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2021

# **Seamus Heaney and Sinéad Morrissey: Why History?**

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## Seamus Heaney and Sinéad Morrissey: Why History?

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Peter Finucane

Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney felt a great need to comment on the violent conflicts of his day, especially those that hit closest to home. In his case, it was the divisive and sectarian Troubles of late 20th century Northern Ireland that Heaney covered extensively in his verses, particularly in his 1975 collection *North*. However, like any conscientious poet, Heaney treads carefully, and covers his commentary with history, in this case, the story of the peat-preserved, once persecuted Iron Age mummies in the “Bog Poems.” Not only does Heaney discuss this history, at points he nearly speaks from the perspective of this historical figure, adding a new depth to his guised commentary. Like Heaney, lauded contemporary Northern Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey also utilizes this deep embodiment of a figure in history to a more personal degree. However, being a post-Troubles poet, Morrissey may not have felt an obligation to cover those issues. Yet, her poems still dive deeply into history. She does not use history to protect her political commentary, but rather uses the commentary itself to illuminate troubles women have faced throughout history and until this day. This illumination is particularly notable in the poems “Flight” and “Vanity Fair.” Together, each of these poets demonstrate how the embodiment of history can be used to comment on pressing issues in subtle yet heavy handed ways. Seamus Heaney, through his “Bog Poems,” uses intimate, but still distant voices from history to mask commentary on The Troubles; a topic which is close to him, yet which he is still apart from. Being a post-Troubles poet, Sinéad Morrissey does not have to cover such a contentious issue, so she is able to distance herself from Irish clamor. However, the ongoing issue of gender inequality leads her to embody history in order to comment on the larger impact of this matter.

It is clear that, due to a variety of forces, Seamus Heaney felt obligated to cover The Troubles in his work, no matter from where he wrote. Although Heaney was not necessarily in the heart of Belfast or Londonderry for the thick of The Troubles, he was still acutely aware from afar that he needed to respond to the brutal violence through his poetry. Simultaneously, there was also something of a revolution on the ground at UC Berkeley, where he taught for much of his time abroad, which included intense student protests regarding the Vietnam War and the US Government. Heaney was no critic of these protests, nor was he ignorant of them, but despite this unrest on his doorstep, Heaney leaned toward his homeland. As he explained during his time in California, “[w]hile Berkeley shouts, Belfast burns” (O’Shea 181). But not only did he feel a personal affinity towards Ireland, Heaney also knew that his being Irish left others with certain expectations about him. These expectations were that, because he was born and raised in “the site where the ancient struggle between colonial subject and an oppressive England was being played out again,” he should discuss The Troubles in his poetry (O’Shea 174). This outside pressure certainly had an impact on his decision. As a result of, both his personal volition and the societal expectations drew Heaney to cover The Troubles. But he had to tread carefully.

Heaney’s obligation to cover The Troubles brought him into a contentious sphere, and therefore he had to take caution with the way he wrote. He said during his time at Berkeley that “I couldn’t imagine a poetry reading in Belfast directed simply and solely against The Troubles...we knew that we were all implicated” (O’Shea 174). Heaney and his family were no stranger to these dangerous implications his work could have, and “even received phone threats when they returned to Ireland” (O’Shea 183). And so, with this in mind, Heaney made the decision to use history as the great guise over his Troubles work. Heaney’s acute awareness of

the risks in Troubles commentary is most apparent than in the “Bog Poems” from his 1975 collection *North*.

“Punishment” is the perfect example of Heaney’s embrace of history as a careful guise. Although the poem does not technically speak in first person from the female mummy’s perspective, in many instances it very nearly does, as the first-person speaker knows impossibly personal details about the victim. He immediately opens the poem, “I can feel the tug/of the halter at the nape/of her neck, the wind/on her naked front” (Punishment 1-4). Although one can imagine physical sensations felt by someone else, this one feels improbably intimate, as if the speaker is part of the mummy herself. Even more intimately, the speaker dives not just into physical feelings, but into the corpse’s emotions: “her shaved head...to store/the memories of love” (Punishment 17, 21-2). There is no way that a third-party onlooker could possibly know the emotions and memories this ancient corpse held when alive. Yet, the speaker still knows some of them with certainty, which demonstrates just how deeply and intimately Heaney is heading back into history. Because he is able to go so far back into history, Heaney’s modern-day identity is removed from contention. To really make his Troubles commentary as subtle as possible, Heaney must, in some places, become someone else.

Seamus Heaney’s choice in “Punishment” to partly embody the voice of a female figure from history is intentional. He is clearly aware of the significance a woman’s voice holds in this context. His choice to speak from the perspective of a female mummy gives voice to a group that has often been suppressed throughout history. The female figure’s suppression and ultimate death in “Punishment” is described by Heaney as the result of a supposed crime: “[I]ittle adulteress,/before they punished you” (Punishment 23-4). She was a female, and because of this, no doubt faced a much harsher punishment than a male might have in that era. Because she was so unjustly killed, Heaney dives back into history and uses the mummy’s voice to make her existence heard all the more louder in the modern day. Had he not chosen to use this centuries-buried (both literally and figuratively) voice, and instead pulled from the modern day, the commentary would not be so poignantly subtle, a subtlety required for Heaney’s physical safety.

