovered bodies featured by Glob in his book. He was a victim sacrificed to Nerthus, in the hope of securing a good crop from the land, and it is in this sense that the speaker describes him, ‘Bridegroom to the goddess’. The speaker imagines the killing of the Tollund Man and his subsequent burial in the bog as a kind of violent love-making between victim and goddess, in which Nerthus, ‘opened her fen’, preserves the victim’s body by immersing it in her sexual ‘dark juices’. When the Tollund Man is dug up, many centuries later, the turf cutters discover His last gruel of winter seeds Caked in his stomach.As a sacrificial victim to the goddess of germination, he carries the potential of germination (‘gruel of winter seeds’) within himself rather than in the pockets of the young fighters in ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ whose graves sprouted with the barley from seeds in their pockets when they fell.In the second section of the poem the connection between Jutland and Ireland is made explicit. Both places have had their innocent .victims. Ireland also has killings that have a certain ritualistic dimension to them. In the last stanza the speaker recalls an incident in which bodies of four young Catholics, murdered by Protestant militants, were dragged along a railway line in an act of mutilation: ‘Tell-tale skin and teeth Flecking the sleepers Of four young brothers, trailed For miles along the lines.’The speaker imagines that, if he addresses a prayer to the Tollund Man (‘risking blasphemy’ as a Christian by aligning himself with pagan rituals), then perhaps the potential for germination and regeneration inherent in the Tollund Man’s sacrifice, and in his very body (‘winter seeds’) might be released, not in the victim’s native Jutland, but in contemporary Ireland. It might ‘make germinate/The scattered, ambushed/ Flesh’ of the sacrificial victims.In the final section of the poem, the speaker imagines a visit to the Museum in Aarhus where the Tollund Man has been in display. Though the names of the regions he passes through (Tollund, Grabaulle, Nebelgard’) will be alien to him, and the local language unintelligible, he fancies that, as an Irishman burdened with the weight of his country’s history, he will feel a kinship with a landscape that has witnessed similar conflict and killings.The poem shows that the sacrificial death of the Tollund man is associated with ritual and this seems to be reflected in the dead body’s restful pose, which is a contrast to the terrible maiming and unrest of the victims in contemporary Irish society. The Tollund man’s body has been preserved and is aligned with a saint (saint’s kept body).The body is constantly associated with the Earth (‘peat-brown head’, ‘mild pods’) and fertility (‘His last gruel of winter seeds’). The earth is represented as female and sexual. ‘And opened her fen,/Those dark juices working’) and it is this that has preserved and elevated him to a saint.He is seen as a bridegroom to the bride-goddess Earth, a sacrifice that will bring some good, some alleviation of pain (though of course he has been violently killed), unlike the death of the four young brothers who are killed shamefully, which resulted in only more turmoil and bloodshed.The last lines reveal the state of mind of the speaker. The terrible paradox of both feeling lost and unhappy while ‘at home’, show the correspondences between Neolithic Jutland and modern Ireland as well as acknowledging the terror and loss that is an everyday occurrence in his world, though there is still resignation but rather a desire for peace that underlies the final lines and the whole poem.Heaney does not venerate the Tollund Man as king or martyr, but as victim. His vowed journey to Aarhus in Jutland recalls the Catholic custom, of pilgrimage to a saint’s shrine, sometimes featuring the miraculously preserved body of the saint. Heaney’s ‘saint’ has had a brief period of glory, but has been violently killed ‘for the land’. To the poet, he stands for the Irish people killed for their allegiance to Ireland, a suggestion which is symbolically rendered as the embrace of the earth-goddess. The gold ‘tore’ (collar), worn by Celtic royalty, is likened to the arms of the goddess encircling the bridegroom’s neck, but the metaphor reminds us that this embrace is a strangulation, the noose of the victim bridegroom. CRITICAL APPRECIATIONHeaney has read about the bog people of Jutland in Glob’s Book “The Bog People”. It describes the archaeological discoveries in Jutland in the Denmark. The researchers found “preserved bodies of men and women in the bogs of Jutland naked, strangled or with their throats cut disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times. Heaney sees a similarity between the bog men and those Irish men who have been killed during the civil war. He develops a myth out of this situation and says that the mother has