

Landscape and Violence in Irish Poetry

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During the years 1879 to 1882, a major movement in Ireland known as the Land War took place. Incited by the formation of The Irish National Land League, Irish tenant farmers demanded from their landlords what are known as the Three Fs: fair rent, free sale, and fixity of tenure. This movement to take back the land they worked points to the long history in which land was forcibly taken from the Irish people for the benefit of Great Britain and the wealthy. The poor Irish farmers were left with the worst land as their only means of support while Britain thrived on the fruits of Ireland's soil. This practice constituted a form of violence that has had devastating effects such as the Great Famine and the deterioration of Irish culture. Over time the violence inflicted on the Irish became deeply rooted in the Irish landscape itself. As a result, poets such as Eavan Boland and Seamus Heaney use nature and landscape to confront historical and cultural violence and reconnect to an Irish identity that has been lost.

Eavan Boland's poetry uses the physical scars left on the Irish landscape to reflect on how the violence of colonization degraded their culture. Boland's poem "Mother Tongue" opens with a description of "The old pale ditch" which once separated the land directly under British control—known as the Pale—from the rest of Ireland (Boland). The ditch, although overgrown, remains a visible scar in the landscape left by colonization. It is first described in unimposing language, simply referred to as "Land. Ground. A line drawn in rain / and clay and the roots of wild broom" (Boland). The reduction of the pale ditch to only a "line" reflects how the events that created it have become a part of the past and its meaning is obscured by time. However, as the speaker continues to reflect, its historical importance grows. In her eyes it morphs into "the abyss of the future" of which she is unwillingly a part (Boland). Due to her being "...born on this side of the Pale" she speaks with "the forked tongue of colony" rather than being a native speaker of Irish (Boland). This shows that the ditch is not only a reminder of past violence, but

also a symbolic barrier that separates the speaker from what she imagines as her authentic Irish identity. Therefore, the ditch signifies continued destruction of culture in the present day.

This loss of language forms a deeper connection to the speaker as a woman herself. As noted by the feminist writer Siobhán Kilfeather,

“Feminists working in the Irish language have long argued that the Irish language is an important feminist issue, as is the fate of all minority languages. Minority languages are often mother-tongues, primarily used in the home rather than in the public sphere, and their position in society may be understood as analogous to the position of women.”

The term “mother-tongue” in itself points to a sense that one’s native language is a symbol of their home as well as femininity. In Boland’s poem, the loss of the Irish language connects to the historical struggles of women. Women were also linked to issues of landscape as Kilfeather describes, “During the 1840s almost all discussion of the condition of women in Ireland was routed through commentary on the causes and effects of the Famine”. Therefore, land also connects to the status of women in Ireland, which had its own difficulties during colonization. In the end, the speaker refers to Irish as “my pure sound, my undivided speech” and as a source of comfort: “...I hear / what I am safe from. What I have lost” (Boland). This line gives the mother-tongue a comforting power that English cannot hold for her, but also shows how her language is a symbol of cultural loss.

Along with the physical reminders of historical violence that Boland uses, Seamus Heaney uses nature to demonstrate the effects that violence has on people’s minds and everyday lives. In his poem “Death of a Naturalist,” Heaney uses a child’s view of nature to show how violence can leave a mental scar. Heaney’s diction in the first stanza is dark and threatening. The expected natural beauty of the flax-dam is disrupted by words such as “festered,” “rotted,” and

“punishing” (Heaney). The language used creates a feeling of unease which disrupts the otherwise normal scene. Despite this ominous diction, the speaker initially loves nature with all the simplicity and enthusiasm of childhood. This innocent love of nature evokes an older view of it being an integral part of life. The writer John Feehan describes the connection people had with nature in the past but have since lost, especially in regard to children:

“The uses of plants were widely appreciated — as food and for cures, dyes and other practical things. And not only by the old and experienced in the community: children abroad in the fields knew... Such knowledge has been all but lost among their computer-schooled descendants of today.”

The lost connection to nature is central in the second stanza of this poem. When the speaker has gone back to where he collected the frogspawn, he is no longer fascinated by the ecosystem before him, but instead fears “...the angry frogs” (Heaney). The speaker feels threatened and his language becomes militaristic and violent; the words “invaded,” “obscene threats,” and “vengeance” come to his mind (Heaney). The speaker looks back on this childhood scene with a sense of corruption that has tainted what should be a quaint, peaceful memory. This militant view of nature has historical context in “...the biblical injunction to ‘subdue the earth and conquer it’” as well as the violence that the speaker may have witnessed during his youth (Feehan). Violence towards the Irish landscape both through its destruction and colonization affected the speaker, no longer allowing him to view nature with innocence. Instead it becomes a backdrop for violence.

Despite the cultural loss that has characterized Ireland’s history, the use of landscape in poetry attempts to reconnect with an Ireland that respected nature: “The early inhabitants’ relationship with nature did not centre on the idea of ownership of land necessary to those who

farm, but on the sense of being part of nature” (Feehan). Seamus Heaney’s poem “Bogland” expresses this past view. In the poem, Heaney celebrates the unique quality of the Irish landscape and its cultural importance. He notes the small landscape’s contrast to the glorified imagery of larger nations like America: “We have no prairies / To slice a big sun at evening” (Heaney). The image of a prairie is reminiscent of the more American ideals of endless opportunity. Ireland’s landscape, however, contains a deep sense of history. Heaney writes, “Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards... The wet center is bottomless.” The imagery of digging into the earth as if uncovering history shows the deep connection the Irish have with their land. It is not only a resource, but a symbol of their culture. The connection with the earth is further emphasized in the stanza:

“Butter sunk under  
More than a hundred years  
Was recovered salty and white.  
The ground itself is kind, black butter (Heaney).

This analogy suggests the sustaining quality of the landscape which has provided for the Irish people for centuries. Just as the bog gives up ancient preserved food, the soil has provided nourishment. Feehan notes the need for a new view of nature in Ireland: “This may be grounded in the new world view of global universal ecology and environmental responsibility, but it will for some look in a special way to the Irish past.” Heaney does this in his reverent poem as he emphasizes the historical and cultural importance that the Irish landscape has in Irish culture.

The violence in Ireland’s past remains a part of the culture and the landscape of the country. No matter how long-ago events like the famine may be, they cannot be forgotten and must be confronted in order to move forward. Poetry like that of Seamus Heaney and Eavan

Boland recognizes the difficulty of this confrontation and attempts to overcome it by reconnecting to an Irish landscape that has been altered by history. The use of landscape and violence in poetry effectively readapts Irelands pre-colonization appreciation of nature into a form that fits modern Irish life. This new attitude towards nature as well as the confrontation of the past could be integral to the construction of a future Irish identity.