The Tollund Man

SUMMARY

One day the speaker would like to go to Denmark to visit the Tollund Man, a mummified Iron Age man who was sacrificed to ancient gods. The speaker imagines admiring the Tollund Man's head (stained as brown as the peat bog that preserved it), his gentle, seed-shaped eyelids, and his pointy leather cap.

Near the spot where the Tollund Man was found (with his last meal of porridge still preserved in his belly and no clothes on except for his hat, a belt, and the noose he was strangled with), the speaker imagines standing and thinking for a long time. The Tollund Man, the speaker imagines, was a human sacrifice to a pagan goddess.

That goddess tightened the "necklace" of the noose around the Tollund Man's neck and welcomed him into the dark bog. The bog's waters preserved the Tollund Man as if he were an incorruptible Catholic saint.

He was preserved until people cutting peat discovered him, like a treasure, in their maze-like diggings. Now, he rests safely in a museum in the town of Aarhus.

Thinking of the Tollund Man, the speaker feels on the verge of doing something sacrilegious: blessing the bog as if it were a church, and praying to the Tollund Man as if he were a saint.

The speaker would ask the Tollund Man to resurrect all the people who have died in the Irish Troubles, bringing murdered farmworkers back to life.

The speaker would ask the Tollund Man to reconstruct all the shredded bodies of four brothers who were dragged to death behind a train.

The speaker imagines driving down Danish roads feeling about the same way that the Tollund Man did on his way to his execution: sad and strangely free.

The speaker would say the names of Danish towns aloud and get confused directions from the locals, whose language the speaker doesn't understand.

Out in the Jutland area, where people used to make blood sacrifices, the speaker imagines feeling lost and sad—but also as if in familiar territory.

THEMES

VIOLENCE, RELIGION, AND HISTORY

Imagining a visit to the mummified corpse of the "Tollund Man"—a famous Iron Age body that was found almost perfectly preserved in a peat bog—the poem's speaker reflects on humanity's legacy of violence. Knowing that the Tollund Man was likely killed as a religious sacrifice, the speaker is reminded of all the people who have died in the Troubles, a long-running and bloody war between Ireland's Protestant and Catholic factions. Religious violence, the poem suggests, is nothing new: it's an enduring (and bewildering) human tragedy.

The preserved Tollund Man, the speaker notes, is a record of an ancient religious killing: he was sacrificed to "the goddess" thousands of years ago. But his well-preserved face, with its "mild," gentle expression, is also a reminder that he was once a real, live human being, not just a mythic figure from a dark past.

In fact, the Tollund Man's predicament feels eerily familiar and contemporary, reminding the speaker of the Troubles. Remembering not-so-distant incidents in which Irish people of different religious backgrounds slaughtered each other in their own homes or dragged each other to their deaths "for miles along the lines" of railways, the speaker observes that violence is in no way a relic of history. The speaker even imagines himself in the Tollund Man's place: just one more person in a world in which people kill each other in God's (or the gods') name.

Visiting the Tollund Man, the speaker imagines, would thus leave him feeling "unhappy and at home": the old corpse's testimony that religious belief can drive ordinary people to violence will feel all too familiar to him. But, he imagines, he'll feel "lost," too, sadly bewildered about why this should be so. And the fact that the speaker would have to visit Denmark to see the Tollund Man underlines both these points: this foreign country, where he doesn't even understand the language, has the same legacy of religious violence as anywhere else in the world.

When the speaker gets the "blasphem[ous]" urge to treat the gentle-faced Tollund Man like a miraculously preserved Catholic saint, praying to him to resurrect all the Irish dead of the Troubles, he thus appeals to a kind of common humanity that he hopes *also* might endure across generations, in spite of senseless killing.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20
- Lines 21-32
- Lines 33-44

THE TRAGEDY OF FUTILE SACRIFICE

The speaker of this poem imagines visiting the "Tollund Man," whose ancient, mummified body bears the marks of human sacrifice: he was killed, scholars speculate,

in an Iron Age religious ritual that was meant to make the land fertile. Thinking of this body, the speaker reflects on all the lives that have been lost to similar sacrifices over human history, right up to the 20th century. In particular, he thinks of the Troubles, a religious and political war between Catholics and Protestants that killed thousands of Irish people. To the speaker, such sacrifices are particularly heartbreaking because they don't, in his view, actually achieve any of the goals they hope to.

The speaker puts himself in the Tollund Man's shoes, imagining that he was a more or less willing self-sacrifice. With his "mild" eyes and his gentle expression, the Tollund Man seems resigned to being the "bridegroom to the goddess." He might have been "sad" as he was carried off to his execution—but the speaker imagines he would also have felt a kind of "freedom" in serving his gods and his people. Perhaps he even felt that being a human sacrifice made him special or holy. And the speaker's vision of his preserved corpse as a "saint's kept body" suggests that such beliefs in the value of sacrifice persist: modern-day Catholics still preserve and venerate the mummified bodies of saints and martyrs.

But the speaker's grim memories of the "scattered," shredded bodies of Irish people killed in the Troubles suggest that he doesn't put much stock in the idea of holy sacrifices. When he thinks of the Irish dead—who died defending their vision of either an independent Ireland or a united Britain—he only sees horrors: "four young brothers" dragged to death on train tracks and the battered "flesh of laborers" rotting on their own farms. These deaths, in the speaker's view, aren't just appalling: they're utterly pointless, sacrifices that bring about none of the change they aim for.

