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# Ireland in Double Vision

## *The Allegory of Seamus Heaney's "Come to the Bower"*

*Janaya Tanner*

The world-renowned Irish poet Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), born in Northern Ireland shortly before World War II, deeply infused his poetry with his homeland. Heaney grew up Catholic on a peat farm in Northern Ireland and frequently faced bitter sentiments and prejudices throughout his childhood and adult life. He felt torn between various identities and opinions of himself, his neighbors, and Ireland itself. Heaney said, "Every day on my road to and from school I crossed and recrossed the Sluggan, and every time my sense of living on two sides of a boundary was emphasized. I never felt the certitude of belonging completely in one place" (qtd. in Russell 7). This feeling deepened later in the 1960s when the Irish Troubles broke out. The vicious fighting, which nearly became a civil war, was fought largely between Irish Catholics (who were Nationalists and wanted to separate from Great Britain to join the recently independent Republic of Ireland) and the Protestant Unionists (who desired to remain part of the United Kingdom). Feelings of prejudice and discontent quickly escalated to bombings, the deployment of British troops, and violent terrorist acts that lasted into the early 2000s. Heaney said of this time that "the stakes were being raised to deadlier levels all the time . . . People you knew [were] getting killed either by accident or at random or by deliberate targeting" (Heaney qtd. in Russell 44). With such chaos in his homeland, Heaney turned

to writing about the bog bodies—those upheaved from “the black maw / of the peat”—seeking for a way to respond and understand in the midst of all the violence and chaos (“Come to the Bower” 7–8).

Given Heaney’s childhood and heritage of peat farmers, it is no wonder these bogs became a staple in many of his works as a place of history, horror, heritage, and hope. When Heaney spoke of the bogs of his home, he said, “It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the whit and bathed in a moss-hole . . . we dressed again and went home in our wet clothes . . . somehow initiated” (*Preoccupations* 19). These experiences prepared Heaney to voice the complexity of the heightening issues that would come to a head in his early adult life. In 1975, Heaney moved his family from Belfast, a city in the thick of the North Ireland Troubles, to the Republic of Ireland, where he published *North*, his most political collection of poetry yet. *North* contains a set of poems often referred to as the “bog poems,” in which Heaney attempts to use the medium of the bog to explore and explain the complicated feelings, perspectives, and motivations clashing in the tense atmosphere of Ireland in the late 20th century. In this particular poem, however, Heaney “see[s] things double” (Hart 388). This double vision refers to the ability to see and express that sight in more than one way or with more than one meaning at one time. In this paper, I will explore how “Come to the Bower,” one of several overlooked bog poems, expresses this double vision through allegory. Heaney is able to tell the story of the ancient Irish tribes while also addressing Irish Republic nationalism and the simmering sentiments of post-colonialism. Each layer of the story washes over the reader, creating an immersive experience with the feelings of the time. In “Come to the Bower,” contradicting ideas coexist: the strong-willed Mother Ireland and the raped victim, the brutal imperial colonizer and the beloved Irish son. Heaney blends these views simultaneously throughout this multi-layered allegory that looks deeply into the complexity of the Irish past and present.

As with all allegories, the poem “Come to the Bower” is, at its simplest layer, a story. It is told in the first person as the speaker makes his way through “sweet briar and tangled vetch” in order to find “the dark-bowered queen” who “is waiting” (Heaney 2, 5, 7). She has been pinned down into the “black maw / of the peat” with “sharpened willow.” When the speaker finds her, he “withdraws gently” her bindings and slowly begins unwrapping her,

observing her skull, her hair, her throat etc. (7–9). Presumably because of the digging the man has done to reach the body a “spring water / starts to rise around her” and the speaker reaches “past / the riverbed’s washed / dream of gold to the bullion / of her Venus bone,” to the prize (Heaney 15–16, 17–20).

