

MID TERM BREAK NOTES AND IDEAS AND ANALYSIS

HEANEY: I wasn't there on the evening it happened, but I do have a clear picture of it in my mind. It was at the bus stop a little up the road from our lane. Christopher and my brother Hugh were on one side of the road, posting a letter on the bus for Belfast - it used to be you could hand a letter to the conductor and it would be mailed later that evening in the city; it saved a trip to the post office.

Anyhow, at that same moment, my brothers Pat and Dan were walking up the road on the other side, on an errand to fetch a gallon of paraffin oil from a house further along. As the bus moves off, Christopher - who is three and a half years old - sees the two boys on the other side and immediately starts across the road towards them. But while the bus is pulling away, a car is coming in the opposite direction, and Christopher runs out from behind the bus straight into the side of the car and is knocked down. The driver hadn't a chance.

What happens next I can hardly bear to think about: Hugh lifts him and holds him, bleeding and probably unconscious; then the man who is a passenger in the car comes and takes Christopher and carries him the thirty or forty yards to our lane, Hugh behind him, weeping all the time. My mother who is out at the clothes line, hears it and comes around to the street and sees what has happened. All in a few minutes.

He was taken to the mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt and died a couple of hours later.

→ poppy bruise : When Heaney looks at his brother and sees the 'poppy bruise' this is a metaphor as it can represent both the colour of the boy's bruise and the fact that poppies are a traditional symbol of death.

snowdrops : A flower. Snowdrops symbolize the renewal of life that comes in the spring, or perhaps eternal life beyond the grave for those who have died. Perhaps because it is a flower with a drooping head, it is associated with death.

stunched : Stopping the flow of blood, often done by applying pressure on a wound.

cooed : The soft murmuring sound of a young baby. The manner of communication used by a baby before it learns to talk. Heaney's sibling has no idea what has happened and is happy to see Seamus back in the house.

→ knelling : The slow steady strokes of a bell at a funeral service is like the sound of an old school bell announcing the changes of class in school.

Mid Term Break centers upon antithetical reactions to infant death.

The most individualized of the first person speakers in Heaney's childhood poems is the adolescent boy who narrates Mid Term Break; his four year old brother has been killed in an accident and he has been called home from school for the wake and funeral. But though a neighbor is named (big Jim Evans), the speaker and the dead four-year-old are not. The poem is mostly the portrait of the poet's mother: not idealized or swooning in her sorrow in Joycean fashion, she is upright and contained even though overmastered by emotion.

Heaney's imagination must somehow find room, in almost every poem, for a three-phase scenario showing, in turn, ordinary life, its violation by some event and its restoration by "keeping going" afterwards.

Heaney: "And I wrote "Mid-Term Break" one evening there after a day's teaching in St Thomas's School, sitting in an armchair waiting for one of those guys to produce the evening meal. We had a rota: week by week, one did the shopping, one did the cooking and one did the dishes. It was my week for the dishes, so I had this free hour from 5 to 6; and I remembered Christopher's accident because it was February, round about the time of his anniversary.

His handling of grief is terse and understated in Mid Term Break. The poem opens with recitation of fact. We have no idea in this first stanza why he sits in the sick bay; not until the first line of stanza 2, when we see the father crying, do we know that the trouble is external. Throughout the poem Heaney maintains a distance between himself and his material. The only sensations he reveals of his 14 yr old self are embarrassment and self-consciousness. Indeed, it is the distance that suggests the pain of loss. The ambulance arrives not with a younger brother but with "the corpse". Later, the details he provides instead are of everyone else: his mother's "angry tearless sighs", old men shaking his hand and expressing sorrow, strangers whispering information, and in the midst of it all the baby, who "cooed and laughed and rocked the pram," a happy island untouched by the ocean of sadness surrounding it. Even at the end, young Heaney does see the body, the recitation is flat, factual as he finds his brother "paler now". Clearly this is an emotional rendering of an emotional moment, and the restraint is not achieved without cost. The regularity of the end-stopped lines, as well as the caesura in the last 2 lines, suggests the effort involved in suppressing the memory of grief. The verse does not flow; it falters and halts. The final line, despite its heavily alliterative debt to Anglo-Saxon, is heartbreakingly simple, conveying so much more than it says.

