



## Molest the Dead

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In this innovative literary analysis, Destinee Asbill describes how Seamus Heaney's poem "Punishment" transforms the figure of the "bog woman"—a corpse exhumed by archaeologists in Northern Europe—into a scapegoat figure sacrificed for the good of humanity, but at deep moral cost. This essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Shelley Rees.

**“NOTICE! ARCHAEOLOGISTS** stumbled upon an Egyptian burial chamber! It is unknown who or what originates in the chamber but the scientists on the scene are excited to start excavation!” Despite every superstition and laws laid down by the deceased hundreds of years ago, scientists have overstepped boundaries by digging up our resting predecessors. Scientists and archaeologists have been removing the dead from their resting places for years and have justified their actions by saying it was for science. But, at what point does graverobbing become archaeology? When does it become all right to remove past lives from their tombs? A couple hundred years? A thousand? Nobody truly knows the answer. But, in all reality, archaeology is another form of graverobbing. While knowing who we were as humans thousands of

years ago is important, such knowledge does not justify our breaking in and entering. It defiles us. Archaeology itself defiles not only the dead but also the living.

For years, scientists have unearthed sleeping ancestors and performed autopsies to learn everything there is to know of where and who the body was. A widely known discovery grew popular when bodies were discovered in Northern Europe. This discovery prompted studies and even inspired authors to write highbrow and fact-filled books and papers. While many reveled in the wonders of the unknown, Seamus Heaney, an Ireland native, wrote a poem riddled with negative passages about the treatment of the bog people: “Punishment.” He describes the bog woman, the deceased, in multiple ways. Heaney relates her to a tree ripped from its roots:

Under which at first  
she was barked sapling  
that is dug up  
oak-bone, brain-firkin[.] (13-16)

The body has been ripped from its peaceful and tranquil resting place just because a man stumbled upon her and discovered her usefulness to academic knowledge. Heaney also describes her as a ship:

I can see her drowned  
body in the bog,  
the weighing stone,  
the floating rods and boughs. (9-12)

Her body has been excavated, ripped from its roots for her usefulness. She is now being perceived as a vessel: a tool humanity has known to use, abuse, crash, and burn. Her delicate body, “the frail rigging / of her ribs” (7-8), has been defiled. The eyes of scientists were not supposed to look upon “her shaved head” (17). She is no longer human, despite her old life, she is now an experiment, a time capsule that a curious human decided to open without permission.

Heaney describes the female carcass as if she no longer were worthy of a shred of empathy. Heaney uses bitter language to describe how she is being punished:

Little adulteress,  
 before they punished you . . .  
 .....  
 My poor scapegoat . . .

I almost love you  
 but would have cast, I know,  
 the stones of silence. (23-24; 28-31)

Heaney describes the moment as the deceased's last shred of dignity is ripped away from her, defiling her body and tarnishing our empathy.

Heaney presents the world another, more perplexing, point of view on the archaeological exhumation of the bog people. He uses negative connotation to draw our attention and uses multiple archetypes to make the reading more intense. The most significant archetype Heaney used is that of the scapegoat: "My poor scapegoat . . ." The scapegoat archetype refers to a person who is blamed for wrongdoings, mistakes, or faults of others. This archetype comes from an old technique religious communities would use to rid themselves of sin. Those communities would choose an animal, usually a goat, and ritually burden that animal with the sins of others before driving it away, where it would most likely be eaten by predators in the wild. It was a technique of sacrificing one for the good of many. Like this goat, the bog woman detailed in Heaney's poem is being defiled/sacrificed for the knowledge that could potentially contribute to society. The bog woman is detailed in intricate words to humanize her, and then she is practically babied. Heaney slowly introduces language to describe how useful she was to the world. She is no longer human, but a tool, a slave to our future. The poem describes her human attributes and then distracts away from these

human traits, showing her alternate identity as scapegoat. She has become a tool for humanity, used for the living's own personal gain, and defiled by her own species. The bog woman is no longer human but a specimen.

Heaney discreetly uses this negative wording and archetypal definition to detach himself as a scientist but also to demonstrate his own uneasiness about using this body as a test subject. He speaks of her as a human:

Little adulteress,  
before they punished you  
  
you were flaxen-hair,  
undernourished, and your  
tar-black face was beautiful. (23-27)

Here, she is still human. A person who lived, laughed, loved, and died. Then Heaney switches back to his scientific side:

I am the artful voyeur  
  
of your brain's exposed  
and darkened combs,  
your muscles' webbing  
and all of your numbered bones[.] (32-36)

The body has already been under the knife. Her bones have been counted and analyzed. No small detail will go unnoticed by his voyeuristic gaze; however, he struggles with his comparative nature. Heaney can't see past the fact that she is still human; while no longer living, laughing, and loving, she is still human. Heaney struggles to detach himself from his emotions to become the best scientist he truly could be. Why? Why not sacrifice this dead woman for the good of society? Well, would you sacrifice your daughter if it meant saving your wife/husband? Many would say no. You wouldn't

choose between either. You wouldn't be able to cast away your emotion to shove you daughter into the black void hiding behind every kitchen knife. Heaney struggles with this part of himself. He struggles in this archetypal journey: the journey in search of knowledge. We find ourselves asking these questions. Do we cast away a ritually burdened goat or keep what shred of dignity and humanity we have left to give? Do we defile the body or lay her back to rest?

Humans have been using scapegoats since before we can remember. We started off by running away burdened animals. Slowly we have started to burden our own species, our own kind. So, why not defile this one woman who has been dead of years? Why not use her discovery to help the rest of humanity? The bog woman is being used as a scapegoat for future generations. Her sacrifice is helping today's society understand our past in order to change our future for the better. Using an already dead society member is better than sacrificing a current member of society. It is the safest option that humans have found to prepare ourselves for the future; however, by cutting open our ancestors and looking at their deteriorated organs, we find ourselves in a sticky situation. We stare at the corpse of a past life and defile ourselves by not seeing just how human that corpse still is. The way scientists and archaeologists have learned to excavate and examine has defiled both of these parties. Archaeology is tearing away the edges of our empathy towards others and making our corners rough. We are no longer polished, and neither are our newly discovered ancestors. ►►

►► WORK CITED

HEANEY, SEAMUS. "Punishment." *Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers*, edited by John Schilb and John Clifford, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., Bedford/St. Martins, 2018, pp. 662-63.