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**THE WITNESS OF ATROCITY IN  
HEANEY'S SELECTED  
POEMS**

**A B S T R A C T**

The research investigates the power of Seamus Heaney's poetry in denouncing human atrocity. His poetry turns to be a record of human trauma. He lives the pain of a quarter-century Secterian and political violence in Northern Ireland, his native ground. He does not only make the wounds of his people speak, but also he selects to be a listener to the wounds. He is qualified to have the responsibility of re-opening the buried pain because of being a sufferer and a witness of this atrocity. Heaney gives voice to the silent victims and grants them an opportunity to reshape their trauma to the world in his poetry, thus every poem carries different story of suffering. This is part of Heaney's commitment as a poet to response to other trauma to present healing for human injuries and experience for preventing such trauma from occurring again. These traumatic experiences in his poems are gathered from different lands and century to prove the human pain is one and poetry which is an accurate reflection of life should mould the pain, fear, betray, violence and shock which are the triggers of man trauma. The research investigates this under the illumination of the theory of trauma.

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شاهد على الوحشية في قصائد منتخبة لهيني

د. أسماء خلف مدلول / جامعة الانبار / كلية التربية للبنات

**الخلاصة**

تناول البحث بالدراسة إمكانية شعر سيموس هيني ان يكون أداة لفضح العنف عبر التاريخ ليتحول شعرة إلى تاريخ يسرد الألم الإنساني. وقد عاش هيني فترة طويلة تحت العنف المذهبي والسياسي في موطنه إلم إيرلندا الشمالية وهذا ما أهله لتولى تلك المسؤولية اختار هيني ان يكون أداة لفضح العنف للسماح لأصوات أسكتت لتتكلم من جديد. وقد امتلك الشاعر ميزات أهله لتولى مسؤولية إعادة فتح جروح دفنت أهم تلك المؤهلات هي كونه عانى من العنف أوجد هيني للصامتين مكاناً للتعبير عن معاناتهم. فكانت كل قصيدة تروي قصة معاناة وظلم. وهذا جزء من الالتزام الذي يحمله الشاعر والذي أدرك بان الشعر يجب ان يمزج الجمال بالمسؤولية

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الاجتماعية ويجب ان يوظف لكشف المعاناة الانسانية. وقصص الالم جمعت من أماكن وازمان متنوعة ليثبت ان الحزن الانساني واحد وان اختلفت الاماكن والازمان. ونجد في اشعار هيني الحزن والالم والصدمة وكلها علامات للصدمة النفسية لذا تم دراسة هذا الموضوع على ضوء نظرية الصدمة النفسي

## Introduction a

Seamus Heaney (١٩١٣-٢٠١٣) is the Northern Irish poet who finds himself in the middle of religious and political conflict. He suffers from violence, fear, pain and distrust due to the long violence. This fear leaves deep stamp on his soul to add blackness to his views and grant him a deep responsibility for the wounded world. Heaney poems tell traumatic experiences that keep crying wounds alive by retelling the pains to provide people with defensive shield to avoid the repetition of such pain. He is talented with a novel power of handling problematic and realistic topics in his poems that address and persuade all sects.

The crystal print of Heaney from ١٩٧٠ is the devotion of his writing to the reflection of the silent victims; his sympathy for their suffer surpasses time and place to have victims from the ١<sup>st</sup> century to the ٢٠<sup>th</sup> century. He states that the theme of his poems reflect the pain and he "get(s) an idea of the bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in it and to it." (Crowder ٤٢). Being a responsible Irish writer in the twentieth century, he selects the complex issues surrounding the political efficacy and responsibility of the artist (Bloom ١٤٢). In spite of his birth in the midst of political religious conflict, he keeps aside from lecturing in politics and does not take the side of any. He is accused by his Catholics to be a traitor because of not supporting his sect in poetry. This neutral state continues until the publishing of the Bog People (١٩٦٩) which tackles in details the pagan rituals of thousands of years ago in Denmark. The sacrificial victims are buried in the Danish bog to be preserved for ever as an evidence of human everlasting brutality. The steps of torture for these victims which are kept in this

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book, shocks Heaney who is inspired a unique path to reach his people and reveal their political views without any involvement in politics.

