

The Third Space of Northern Ireland: An Analysis of Seamus Heaney's Bog Poems from Postcolonial Theory

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In the decade after 1969, Heaney reached the climax of his poetry composition, in which he published four volumes of poetry, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, *North* and *Field Work* to explore the nature and origin of the hatred and violence in Northern Ireland. The thesis focuses on five representative bog poems written in the period to explain according to Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory how the bog bodies configure the hybrid space and how it reflects the Third Space of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the thesis argues that from the construction of the Third Space, Heaney achieves temporary harmony between his artistic and realistic responsibility.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, Northern Ireland, postcolonial, the Third Space, bog poems

Introduction

Born in Derry, a politically and religiously divided city in Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney in his life has experienced numerous violence that generated his inspiration for a series of poems. Experiencing and writing "historical disjunction and uncertainty" (O'Malley, 2015, p. 381) of Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney, the winner of Nobel Literature Prize in 1995, has been categorized by the researchers as a postcolonial poet.

Naturally, there have been a large number of monographs and theses explaining Heaney and his poetry from postcolonial theory. Some concern the in-between plight of Heaney. In "Seamus Heaney's Postcolonial Epistemology and Political Aesthetic", Yoo-Hyeok Lee analyzes Heaney's struggle between the demands of art and reality to argue that his postcolonial theory of knowledge and political stance "are shaped through enduring tensions between the political and the artistic" (Lee, 2003, p. 2). The significance of Heaney's in-betweenness has continuously been the focus of literary debate. David Kennedy, David Lloyd, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford and other scholars propose that in his poetry the images, autochthonous and mythical feed from and feed back into stereotypes which obscure and override the features of different identities. Kennedy takes "Broagh" as an example to argue that "the possibility of accessing an original, essential identity" is invalidated by the strangers' inability to manage the "last gh" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 305), which denies the reconcilability of cultural difference. In order to object to the criticism, Ashok Bery in "Seamus Heaney's Acoustics" of *Cultural Translation and Postcolonial Poetry* explores Heaney's usage of translation existing "between languages and cultures" (Bery, 2007, p. 103) to embody that it is his in-between position that makes him "see not only his own culture more clearly but also the culture of England" (Bery, 2007, p. 104). As a result, the in-betweenness adds emotional depth

and profound meaning to Heaney's poetry. Other postcolonial readings focus on the comparison between Heaney and other poets from other colonial countries. T. J. Boynton explains that the ambiguity formed by "the complexities of postcolonial interculturality" (Boynton, 2019, p. 764) in the poems of Heaney and other postcolonial poets intensifies "the claims of poetry for a larger role in postcolonial scholarship" (Ramazani, 2017, p. 5). Aidon O'Malley reflects that similar to the Polish poets, Mahon and Zagajewski, Heaney in order to relieve the tension between British colonial influence and Irish historical convention in the second half of his life looked outwards and casted "his poetic self in a more abstract fashion" (O'Malley, 2015, p. 382).

Heaney has created several poems of diverse themes, forms and styles in his long career, especially from 1960s to 1970s when Northern Ireland suffered the most extreme and sanguinary conflicts. Sensing the need to respond to the bloodshed in his poetry, Heaney devoted to seek his "befitting emblems of adversity" acquired his inspiration from *The Bog People* by a Danish archaeologist, P. V. Glob who in the book briefly recorded the discovery of male and female bodies in the swamps of Denmark. The nearly complete corpses sacrificed to the goddess stimulated Heaney's imagination to connect these dead people of Iron Age with the martyrs for the freedom of Ireland. Consequently, Heaney composed a series of bog poems to "comprehend and convey the underlying causes and nature" (Foley, 1998, p. 61) of the crises in Ireland. Andrew Foley explains the bog poems in *North* to prove that the bog bodies, the symbols of the turmoil of Northern Ireland enable Heaney to dig out not only the savage nature "of the perpetrators of the violence but also the archetypal barbarity of the conflict" (Foley, 1998, p. 74). Moreover, focusing on the image of the bog body, Anthony Purdy interprets the body as a chronotope reducing temporal and spatial distance to "make the past present" (Foley, 1998, p. 94). Chongkyen Kim proposes that the bog body preserving cultural and domestic memory continuously reveal the "ongoing negotiation between the past and the present" (Kim, 2016, p. 121) and incessantly transform the incomplete and unfinished past instead of like museums presenting unchangeable history. Different from Foley and Kim, Rosie Everett and Benjamin Gearey analyzes Heaney's bog poems to clarify the complexity of the relation between the creation of poetry and "the practice of archaeology" (Everett & Gearey, 2019, p. 13). In the turbulent period of Northern Ireland, Heaney wrote a series of bog poems consisting of "Bogland" in *Door into the Dark*, "The Tollund Man," "Bog Oak" and "Nerthus" in *Wintering Out* and "Bog Queen," "The Grauballe Man," "Kinship," "Punishment" and "Strange Fruit" in *North*. The thesis from Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory analyzes the five bog poems that refer to the bog bodies forming the hybrid space that emblemizes the Third Space of Northern Ireland.

