

Hozier, Bog People and Seamus Heaney – An Interpretation and Analysis of *Like Real People Do*

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Like Real People Do is a song written by the Irish singer-songwriter and musician Hozier, released in 2015 on his first album *Hozier*. The inspiration behind the song falls not only in the hands of the historical bog people but also the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. However, before we delve into the meaning of the song, we must first understand the history that inspired this beautiful love ballad.

Who are the bog people?

Bog bodies – also known as bog people – were human corpses that were naturally mummified in “dark and watery graves” known as boglands. A bogland is a marshland that contains peat and dead plant material such as moss. The water in these boglands is highly acidic and, alongside the combination of low temperatures and lack of oxygen, results in the skin, hair, organs and some clothing of the corpses being preserved. However, the bones tend not to be preserved due to the fact that the peat’s acidity dissolves them.

These mummified bodies were generally found in the northwest of Europe – more specifically in countries such as Denmark, Ireland, Germany and the Netherlands – but were geographically and chronologically widespread (800 BCE – Second World War). The Iron Age bog bodies often depicted clear signs of rather violent deaths and were usually found with no evidence of clothing. This signified to archaeologists that perhaps these people were killed as human sacrifices (or as criminals) and thrown into bogs instead of being placed in actual graves. It is often speculated that bog people were social outcasts who were either mutilated ritualistically or seen as ‘witches’ and therefore deposited into the bogs – but there are many interpretations surrounding the reasons behind the unfortunate deaths of these people in such strange conditions.

In Europe, during the Neolithic period, the bog was seen as a resource, considering the fact that the bog’s peat could have been burned to keep the inhabitants of a house warm. But, with the high levels of superstition amongst ancient people, bogs were also seen as strange and menacing supernatural portals. This, combined with the fact that ancient people lived by the rule of ‘if you take anything, you must offer something back’, a lot of people were chosen to be sacrificed by being deposited into the bog as a ‘thank you’ of sorts. Although horrific to us now, there is a high chance that quite a few of these bog people could, perhaps, have felt honoured to be the ‘chosen one’ and maybe even volunteered themselves to be presented as a ‘gift’ to the bog.

There is a vast amount of speculation surrounding the history of said bog bodies, however, as much as we may wish to know the ins and outs of this peculiar phenomenon, the reasons behind the strange earthy tombs of the bog people will most likely remain a murky mystery.

Seamus Heaney and his bog poems

Seamus Heaney was an Irish poet and playwright who won a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. A lot of his poetry was focused on the Northern Irish Troubles (1968-1998). However, besides the political and religious unrest in Ireland, Heaney also wrote about the bog people of his native land. He became fascinated by these mummified corpses when he read P.V. Glob’s book *The Bog People*; he described the experience as “opening a gate”. Heaney was intrigued and inspired by what he read and saw in this book and even claimed that if the Northern Troubles never happened, he could have easily focused more of his work around bog people. Heaney saw a parallel between both the Troubles and the bog bodies; in some of his work he combined the two worlds and produced what are known as his bog poems.

“The photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles” ~ Seamus Heaney

He saw the tragic and violent deaths of the bog people as needless and often compared the suffering of the bog bodies to the suffering of the Irish during the dark times of the Northern Troubles.

Some of his most famous bog poems include: *Bog Queen, Bogland, The Grauballe Man* and *Punishment*. Although, on the surface, they are clearly about bog bodies, the deeper meaning of these poems reflect Heaney bringing together all of the key themes that are visible in his work – pain, punishment, the past and present, religion, sacrifice, and Irish conflict. He explores the calamity of the issues in Ireland through this beautiful earthy imagery of the bog people. Heaney also highlights how history repeats itself in such a cruel way, comparing the unfortunate deaths of those during the Troubles to the ritualistic killings of the bog-mummified corpses – he is protesting against violence through his ecological and archaeological symbolism.

His work is a representation of longing to break away from the bloody cycle of violence that the people of Ireland had to experience for years.

