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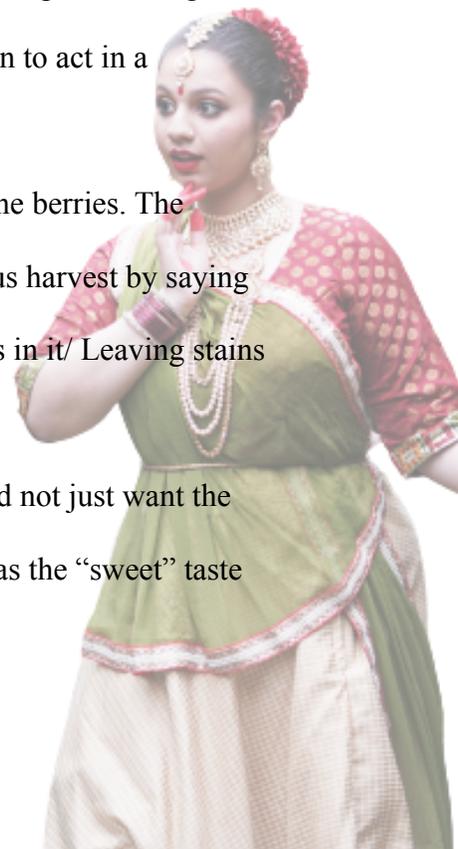
The Consequences of Greed

In the poem “Blackberry Picking” by Seamus Heaney, the speaker paints a picture of his childhood experiences while blackberry picking and reflects on these memories with a sense of nostalgia. In these memories, the speakers revisit the happier moments, during which the kids indulged in berry picking and harvested to their heart's content, as well as the more remorseful aspects of the memory, such as when the berries began to rot. The author uses this childhood memory to make a connection between the change in the berries and the inevitable change in life as one grows. The speaker highlights how the children were eager to pick the berries, and therefore picked more than they should have. As a result, more berries rotted than they would have if the kids were not overcome with greed. While it may seem like the fermentation of the blackberries was inevitable, Heaney uses the children’s behavior to hint at a deeper meaning: Lust and greed are the toxic traits within human nature that cause the children to act in a reckless manner, and bring about the downfall of their entire harvest.

The speaker begins by describing the children’s gluttony in picking the berries. The speaker details how he wished to pick more berries after tasting their previous harvest by saying

its flesh was sweet/ Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it/ Leaving stains
upon the tongue and lust for/ Picking” (5-8)

The speaker uses the word “lust” specifically to explain how the children did not just want the berries, but rather they had a strong desire for the fruit. He explains that it was the “sweet” taste



of the berries that drove him to continue picking: He became consumed by temptation after relishing the first few sugary treats. (5-7). The visual imagery in the words “summer’s blood” and “thickened wine” help not only describe the taste of the fruit but also depict the strong emotions and yearning the speaker felt when tasting their harvest. The speaker then transitions to sharing a more upsetting part of his memory, stating all the berries they “hoarded” began to rot due to the fungus on the more overripe berries (17). The blackberries are a physical representation of the consequences of lust and greed. While the children could have harvested a fair amount of berries that were easily consumable, due to their greed and lust to pick more, the berries molded, ruining the whole harvest.

The children’s actions show that their greed is the primary reason for the severity of memory’s downfall. The berries were going to spoil regardless and the children, including the speaker, were well aware of this: “once off the bush/ The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour” (20-21). Despite this, they over-picked more than they could salvage and spoiled all of their fresh treats. “We” the speaker recalls “trekked and picked until the cans were full / Until the tinkling bottom had been covered” showcasing the absurd amount of berries the children picked and making it clear that the harvest was much more than the children could handle (12-13). As a result, the speaker felt more depressed, thus making the memory feel more sad and remorseful than the seemingly innocent activity should yield. He emphasizes his negative attitude towards the memory as well as his awareness of the fruit's perishable nature by saying “I always felt like crying / ... each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not” (22-24). Had the speaker not been overcome by his own greed to pick the berries, he would have been able to act upon his awareness of the berries’ tendency to spoil and not feel as remorseful over the larger loss of the fruit.

Heaney continues outlining the impact of the children's lust by using the allusion of "Bluebeard" in the final line of the first stanza (16). The allusion of Bluebeard refers to a French folktale in which an insane, but powerful, nobleman murders his wives out of lust. This allusion marks the transition and shift in the tone of the poem from a happier memory to a more remorseful experience. Heaney uses a vast amount of imagery that mimics the visuals of murder when describing the consequence of the children's lust. The speaker describes that the berries were like a "plate of eyes" and the speaker's hands were "sticky like Bluebeards" as the children had destroyed a full batch of blueberries by over picking, therefore connecting their deeds back to murder (15-16).

While this murder-like imagery is much clearer in the second stanza, after one realizes the connection between murder and the berries, many aspects of the first stanza seem intentionally placed. For example, the word "flesh" may seem like a common word to describe fruit, however, it is extremely fitting as a build-up to Heaney's clear usage of dark imagery (5). Heaney's choice to include these visuals and allusion establish how strong the children's emotions toward the berries are, and how it causes them to act in the irresponsible way they do. Their desire and, in connection to Bluebeard, uncontrollable need for berries overtake their actions and cause them to participate in gestures they know are not right, as understood in the speaker's connection between their own dirty hands to those of a murderer, Bluebeard. Using the phrase "summer's blood" emphasizes the children's unhinged behavior and the use of the term "blood", specifically, builds the connection between the destruction of the harvest and Bluebeard's murderous actions. The speaker's mind was clouded by his own selfish desires and while giving into temptation, failed to realize the consequences and effects his actions would have on the berries.

The speaker in "Blackberry Picking" goes beyond recalling his memories and reflecting on the evident changes in life by making it appear that the loss he suffered was magnified by his own actions and irresponsibility. The experience of berry picking remains delightful in the speaker's mind, but his unthoughtful actions caused the more bitter parts of the experience to become a large part of his memory. Considering the speaker is able to reflect on this memory, one can assert that as an adult, he feels regret and now understands the value of his actions. While the change in the berries was inevitable, the greater loss of their hard-earned fruit was unavoidable had it not been for his own actions and greed.

Works Cited

Heaney, Seamus. "Blackberry-Picking by Seamus Heaney." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50981/blackberry-picking>.