The Postcolonial Theory of Homi K. Bhabha

The pioneer of postcolonial theory, Edward Said explains that Orientalism constructed according to Western centralism contorts the real appearance of the Oriental world. Even worse, rooted in cultural hegemony, Orientalism aims to marginalize the Eastern as an inferior "Other" to maintain the supremacy of the Western authority which intensifies the binary opposition between the West and the East. Opposing the binary argument, Bhabha explains that the boundary between the colonized and colonizer instead of a fixed one changes into "the place from which something began its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5). Crossing the border of binary contradiction, Bhabha proposes that as different cultures are connected, articulated and hybridized, a Third Space forms, in which "the meaning and symbols of

culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37) and even the same signs can be redefined and rehistoricized. From Bhabha's postcolonial theory, the thesis embodies how the in-between space generates from the bog corpses in "The Tollund Man," "Bog Queen," "The Grauballe Man," "Punishment" and "Strange Fruit." Then the thesis analyzes the association between the intermediate space of the bogland and the hybrid circumstance in Northern Ireland whose destiny Heaney is most concerned about. Then on the basis of the explanation of the Third Space in the marsh and Northern Ireland, the thesis argues that the bog poems imply Heaney's reconciliation between the requirement of politics and the pursuit of art.

The Third Space in Bogs

According to Bhabha, a Third Space is characterized by mobility, remoldability and heterogeneity. As "the memory of the landscape" the bog body remembering what "happened in and to it" (Heaney, 1980, p. 51) witnessed the elapse of time which can be discovered from the appearance and shape of the body. With the "last gruel of winter seeds caked in his stomach" the corpse of the Tollund man, hanged and naked, presented his "peat-brown head" and "pointed skin cap" (Heaney, 2009, p. 37) that experienced the baptism of time. Buried "between turf-face and demesne wall, between heathery levels and glass-toothed stone" (Heaney, 2009, p. 86) for centuries, the bog queen preserved and swallowed by the bog imperceptibly digested and hoarded it in turn (Batten, 2009, p. 182). Brain darkening, diadem carious, gemstone dropped, sash wrinkled, stitchwork retted, the dead body lay under ground as berries decomposed under her nails. Similar to the Tollund man and the bog queen, the Grauballe man underwent a battery of transformation in his superficially calm hibernation. "The grain of his wrists is like bog oak," "his hips are the ridge and purse of a mussel," his spine is "an eel arrested under a glisten of mud" (Heaney, 2009, p. 89) and the wound in his body "opens inward to a dark elderberry place" (Heaney, 2009, p. 90). These physical features are also possessed by the other bog bodies. The female corpse in "Strange Fruit" with broken nose, blank eyeholes and stone teeth reveals "her leathery beauty" (Heaney, 2009, p. 94). In "Punishment" the dead adultress is compared to "a barked sapling that is dug up" whose head is "like a stubble of black corn" (Heaney, 2009, p. 92). Long immersed in the mud, her undernourished flaxen hair as well as her beautiful tar-black face have been eroded and devoured by the shifting power of time and nature. Although the corpses have been perfectly conserved in the bogland, their kraurotic face, rotten limbs and shrunk skin indicate the mobility of temporal and spatial force.