As the speaker imagines traveling the "old man-killing parishes" of Denmark, then, he feels both "unhappy and at home," knowing that, in one way or another, people have been making human sacrifices for centuries. And such sacrifices, so laden with meaning for the people who lay down their lives, ring hollow in the long view: the crops don't grow any better, and Ireland doesn't change.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20
- Lines 21-32
- Lines 33-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Some day I ...
... pointed skin cap.

"The Tollund Man" begins in the speaker's imagination. "Some day," the speaker thinks, he'd like to visit "Aarhus," the city in Denmark where the Tollund Man himself was discovered in 1950.

This is an allusion to a famous bog body (that is, one of several Iron Age mummies discovered in peat bogs). The Tollund Man is one of the best-preserved of all of these bodies; though he's 2,400 years old, visitors to the museum where he rests can still see the stubble on his chin—and the noose around his neck. Many researchers believe that he was strangled as part of a religious ritual, a human sacrifice to appease nature gods.

But at the outset of the poem, the speaker isn't focused so much on the Tollund Man's grim fate. Instead, he's looking at his calm, gentle face. The mummy's skin is stained "peat-brown," and his closed eyelids make the speaker think of "mild pods," a metaphor that suggests the Tollund Man looks a lot like the old, rich, partly-decayed vegetation of the peat bog he was found in. It's as if he himself has become a kind of earth god.

But if he looks strange and earthy, he also looks very human. He's wearing a "pointed skin cap"—an everyday detail that reminds readers both of his humanity and his great age. (One doesn't see too many pointed skin caps on the street these days.) And those seed-pod eyes are "mild" and gentle, as if he were peacefully sleeping.

The speaker's careful imagery in this first stanza suggests that he's already spent quite a bit of time looking at the Tollund Man. Remember, he's only imagining a visit to Aarhus here; all his previous acquaintance with the Tollund Man must have been through photographs. He seems to have developed a fascination with this astonishing mummy from afar. And his interest isn't purely archaeological: even his dream of visiting the Tollund Man already sounds rather like a religious pilgrimage.

This poem will trace the speaker's reflections on Tollund Man—reflections that will travel from the Iron Age right up to 20th-century Ireland, where, in the speaker's unhappy opinion, some version of human sacrifice is still going on.

LINES 5-11

In the flat ...
... a long time.

As the speaker continues to imagine his future visit to the Tollund Man, he reveals just how much he's learned about this long-dead man.

He clearly knows plenty about the circumstances surrounding the Tollund Man's discovery: he's familiar not just with the "flat country [...] where they dug him out," but with the scientific investigations that found the Tollund Man's last meal was a "gruel of winter seeds"—a meager diet that might suggest he was sacrificed so that the gods would make the frozen winter landscape fertile again. He also knows that the Tollund Man was discovered "naked," wearing only a "cap," a "girdle" (or belt),

and the "noose" he was strangled with.

This passage provides a good example of the poem's form. Here, one long sentence runs across two quatrains (or four-line stanzas), broken up into short, roughly even lines. This fits the speaker's meditative free verse into a regular order. In other words, the poem's shape imposes a rigorous pattern on more organic-feeling language.

That formal choice will start to look pretty significant as the poem goes on. As the speaker begins to describe what happened to the Tollund Man, he'll also begin thinking about the ways that ancient patterns of human *behavior* repeat over and over—and cut right through individual lives.

Take a look at the speaker's grammar at the beginning of the third stanza:

> Naked except for
> The cap, noose and girdle,
> I will stand a long time.

This stanza closes the sentence that started in the previous stanza. But set apart like this, these lines could also suggest it's the *speaker*, not the Tollund Man, who's "naked" out in the "flat country." It's as if he's starting to feel himself in the Tollund Man's place, deeply imagining what it might have been like on the day of his execution.

LINES 12-20

> *Bridegroom to the ...*
> *... Reposes at Aarhus.*

Having started to imagine himself in the Tollund Man's shoes, the speaker paints a picture of what happened on the day the Tollund Man died.

The Tollund Man, the speaker imagines, was sacrificed as a "bridegroom to the goddess," a new spouse for a dangerous deity. This goddess bestowed a grim wedding present on him: a metaphorical "torc" (or necklace) that is in fact a noose. The alliterative line that describes how she "tightened her torc" around his neck evokes how the Tollund Man choked to death: those close-set /t/ sounds themselves feel tight and choking.

This is all pretty frightening stuff. But in the speaker's imagination, the Tollund Man might have felt, not just terrified, but honored to be sacrificed. Becoming "bridegroom to the goddess" sounds like a lofty promotion for a guy who's been living off "gruel." And the image of the goddess "open[ing] her fen" to him hints at some sinister sexuality.

And of course, this fen has given him a kind of immortality, its "dark juices" preserving his dead body for millennia. He even makes the speaker think of "a saint's kept body"—an allusion to the Catholic practice of venerating and displaying saints' corpses.

That allusion will become important. It isn't just the people of a far-away ancient world, the speaker will go on to suggest, who believe that there can be something honorable about human sacrifice—particularly in the name of the gods.