always demanded sacrifices from the people as the bog men were sacrificed to the goddess of the land similarly the Irish men are being sacrificed for their motherland. It is in this spirit that Heaney wishes to go to the bog land to personally see what happened in the early Iron Age, or perhaps Stone Age, and what is happening now in Ireland. Therefore he says that he wants to go to Aarhus—a place where the head of one of the bog men, called, Tollund man, is kept in a museum. The researchers have found that the Tollund man at the time of sacrifice was fully fed and seeds of grain are found in his stomach. It is with reference to this fact that he has described his eye lids as pods, which are ready to sprout. The Tollund man had only a skull cap on his head, otherwise he was naked. Besides the cap the only two things on his body were a noose and a girdle, or a belt around the waist.Heaney calls him the bridegroom to the goddess. This refers to the myth that the goddess of the land wanted the sacrifice of a male so that she could conceive with him. Thus he is the bridegroom of the goddess who must become pregnant so that the earth may become fertile and the crops may flourish in the next season. The goddess tightened the noose around his neck and the bridegroom was sucked by the fen or the bog. The sacrificed man thus becomes the fertilizer of the land. The dark juices symbolise the transference of the sacrificed man to the earth. To Heaney, in this way, he becomes a martyr whose death is the life of others and whose blood is the fertility of the land. Heaney then compares these martyred bodies to the beehives, the cells of which are full of honey and that face still exists in the museum of Aarhus.In the second section, Heaney feels that he has committed blasphemy by calling a Pagan a martyr and the bog as cauldron made holy by the sacrifice. He believes that from this cauldron a new life may emerge. This is the creativity of the martyr. T.S. Eliot explained the process of creativity to the chemical action that takes place in the chemist’s crucible. When the ingredients are proportionately mixed, they are re-created in a new form. Similarly martyr’s blood also germinates or recreates life.He, then, compares these sacrificed bog men to the labourers of Ireland whose dead bodies were found in the fields. These labourers were in their working dress. They had their stockings on. Heaney means to say that these people were not fighters. They were ordinary labourers and were killed mercilessly in the civil war in Ireland. So many innocent people who had nothing to do with this war were killed.Heaney also recalls the stories of men who were dragged from miles along the railway track. They had been thoroughly skinned and their dead bodies were bare to the teeth because of this dragging. Heaney recalls, perhaps alluding to the scenes of condemned people carried in tumbrels to the guillotine during the French Revolution as described by Dickens in ‘A Tale of Two Cities’.Heaney recalls these people name by name Tollund, Grabaulle, Nebelgard. These are the names of the bog men. Yeats also gave the names of the Irish men in Easter 1916. This is meant to show the close association of the poet with those who were killed in this war. They were his fellow countrymen. Though the bog men belonged to a different land and spoke a different language, yet there is a archaetypal kinship between them (Archaetypal is a term coined by Jung, a psychologist, to describe the thoughts and feelings common to all humanity at all places and in all times belonging to all races and nations).Heaney says that in Jutland he will feel at home because the bog of the Jutland is no different from the bog of the modern Ireland. He will be very sorry for the loss of so many lives but the idea that the tragedy is universal is a consolation to him. This is what he calls ‘the Redress of Poetry’. He will feel unhappy and at home simultaneously.Heaney claims to be a pure poet. He believes that poetry should have no function beyond poetry. He believes in poetry for the sake of poetry. He condemns the heckler who wants to use the poetry for politics. Heaney feels that politics is not the function of poetry. But, ironically, he cannot detach himself from the world in which he is living. He sees men falling around him. He feels guilty that he is only writing poetry. He wants to find a role for himself in that strife. He elaborates upon it in his essay “the Redress of Poetry”. This poem, as we can see, is a political poem. But Heaney joins the tragedy of Ireland with the tragedy of pre-historic bog man. He creates a myth of misery. In this way he turns a political tragedy into an aesthetic tragedy. This is how he combines politics in poetry.Perhaps it consoles him but does it console the hundreds and thousands who are everyday massacred in Ireland?

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