Furthermore, as time went by, the objects in the moorland were ceaselessly remoulded. Soon after they were executed the sacrificers shared complete body, elastic skin and other characteristics with alive people. However, the more distant they have been preserved in the swamp the more severely they have been corroded by it until hundred years later the bodies were engulfed and internalized as the bog itself. Consequently, the process of interiorization contains the reconstruction of the corpses. Moreover, the bog bodies are reshaped not only by natural power but also by poetic imagination. In the second section of "The Tollund Man," Heaney combines the dead bodies in Jutland with the "scattered, ambushed flesh of labourers" and the corpses of "four young brothers trailed for miles along the lines" (Heaney, 2009, p. 38), which embodies the link between the "brutal Iron Age culture in Jutland" (Foley, 1998, p. 65) and man-killing violence in Northern Ireland. Serving as a vehicle "for materializing time in space" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250), the bog bodies abolish the temporal and spatial hindrance between the Tollund man and the martyrs in the Anglo-Irish War as well as the sectarian clashes. It is not only the

Tollund man but also other bodies that are redefined as the emblem of the innocent Irish people killed in endless tumults caused by British colonization. In "The Bog Queen" the body "waiting on the gravel bottom" finally finds her opportunity to rise "from the dark" (Heaney, 2009, p. 90), which symbolizes the colonized Irishmen who have fought against the oppressors. What's more, Heaney makes a comparison between the slashed Grauballe man and the Dying Gaul to reflect their similar end which is parallel to the death of the victims in countless political and religious conflicts in Northern Ireland. Following the symbolic mode of "The Grauballe Man," "Strange Fruit" depicts a beheaded girl to emblemize every murdered person "forgotten, nameless, terrible" (Heaney, 2009, p. 94) in the decades of turbulence. To reflect the reality in a more direct way, Heaney in "Punishment" explicitly links the drowned adulterous girl with present Irish women who "cauled in tar, wrapped, enclosed" (Heaney, 2009, p. 93) weep by the railings because of their love affairs with British soldiers. The bog bodies are reconfigured by the surroundings and the poet to function as not only changeable objects maintained in the moor land but also images indicate the "deplorable authenticity and complexity" (Heaney, 1980, p. 57) of the violence in Northern Ireland.

In addition to variability and reconfigurability, the bodies possessed the characteristic of heterogeneity which is presented in two perspectives. Firstly, as the bog swallows and assimilates the corpses, it is either digested or absorbed by "the presence of those objects in the self" (Batten, 2009, p. 182). In other words, the relation between the bog and the bodies preserved is a process of the internalization of each other. Just dug out of the bog, all the corpses, the sacrificed man, the buried woman, the slashed man, the drowned girl and the decapitated girl remain the features of the everglade. For example, the corpse in "The Bog Queen" explains that why her body is braille is because of "dawn suns" that grope over her head and cool at her feet as well as "the seeps of winter" that digest her "fabrics and skins" (Heaney, 2009, p. 88). As she is reconstructed by her environment, "the illiterate roots" die and disappear "in the cavings of stomach and socket" (Heaney, 2009, p. 88). In the process of digestion and assimilation, the body like the other ones in the bog gradually turn into a hybrid of nature and human, self and other. Secondly, the ancient bodies serving as the symbols of the chaos in modern Ireland compress the past and the present in itself. In the bog poems, they are not merely the corpses bearing "the marks of their living and their dying" (Purdy, 2002, p. 94) but the images to mythologize Irish history and "aestheticize political violence" (Purdy, 2002, p. 96). Besides the archaic bodies themselves, they are also the emblems of the "stockinged corpses laid out in the farmyards" (Heaney, 2009, p. 38), the resisters fighting for freedom, the victims of sectarian atrocity and the "betraying sisters" (Heaney, 2009, p. 93) punished by IRA. Heaney adds his political and religious concern for Northern Ireland to the objects in the bogland, which generates the heterogeneity of the bog bodies. As the contents of the swamp, the bodies enduring the erosion of time and nature as well as mingling the past and the present forms a heterogeneous place indicating the Third Space of Northern Ireland.