LINES 17-20

> *Trove of the ...*
> *... Reposes at Aarhus.*

Even now, the speaker continues, the Tollund Man's body feels valuable and special: the "turfcutters" who found him in their "honeycombed workings" (that is, their complex, elaborate diggings) treat him like a treasure "trove." The alliteration and consonance of /t/ sounds here ("Trove of the turfcutters") again brings the poem's imagery to life on the page. The description of their "workings" as resembling a "honeycomb," meanwhile, links human beings to the earth.

The closing lines of this section echo the opening lines, again returning to "Aarhus," where the Tollund Man "reposes," or calmly rests, in dignified peace. This return to the beginning suggests that the speaker has gone on a wild inner journey: from imagining the Tollund Man in a glass museum case, to standing in his shoes as he goes to his death, all through the centuries and back again.

These lines also complete the first section of the poem, which has been concerned with a detailed description of the Tollund Man.

LINES 21-24

> *I could risk ...*
> *... to make germinate*

In the poem's first section, the speaker looked at the Tollund Man from a number of angles, seeing him as a museum display, a fellow human being facing death, and a religious figure. Now, he goes deeper into that last perspective—or nearly does.

The speaker is just on the verge of praying to the Tollund Man—to declaring the "cauldron bog" that preserved him to be sacred ground and asking him for help, as one might pray to a saint. The alliteration, consonance, and assonance of "Consecrate the cauldron bog" elevates the speaker's language at this moment, making it sound almost like that prayer he's on the verge of making.

The reference to germination, meanwhile, alludes to the reason the Tollund Man was probably sacrificed in the first place: as part of a ritual meant to help crops grow. Yet notice how this final line of the stanza is enjambed: it's not clear yet what the speaker was to "germinate," or sprout seeds, and won't be until the next stanza.

But the speaker is aware that to do any such thing would "risk blasphemy," words that suggest that the speaker's own Christianity is as powerful a presence in his life as the "goddess" was in the Tollund Man's world..

LINES 25-28

The scattered, ambushed ...
... in the farmyards,

The speaker continues the enjambed line the closed the previous stanza, now telling readers what he would pray "to make germinate." The speaker wants to beg the Tollund Man to "make germinate" the "scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers": that is, to make the mangled, murdered bodies of ordinary people spring back to life.

The speaker has a particular group of the dead in mind here: the people who were killed during the Troubles, the 20th-century war between Irish Protestants (who mostly wanted Northern Ireland to remain a part of the United Kingdom) and Irish Catholics (who mostly wanted Northern Ireland to join the south and form a united Irish nation). While this conflict is often described as a religious one, religion was just one part of the complex political and cultural sectarianism that split Ireland apart. The descriptions that follow all refer to genuine news photographs or stories that Heaney, who lived in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, encountered himself.

The Irish dead the speaker describes here are thus, like the Tollund Man, a kind of sacrifice: people who were murdered in the name of religious and political beliefs. Perhaps the Tollund Man is the right guy to pray to, in that case, because he knows the territory—he can relate. But he also doesn't have skin in the game: he's pre-Christian!

The speaker's horror and sorrow over the Irish dead are clear in his imagery here. The image of "stockinged corpses"—caught off guard wearing just their socks, perhaps hauled out of bed—"laid out" in their own "farmyards" makes it clear just how heartless these murders were. Like the Tollund Man's "pointed skin cap" in the first section, those "stocking[s]" remind readers that the dead were ordinary people.

LINES 29-32

Tell-tale skin and ...
... along the lines.

The speaker ends his not-quite-a-prayer with a hope that the Tollund Man might resurrect a few people in particular: "four young brothers" who were dragged to terrible deaths along railroad tracks.

Listen to the sounds the speaker uses in these grisly lines:

> Tell-tale skin and teeth
> Flecking the sleepers

There's a lot going on here—/t/ and /s/ alliteration; /k/ and /l/ consonance; /ee/ assonance. Taken all together, these hissing, slithering, biting consonants and queasy, drawn-out vowels evoke just how ugly these brothers' deaths were. "Trailed [...] along the lines," these young men were reduced to slimy scraps of flesh.

Also notice the speaker's complex grammar here. It's not the "sleepers" (or railroad ties) that belong to the "brothers": it's the "skin and teeth." But the speaker's phrasing here suggests that the brothers' bodies were so mutilated that it became hard to tell where the "sleepers" ended and the corpses began.

These horrific images are worse than anything the speaker imagined for the Tollund Man: he, at least, could imagine his noose as a ceremonial "torc." Human sacrifice, this section of the poem suggests, isn't a relic of the past. It's still happening to this very day. Every one of those unfortunate brothers died in the name of a religious or a political belief. And to the speaker, there's nothing glorious or redemptive about that. These boys were painfully "young," and their deaths were not holy martyrdoms, but atrocities. The "tale" their bodies "tell" isn't a pretty one.

LINES 33-40

Something of his ...
... knowing their tongue.

In the third and final section of the poem, the speaker turns away from his appalled reflections on the Irish dead and returns to his imagined visit to the Tollund Man. His experience of the Troubles shines a new light on this journey.