His poems reveal the truth about human brutality via ages and nations; thus his voice turns to be a poetic witness of human atrocity that resists any change. He elegizes private as well as public pains. Being a witness of the poor victims that is part of his poetic doctrine, he shoulders poetry a new responsibility of being the voice of sacrifice and pain not only the sound of beauty and sentimentality. Through adopting this side, he is able to deliver crucial messages to all sects and human concerning violence. He laments various types of victims like the dead of 1970, the victims of the catholic in their struggle against British protestant domination and he reveals the trauma of the bog people who are discovered in the bog of Denmark. All these victims are granted voices in Heaney's poems to have an opportunity of retelling their forgotten stories that are believed to be buried with their stories. The retelling of human pain in his poems, reveals that truth cannot be dead in spite of the death of their owners and has a time to be revealed. Most victims are from his native ground, Ireland, which its long history of bloody conflict is his creative wound (Parini 123) and it turns to be a fertile soil for pain and poetry.

Heaney's goal is to confront the world with the hidden truth about the dark history of human brutality and warn about the still living of the identical brutality in modern society, creating such awareness turns to be one of principle task in his poetry. Heaney wants to create active sharers from the readers to be active voices to put an end to the human contemporary barbarianism by taking lessons from the old pain. His success comes from his writing about the past and present and he regrets his previous noninvolvement. His writing is targeted for people whom he addresses with emotion requesting their sharing.

### **Themes in Heaney's Poetry**

Many circumstances qualify Heaney to be the witness of atrocity and a voice of

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victims. His premature awareness of death in his childhood and the spread of death leaves deep touches on his soul. He states that "my childhood was full of death ... the sight of a corpse ... was quite common to me ... I'm certain all these funerals and corpses had some definite effect" (Thwaite 116); thus his sense for the dead is sharpened early to such extent that "his childhood landscape has acquired the validity of myth" (Blooth 224-226). The violent Irish troubles, a sectarian religious bloody conflict in Northern Ireland in 1972, nurture Heaney's poetry with various themes, and new attitudes toward the role of poetry in confronting such trauma. He is selected to be "the most important Irish poet since Yeats" (Mukherjee 9). Selecting to answer the national call and his devotion to his land makes him the devoted pen to "the sufferings of every one; fear, deaths, and untold suffering. His poetry was to alert people today-to-day happenings" (King 29).

For Heaney, poetry should reflect the human pain otherwise it will be empty as he states "In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil - no lyric ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed"( Heaney, *The Government*, 107). His poems show a responsibility for the public and he tries through them archive the events without any evocation (Quinn 132). Mortality is a frequent theme in Heaney's poetry. He adopts the dead's voice to reveal their stories, imagine their life, and confront their ghosts. His tackling of death is unique since death appears not as a sign of frailty but an invitation of continuity that should be encounter with steadiness.

## Trauma

The Greek meaning of trauma is the "wound" that hurts the body (Caruth 9). Freud widens the meaning of the wound to affect not only the body but the soul and the mind. Freud establishes the seeds of theory of trauma which can be seen as any hurt to the psyche from serious experience. This hurt hinders the person from having any integration

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with the idea of this similar experience. It is a reaction to a sudden unexpected overwhelming intense emotional blow or series of blows assaults the person from outside.(David ۳۰). Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind”(Pillemer ۳۰). Cathy Caruth develops the theory of trauma in her *Unclaimed Experience*. (Caruth ۶). Shoshana Felman like Caruth participates in the traumatic studies via publishing her book *Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Both participate in establishing this theory depending on Freud's deliberations on traumatic experiences in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Moses and Monotheism*. Caruth uses literature to be the suitable arena for applying the theory of trauma as she believes that literature has the ability to mirror the real human life with all its challenges, pain, fear and shock. Having this role makes literature the authentic witness to horrible events that blow human via history. Without literature part of human dilemma will be buried to be a continual source of human trauma. This revelation of pain via literature can be a tool of having recovery for the traumatized and a experience for the survivors.

## Analysis

Though Heaney is not a political poet, he reflects the trauma of his people practically in the Troubles in Ireland , religious conflict between protestant and catholic in ۱۹۶۰s. In his "The Tollund Man", Heaney depicts the sacrificial murders in the iron age to connect it with the modern Irish land. The Tollund Man is given as a sacrifice to the Goddess, Nerthus, who needs new bridegroom to grant fertility in return. The traumatic triggers of pain , shock are conveyed in this poem This is the new path that Heaney selects to indulge in politics and gives his political lectures that he has previously refused:

Some day I will go to Aarhus

To see his peat-brown head (Heaney, *Complete Poems* (C.P.) ۴۴۳).