This simple, surface-level story has its roots deep in the ancient past of Northern Europe and in the violence of those ancient people. Some time before writing *North*, Heaney discovered *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved* by P.V. Glob. The book is about a collection of bodies that have been uncannily preserved and then dug up from peat bogs. Glob theorizes about the lives and causes of deaths of these individuals, and his writings inspired many of Heaney’s bog poems. In fact, “Come to the Bower” has its roots in the tale of a body found in 1835 by ditch diggers on the ancient estate of Haraldskjaer in Denmark. The body, pinned down with willow sticks, was declared to be the ancient Norse Queen Gunhild, “the cruel consort of King Erik Bloodaxe” (Glob 74). Though the theory has since been disproved, it strongly influenced Seamus Heaney’s description of the “dark bowered queen” (Heaney, “Come to the Bower” 5–6). When this body was discovered, “it was deduced that the woman had met a violent death and had been pinned down into the bog alive” (Glob 77). About this strange death, a local publication in *Light Reading for the Danish Public* read, “Every countryman will immediately recognize in this corpse the body of someone who when living was regarded as a witch and whom it was intended to prevent from walking again after death” (qtd. in Glob 76).

Despite the violent end and supernatural fear that interred this dark-bowered queen, when the speaker unpins her, the “sharpened willow / withdraws gently” (Heaney, “Come to the Bower” 8–9). We discover a layer of depth in the allegory as the speaker digging through the peat has now dug through time and discovered an object of the past, a person once of great power and fear, a witch in her time, yet only a dead shriveled body in ours. He “unwrap[s] skins,” and there is no tone of fear or apprehension in this discovery; rather, all this is looked past for the greater treasure of “the bullion / of her Venus bone” that is reached for by the speaker (10, 19–20). Though those in the past were terrified of the return of this woman, the poem’s speaker willingly frees her. Heaney approaches the horrors of the past with affection, great care, and reverence. These horrors have been buried in the ground for hundreds of years, and as a pearl forms by being compressed

in an oyster, this ancient body has formed “bullion.” Bullion is defined as “precious metal in the mass,” or more specifically, “solid gold or silver (as opposed to mere show imitations)” (“Bullion”). It is also important to note that this great treasure is attributed to be “of her Venus bone,” evoking imagery of the female genitals through which humans are brought into the world (Heaney, “Come to the Bower” 20). This becomes significant when considering other layers of the dark-bowered queen, such as Mother Ireland. Whoever this woman represents, instead of her “Venus bone” producing life, it has produced a treasure or become a treasure itself from the long years smothered in the earth. Does Heaney intend for this treasure to be indicative of hope for the future of Ireland if they too bury their violence? Or does he mean it to represent a malicious release of a gift from the past, a gift of violence that would then continue the bloody cycle? Here we see evidence of Heaney’s double vision, showing the past as offering both peace and violence, leading us further into the allegory as we seek to immerse ourselves in the complicated story Heaney has woven.

The introduction of the bullion at the end of the story complicates the seemingly benevolent intentions of the speaker. This introduces a new layer of the allegory, shifting from the ancient Norse queen to imperial England, and exploring how the imperialist Speaker interacts with and treats the colonized and the dark-bowered queen: Mother Ireland. In particular, the moment of the “dark-bowered queen” being unwrapped evokes imagery of the imperialist conquerors of England and the common trope of the English rape of Ireland. When read through this lens, the speaker of the poem resembles “the typical conqueror, like Raleigh in ‘Ocean’s Love to Ireland,’ who reaches for sex and gold with the same fist” (Hart 404). Yet, “Heaney speaks for and against the imperial colonizer, whose economic dreams are sexual as well as deadly . . . Heaney sees the difference in their political stances as difference in sexual preferences. One prefers sexual immolation, the other economic and physical rape” (405). In this light, the treatment of the bog body is morally reprehensible, as Heaney describes the relationship of the imperialism and patriarchy England wields over Ireland, who is, in both cases, the victim.