In hoping to go see the Tollund Man, the speaker seems almost to be making a religious pilgrimage—but not an especially hopeful one. He might pray to the Tollund Man to resurrect all those who have been murdered in the name of God (or the gods, for that matter). But he might also just want to look this corpse in the face, to really understand that there's nothing new in the kind of violence he's seen during the Troubles. That knowledge, he thinks, will give him the same "sad freedom" he imagines the Tollund Man felt as he "rode the tumbril" (or executioner's cart) toward his death.

These stanzas emphasize both the similarities and the differences between the speaker's native Ireland and Denmark. As the speaker imagines driving across the Danish countryside, he's sure he'll feel confused and lost: he doesn't know the "tongue," the language, and he'll have to rely on "the pointing hands / Of country people" to get where he's going.

But those "country people" might well take readers back to the Irish "labourers" whose "stockinged corpses" the speaker described back in the second section. And even the landscape might feel rather familiar: Ireland, like Denmark, is full of peat bogs, and those peat bogs are also "trove[s]" of ancient bodies.

In other words: even when the speaker's in a completely different country, one where he's a stranger, a lot of things feel the same. People, these lines suggest, are pretty much the same across generations and miles: and wherever there's a bog, there's likely a bog body, a person who has died in the name of religion.

Take a look at the speaker's asyndeton here:

> Saying the names
> Tollund, || Grauballe, || Nebelgard,

Presented without any conjunctions, this list of foreign place names sounds like a weary list that isn't over yet: in any of these strange towns, the speaker suggests, one can count on finding violence, whether historical or contemporary.

LINES 41-44

> *Out here in ...*
> *... and at home.*

Wherever one is in the world, the speaker concludes, one will always find oneself in the "old man-killing parishes." Everywhere humans live is a place where people have justified killed each other, believing their murders are righteous, meaningful, or holy. His use of the word "parishes" here is darkly ironic: a "parish" is a religious district, and the implication is that "man-killing" has always fallen under the jurisdiction of those who claim to speak for the gods.

In Denmark, then, on his way to see ancient proof of this sad reality, the speaker imagines:

> I will feel lost,
> Unhappy and at home.

There's a literal level of meaning here: the speaker will feel "lost" because, as he's just finished saying, he doesn't speak the language or know quite where he's going. But he'll also feel *at a loss*, unable to understand or explain to himself why generations of people should shed so much blood for such empty reasons.

And that will make him feel both "unhappy and at home"—and, perhaps, unhappy *because* he feels so at home. The culture that killed the Tollund Man feels as immediate and familiar to him as the morning newspaper.

SYMBOLS

THE TOLLUND MAN

The Tollund Man himself is a symbol of all the people who have ever died fruitless deaths in the name of a religious or political belief.

Sacrified to a bloodthirsty "goddess," the Tollund Man reminds the speaker of all the young Irish dead of the Troubles. Like them, he might well have gone to his death believing that it had a purpose or a meaning—a meaning that, in the speaker's opinion, isn't nearly as valuable as any single human life.

In both his calm humanity and his tragic fate, the Tollund Man thus becomes an image of generations of lost lives.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-20:** "Some day I will go to Aarhus / To see his peat-brown head, / The mild pods of his eye-lids, / His pointed skin cap. / In the flat country near by / Where they dug him out, / His last gruel of winter seeds / Caked in his stomach, / Naked except for / The cap, noose and girdle, / I will stand a long time. / Bridegroom to the goddess, / She tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's kept body, / Trove of the turfcutters' / Honeycombed workings. / Now his stained face / Reposes at Aarhus."
- **Lines 23-26:** "pray / Him to make germinate / The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers,"
- **Lines 33-34:** "Something of his sad freedom / As he rode the tumbril"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery helps readers to feel the speaker's fascination with the Tollund Man, and his horror over the Troubles.

The poem begins with a portrait of Tollund Man. Preserved in a bog for millennia, he seems almost to have become part of the earth: his skin is the same "peat-brown" as the earth around him, and his eyelids have become "mild pods," like the ancient plant matter that makes up peat. His "pointed skin cap" feels earthy, too—and also marks him out as someone from a distant, long-vanished culture.

This imagery paints the Tollund Man, not just as an earthy figure, but as a gentle one. Anyone who's seen a picture of the Tollund Man will know that he looks as if he were sleeping; the speaker's attention to his "mild" eyelids captures that peaceful feeling.

The poem's next images, however, paint a more forensic picture. The speaker knows that the Tollund Man's "last gruel" was "caked in his stomach," preserved (and compressed) just like his flesh. But of course, one can't cut open a sleeping person's stomach to find out what they ate. This image underlines Tollund Man's emphatic deadness.

The Tollund Man isn't just a peaceful sleeper or a crime scene body, however: he's also a religious sacrifice. When the speaker imagines how the "goddess" allowed the "dark juices" of the bog to slowly stew the Tollund Man, his imagery suggests that those "dark juices" might be, not just literally dark-colored, but full of sinister magic.

After this portrait of the Tollund Man as a calm sleeper, a crime victim, and a sacrifice, the speaker's pictures of the Irish dead

feel a lot simpler and grimmer. Like the Tollund Man, some of these figures are marked by their clothing: they're "stockinged corpses," looking vulnerable in their socks as they lie dead in their own "farmyards." Some, though, have been reduced to "tell-tale skin and teeth / Flecking the sleepers"—mere stains and scraps, speckling the railroad upon which they were dragged to death.