Though one of his first published poems, Mid Term Break shows a remarkable degree of poetic maturity and control, dealing as it does with the death of one of his younger brothers, Christopher. Isolated from the rest of the school, "in the college sick bay" - as if death itself might be contagious - the boy narrator waits for neighbors to take him home, and listens to the "bells knelling". The familiarity, predictability of home, however is immediately violated when by the sight of his crying father and the sound of his mother's "angry tearless sighs". Once more Heaney is deft and delicate in handling the double perspective, the reader being simultaneously aware of the child's embarrassment in suddenly becoming the focus of strangers' sympathy, and the adult writer's irony describing how "the baby cooed and laughed" and how Big Jim Evans referred a "hard blow". After the inadequate stock phrases proffered by the community - understatement that cannot bear grief - the poet chooses apposite images to move us. The snowdrops and the candle imply innocence and fragile beauty, qualities reiterated when Heaney talks of the "poppy bruise on his left temple" and how the child still slept in a "cot". The mathematical preciseness, the tragic equation within the final line deepen the paths of the poem's ending. After the alliterative density of Death of a Naturalist, The Barn, Blackberry Picking, Churning Day, the decasyllabic tercets of Mid Term Break seem fittingly austere and spare in sound while vivid in image. Though the form is derived from Montague, the voice is clearly Heaney's.

In his early teens while at St Columb's, two incidents connected with home must have had a huge impact on him. One year, after returning from the happy reunion with his family the Christmas holiday afforded him, he was suddenly summoned back home for an unexpected, unwished for Mid Term Break. His 4 yr old brother Christopher had been killed in a car accident. Heaney's early poem recording this event accurately and vividly records the bewilderment he had felt as a child in the face of death. Less tragic, but almost equally momentous, was his parents decision to move from his childhood home and birthplace, Mossbawn, to Bellaghy. Christopher's death must have been a factor in the decision; for the young Seamus, it must have constituted another physical and symbolic break with innocence.

The subject of this poem is the death of Seamus Heaney's younger brother, Christopher who was killed by a car at the age of four. It is a tremendously poignant poem and its emotional power derives in large measure from the fact that Heaney is very muted and understated with respect to his own emotional response. He chooses to focus more upon the reaction of his parents in order to convey the shocking impact of the death of their little boy. Usually, we must be careful not to assume the "I" in a poem is, in fact, the poet. In this case, though, we may be sure that Mid-Term Break is purely and intensely autobiographical.

As is frequently the case with Heaney there is an arresting amalgam of manliness and tenderness in the writing that lends it both warmth and astringency at the same time. This poem is powerfully moving because of its emotional restraint and control of tone. Heaney concentrates on observed details and it is the accumulation of these details that helps to make the poem so memorable.

An elegiac tone is established at the beginning of the poem. An elegy is a poem written to commemorate a dead person who is traditionally resurrected in a benign landscape. Here, though, the little boy is recalled with clarity and realism; Heaney finishes with the rueful and terrible equation "A four foot box, a foot for every year", which starkly conveys the shocking loss of a young child.

The poem opens with a line that might easily describe any child but the second line introduces a darkly foreboding atmosphere:

"I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close."

The word "knell" is appropriate in the context of a poem about death because it is the sound of a funeral bell. We do not normally associate school bells with death but this day was to prove horrifically different for the poet. The rhythm and alliteration also reinforce the mournful tone. The 'c' and 'l' sounds, as well as the internal rhyme of "bells" and "knelling" help to suggest both the idea of finality and of time seeming to slow down. The poet is driven home by his neighbours and not his parents, another unusual event preparing the reader for the idea that something is terribly wrong. The fact that Heaney remembers the precise time, "two o'clock" is convincing as we all tend to remember precise timings when recalling traumatic, life changing events.

Stanza two concentrates on the poet's father's emotional response who is "crying". Heaney tells us that his father "had always taken funerals in his stride" but this death is unnatural as well as personal. The bereft of a little child is unbearable for the normally rock solid father who would, we assume, be the sort of man to offer words of comfort to others just as "Big Jim Evans" offers his to Heaney's family in "saying it was a hard blow." (line 6) There is a terrible double meaning in the phrase "hard blow" because Jim Evans, by referring to the emotional impact of Christopher's death, also unwittingly uses language that recalls the impact of the car that killed him.

The third stanza presents us with another contrast, the baby's innocent joy at seeing his elder brother. Remembering the title of the poem, we might be tempted to hope, along with the Heaney family that this event is some terrible nightmare that might be woken up from. The baby's normal behaviour, though, only accentuates the reality of the situation. From a technical point of view, Heaney's skillful use of the iambic pentameter helps to emphasise the family drama that is played out in the poem. The baby's innocent obliviousness to the tragic circumstance of his elder brother's return from school is captured in, "The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram." The bouncy emphatic rhythm is in direct contrast to the opening stanza's measured pace. The unusual aspect of the situation is developed further in lines 8-11 as the young Heaney is "embarrassed" by the proffering of sympathy from "old men". Their awkwardness is economically conveyed through their euphemistic use of language in telling him that "there were sorry" for his "trouble" (line 10). The sibilant alliteration in "Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest" (line 11) captures the hushed, muted atmosphere in the house.