Heaney also chose a historic female figure for another reason: to utilize the tradition of characterizing Ireland as female. It is no coincidence that Edward O’Shea’s aforementioned description of Ireland during the Troubles, “the site where the ancient struggle between colonial subject and an oppressive England” (O’Shea 174), sounds eerily similar to how Heaney ends “Punishment”: “...yet understand the exact/and tribal, intimate revenge” (Punishment 43-4). The landscape of Ireland, which is traditionally characterized as female, was being ravaged by what could be called “tribal, intimate revenge”, not dissimilar to the “ancient struggle” in which the woman in “Punishment” was killed. In giving a historic example of violence against women in the past, Heaney alludes to persecution and extrajudicial violence in modern Ireland. Had he announced brazenly in a poem that Ireland was being ravaged by violent men, who were senselessly killing based on ancient grudges, his statements would have been much more inflammatory. However, through subtle historical symbols, Heaney evades overtness and makes a stance on a dangerously controversial issue.

Although Seamus Heaney does embody the female figure at times, feeling “the wind on her naked front,” there are disconnects: the fact that he cannot truly go back to her, and also by the fact that he is male (Punishment 3-4). In some parts of his bog poems, Heaney is just a bystander, unable to physically address the horrors that confronted the woman. Heaney describes, “I am the artful voyeur” and declares, “I who have stood dumb” (Punishment 32, 37). Heaney still chose to slightly remove himself in this way to reflect the displacement he had with

The Troubles. As mentioned, unlike some other colleagues of his, Heaney left Northern Ireland and lived abroad, such as in Berkeley, for much of The Troubles. He was quite literally displaced from The Troubles. This displacement does not revoke his license to comment on them, and he still does, in his veiled historic way. But his distance from The Troubles means that his coverage has to be different than that of Ciaran Carson. Because he stayed in Ireland, Carson can describe walking down the streets of Belfast filled with projectiles and remnants, how “[t]he riot fizzles out. Still smoldering as the troops march in” (August 1969, 3-4). Heaney could not write in this way, or at least not as convincingly. Thus, he uses history to suggest displacement, while simultaneously referring to its reverberations in the extrajudicial killings of the Troubles.

There is also distance between Heaney and his subject in “Bog Queen,” also from 1975’s *North*. In this poem, Heaney fully embodies a mummified female character in first-person voice: “I lay waiting/between turf face and demesne wall” (Bog Queen 1-2). It seems there is no displacement whatsoever; he has truly become the mummy. But there is a distance here, shown in the “lay.” The disconnect here is in time; “Bog Queen” is in past tense. “My body was braille” “I lay waiting” and “My diadem grew carious” (Bog Queen 5, 16, 25). Through the past tense, the “Bog Queen” shows she is history herself, the history of this old conflict which is rising again. There is always a displacement from history; “Bog Queen” does not make an exception.

Sinéad Morrissey’s 2005 poem “Flight” uses history similarly to Heaney’s “Punishment” and “Bog Queen” from 30 years prior. The first and most obvious similarity is in the embodiment of a persecuted female historical figure, who Morrissey embodies entirely, using first-person voice to become a woman punished during the 17th century English Civil War. “1651:/The Year of Our Lord that my husband bridled me/And I have learned to hold my tongue in company,” she describes, taking on a whole new personality and character (Flight 7-9). The speaker also delves deeply into their own religious beliefs, presumably Catholic ones. “I say heaven admits its own/And it is Him” (Flight 23-4). The “Him” could be King Charles, but also simultaneously is God, as “Him” is capitalized. Religious belief is an intimate side of one’s mind, and is something we do not see overtly in “Punishment” or “Bog Queen”, making Morrissey’s voice all the more personal.

Although Northern Irish, Morrissey writes several years post-Troubles, so she does not need the protective political guise of history that Heaney uses to help him tread carefully. There is a different reasoning behind her use of history. Morrissey’s poetry uses history to make a commentary on the rights and freedom of women and imply that perhaps not so much has changed since the 1650s. “Flight’s” description of 17th century violence and persecution is horrific, and the method of the subject’s punishment makes a clear statement on women’s freedom of speech: the Scold’s Bridle. This was a torture device which, from “the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries in Europe...was used to punish women who had a lashing, scathing tongue, to punish chatterboxes, gossips, busybodies,” smothering their face and squishing their tongues so that they could not speak (Ugrešić 37). Morrissey has chosen such a verbally oppressive device, and not some other form of punishment because if a woman was killed wearing the Scold’s Bridle, they could not cry out defiantly in their final moments and would perish a smothered female martyr. Morrissey invokes this brutal mask in “Flight” to show the horrific suppression of women’s voices that has existed throughout history.

