

The Tollund Man Summary

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The poem is about an ancient man's body found in a bog (a wet, muddy place) in Denmark. This man was killed as a sacrifice to the gods around 2,400 years ago. But his body was wonderfully preserved in the peat. Heaney sees this man as a symbol of both old religious sacrifice and modern violence in Ireland.

Part I: The poet says that one day he will visit Aarhus, a city in Denmark, to see the preserved body of the Tollund Man. He imagines the man's peat-brown head, closed eyelids, and pointed skin cap. The poet remembers that the man was found in a flat, quiet countryside. The scientists who dug him up found his last meal—a simple porridge of seeds still inside his stomach. He was naked, wearing only a cap, a noose (rope), and a belt.

The poet feels great respect for him. He imagines the man was sacrificed to the Earth Goddess as a holy offering. The bog, full of dark juices, preserved his body as if he were a saint. The poet says his face now rests peacefully in the museum at Aarhus. People come to look at him like a sacred relic.

Part II: In this part, the poet's thoughts move from ancient Denmark to modern Ireland. He says he could *"risk blasphemy."* He means that that he could treat the bog as a kind of holy place, like a church, and pray to the Tollund Man. But he would not pray for himself. He would pray for the innocent people killed during "The Troubles," also known as the Northern Ireland conflict (1960s-1998). He remembers the dead farmers and workers who were killed and left in the fields. He also remembers the four young brothers who were dragged and murdered. These deaths remind him of the ancient ritual killings. For the poet, modern violence feels like a new kind of sacrifice.

Part III: Now the poet thinks about visiting the land where the Tollund Man once lived—Jutland, in Denmark. He says that when he visits, he might feel something of the Tollund Man's sad acceptance of death.

He imagines himself driving through the countryside and hearing the names of places—Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard. All these place are linked with ancient bog bodies. Local people might point at things and talk to him, but he will not understand their language.

Still, he will feel strangely connected to this land. He will feel ***“lost, unhappy, and at home.”*** He means that even though he is far from Ireland, the violence and sadness of this place make him feel close to it. Both Denmark’s past and Ireland’s present share the same pain of sacrifice, death, and suffering.

Main Idea: Heaney uses the Tollund Man as a symbol to connect ancient ritual killings in Denmark with modern political killings in Ireland. He sees that violence and sacrifice have always existed, in the past and in the present.

LxNotes