Paganism

Pagan: a member of a group of any religion other than Christianity, Judaism or Islam. Paganism was the ancient religion of the Celts, the original inhabitants of Ireland. This is relevant to the poem ‘Funeral Rites’ because Gunnar supported the Pagan way of life and the chambers of Boyne are an ancient Pagan burial site.

The Vikings

The Vikings are especially renowned for their fantastic exploits in many parts of the world. Over a period of 300 years, from 750 – 1050AD, their fast, highly-manoeuvrable longships carried them to places as far as Greenland in the North, North Africa in the South, the Caspian sea in the East and North America in the West. The Vikings are famous for their adventurous, but violent and murderous exploits as they invaded towns, raping and pillaging as they went.

It was in and around the British Isles that the Vikings gained their strongest foothold. In Ireland the Vikings founded a number of mainly trading settlements, including the city of Dublin.

‘Funeral Rites’ – Seamus Heaney

Glossary

Rosary beads: a string of beads used by Catholics in prayer
Dulse: a type of edible seaweed
Cribs: beds
Soapstone: fine-grained soft stone, a form of talc, white in colour, feels like soap
Temperate: even
Cortege: funeral procession
The great chambers of Boyne: a group of large stoned mounds within hills, believed to house burial chambers
Sepulchre: tomb
Cupmarked stones: stones associated with this site bearing a small rounded hollow
Somnambulant: sleepwalking
Megalithic: large stoned
Strangford and Carlingford: places in Ireland founded by Vikings
Gunnar: a hero of a Norse saga whose death was unavenged. Usually, under Norse law, families would regroup and seek revenge for violent deaths. Gunnar’s unavenged death broke the cycle of vengeance and feuds. It was said that four lights burned in his burial chamber and he himself sang about honour and when the chamber opened up he looked joyfully at the moon.

Heaney has said that this poem offers “a dream of forgiveness”.

This free resource is available at www.teachit.co.uk
Copyright © 2001 Teachit
Seamus Heaney - 1 -
Funeral Rites & North
funnorth
Questions on ‘Funeral Rites’

Section 1:

This section deals with Heaney’s childhood memories of relatives’ funerals. (Nothing to do with sectarian problems, which began later.)

1) What part does Heaney recall playing at the funerals? (lines 1-3)
2) “I shouldered a kind of manhood…” How did being a pallbearer make Heaney feel?
3) Describe how the dead were “laid out”. (lines 4 – 14)
4) Why do you think the family felt the need for this kind of ceremony? What other poem does this remind you of?
5) What is the significance of the dead’s wrists being “obediently sloped”?
6) How did Heaney feel on observing his dead relatives? (lines 15 – 16)
7) Find some references to cold and ice. Why might Heaney use this imagery?

Section 2:

8) Which word alerts the reader that the poem has moved to the present?
9) Consider the phrase “neighbourly murder”. To what does this paradox refer?
10) What do people now feel we need as so many are killed in the sectarian troubles? (lines 1 – 7)
11) “I would restore / the great chambers of Boyne…” What does Heaney suggest we should do for the victims of sectarian violence?
12) Who does Heaney imagine will take part in this funeral procession?
13) The chambers of Boyne are in Newgrange in the centre of Ireland. What would be the significance of the whole country proceeding together to this spot?

Section 3:

In this section Heaney imagines the procession moving Northwards again. He weaves in Viking associations as he extends his vision into a redemptive and healing ideal.

14) How will people feel on the way home?
15) Heaney imagines “those under the hill” to be “like Gunnar”, a Viking leader from a Norse saga. Using the information in the Glossary, write a paragraph about why you think Heaney uses this image of Gunnar. What is Heaney’s message in this poem?
16) Is Heaney once again suggesting we should turn to an alternative religion? Why?
‘North’

In ‘North’ Heaney once again communicates with the Viking dead, linking their struggles with those of his own world. In this poem Heaney is searching for answers and inspiration for his writing, in a time of troubles.

As the poem opens, Heaney stands on the West Coast of Ireland, by the Atlantic Ocean. He looks towards Northern Europe, but feels no inspiration, until suddenly he feels the presence of the Vikings who colonised Iceland and Greenland, along with much of Europe, including Britain. He imagines their voices in the sea, and imagines their longship to have a tongue, which speaks to him.

Heaney imagines the Vikings are sending him a warning, with the hindsight of history. They seem to be revealing the true nature of violence as the past reveals the greed for territory, wealth, blood feuds and internal treachery.

Thor, the Norse god of war, was not only the overseer of ‘geography and trade’, although these were the Vikings’ main reasons for invasion. Thor also witnessed attacks, revenges, feuding and backstabbing within his own people, rape and pillaging. Peace only came after the exhaustion of battle, and the spilled blood was preserved by memory. Therefore, violence is cyclical: memory ensures that nothing is forgotten, and violence will be reborn as people seek revenge.

The voices of the dead, then, give rise to a link with the powerful and destructive forces of Heaney’s own province, and although the poem does not explicitly discuss the Northern Irish ‘troubles’, an implicit parallel can be drawn. It seems, once again, Heaney is suggesting that we need to bring an end to the cyclical force of violence, by allowing things to be set to rest, and giving up our quests for revenge.

The voice of the Viking longship also brings Heaney advice about his own writing. It tells him to look inwards, to trust what he knows, to search his mind and his imagination for the right words. They can offer lessons from the past, but these are of no use unless people of the present look within themselves and apply errors of the past to present day situations. We have not progressed that far – we may believe ourselves to be civilised, but we still engage in brutal acts of violence and retribution.

The Viking voices tell Heaney to expect no blinding revelations, only occasional glimmers and illuminations. They assert that he should be clear-eyed and rely on what he knows from his own experience. As Heaney has said himself, there is no point in poetry about ‘the situation’ if it doesn’t also look inwards and say something about the poet.

The advice comes in a series of commands: “Lie down… burrow… compose… expect… keep… trust…” In other words, Heaney is being compelled to trust his own intuition and to search for the right words. Thus, Heaney translates the past and hidden memory into a poem that deals both with the political problems of Northern Ireland and at the same time addresses his own creative development as a poet.