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Heaney creates a painful comparison between the Tollund Man who is presented as a sacrifice for life and the killing of four brothers in one of Irish violence. Heaney regards the death of these brothers as a sacrifice for the life of other fellowmen. Both are sacrificed by different hands for the same goals. He immortalizes the death of the four brothers and at the same time connects their death with the brutal ritual of the iron age. The message to modern people is bitter. The trauma of these victims is conveyed to be warning He teaches his people in this way:

The scattered, ambushed

Flesh of labourers,

Stockinged corpses

Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth

Flecking the sleeper

Of four young brothers, trailed

For miles along the lines. ( C. P. ११३ )

He depicts the dead victims in details and insists on "speak[ing] about and for those whose voices are lost to history" (Heaney, *The Redress*, 117 ). He mediates in this corpse to find quietness and brown skin. Though he is thrown into the bog naked and unprotected, Tollund Man is elevated to be a source of life and fertility to his country. Heaney honors him to be depicted as a saint because of having preserved body. Heaney goes further in considering him as a deity due to be a victim of religion even before Christ:

The mild pods of his eye-lids,

He pointed skin cap.

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In the flat country near by

....

Naked except for

The cap, noose and girdle, ( C P 443)

Heaney in his analogy between two victims raises many fearful questions like: do humans need to present sacrifice even in modern age to grant life for others? And is there any option to save human blood and live peacefully? The poet's sympathy towards the Tollund Man reveals his fear, shock and pain which are triggers for trauma for his land that continues in its sacrifices. He finds himself at home in the location of the killing of this man to hint to the identity of human blood everywhere:

Out here in Jutland

In the old man –killing Parishes

I will feel lost,

Unhappy and at home. ( C P 443)

In "The Grauballe Man," Heaney raises human crisis and depicts the corpse of a dead man that is tormented to death by applying cruel steps of torture at human's hands and thrown in Danish bog. Due to this depiction, Fear and shock are conveyed to the readers He shoulders his pen the responsibility of being the silent witness of such barbarian action against man that occurs at the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and this is a new stage in his divergence of attitudes towards adopting the authentic role of poetry. This poem proves Heaney's commitment towards silent victims at any age. He examines the tortured body:

As if he had been poured

In tar, he lies

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On a pillow of turf

And seems to weep ( C P ٦٩)

By offering detailed depiction of his appearance, he immortalizes this silent victim. The poem traces the trauma of pain, fear of this tormented body across its stanzas. The first stanza is devoted for the describing of the state of the whole body then the details go to describe his wrist, heel, and head. The memory of this man is engraved in Heaney`s mind. To him, the victim in his poem does not only represent victim of humanity, but also deserves to be a monument of art:

But now he lies

Perfected in my memory,

Down to the red horn

Of his nails,

Hung in the scales

With beauty and atrocity[ C P ٦٩]

He honors this dead victim to be the unique marble of Greek bronze sculpture of a wounded soldier of Gaul. The depiction includes a shocking contradiction of "beauty and atrocity and the exploitative way the artist will ensure that the tortured figures, twisted face, is perfected in my memory" ( Roberts p. ٥٣٤) . Due to his sympathy, Heaney does not regard this as a merely corpse, but it is a noble image whose hair is still soft in spite of years. It is a painful image of beauty and violence. Heaney`s achy questions carry the meaning of defiance in not considering this man as body or corpse because human atrocity grants him soft countenances of immortality:



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Who will say `corpse`

To his vivid cast?

Who will say `body`

To his opaque response? ( C P 19)

In "Punishment," the shock as well as pain are revealed through the depiction of victims . The poet offers the trauma of a fourteen years girl who is killed at the hands of her tribe because of adultery. Heaney imagines the steps of her death, offering a painful image of her trembling body during the first steps of facing the horrible process of death. The killing that occurs at the 1<sup>st</sup> century, brings by the poet in a comparison with the 2<sup>th</sup> century identical crime. Heaney holds a comparison of human trauma by comparing the fate of this girl with the fate of Irish girls who fall in love with British soldiers. Heaney goes further when he refutes even Christ orders in such state. The poet confesses human fragility and thinks death is a big punishment for love. The poet imagines the state of torment step by step to enliven her pain and fear:

I can feel the tug

Of the halter at the nape

Of her neck, the wind

On her naked front

It blows her nipples

To amber beads,

....