The Intermediate Space in Northern Ireland

Since December 1921 when the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, Northern Ireland remaining as a part of the United Kingdom has unremittably been changed, remoulded and hybridized. In June 1922, contrary stances on the treaty had resulted in the outbreak of the Civil War and even after the war the tension between the two remained unresolved, which initiated plenty of violence in the following decades in Northern Ireland. Especially

from the 1960s to the 1980s, suffering a series of extreme conflicts, Northern Ireland has experienced "an exploratory, relentless movement" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). Since Southern Ireland acquired the "status of self-governing dominion and the title of Irish Free State" (Vaughan, 2010, p. lvii), it has dedicated to unify the two antithetic states. Regarding Northern Ireland as "a failed entity" (Mulholland, 2002, p. 91), the southerners rejecting to accept the legitimacy of the Northern state belonged to nationalists, among whom IRA were the most radical and violent. Contrary to them, most northerners as the descendants of the English and the Scottish preferred remaining in the UK and thus were called unionists. Then intertwined with religious conflicts, the antagonism between nationalists and loyalists has in Northern Ireland triggered waves of riots which from "throwing of stones and petrol bombs" gradually developed into "a great deal of shooting at troops" (Cosgrove, 2008, p. 346) and civilians. Through successive bloodshed and occasional ceasefires, an unusual extreme form of communication of "contradictory and antagonistic instances" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 25), the social order and structure of Northern Ireland have been continually reshaped.

Besides mobility and remoldability, Northern Ireland is typical of hybridity. Take Heaney's hometown, Derry as an example. Throughout the 20th century, Derry whose major residents are Catholic has remained the center of political and sectarian confrontations among which "Bloody Sunday" forced the whole world to "acknowledge the extent and complexity of the divisions" (Vaughan, 2010, p. 250). On 30 January 1972, in the parade held by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, the British paratroopers "without warning, shot indiscriminately at unarmed people" (Cosgrove, 2008, p. 350) and caused the death of thirteen civilians, which further "worsened relations in the north" (Cosgrove, 2008, p. 351). It was since the 1980s that more attempts have been made to "create conditions for all-party talks in Northern Ireland" (Mulholland, 2002, p. 91) to end the ceaseless murders. Composed of Derry and other similar five counties, Northern Ireland is a mixture of Britishness and Irishness, Protestantism and Catholicism, unionism and nationalism, colonial influence and native tradition, incessant overages and transitory peace, brutal soldiers and innocent inhabitants. Since the partition of Ireland, these factors have collided, interwoven and negotiated with each other, in which they have formed several forces to continually reconstruct the Third Space of Northern Ireland similar to the heterogeneous space of the bogland.

The In-between State of Seamus Heaney

Understanding "the actual substance of historical agony and dissolution" (O'Brien, 1975, p. 404) of the north, Heaney keeps digging proper images to reflect it in his "poetry as divination" of the future, "revelation of the self to the self" and "restoration of the culture to itself" (Heaney, 1980, p. 33). Finally Heaney chooses the bog bodies from the distant past to reflect the brutality of the present, from which the poet expresses his "national consciousness" (Heaney, 1980, p. 51) as an Irish Catholic. Therefore, in Heaney's bog poems, the blended space of the moorland indicates the space of "thirdness" in Northern Ireland. In his creation of the bog poems, Heaney experiences the struggle between "his personal dedication to a reflective art and his public responsibility towards political action" (Cahill, 1987, p. 55) which he attempts to resolve through the depiction and representation of the mixed space of the corpses which from artistic perspective demonstrates the beauty of symbols by combining subject and object, the past and the present as well as from realistic perspective implies the concern of Heaney by

juxtaposing themselves with victims in contemporary outrages. In other words, the bog poems embody Heaney's satisfactory coordination between his pursuit as a poet and his mission as an Irish nationalist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on Bhabha's postcolonial theory, the thesis explains that the image of the corpses in Heaney's bog poems constructs a compounded space that signifies the Third Space of Northern Ireland, through which Heaney achieves his balance between poetic expression and political reflection. Moreover, the bog poems as an indispensable segment of Heaney's postcolonial compositions do not only provide a Third Space eliminating temporal and spatial limitation but also contain more value that deserves further academic research.

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