So, how does that link to Hozier?

Hozier is a big fan of Seamus Heaney’s work. He even has a tattoo on his arm of his famous last words – “Noli timere” (“Don’t be afraid”); Hozier thought that Heaney sending those last words in a text message to his wife was “very tragic and very beautiful”. He loves Heaney’s poetry – especially his bog poems – and was inspired by the idea that through romantic love a violent past can be overcome.

Hozier was fascinated by the imagery of someone falling in love with the person that they just dug up – ultimately allowing for this body to be “relieved, reborn, and [become] somewhat suspicious of the motives of the grave digger”.

His lyrics often link to ideas of very intimate love, longing and religious symbolism. Sometimes even these apocalyptic scenes are in relation to romantic feelings (*Wasteland, Baby!*). I personally find his lyrics to be very rich and poetic – with the vast amounts of artists that I have listened to, no one has been able to (as strange as it may sound) touch my soul the way that Hozier’s music has; simply exquisite...exquisite and aesthetically pleasing!

Lyrics:

I had a thought, dear

However scary

About that night

The bugs and the dirt

Why were you digging?

What did you bury

Before those hands pulled me

From the earth?

I will not ask you where you came from

I will not ask you, neither should you
Honey just put your sweet lips on my lips
We should just kiss like real people do

I knew that look dear
Eyes always seeking
Was there in someone
That dug long ago
So I will not ask you
Why you were creeping
In some sad way I already know

I will not ask you where you came from
I will not ask you and neither would you
Honey just put your sweet lips on my lips
We should just kiss like real people do

I could not ask you where you came from
I could not ask you, neither could you
Honey just put your sweet lips on my lips
We could just kiss like real people do

Analysis and interpretation:

Verse 1:

The song is written from the perspective of a bog body that questions the motives of the person that has unveiled them. This draws a parallel to Seamus Heaney's poem *Bog Queen* – also written from the perspective of a bog body. And although the *Bog Queen* doesn't question the motives of anyone who may uncover her corpse, she does "lay waiting" for whoever may come her way. This gives the speaker a sense of normality and a breath of human life that had previously been drained out of them for unknown reasons.

The speaker in *Like Real People Do* is reminiscent of the day that they had met the grave digger – "I had a thought, dear, however scary about that night the bugs and the dirt". By referring to the other person as "dear" the bog body automatically establishes an emotional connection with said person. This creates a sense of irony, considering that corpses are not supposed to have feelings; but this is exactly what Hozier is trying to subvert – he wanted to build on the idea of rebirth by having a person dig up a body and, through their love, resurrect them. This could also be Hozier questioning religion – a typical feature in his work. He is clearly bringing attention to the idea of 'playing God'. Hozier himself has said that "the damage done by the Church to the

people of Ireland is completely irreparable" and believes that faith is an "absurd thing", so no wonder that he would give this person the ability to revive the bog body, highlighting the power that love has in comparison to the detrimental feelings of faith.

In the first verse we can also see two rhetorical questions being asked by the bog body: "Why were you digging? What did you bury before those hands pulled me from the earth?". The bog person is curious about why exactly their lover was at the bog in the first place – "why were you digging?". The use of the verbs "digging" and "bury" instantly connote ideas of secrecy, suggesting that the person could have been hiding personal baggage or some element of their past – in hopes that the earth, in its mighty ways, would swallow it whole and their past would crumble away into nothingness. However, on the other hand, it could be a metaphor for digging *up* the past rather than hiding it. Perhaps this person craves a romantic interaction so they begin to desperately dig up their past looking for the remains of an old relationship that they can grab onto, but instead they stumble across this new person – the bog body. It highlights how love comes to us unexpectedly– we may be searching for the wrong thing and it is this sudden arrival of another person that gently takes us by the hand and leads us towards the right path. However, their motives are still questioned. The bog body is wondering: well, if my lover was digging and actively looking for something, but they simply stumbled upon me – am I satisfactory? It creates a sense of anxiety, especially when these thoughts are referred to as being "scary" – clearly they have never addressed this situation before (as later seen in the chorus) and the bog body is themselves searching for the same closure that the lover was searching for when digging in the ground. Now both of the characters have dug around in the past looking for answers surrounding the unexplained. This theme of secrecy is a parallel to the history of the bog people – to this day archaeologists struggle to find a definite answer that would explain the reasoning behind the unfortunate deaths of these people and the choice of depositing them in such an atypical way. But it also links to the typicality of the themes of conflict, tension and the past and present in Seamus Heaney's poetry – it is clear that both of the characters are suffering from inner conflicts that had led to an uncomfortable tension between them, ultimately resulting in having to question certain aspects of their past. The bog person understands that it is not always easy to open up about your experiences, but they also equally understand that it is impossible to always be in the dark when it comes to understanding your partner because it will destroy you psychologically and physically; and, in essence, even though their body has been mummified, this metaphorical psychological stability is all that they have left.