The poem's imagery thus helps readers to imagine all these different (and similar) dead bodies: their shared humanity and their shared suffering.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "his peat-brown head, / The mild pods of his eye-lids, / His pointed skin cap."
- **Lines 7-8:** "His last gruel of winter seeds / Caked in his stomach,"
- **Lines 15-20:** "Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's kept body, / Trove of the turfcutters' / Honeycombed workings. / Now his stained face / Reposes at Aarhus."
- **Lines 27-28:** "Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards,"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Tell-tale skin and teeth / Flecking the sleepers"

ALLUSION

The poem makes a few different allusion to religious beliefs, to the Troubles, and to bog bodies.

The poem's central allusion, of course, is to the Tollund Man himself. When the speaker describes the Tollund Man's "peat-brown head" and "pointed skin cap," he's counting on readers to have some idea that he's referring to a famous Iron Age bog mummy. The allusion to the Tollund Man sets up the poem's whole mood, evoking both the speaker's sympathy and his bewilderment:

- Because the Tollund Man is so well-preserved, the speaker feels a human connection to him: it's as if the Tollund Man might open his eyes and say hello at any moment.
- And because the Tollund Man was likely killed in a religious ritual, the speaker has to reckon with the fact that people have been fruitlessly sacrificing each other for millennia.

These thoughts lead the speaker into his allusions to ancient and contemporary religious beliefs. Describing the "goddess" who "tightened her torc" on the Tollund Man's neck, the speaker paints a specific cultural picture: a "torc" was a kind of necklace made from a metal band, and it's a type of jewelry especially associated with the cultures of the Iron Age in northern Europe. (Here, it's also a metaphor for a noose!) The kind of "goddess" who accepts human sacrifices and bestows dangerous torcs clearly belongs to a mysterious, pre-Christian past.

But the speaker depicts this goddess's actions in Christian terms. When he speaks of the Tollund Man's resemblance to a "saint's kept body," he's alluding to the Catholic belief that saints can be identified, in part, by the fact their corpses don't rot. Catholic churches to this day preserve saint's bodies (or body parts) as holy relics; the mummified head of St. Catherine of Siena is one famous example. The juxtaposition of these two allusions suggests that the speaker sees more than a little continuity between the religious beliefs (and behaviors) of the past and the present. When he worries that he'd "risk blasphemy" by praying to the Tollund Man, he similarly hints that his own contemporary Catholicism has its own fears, restrictions, and dangers.

The poem's final allusions are grim and sad. In his descriptions of "stockinged corpses" and the mangled bodies of "four young brothers" who were dragged to death along the train tracks, the speaker is referring to the modern-day atrocities of the Troubles. These deaths, the poem suggests, are as much a futile human sacrifice as the Tollund Man's long-ago hanging.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Some day I will go to Aarhus / To see his peat-brown head, / The mild pods of his eye-lids, / His pointed skin cap."
- **Lines 12-16:** "Bridegroom to the goddess, / She tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's kept body,"
- **Lines 21-24:** "I could risk blasphemy, / Consecrate the cauldron bog / Our holy ground and pray / Him to make germinate"
- **Lines 25-32:** "The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers, / Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards, / Tell-tale skin and teeth / Flecking the sleepers / Of four young brothers, trailed / For miles along the lines."

METAPHOR

The speaker uses only two metaphors, but they both bring a lot to the poem's mood and tone.

In the first of these metaphors, the speaker describes the Tollund Man's closed eyelids as "mild pods." This image suggests both that the Tollund Man looks "mild," gentle, and placid (as indeed he does)—and that his long stewing in the peat bog seems to have made him into a scrap of peaty vegetation himself. Peat is made from ancient plants, slowly and incompletely decaying in the anaerobic waters of a swamp; the Tollund Man's eyes, this metaphor says, blend right in with the grasses and seeds that surrounded and preserved him. He looks at once calm and human, and like some primitive earth

god.

The second metaphor is rather more sinister. Here, the speaker imagines how the Tollund Man's "goddess" accepted him as a sacrifice: "she tightened her torc on him." That "torc," which sounds almost like an honorary gift, is no necklace: it's a metaphor for the noose with which the Tollund Man was strangled. This image helps to evoke how Tollund Man and his culture might have felt about human sacrifice. Being the sacrificial victim, the speaker imagines, could well have meant feeling honored and chosen.

But in this case, as in the case of all the modern-day people who "sacrifice" themselves to a cause, the speaker seems to find this thought disturbing, even delusional. Calling a noose a "torc" can't take away the fact that it's a murder weapon.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "The mild pods of his eye-lids,"
- **Line 13:** "She tightened her torc on him"

ASYNDETON

Moments of asyndeton give the poem's free verse rhythm and power.

The asyndeton in the first stanza is one excellent example:

> To see his peat-brown head,
> The mild pods of his eye-lids,
> His pointed skin cap.

