

Punishment

Seamus Heaney

Q: 'Seamus Heaney has criticized society's attitude and treatment towards women'. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer. Elaborate from your reading of the prescribed poem. (2017)

Or,

How does the poet describe the punishment of the girl in the poem, *Punishment*? What is the poet's reaction to the punishment? (2012, 2016)

Or,

Give, after Seamus Heaney, a brief description of the young girl's punishment in the poem *Punishment*. (2013, 2014)

Answer:

Seamus Heaney's 'Punishment' paints a dismal picture of a young girl brutally punished for adultery. The brutality of the punishment dates back to the primitive age. But, the poet likens it to the modern time, when Irish girls having a relationship with British soldiers received similar punishment.

The poet presents the past incident vividly as though he had been witness to it. The girl was pulled with a rope from her neck and stripped naked. Her head was shaved and all parts of her frail body were subjected to unbearable torture. Finally, she was buried alive in a bog. Stones, rods and boughs were used to cover her in the bog.

The poet cannot alienate himself from her deep anguish. He feels 'the tug of the halter at the nape of her neck' and 'the wind on her naked front'. He imagines her being a flax-haired beautiful girl before the punishment mutilated her. He almost falls in love with the girl. But, he regrettably finds himself only as an 'artful voyeur' who stood dumb at the sight.

The poet affectionately calls her 'little adulteress' and a poor scapegoat. The image of a scapegoat suggests that only the women were subjected to such cruel punishment. It speaks of the sad plight of women who have little free choice in male-dominated society. Adultery is seen as a sin committed by women, and not men, in a patriarchal society.

To conclude, 'Punishment' is one of the most touching poems included in the poet's volume entitled 'North'. He uses the title of the poem to question the justification of punishment meted out to the frail young girl. He finds it deeply shocking that such a tribal mode of ruthless punishment continues through the age he lives in.