I can see her drowned

Body in the bog [ C P 19]

The beauty of the poem lies in the narrator`s empathy to take different positions in the

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poem to be the lover who stands silently in front of such crime to suffer without taking action to save "his scapegoat". Then, the poet moves to another role of a sympathizer, saying:

My poor scapegoat,  
I almost love you  
But would have cast, I know  
The stones of silence.  
I am the artful voyeur  
Of your brain`s exposed ( C P ʸʸ )

The second part of the poem takes the readers to confront a similar violence of the death of Irish girls because of marrying British soldiers. Heaney again wants to unify human pain and surpass any boundary of time and place in atrocity. Again love is judged as a capital crime in the tribal and barbarical rules which proves that this unjust decision is old and new in the human society since it is still alive in spite of civilization. The lover of the girl is the sympathizer of the Irish girls. He criticizes even his situation and through the lover, he addresses human who select to be "dumb" in front of such crime. He mixes the actions of the lover with the sympathizer to care for the Irish girls:

I who have stood dumb  
When your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railings,  
who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge. ( C P ʸʸ )

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He varies his witnessing to present the identical testimony about human brutality. He measures the brutality of the iron age with that of contemporary one to find out the human indifference is alive in both ages Heaney is so aware of "the interplay of the past and present, self- consciously distant from Anglo- Ireland though aware of its literary potency, alert to the Trouble and to the stored angers" ( Gonzolez 130). In the closing part of "Punishment", the poet creates a unity between him and the young victims as part of sharing ( Glancy 218-219). Via this poem, Heaney wants to prove that the crime is one in all centuries and society is still slave to the tribal rules in putting unjust sentences for human love. Heaney believes in the role of poetry in offering truth and beauty, but it seems that he "elevate[s] truth above beauty" (Heaney xvi) Heaney affirms that poetry can have a noble role by presenting realistic dilemma and share human beings their blight, at least via words.

Heaney wonders about finding any means to reflect human's suffer and because of being "a poet, not a philosopher, he examines how his form of human enquiry might illuminate these questions" (Bloom 97). Heaney laments the doomed, the deprived, the victimized, and the underprivileged" (Heaney xvi). Poetry can escape the emptiness of meaning and be more than arrangement of words on certain rhyme by "slavage (ing) out of the catastrophe of history" ( Heaney xviii). Justice and truth are the main distinction between poetry and mere words.

In "Station Island", which is a long poem with various sections. Heaney appears as a pilgrimage with a religious group. During this pilgrimage, he shows his pain for taking the situation of a passive sympathizer toward the violence in the Trouble. Confronting the ghosts of the Trouble, forces Heaney to confront his guilt. Among these ghosts are his woodcutter, a priest friend, an athletic, a cousin schoolfellow and an archaeologist who are killed by the Irish Army. He asks for forgiveness because of ignoring the national call and isolating himself in the realm of art. This pilgrimage will turn Heaney's attitudes toward the

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main goal of arts. Heaney confronts his ghosts:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
Has stopped behind me, to find you and your knees  
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eye,  
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass.  
And gather up cold handful of the dew  
To wash you, cousin. [ C P ١٦٣]

The poet in this poem questions the personal and poetic responsibility and the ability of art in representing the brutality of the world (Gonzalez ١٣٠). Heaney presents to the murdered ghosts an apology for his indifference. The victim is described as "perfect ,clean, unthinkable victim." The poem carries a painful sense of responsibility to take lesson and prevent such human trauma from occurring again. The poet asks forgiveness for not using his art for reflecting human dilemma. This poem represents the dividing line between living in art alone or indulging with human:

Forgive the way I have lived indifferent-

Forgive my timid circumspect involvement.

I surprised myself by saying 'Forgive my eye', he said,'all that`s above my head.'

And then a stun of pain seemed to go through him

And he trembled like a heatwave and faded, ( C P ١٦٣)

Heaney in this poem confronts the ghost of James Joyce who blames him for neglecting the wounded and killed people and not reflecting their pain in poetry. Joyce presents his advice to the poet to be a faithful mirror of victims (Mohanram ٣٨-٣٩). The ghost of Joyce continues to provide evidence of the strength of reflecting the voice of the

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deprived:

You lose more of yourself than you redeem  
Doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.  
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim  
Out on your own and fill the element  
With signatures on your own frequency,  
Echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,  
Elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea. ( C P ١٦٣)

Brutality , pain and fear are the signs of trauma in his " Casualty," in which Heaney mingles political and personal themes. He immortalizes the violence of the British Army Regiment in killing thirteen catholic men as a reaction of the killing of catholic demonstrators on bloody Sunday. He, via elegizing of the dead of the Troubles, laments the unknown victim who is found among the dead. The poet triggers his lament with the depiction of the life of this victim who follows quite tune of life. The poet admires his:

Sure- footed but too sly.

....