Furthermore, this song lives up to the typicality of Hozier's work that is the use of natural imagery. This idea of being buried or becoming one with nature is a theme that is intertwined in the majority of Hozier's lyrics. Some examples being: *In a Week* ("I have never known peace like the damp grass that yields to me. I have never known hunger like the insects that feast on me//We lay here for years or for hours, thrown here or found, to freeze or to thaw, so long we become the flowers"); *Work Song* ("lay me gently in the cold dark earth") and *Take Me to Church* ("In the madness and soil of that sad earthly scene"). This earthy imagery is also a reflection of Hozier's love for Irish folklore and fairy tales; and *Like Real People Do*, not only in the lyrics but also in the music itself, is very ethereal and somewhat haunting – especially when considering the background wailing combined with the guitar (and, of course, Hozier's phenomenal vocals). The entire song is very traditionally fairy tale-like – this idea of digging up someone, bringing them back to life and falling in love with them in this magical bogland.

Verse 2:

The theme of the past blending in with the present is extremely significant in this verse. The bog body recognises the grave digger's "eyes always seeking" because those eyes reminded them of "someone that dug long ago". It gives us the impression that someone dug up this bog body before – perhaps signifying an old relationship. Those "seeking" eyes highlight how the grave

digger is continuously looking for someone new and someone better, perhaps emphasising the fact that the bog person can predict that this relationship was not meant to last (just like the last one), and once again they will be buried and hidden away in the ground as a vague memory of someone's past. It is subtly alluded to the fact that the bog person is stuck in a vicious cycle of being exhumed, used for a short-lived relationship, and then deposited again into the bog. They are mummified and therefore preserved alongside this treacherous cycle. This then ultimately results in them feeling a miserable certainty in the current relationship with the grave digger – they know it will disintegrate. This is why they will “not ask [them] why [they] were creeping” because “in some sad way [the bog person already knows]”. The bog body has fallen deeply in love with this person, but they are also aware of the fact that the grave digger is only looking for this ‘no-strings-attached’ relationship – they recognise the patterns and inconsistencies that lead to a divergence of paths and yet they can't help feeling such strong emotions for this stranger. It is these unanswered questions that are feeding the helpless paranoia of the speaker because they know that the person was digging looking for something other than them and they simply stumbled upon them by chance; however, the grave digger will not open up about their true intentions, and the bog body doesn't even try to force it out of them – they are helpless and perhaps they want to keep it that way; because what guarantee do they have that they won't tell the next person to not come and dig them up because the body gets too attached? It craves human connection – even if short lived. It is the only thing keeping them ‘alive’.

Chorus:

The chorus is where we really see the true nature of this relationship. It is very much a ‘no-strings-attached’ relationship, but it is also one-sided. The two characters had come to an agreement that it's best that they leave their past behind them, and not question each other about their experiences and instead they should “just kiss like real people do”. I think that the bog body is truly in love with this person, but the grave digger struggles to commit due to them being unable to communicate about their past and be honest with the body. This results in the body deciding that it would be ideal to simply not ask any questions; to not try to understand the other person because it will just make matters worse. Once in an intimate relationship, you begin to almost become the other person because you understand them on a level that no one else ever will – therefore, if the bog person was to delve deeper into the ocean of who this grave digger is, they would simply be disadvantaging and hurting themselves; sometimes it is easier to stay in the shallow end in case you can't find your way back out of the depths of the murky waters.