Through a particular epigraph in “Flight”, Morrissey strongly implies that these gender suppressions have not disappeared today. She quotes a historical text, “England’s Grievance Discovered”, which describes an instance of the Scold’s Bridle punishment, from 1655. Although in the poem beyond the epigraph, she is fully another person, by quoting that book as

someone studying it later, Morrissey suggests she is viewing it contemporarily. It is certainly not the speaker who is being punished reading “England’s Grievance Discovered”, as she has been martyred. Thus, with this epigraph, Morrissey has partially removed herself from history from the very start. In placing the reiteration of the martyrdom in the modern era, Morrissey suggests women are still not given equal voices, and that the era of Scold’s Bridle suppression reverberates to this day.

Epigraph is not the only way in which Morrissey suggestively makes poems embodying historical figures jump to the present. “Vanity Fair”, for example, enters a 19th century widow’s mind: “I could begin by hoping you are well in England,” it writes, fully in another century’s voice (Vanity Fair 2). This poem uses different tactics to reappear to the present: instead of an epigraph, it is written in the form of a letter, opening with “Dearest William,” and closing with “Yours, Amelia Sedley” (Vanity Fair 1, 45). The fact that Amelia’s mind is seen through a letter implies that it is a historical document being observed, like “Flight,” posthumously. In being re-observed presently, Morrissey once again implies that issues faced by women in the past have continued relevance in the modern day.

Sinéad Morrissey’s post-Troubles status is partly what allows her to direct commentary towards female oppression. This was not outright banned pre-Good Friday Agreement; one could have both commentary on The Troubles and gender at the same time. Indeed, as recently observed, Seamus Heaney did so. But generally, poets felt a heavy obligation to speak on The Troubles, even if they were on the other side of the world, even if they told their truths slant. However, with sectarian violence no longer raging, Morrissey can focus on other issues and other areas of history, capable of “look upwards and outwards to engage with other cultures, places, and times,” such as the English Civil War, seen here (Parker 178). But it is not solely her era of writing that allows Morrissey to comment on separate issues. It is also her geographical disconnect from Ireland that frees her from many thematic ‘obligations’ other poets feel. As critic David Wheatley notes, even by the 21st century in Ireland, there are still “powerful binaries at work. The reflex assignment of Irish writers into... unionist or nationalist, Protestant or Catholic...theorist or liberal humanist, continues to possess a baleful tenacity” (Wheatley 255). Having lived in Japan, New Zealand, having travelled so extensively, having been the child of two Communist party members, Morrissey checks none of those boxes, able to escape from Irish dichotomy. However, there is one thing she cannot escape: her gender. This is what leads her to comment on, more than anything, gender issues. Had The Troubles still been going on when she wrote “Flight,” their pull would have been too for her to escape them, and thus would not have been able to devote her entire commentary to gender. Even if she were commenting from her residency in Japan, for example, that would not have been an excuse; after all, Heaney commented from California. But post-Troubles, Morrissey’s options have opened.

It is worth noting that, although Sinéad Morrissey is not characterized as a Troubles Poet, the part of history she has chosen here still holds deep sectarian implications. In “Flight,” just as in Belfast “exact/and tribal, intimate revenge” is at play (Punishment 43-4). The poem’s prosecuted speaker has sided with Catholicism, meaning the Royalist Cavaliers, led by the Catholic-leaning King Charles I. This may be why her husband has punished her; because he is a Parliamentary supporter, on the Roundhead, Protestant-leaning side of the conflict. He is Cromwellian, and Oliver Cromwell’s presence also cannot be ignored here. For many Irish people, Cromwell is the symbol of ultimate identity-based oppression. The centuries-long Anglican brutalization of Ireland held many villains and perpetrators, but Cromwell is one of the worst. And in this poem, the husband effectively is Cromwell, so when the wife speaks her

Royalist views, it deeply angers him. We see this anger in real time in the poem as a response to her words: when she praises the King and her Catholic God, declaring “He has stood in a fall of rain/While Cromwell’s men sang psalms against him,” immediately “The jaw-straps tighten” on her Scold’s Bridle. Her silent female martyrdom looms, enforced by a historic brutalizer of Ireland (Flight 17-18, 24). Morrissey can and does disconnect very much from classic Irish history, but there are still strings of it subtly weaved in.

Seamus Heaney’s male status does not revoke his ability to comment on issues of female oppression. However, because he has The Troubles before him, he must cover that. Yet Heaney still memorializes female oppression in his work, as Edna Longley describes in her essay “‘North: 'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur:’” “*North*...is a book of martyrs rather than of tragic protagonists,” the poet observes (Longley 79). The mummies’ martyr status parallels the martyrdom in “Flight”, which is then suggestively pulled into the present. Both describe the injustice the martyrs faced: one is a “poor scapegoat” (Punishment 28), unjustly taking blame, and another is martyred simply for what and who they believe in during a Civil War. By making conscious, particular use of this side of history, both Seamus Heaney and Sinéad Morrissey give voice to these once-oppressed voices that, without the poets’ endorsement, may have forever been lost to history. It is only now that they are pulled back into the present to be read around the world.

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