However, in recalling Heaney’s own personal connection to the land and the seemingly gentle nature of the speaker, another layer of the allegory must be considered: Mother Ireland as an active participant and driving force of her unearthing. “My hands come,” rings out the first line of “Come to the

Bower" (Heaney 1). The speaker of the poem describes his hands as "touched / by sweet briar and tangled vetch," already intimately connected with the land and not a foreigner to it (2). These hands are his primary instrument in interacting with the "dark-bowered queen" and other elements of the poem. His hands are "foraging," "to where the dark-bowered queen . . . is waiting" (3, 5, 7). They "unpin", "unwrap", and "reach" confidently and unafraid (7, 10, 17). This view of their relationship is described by Karen Moloney who does not see the "dark-bowered queen," or Mother Ireland, as the victim, but rather, as an active participant and the driving force in her unearthing: "The narrator of 'Come to the Bower' moves slowly, gently: he will undress the body of his loved one in nearly venerative awe, a loving prelude to actual lovemaking. Even the poem's first line signals that what occurs in this bower will be no rape" (117). The interactions between the speaker and the bog queen are mutual and positive. The speaker has accepted the invitation extended to him to "come to the bower," and his show of genuine love to the bog body acts "as a powerful antidote to the arrogance that propelled . . . [English] . . . imperialists" (125). This is an awakening or reviving of Ireland rather than a retelling of its rape and ravaging; "Others before him may have valued the peat for its yield of priceless artifacts, or panned its streams for gold, but this narrator has come here as a lover; the bullion he values is the Venus bone of a woman beloved" (124). Throughout her article, Moloney compares the poem to the tale of Sleeping Beauty and the speaker to "the rescuer of Sleeping Beauty, [who] is . . . given right-of-way by the flowers themselves . . . The gesture suggests that the natural world endorses what transpires here" (119). This view of "Come to the Bower" paints a strong Mother Ireland. She is no longer a helpless victim being violated and robbed. Instead, she is finally ready to arise and be released by the speaker whom she has beckoned to her bower.

Heaney, however, does not content himself with only layering the ancient and imperial pasts. He also laces his story with the allegory of a modern-day revolution. The title "Come to the Bower" relates directly to the similarly titled patriotic Irish song, "Will You Come to the Bower?" This song gained popularity in the early nineteenth century, serving as a call to native Irishmen who had fled to other countries to return home and fight for Irish independence from Great Britain ("Will"). Though such independence did not come until the early twentieth century, when the Republic of Ireland officially formed, both the poem and the song carry strong connotations of

an awakening Irish identity. Heaney himself described “a newfound pride in our own places that flourished suddenly in the late nineteenth century and resulted in a new literature, a revived interest in folklore, a movement to revive the Irish language, and in general a determination to found or refound a native tradition” (*Preoccupations* 134–35). This revival of Irish pride carried with it an undertone of the Irish Republican nationalism that drove many to desire to break from Great Britain and formed a major part of the political attitude during the Irish Troubles. Both the song and the poem invite people to come to their homeland, using the synecdoche of the bower to represent Ireland. Reading the poem with this lens paints the “dark-bowered queen” not as a mere dead body nor an ancient witch of violence, but rather as a personification of Mother Ireland herself. In the song, those being called are asked, “Will you come and awake our dear land from its slumber / And her fetters we’ll break, links that long have encumbered” (Irish Music Daily). These lyrics call for the very action taken by the speaker of the poem: coming to the bower to release and awaken the “dark-bowered queen” from her long slumber. The lyrics also portray similar intimations of violence and nationalistic sentiments as those that lace Heaney’s “Come to the Bower.”

Not surprisingly, Heaney associated all bog bodies and their unknown pasts with an Irish Republican symbolism. When speaking of the religious beliefs that were thought to have led to the sacrificial deaths of the bog people, he said that “in many ways, the fury of Irish republicanism is associated with a religion like this . . . I think that the Republican ethos is a feminine religion, in a way. It seems to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our own time” (qtd. in Hart 403). In one aspect, this bog queen represents the bogs, or Mother Ireland, beckoning the speaker to come to her bed chamber. However, the symbolism is deeper than a mere invitation to discover and lie with the land; the alluring call also references the ancient goddesses—especially the goddess of fertility—to whom sacrifices were performed during the Iron Age. These ancient religious traditions seemed all too fitting a comparison to modern Ireland; for although the Irish Troubles outwardly focused on political ends, the battle raged mainly along religious and ancestral divides. Ireland had long lived with its own double vision, with people of different nationalities and religions coexisting, and these juxtapositions often brought strife. Heaney himself saw and felt this double vision in his childhood as he crossed the Slughorn. The double vision and simultaneous complexities held as one in

“Come to the Bower” are not a mere literary tool, but rather an attempt by Heaney to more accurately portray the multiple identities of Irish life.