The lack of conjunctions here helps the poem to feel almost ritualistic: more like an incantation than a description. Think how differently this passage would land if the last line read "and his pointed skin cap": it'd feel much more like a casual list of "stuff the Tollund Man has." Instead, the asyndeton makes it feel as if the speaker's fascinated eyes are landing on each of the Tollund Man's features one by one, taking them in. Asyndeton creates a tone of respectful awe.

Something similar happens in the poem's second section. Lines 25-32 ("The scattered [...] the lines") again use asyndeton to suggest fascination—but this time, it's horrified fascination, as the speaker describes the corpses of Irish people who were murdered during the Troubles. The asyndeton here makes the speaker sound so appalled that he can barely put what he's seen into orderly, everyday sentences. All he can do is string together short, shocking descriptions of mangled bodies, one after another.

In the final section, asyndeton plays a gentler and more melancholy role, helping the speaker to describe his imagined drive through Denmark. The lack of conjunctions in lines 33-40 ("Something of [...] their tongue") works with the speaker's descriptions of making a journey through a strange and foreign country: asyndeton here makes this journey feel drawn-out and reflective.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Some day I will go to Aarhus / To see his peat-brown head, / The mild pods of his eye-lids, / His pointed skin cap."
- **Lines 25-32:** "The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers, / Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards, / Tell-tale skin and teeth / Flecking the sleepers / Of four young brothers, trailed / For miles along the lines."
- **Lines 33-40:** "Something of his sad freedom / As he rode the tumbril / Should come to me, driving, / Saying the names / Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard, / Watching the pointing hands / Of country people, / Not knowing their tongue."

ENJAMBMENT

Moments of enjambment give the poem energy and urgency.

Enjambments cluster most densely in the poem's central section, in which the speaker imagines praying to the Tollund Man to resurrect the Irish dead of the Troubles. Nearly every line in this three-stanza passage is enjambed, giving the speaker's prayers a rushing, pressured tone.

Listen to the way enjambments work in this stanza, for instance:

> Tell-tale skin and teeth
> Flecking the sleepers
> Of four young brothers, trailed
> For miles along the lines.

Enjambment helps this stanza—built from one long sentence—to feel as stretched-out as the bloodstained train tracks it describes. It also works with the stanza's strange grammar. The line "flecking the sleepers" (that is, speckling the railroad ties) runs straight into the line "of four young brothers," making it seem for a moment as if it's the *sleepers*, not the "skin and teeth," that belong to those unfortunate "brothers." The enjambments here thus help to create an unsettling picture of bodies so mashed into the train tracks that it's hard to tell where bodies end and tracks begin.

Earlier on, enjambments also serve the poem's rhythm. The poem's natural, organic-feeling free verse is always broken up into quatrains with roughly equal line lengths, creating plenty of enjambments. This gives the whole poem a steady pulse in spite of its lack of a regular meter:

> His last gruel of winter seeds
> Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,

The enjambments here break this sentence into lines with two or three strong stresses each, giving the poem an ominous, drumbeat rhythm as it works up to a description of the Tollund Man's execution.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "seeds / Caked"
- **Lines 9-10:** "for / The"
- **Lines 13-14:** "him / And"
- **Lines 15-16:** "working / Him"
- **Lines 17-18:** "turfcutters' / Honeycombed"
- **Lines 19-20:** "face / Reposes"
- **Lines 22-23:** "bog / Our"
- **Lines 23-24:** "pray / Him"
- **Lines 24-25:** "germinate / The"
- **Lines 25-26:** "ambushed / Flesh"
- **Lines 27-28:** "corpses / Laid"
- **Lines 29-30:** "teeth / Flecking"
- **Lines 30-31:** "sleepers / Of"
- **Lines 31-32:** "trailed / For"
- **Lines 33-34:** "freedom / As"
- **Lines 34-35:** "tumbril / Should"
- **Lines 36-37:** "names / Tollund"
- **Lines 38-39:** "hands / Of"
- **Lines 41-42:** "Jutland / In"
- **Lines 42-43:** "parishes / I"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives the poem's language force and focus.

For instance, look at the string of /p/ sounds that appear in the first stanza:

To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap.

These compact, plosive sounds make each of the Tollund Man's features pop, one by one—as if the speaker is in turn focusing on the body's "stained," leathery skin, its closed eyes, and its hat.

Later, the alliterative /t/ sounds of "She tightened her torc on him" draws attention to a grim metaphor: the "torc" (or necklace) the "goddess" bestows on the Tollund Man is, in fact, a noose. Coming in quick succession, those /t/ sounds feel appropriately tight and choking.

And listen to the sounds in this grisly passage:

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers,

The sharp, biting /t/ sounds here mix with a hissing sibilant /s/ and a forceful /f/ to make this passage sound as nasty as the horrible sights it describes.

All the examples above don't just create evocative sounds: they give the poem some punchy rhythm. Heaney is borrowing a technique from the Old English poetry he loved, here: Anglo-Saxon verse often used pronounced alliteration to stress important words.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "peat"
- **Line 3:** "pods"
- **Line 4:** "pointed"
- **Line 9:** "Naked"
- **Line 10:** "noose"
- **Line 13:** "tightened," "torc"
- **Line 17:** "Trove," "turfcutters"
- **Line 22:** "Consecrate," "cauldron"
- **Line 29:** "Tell-tale," "skin," "teeth"
- **Line 30:** "Flecking," "sleepers"
- **Line 31:** "four"
- **Line 33:** "Something," "sad"
- **Line 38:** "pointing"
- **Line 39:** "people"
- **Line 40:** "Not knowing"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the poem moments of hypnotic harmony.

