

DIGGING UP MEMORY: USING SEAMUS HEANEY'S POETRY TO UNDERSTAND CELTIC TIGER FICTION

By Claire Shu

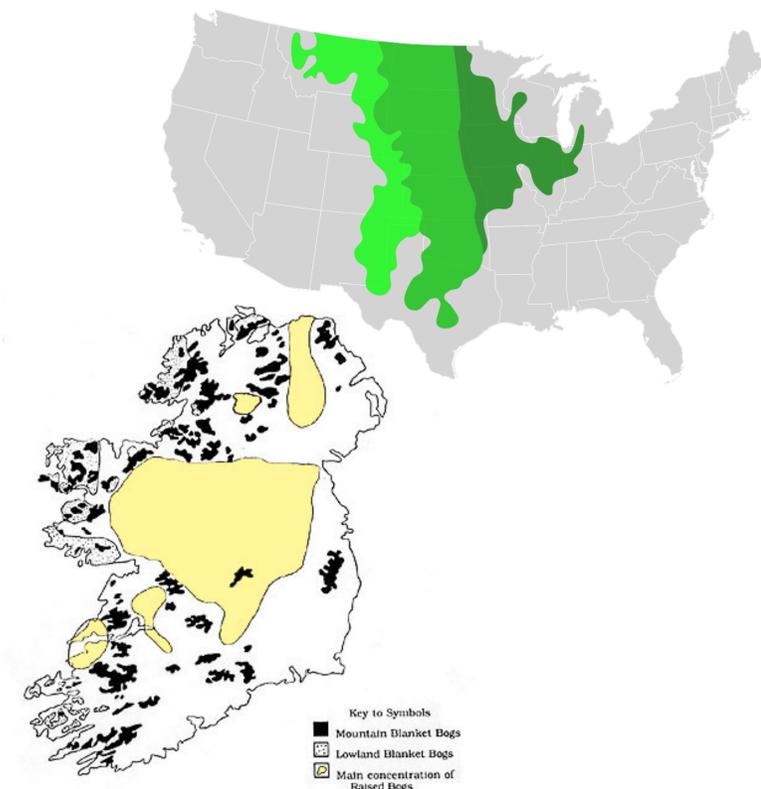


INTRODUCTION

This research explores how Ireland's distinct landscape, specifically the bog, influences the literature and culture of the nation. It will define Seamus Heaney's myth of the bog through select poetry and nonfiction by Heaney and weave the myth through various works of Celtic Tiger fiction to understand how the literature of the era explores a rapidly changing landscape through imminent personal loss, the influence of place by embarking on pilgrimages, the preservative features of the bog by digging through layers of history, and the reevaluation of land from a means of survival to a means of emotional reconciliation.

HEANEY'S MYTH

"I had been reading about the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness, so I set up—or rather, laid down—the bog as an answering Irish myth."



PILGRIMAGE AND SLEEP

Heaney explores coming to terms with nature through a pilgrimage. Heaney's "The Tollund Man" explores the impact of physical space. Aarhus's potential for emotional influence inspires Heaney's pilgrimage to Aarhus to view the Tollund Man. As do Annie Dunne and Max in *The Sea*, Toibín's protagonist, Helen, returns to a setting of deep trauma where pilgrimage and sleep bring on the reckoning process. In the Celtic Tiger fiction this essay treats, sleeping in the marked land enables the full impact of the pilgrimage.

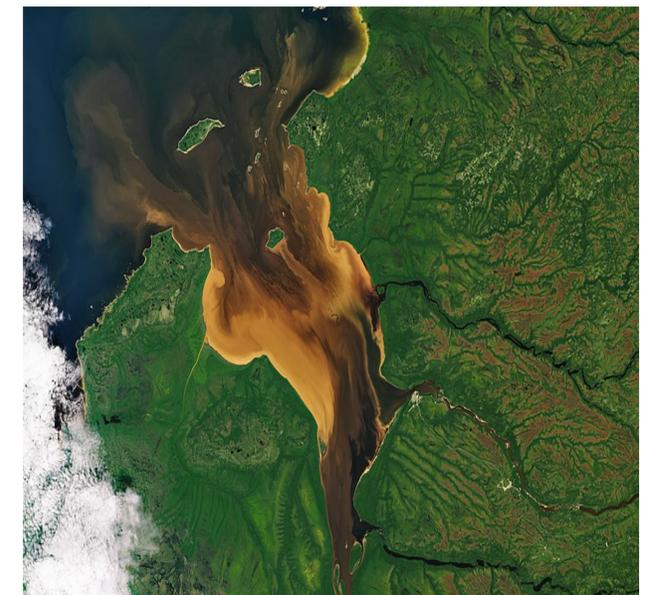


EMOTIONAL VALUE OF LAND

Even the title of the novel, *The Blackwater Lightship*, suggests an inability of material to decompose. "Blackwater" lakes and streams are distinct because of the large amount of tannins in the water that darken the water's color. Tannins are chemical substances found in several coniferous trees and flowering plants. Tannins resist decomposition, so while every other part of the plant breaks down, the tannins remain intact. Bodies of water with "blackwater" are similar to bogs. They are comprised of material that cannot decay due to unique biological factors. Nature is linked to memory in Irish literature, so this lack of decomposition in nature signals a lack of decomposition in memory, or an inability to let go of the past.

CONCLUSION

Heaney's Irish bog myth is one island's answer to the question of how land and place influence a people. In a much different landscape, the sweeping prairies of the American West instill an innate sense of freedom manifested through culture. Analyzing the use of nature and land in the literature of other regions with distinct ecosystems may determine the existence of comparable myths. The supporting evidence for Heaney's metaphor in *Annie Dunne*, *The Sea*, and *The Blackwater Lightship* opens the door to greater explorations of natural anthropology in regional literature.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to my advisor, Professor Gualtieri-Reed, for her consistent encouragement and expertise.



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL