

There is an element of worship in this 'waking' of the dead for the bodies have become statuesque, with 'eyelids glistening' and their faces like 'soapstone masks' with icy foreheads. In respect the mourners light candles, kneel and pray around the bodies and finally kiss their brows.

The want of a similar process for unnatural death is emphasised by the poet's paradoxical expression, 'neighbourly murder'. The usual convivial significance of 'neighbourly' is undermined by its association with 'murder'. The reliable structures of society are destroyed. In that paradox the despair of the community is summarised.

'Blinded' too in the next verse has a significant ambivalence; referring literally to the window blinds drawn shut as a mark of respect for the dead it carries the force of a physical affliction, implying that every family is in some way hurt by these murders.

The ritual that the poet would like to revive is a specifically pagan one, focused on a megalithic site in the centre of Ireland. The mound at Newgrange is thought by some to have been a passage grave. He reiterates his initial connection of funerals with virility when he envisages only men taking part in this new procession.

The image of the serpent has a particular meaning for the Irish reader. It is believed that St Patrick who introduced Christianity to Ireland banished snakes from the island. This was a symbolical purging of the demons of paganism. Now the poet reinvoles that primeval spirit in the attempt to formulate an alternative ritual.

To found such a ceremony would, he believes, lay memory to rest with the bodies of the dead. The site which he has chosen for this figurative burial has many historical associations. Of these the poet alludes to its proximity to the river Boyne, the scene of the crucial battle of 1690. The memory of this battle still rankles and provokes dissension in the poet's community. The capacity to remember is like a cud, chewing over old disputes.

The final image of comfort offered by the poet is drawn from the Old Norse text, *Njáls Saga*. Occasional references, for example, 'black glacier', 'Strang and Carling fjords', the 'Gap of the North', have simultaneously guided the poem backwards and northwards into the poet's history. Gunnar's beauty in death parallels that of the poet's relatives.

Njáls Saga is particularly appropriate in the context of this poem as it records the conflict between the old pagan way of life pursued by Gunnar and the new Christian ethos adopted by Njal. By the preservation of his memory in literature and his song of 'verses about honour' Gunnar sets a twofold example for Heaney. In his own verses the poet can ensure that the dead are remembered and he can resolve despair in an image of coherence.

Consider the relationship between memory and ritual in this poem and compare it with that in Heaney's other poems.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

dulse: a type of edible seaweed

cribs: beds

great chambers of Boyne: a group of megalithic mounds (the oldest dates from 3200BC), commonly believed to house burial chambers, or passage graves, though recent research suggests that they might have been temples of the sun. They are in the valley formed by the river Boyne in County Meath

cupmarked stones: stones associated with this site bearing a small rounded hollow

'Punishment'

North

The poet's contemplation here of another bog body leads him to reflect on the violent reprisals enacted in his own society.

At the outset he identifies himself with the dead girl, imagining the feel of the rope around her neck and the wind blowing against her skin. The wind stiffens her nipples making them hard as beads, and it makes her ribs tremble like the ropes and stays on a ship. He envisages her body submerged in the bog, weighed down by a stone and covered with branches.

When she was taken out of this hole she resembled a young tree stripped of its bark, her bones like branches, her brain like a fir cone. The poet compares her shorn head to a harvested field, and describes her blindfold as a protective binding. The rope about her neck he likens to a wedding ring.

He addresses her now as an adulteress, visualising her as she was before she died, blonde-haired and thin. Her face, now blackened by the bog, would have been beautiful. He pities her, recognising that she was a 'scapegoat', an object of blame for the community, punished for their sins.

His pity is close to love yet he realises that he too would have let her die, afraid to make his own sins known. Having acknowledged this the poet admits further to deriving a sexual thrill from his observation of the girl's naked body with its inner parts revealed. He has said nothing when girls in his society were punished for befriending English soldiers. Their heads too were shaved and covered in tar. Then the girls were tied to railings, their shame made public. Like those around him he has affected to deplore the act, aware that within himself he sympathises with the motive of revenge.