Heaney’s *North*, the collection of poetry that “Come to the Bower” first appeared in, has generated large amounts of critical conversation, with many seeking to identify Heaney’s opinion of the political upheaval of the time. Though critics of Heaney have never fully identified this double vision in “Come to the Bower,” they have sensed the intense contradictions it holds, and many have attempted to settle definitively which side of the political battle Heaney was advocating for. Most critics limit their discussion of “Come to the Bower” to a few horrified or disgusted sentences on the grotesque sexualization and quasi-necrophiliac action of the poem (Alexander, Hart, King). Others note the blatant undertones of Irish Nationalism and accuse Heaney of celebrating the Irish Nationalists and extremists, giving them the same reverence and purpose that are bestowed upon religious sacrifices (Alexander 22, Hart 404). However, while these accuse Heaney of allowing his own Catholic background and personal Republican sentiments to give a very one-sided view and solution, other critics believe that Heaney remains politically neutral. They argue that he seeks to show and discuss violence and religious motives but not give his opinion on what political course of action Ireland ought to take (King 100, Hart 388). These critics can sense the contradiction and complexity of “Come to the Bower,” and some have even directly identified Heaney’s sense of double vision and how this helps “comprehend and convey the underlying causes and nature of the Irish conflict” (Foley, Hart). Notwithstanding, none have sought yet to explore how Heaney uses allegory to convey this double vision, nor explored the many layers of the allegory itself. Instead of having one simple intention or purpose, “Come to the Bower” describes the violence from a neutral perspective while also giving voice to potential causes of the violence and thus displaying the call of action from the feminine republican ethos.

This feminine republican ethos or the “dark-bowered queen”—who is either the revolution’s sacrifice-seeking goddess or the raped Mother Ireland—has been long buried in the ground, and the suffering she has seen has turned her “Venus bone” to gold. The bog is what connected Heaney to Ireland, so it’s no surprise that he used the symbolism of bog bodies frequently to show the horrible violence committed to Ireland and by Irishmen, yet the bogs are a unifying factor for him in this divisive battle occurring in his homeland. They are neutral territory upon which he can

speak and address both sides and express his “double vision.” In “Come to the Bower,” we find a characterization of Heaney’s homeland that gives an in-depth insight into the complicated situation in Ireland. This bower is a place where the victim can be both sacrifice and hero; there is power and powerlessness, rage and hope conveyed in these lines. The simultaneous contradictions of this poem are uncomfortable for many readers, and while most chalk it up to the apparent necrophilia that occurs, the fact is that contradictions are uncomfortable. The use of allegory gives Heaney mobility to address multiple, complex topics with a simple image. It allows the poem to be continually interpreted and applied. Poetry in its fluid ability to convey multiple meanings at once allows for an immersive experience into the emotions and events discussed as Heaney searches for an understanding of or a hope for the eventual end of violence.

As Heaney strives to portray multiple facets of Irish history, from long-buried bog bodies to the Irish Troubles, he stands upon metaphorical ground that seeks to blend the jarring differences found in the real world. Just as in “Come to the Bower,” the events that fill our lives are complex and built off long histories and differing emotions. Often, we see with “double vision,” viewing contradicting sides of an issue, experiencing conflicting emotions, and holding such contradictions simultaneously inside ourselves. In Ireland, such an intense coexistence of contradiction spurred violent actions and reactions. We are left to question if this double vision within our lives represents part of the problem or part of the solution. Does holding opposing views at once inherently bring conflict, or does it represent the beginning of healing and hope? The bogs may be neutral territory for Heaney’s words, but neutral does not mean free of danger. We must remember there are both benefits and dangers to seeing with double vision as we seek our own neutral territories upon which to explore the arising complex issues of our own lives.

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