His fisherman`s quick eye  
And turned observant back. ( C P ١٠٠)

This innocent unknown victim is one of thirteen whose fate puts him in front of human brutality that stultifies his life for nothing only to be faithful to their soil and protests peacefully against the British aggression. The victims travel in a group like departed birds leaving an appalling message of having no place with the existence of such human barbarianism:

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Coffin after coffin

Seemed to float from the door

Of the packed cathedral

Like blossoms on slow water, (C P 100)

He also describes another victim, a drinking friend who is killed by a terrorist bomb:

But my tentative art

His turned back watches too:

He was blown to bits

Out drinking in a curfew

Others obeyed, three nights

After they shot dead

The thirteen men in Derry.

PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said,

BOGSIDE NIL. That Wednesday

Everybody held

His breath and trembled. (C P 100)

In this poem, Heaney relates the story of a Catholic fisherman who was killed by a bomb while drinking in a Protestant pub during an Irish curfew imposed after Bloody Sunday. "Casualty" creates a picture of a free man creates his own world and follows his rules in life. The poet depicts the funeral of the victims of Bloody Sunday and the sense of close-knit community it created:

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The common funeral

Unrolled its swaddling band,

Lapping, tightening

Till we were braced and bound

Like brothers in a ring. (CP 100)

But the dark side of this 'binding' is highlighted by the next stanza which describes the fisherman's death after "he had gone miles away/ for he drank like a fish / Nightly, naturally". The poet asks: "How culpable was he / That last night when he broke / Our tribe's complicity?" (CP 100). The poet closes the poem with new vision of the death which is a journey and escape from the pressure and injustice of society.

In his volume, *North*, Heaney holds a painful responsibility of silent victims from over the world. He presents them to be immortalized and be witnesses of human violence. He feels the weight of several elegies "the deaths of fellow artists, friends and relative" (Crowder 6). He constructs analogy among the archaeologist, the poet, the victims, violent worlds and the violence in Northern Ireland (Gonzalez 130). Thus, this volume is regarded as "one of few unforgettable single volumes polished in English since the modern era" (Robert 24).

Heaney shows the senselessness of the sectarian conflict in his "The Strand at Lough Beg" through depicting pain, fear, shock of losing his cousin, Colum, who is so innocent and has no hand in the fighting between the protestant and catholic. Colum is the victim of this violence that is too blind to distinguish between innocence and the guilty:

I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.

With rushes that shoot green again, I plait

Green scapulars to wear over your shroud. (CP. 103)

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Heaney presents his best poem that tackles the sectarian violence of Irish conflict. He depicts the quietness of the victim in spite of confronting an appalling question mark of not knowing why he is killed. Heaney tries to calm the violence when he washes the blood of his cousin as if to reflect the sole solution for this conflict which is conciliation and peace:

To find you on your knees  
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss  
Fine a drizzle out of a low cloud.( CP 103)

Colum, like other victims, does not know the hidden hatred of sectarian violence that steals his years; thus he lives his life without seizing the day or exploiting every moment in enjoyment in his short age. He is not given a time to achieve his unfulfilled dreams. Heaney through Colum and other victims wants to show a painful shadowy spot in this conflict. He wants to stop bloody struggle by dropping the assumed heroic cover and showing the true ugliness and horror:

For you and yours and yours and mine fought shy,  
Spoke an old language of conspirators  
And could not crack the whip or seize the day:  
Big-voiced scullions, herders, feelers round  
Haycocks and hindquarters, talkers in byres,  
Slow arbitrators of the burial ground. [ CP 100]



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It is a heavy weighted load to ask a poet to be a means of scandalizing human crudity and shouldering a noble task of allowing voices that are silenced to tell the detail of their trauma. This matter can be complicated if it is woven with political crisis. Heaney selects, under certain circumstances, to be the witness of violence and a reflector of trauma. It is worthy to mingle beauty with responsibility and softness with strength. Heaney does this when he is inspired to exploit his creative outlet to adopt such an angelic responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

Poetry proves at Heaney's hands to be a vital means in solving political predicament and registering human suffer to be an immortal record that cannot be closed for ever. Poetry is used as being "instrumental in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world" (Redress of poetry 192). Heaney invents through this procedure a way of indulging in political dilemma without taking any sides. His poems are read for different religious sects since he touches the human painful spot of their injuries in employment of art for human sake. This cannot be fulfilled without a deep faith in both poetry and human; thus Heaney victims: the fisherman, the Irish girl, Grauballe man, Tollund man and others are turned to be witnesses of human violence. Gathering the dead voices in one document in his poems, proves that his poetry will be the everlasting witness of atrocity that ever existed. Living the trauma qualifies Heaney to be the healer who gives voice to the silent victims to be heard to cure them and participate in warning the new generation not to fall in the identical dilemma. Poetry as other literary works show a unique capacity to reflect man trauma to have recovery or everlasting lesson for others.

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