For instance, listen to the alternating vowel sounds in these lines:

Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.

There's a weaving pattern of assonant sounds here: the speaker alternates between the long /oh/ of "trove" and "honeycombed" and the neutral /er/ of "turfcutters" and "workings" (strengthened by /r/ consonance). These back-and-forth sounds give these lines a slow, musical swing that makes them sound almost like a spell—perhaps even like the ancient chants that might have accompanied the Tollund Man's execution.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "see," "peat"
- **Line 3:** "mild," "eye"
- **Line 8:** "Caked"

- **Line 9:** "Naked"
- **Line 17:** "Trove," "turfcutters"
- **Line 18:** "Honeycombed," "workings"
- **Line 19:** "stained face"
- **Line 22:** "cauldron bog"
- **Line 25:** "scattered," "ambushed"
- **Line 29:** "teeth"
- **Line 30:** "sleepers"
- **Line 31:** "young brothers"
- **Line 32:** "miles," "lines"
- **Line 36:** "Saying," "names"
- **Line 39:** "country"
- **Line 40:** "tongue"

VOCABULARY

Peat (Line 2) - A kind of thick soil created when grasses and plants slowly and incompletely decay in a bog or swamp.

Torc (Line 13) - A kind of necklace made of a curved band of metal.

Fen (Line 14) - A bog or swamp. Peat fens, which don't contain a lot of oxygen, do a great job of preserving and mummifying things that might otherwise rot.

A saint's kept body (Lines 15-16) - These words allude to a Catholic belief that saints' corpses remain "incorrupt"—that is, undecayed.

Turfcutters (Lines 17-18) - People who harvest peat from bogs for a living. (Peat makes a good fuel.)

Blasphemy (Line 21) - Speaking sacrilegiously about holy or religious subjects.

Consecrate (Line 22) - To bless something or declare it sacred. For example, one "consecrates" a building to officially make it a church, and some kinds of Catholic nuns call themselves "consecrated sisters."

Germinate (Lines 23-24) - The word "germinate" is usually a verb that means "to sprout, to begin growing." But Heaney uses the word as an adjective here, suggesting that the Tollund Man might, like a saint, bring the bodies of people killed by religious violence back to life, making them "germinate" in the sense of "full of new life."

Sleepers (Line 30) - Railroad ties—the wooden beams that cross between the rails.

Lines (Lines 31-32) - Branches of a railway.

Tumbril (Line 34) - A cart, especially one used to carry condemned people to their executions.

Parishes (Line 42) - Religious jurisdictions or districts.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Tollund Man" is built from eleven four-line stanzas (or quatrains), divided into three sections.

The sections act rather like a three-act play:

- In the first section, the speaker imagines a visit to the Tollund Man's body in Denmark—and then what it might have been like to *be* the Tollund Man on the day of his execution.
- In the second section, the speaker connects the Tollund Man to the Irish dead of the Troubles—a different (and yet horribly similar) kind of human sacrifice.
- And in the third section, the speaker imagines driving across the Danish countryside, feeling both "lost" in this foreign land and "unhapp[ily] [...] at home." He knows that, wherever one goes in the world, people have killed each other in the name of supposedly righteous causes.

Within these different "acts," the drumbeat constancy of the quatrains underlines the speaker's central point: religious and political murder just keeps happening, essentially the same across time and space.

The steady quatrains also feel *restrictive*: they often break sentences or ideas in unlikely places, cutting across the speaker's train of thought. This choice might evoke the way that distinct, individual, one-of-a-kind human beings find themselves falling into (or forced into) ancient patterns of behavior.

METER

"The Tollund Man" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a regular meter. Instead, a varied rhythm makes the speaker's voice feel down-to-earth, conversational, and thoughtful.

However, from time to time, the poem quietly drops into accentual meter: that is, meter that doesn't stick to any one metrical foot, but instead uses a certain number of stressed syllables per line. This poem chooses accentual dimeter, lines with two stresses apiece. Here's how that sounds:

> The scattered, ambushed
> Flesh of labourers,
> Stockinged corpses

These moments of accentual meter fit right in with the poem's (and the poet's!) interest in the ancient world. Accentual meter is the oldest form of meter there is, and it turns up everywhere from nursery rhymes to Old English epics like *Beowulf* (which, not coincidentally, Heaney translated).

The dimeter here is also evocative, creating a pulsing, pounding rhythm like an executioner's drum or a terrified heartbeat.

When accentual meter breaks into the poem's free verse, it thus both creates moments of drama, and reminds readers that this poem is dealing with tragedies as old as humanity.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, "The Tollund Man" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. But the speaker does use plenty of powerful repeated sounds, giving the poem some stern music.

For instance, listen to the rhythmic alliteration, assonance, and consonance in the first stanza:

> Some day I will go to Aarhus
> To see his peat-brown head,
> The mild pods of his eye-lids,
> His pointed skin cap.

