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A Feminist Critique: The Value of a Body

Hilary Weaver

“The Bog Queen”

The poem, “The Bog Queen” by Seamus Heaney is one that, through rhetorical tools of personification, communicates the role of the female body in the later years. While the poem can be seen as a literal illustration of the decay of nature as a reflection of the influences of society’s wasteful actions toward natural resources, it is also a depiction of a society heavily dependent on women as objects of sexual desire. “The Bog Queen,” when analyzed through the lens of feminist criticism, has an apparent message of the sexual roles and their relation to the overall worth of women from the perspective of a patriarchal society.

Heaney takes on the persona of a woman in the poem through personifying the narrator as nature in a state of decay. Through the use of this motif, this role of women is communicated to be one very largely based on sexual worth. The poem begins as the speaker “lay waiting” with a “braille” body “for the creeping influences.” The line “I lay waiting” itself holds the connotation that sex is an assumed duty for the role of women. The woman lies between “demesne” wall and “glass-toothed stone” The word demesne, meaning possession, points to the idea of sexual ownership that men have over women. This line brings about a new meaning to the phrase “lay

waiting” (Heaney 1). It is now clear that the woman might not be waiting on her own accord, but as a result of years of entrapment by a man. The speaker has no other choice but to lie in waiting to fulfill her role as a woman. The metaphor of the narrator’s body being “braille” relates directly to its role as an object of physical desire. In the same stanza, the woman remarks that “dawn suns groped” over her head. This stanza is heavy with the idea that much of her existence is made up of her sexual experiences. These verbs “groped” and “creeping” bring about the images of hands, grasping for sexual satisfaction. The narrator’s body has assumed the role of an object intended for feeling and touching. By calling her body “braille” (5-7) she sees herself as an object that men can understand only through physical contact.

The narrator’s intellectual worth is belittled by those who have “robbed and “barbered and stripped” (41-44) her. Her skull “hibernated” (38) in the wet nest of hair has been removed from others around her, thus communicating the idea that her value as an object of sexual desire is more significant than any other role. This stanza defines the idea that as a woman the narrator is possessed by a patriarchal society. Her role has been defined by her body, which, due to its slow decay, is now of little value to society.

Another very obvious role of women in the poem is that of reproduction. The narrator lay waiting on the gravel bottom, a “jar of spawn fermenting underground (19-20).” This language suggests the decay of the woman’s body as it relates to its abilities to produce life. Heaney communicates the idea that when reproductive organs die, so does a major purpose for the existence of women. This repetition of the line “I lay waiting” is a reference to the concept that

the woman lies waiting to give up an essential part of existence. As she lies in her case of entrapment, the “vital hoard” of reproduction [reduces] in the crock of her pelvis.” The word “vital” conveys an the idea of necessity of reproduction. The word “pelvis” is not proceeded by a possessive word, but rather is reduced to an object as “the pelvis” (23-24). This body part is not seen as belonging to the narrator but rather a vessel for the means of a crucial role of womanhood. Once this role becomes irrelevant, so does the means of its existence. Women’s role in society as the producers of new life is visibly communicated through the death of that ability. A later line of the poem refers to the narrator’s hair as a “slimy birth cord” (51) that has been cut. In this sense, the birth cord relates to an ability to thrive as a being of importance. Through a feminist lens, Heaney’s clearly states that women are worth very little without the ability to reproduce.

The portrayal of women as objects becomes apparent in the lines that feature material possessions in relation to the narrator’s slow decay of sexual desire and reproductive capabilities. In the seventh stanza, she mentions that her “diadem grew carious” This statement carries within it the concept that possessions define the speaker. The “diadem” (25) represents a symbol of honor and distinction and its decay communicates the end to that honor. Women’s valued role as objects of sexual desire place a certain value on their existence. When this honorable role no longer exists, its relevance slowly fades. The “gemstones” (26) that drop from her crown of honor illustrate this prolonged decay. The slow death of sexual value elevates the pain that accompanies the experience. The speaker wears a sash, another symbol of honor that has turned back and is

wrinkling. The sash that lies across her chest communicates the idea that her very possessions illustrate her rotting value as a human being. The black sash, and “stitchworks” which lie across her heart, is a “black glacier.” This image of a slowly melting natural formation exemplifies the transformation of the speaker’s natural existence to that of a slowly decaying object.

The narrator’s decay is also closely related to the cold dead, nature of winter. Her body remains a main focal point of the poem as the narrator states that she “knew winter cold like the nuzzle of fjords” at her “thighs.” She remarks that the “seeps of winter digested” (29-32) her. This image relates to the narrator’s body being completely consumed by her inability to maintain her reproductive duties. The image of cold, numbing water working its way up on the body of the narrator is another illustration of her slow decent to a frigid sexual status. Her body becomes “heavy” as it sinks into the numb state of sexual demise.

The role of women in Heaney’s “The Bog Queen” is very largely defined by the female physique and the slow decline in value that the narrator’s body assumes. From the perspective of a feminist criticism, the poem’s definition of women’s roles in society is based on the female body as an object of sexual desire. Her body becomes her only valuable possession and as she loses her sexual appeal, she loses her reason to live. Heaney makes the point that while death is a natural process, the death of sexual desire is a result of the oppressive nature of a society that views women from the value of their ability to reproduce. The dark, cold and tattered material objects discussed in the poem illustrate a purpose that is void in the life of the narrator and the lives of women in society. These motifs

of decay and frigidness are an extension of the idea that women are no longer valuable to society after their sexual desire ceases to exist.

Reference List

Heaney, Seamus. "The Bog Queen." *North: Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1975. Print.

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