Heaney goes on to concentrate upon his mother's reaction to her little boy's death who says nothing but holds his hand in her own as she "coughed out angry tearless sighs" (line 13). The implication here is that she has cried so much that there is nothing more to cry but incensed by the driver's failure to avoid her son. Line 14 begins with another precise time reference and the reality of the family having to receive "the corpse". This is the first time that we know that the "trouble" is connected with.

The sixth stanza recounts the poet's visit to his brother's room. Heaney conveys the feeling of being unable to name the reality of the situation. He does not go on to say that this is where his little brother is lying dead. Instead the surrounding details emphasise the atmosphere of quiet as the boys are reunited after "six weeks". The snowdrops and candles are symbolic of life but they are also ritualistically funereal. The word "soothed" may be applicable to both the idea that the flowers and candles are placed as a comfort to the dead boy but they are also for the solace of the grieving family. Unable to articulate the reality of his brother's death, the poet chooses to present his earlier self, noticing that he was "Paler" (line 18). Another flower image draws attention to the apparently insignificant injury that had such a devastating effect, as well as the fragility of life with which the poppy is traditionally associated.

The description here becomes almost unbearably powerful because of the restraint Heaney exercises. The young boy could easily be asleep but, tragically, it is only as if he were asleep. He will never wake up again. The word "cot", along with the earlier use of "pram" in stanza three emphasises the unnatural eruption of death into the life of a family with very young children. It also helps to highlight the horror faced by any parent who is predeceased by a child. The final couplet is consistent in tone with the remainder of the poem. Heaney chooses to add a single line stanza to complete the poem that has seven three line stanzas preceding it. The effect of this is to present a terrible equation on its own, something that stands out baldly and inescapably. Just as there are "No gaudy scars" visible on the poor child's body, so too there is no lurid concentration upon injury or any self-indulgent displays of grief. The final line is, in a sense, "knocked clear" of the rest of the poem through Heaney's decision to separate it. There is a heartbreaking logic in the statement that reminds us both of the small stature of the child and the brevity of his young life.

As a lyric poem commemorating a terrible event, it is difficult to imagine anything to surpass it for control, truthfulness and austere reverential beauty.

Seamus Heaney wrote this poem as a reflection on the death of his infant brother, Christopher, who died in a car accident in 1953 when Heaney was fourteen. He was at boarding school forty miles from home at the time his brother died.

The word knelling is often associated with death (as with the "knelling" of a funeral bell) so this adds a morbid tone to the opening of the poem.

Heaney brings the reader with him as he has to walk into the house through the porch to meet his father: "Big Jim Evans"; the baby in its pram; the old men gathering in the living room; and finally his mother coughing out "angry tearless sighs", which show she was hiding how she really felt, perhaps for the sake of her son.

There is a contrast between the way the mother and the father react to the son's death. The mother is more angry than sad while the father is filled with tears.

His feelings at the house when he gets there were those of embarrassment as he was treated like a mature adult by old men standing to shake his hand.

In losing his four-year-old brother, Heaney also lost his own childhood innocence, as he discovered the brutal reality of the world.

The effect of the isolated last line is to focus on the tragedy of the boy's death.

This poem records his experience quite dispassionately; we know how other people feel but not much of how he felt. Yet he remembers everything of that day.

Heaney is in between the very young and the old. He is outside.

Apart from the last line which reveals the brother's age, the poem is written in 3-line unrhymed stanzas.

The poem has such a powerful effect because the emotions are so understated. Heaney describes only what he sees, not commenting, never letting any feelings reach the surface. His emotions are restrained.

The title, "Mid Term Break" is a clue to the contents and the meaning of the poem, the phrase Mid-Term break can symbolize Christopher's life being cut short like a term being cut short by the holidays.

Heaney is comparing the ringing of the bells in a school to the ringing of bells announcing a death or a funeral

This is an incredibly sad poem. The mood is set almost immediately in the second line: Counting bells knelling classes to a close. Notice how Heaney uses assonance and alliteration to emphasise the funereal sound of the bells and the feeling of time dragging. The stanza begins with the 'morning' in line one but it is two o'clock in line three showing that hours have passed in waiting.

The second stanza begins with the image of Heaney's father 'crying'. Having come across Heaney's father in poems such as Follower in which he appears to be a strong man of few words, this contrary picture evokes powerful emotion in the reader. Heaney skilfully takes the reader with him as he enters the house through the porch - we meet his father, 'Big Jim Evans', the baby in its pram, the old men congregated in the room and finally Heaney's mother coughing out 'angry tearless sighs'.