The strong alliterative /p/ sound helps to give lines 2-4 a point-by-point quality, as if the speaker is considering each of the Tollund Man's features, one after the other. The /d/ consonance brings words to a quiet-but-firm close that suggests the stillness of a museum. And long /ee/ and /i/ assonance makes the lines feel balanced and harmonious. The Tollund Man's peaceful (and even beautiful) face, these sounds suggest, inspires hushed reverence.

SPEAKER

Seamus Heaney often wrote first-person poetry from his own perspective, and the melancholy Irish speaker of "The Tollund Man" seems likely to be a version of Heaney himself. Heaney became fascinated with bog bodies in the 1970s, and wrote a whole series of poems relating these Iron Age mummies to the Troubles. For these reasons, we're referring to the speaker as "he" in this guide—but readers don't have to interpret the speaker as Heaney to make sense of the poem.

Whether the speaker is Heaney or not, he's world-weary and sad, haunted by the thought that people have always killed each other in the name of religious or political righteousness. Imagining making a trip to Denmark just to look the Tollund Man in his ancient face, this speaker seems to want to confront that tragic, bewildering reality.

He's also a humane and empathetic person, able to imagine his way into the Tollund Man's experiences—and even to feel how the Tollund Man might have experienced his own death as a holy, worthwhile sacrifice.

SETTING

This poem visits Denmark and Ireland, the past and the future—all in the speaker's imagination.

In the first part of the poem, the speaker says that "some day" he'll make a trip to Denmark to visit the Tollund Man in a museum in Aarhus. But such a visit, he thinks, will also carry him into Denmark's distant past. He imagines standing on the "flat country" where the Tollund Man was unearthed and then envisions himself as the Tollund Man on his way to be sacrificed to the "goddess" in a dark, boggy "fen," almost 2,500 years ago.

But these thoughts also carry him to the more recent past in Ireland: the atrocities of the Troubles, in which human bodies were battered to mere "flesh," "skin," and "teeth." The ordinary "farmyard" landscape of these horrors, in the speaker's mind, has rather a lot in common with the windswept swamps where the Tollund Man died: both times and places sanctioned dreadful violence by claiming it was righteous or holy.

By leaping around in time and space, the poem makes its central point clear: pointless killings in the name of religious or political belief have been around as long as humanity has.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) was an important Irish poet, translator, and essayist. Much of Heaney's poetry is grounded in his native landscape. Born in majority-Protestant Northern Ireland to a Catholic family, he saw the terrors of the Troubles first hand, and often reflected on that long-running bloodbath in his verse; "The Tollund Man" is just one example among many.

But Heaney also loved the Irish countryside, and much of his richly atmospheric poetry takes place in the Ireland of his youth. He was interested, not only in Ireland's natural beauty, but in the difficult lives of the people who worked the land, and his poems often strike a balance between grounded realism and lyrical poignancy.

Some see Heaney as a descendent of Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, whose poetry similarly described ordinary life and rural landscapes in plainspoken language. Heaney also admired poets like Robert Frost and Ted Hughes, who found deep (and sometimes mythic) significance in everyday scenes.

But Heaney was also deeply influenced by much, much older poetry. A scholar of Old English, he made an acclaimed translation of *Beowulf*, and his poetry sometimes borrows from Old English verse, using kennings and accentual meter.

Unlike a lot of poets, Heaney was both a popular and critical success during his lifetime and became a well-known man of letters. He was awarded the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature and served as honorary Professor of Poetry at Oxford University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Seamus Heaney became interested in bog bodies when he read Danish archaeologist P.V. Glob's book, *The Bog People*. The stories of these Iron Age mummies reminded Heaney of his own Irish childhood: he grew up near a bog, in which people harvesting peat would often unearth the remains of ancient creatures and cultures. (In his poem "Bogland," for instance, Heaney recalls the time his neighbors pulled the skeleton of an extinct Irish elk out of the turf.)

The book's images of the bog mummies also made Heaney think of other pictures of corpses: the endless news photos of contemporary Irish people who were murdered during the Troubles. This long-running 20th-century conflict pitted Protestants (who mostly wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK) against Catholics (who mostly wanted Northern Ireland to be part of a separate and independent Irish state). The sectarian violence these political/religious divisions provoked killed thousands of people.

Heaney, a Catholic who grew up in Northern Ireland and eventually fled the Troubles, thus saw in the bog bodies a reminder that such devastating violence is nothing new.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Heaney's Life and Work — Visit the Poetry Foundation to read a short biography of Heaney and read more of his poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney)
- Heaney's Creative Process — Read a short piece in which Heaney discusses his writing room and his writing habits. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/aug/31/writers.rooms.seamus.heaney)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/hMLgkQrqa3w)
- The Tollund Man — Learn more about the Tollund Man (and see pictures of his astonishingly well-preserved face). (https://www.museumsilkeborg.dk/welcome-to-the-story-about-tollund-man)
- An Interview with Heaney — Read an interview with Heaney in which he discusses "The Tollund Man," as well as his thoughts and feelings about the Irish political situation in the 1970s. (https://www.pshares.org/issues/spring-2011/archive-interview-seamus-heaney-james-randall)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SEAMUS HEANEY POEMS

- Blackberry-Picking
- Death of a Naturalist
- Digging
- Follower
- Mid-Term Break
- Personal Helicon
- Storm on the Island

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