In essence, all that the bog body wants is to “kiss like real people do”. The use of the adjective ‘real’ emphasises just how detached the body is from the ‘real’ world – it craves human connection, human touch, human interaction, because it has been deprived of it for so many years. They refer to the grave digger's lips as “sweet lips” and calls them “honey” – it's this use of stereotypical pet names and phrases that truly highlights the body's desperation to finally feel something and taste the sweetness of intimacy that drips over them like honey. There is a clear sense of longing for normality – they want to pretend that there are no heavy burdens of the past weighing them down and instead just have this casual connection – any connection, as long as it happens because they both so desperately need it. They are both broken in some way, shattered; both filled with secrets and uncertainties, looking for some form of explanation in each other – longing to be the glue that sticks their pieces back together.

However, they did try to speak of the past, but they never succeeded. This is seen in the shift in the tone of the chorus : It goes from “I will not ask you, neither should you” to “neither would you” and finally to “neither could you”. This very subtle change in the chorus reflects how they slowly tried to address the past or find clarity, however, there was still something blocking them. At first the bog body is very definitive in the fact that they shouldn't ask any questions and instead purely

focus on physical intimacy; clearly not wanting to fall into the same trap of knowing too much and then feeling miserable when it all ends. But then there is a progression to the idea that they “[wouldn’t]” ask questions – it now becomes more of a choice; it is no longer a rule but more of an inconvenience to uncover the past. The bog body is slowly realising that their love for this person is growing stronger and they secretly wish to unveil something about their past to build a deeper connection – but the grave digger is hesitant. Finally, there is a change to “neither could you” – there is a clear sign that there was an attempt to speak of the past but they simply weren’t able to do so. Silence is the sad reality of the relationship of these two unfortunate characters – they understand each other through touch (because that is what they both craved), but they never managed to reach a stage at which they would have been able to express their worries and needs; therefore, their relationship never evolved and simply remained still and lifeless – an unpretentious ‘no-strings-attached’.

If we take into consideration the fact that Hozier was inspired by Seamus Heaney, perhaps this song could be a comment on the Northern Troubles. As mentioned previously, Hozier thinks that the damage done by the Church to the people of Ireland is “irreparable”, and understands the gut-wrenching consequences of the Irish conflict. In my eyes, this song could be interpreted as an extended metaphor for the aftermath of the Northern Troubles – the past is often swept under the rug, whether that be for social, political or even personal reasons. However, in this song, I feel a sense of regret for trying to cover up the past, because the two characters can’t evolve and grow together. Instead they sit broken, in silence, pretending that nothing has happened – and perhaps that is a representation of Ireland; too quickly did they ‘move on’ after the Northern Troubles, not even batting an eye at the “irreparable” damage done by the Church. Hozier is stressing the importance of addressing our pasts and our issues – whether that be in an intimate relationship or in our society – in order to flourish and to bloom. This is also very reflective of the fact that his work is often referred to as ‘revolutionary’ music – he seeks a change in attitudes in hopes of a brighter future.

To conclude:

Although the lyrics to *Like Real People Do* are not as complex as those in some of Hozier’s other songs (e.g. *Take Me to Church*, *From Eden*, *Shrike* and *Would That I*), nonetheless, the song is phenomenal in its simplicity. It addresses the detrimental and saddening outcomes of being unable to unveil the truth of the past or communicate one’s feelings; it could even be representative of the issues surrounding the repercussions of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, but all nicely packaged in a fairy tale story of a person falling in love with a bog body. Andrew John Hozier-Byrne – a musical and lyrical genius.

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