Lines 14-15 again show Heaney using assonance, this time in his repetition of the short 'a' - 'At', 'ambulance', 'arrived', 'stanced', and, 'bandaged' - emphasising the stopping short of blood and life.

We learn in the sixth stanza that Heaney hadn't seen his brother for six weeks having been 'Away at school'. The words 'Paler now', hang at the end of the stanza causing a sad pause before the sentence continues and describes how little changed in appearance the boy is in death, the difference being his paler complexion and 'poppy bruise'.

Rhyme & Form: Iambic Pentameter

Tone: Sombre

Imagery: Death, Grief

Themes: Death, Frailty of Life, Growing up

Poetic Techniques: Onomatopoeia, Alliteration, Assonance, Simile, Metaphor

'Mid-Term Break' is told over the course of three main parts. In the first the boy waits in the college sick bay to be brought home by a neighbour, the reason for his father not collecting him could be due to his family not owning a car (this was in the 1950s). The second occurs in the family home where he meets his grieving parents, family friends and neighbours, who have gathered for the wake. The final scene takes place the following morning when the boy sees his little brother's body laid out surrounded by flowers and candles.

His father, apparently always strong at other funerals, is distraught by his child's death, while "Big Jim" says that it was a "terrible blow". The young Seamus is made uneasy by the baby's happiness on seeing him, by hand shaking and euphemisms "Sorry for my trouble", and by people whispering about him.

In the last two stanzas the boy goes to the room where his brother's body is laid out. This is the encounter that the entire poem has been moving towards, the climax of the whole piece. There is an almost peaceful feeling in the poet's description of the room: "snowdrops and candles" soothe the bedside scene. His brother is paler than he remembers, and the only sign of his fatal injury is the "poppy bruise" on his left temple. The young boy sees his brother for the last time and faces death for the first. In the final image the poet compares the small size of his brother's coffin with the shortness of life.

The sombre mood of 'Mid-Term Break' is established in the opening lines as the boy sits in the college sick bay with nothing to do but count the bells "knelling classes to a close". Notice how the poet uses the word "knelling" instead of ringing. This gives us a hint of the mood: the bell, which

Instructions

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is bringing classes to an end, reminds the boy of a church bell "knelling" for a funeral mass, and perhaps is forewarning him of the death he is about to face.

His brother's death, as well as being a great tragedy, is a rite of passage for the boy. He is treated as an adult and perhaps as a support to his parents in their terrible grief – he is the only member of the family not crying.

In the final two stanzas the mood is heightened as the boy goes alone to see his brother's body. Heaney's language now is much more poetic than it was when he referred to his brother as a corpse: note the personal pronouns "him", "his", "he" – as opposed to "the corpse". We barely notice that Heaney has twice referred to a "box", almost a flippant name for a coffin.

A "mid-term break" is a period of a school year when students are relaxed and enjoying their leisure times. A short yet rejoicing respite in the middle of the semester, a mid-term break as the title gives an impression that this poem will have a happy and active mood. Though, ironically, the poem turns out to be completely sad and also extremely calm.

There is one more point very exceptional in this poem, which is the last line. The last line has only nine words: "A four foot box, a foot for every year." And it is the last stanza. This structure visually emphasizes the last line, showing that it has much importance. Also, in this poem there is no specific rhythm or rhyme pattern. However the last word in the poem rhymes with the last word of the previous stanza. Hence, it is clear that Heaney gave variation on the poem's structure to outline the importance of the last line.

Moreover, the very last line sums up the much of the whole poem; illustrating the coffin, the speaker is conveying the ambience of extreme sadness. Heaney's "Mid-Term break" revisits his younger self's confrontation with the tragic death of his four year old brother. The considerable pathos of the poem emanates from the delay in the poet's articulation of his brother's death: we do not know that the child is dead until the final stages of the poem. In fact he arrives as an "anonymous" corpse at first, deferring the revelation of his death until the inescapability of the last line.

This delay shows how literally incredible death is. The poet opens the poem in a sick bay, the only place in his boarding school able to accommodate the mourner before he can return home. The ambiguity of the word "sick" is obvious and drenched in a painful awkwardness. Death has isolated the poet and the activity of marking time through "counting bells knelling" again underlines the ironic disassociation of the poet from the reality of his brother's death. In retrospect he uses the vocabulary of death: "knelling" yet there is a real sense that he is too shocked to acknowledge the correspondence.

The economic situation of the poet's family is flatly told in the line: "At two O'Clock our neighbours drove me home." It also delays the moment of reunion with the poet's family: he has not seen them for six weeks and a cataclysmic event now separates them. Time has estranged the poet from everything and everyone. He feels an outsider even unto himself. The poet meets his father crying in the "porch". The humanity and fragility of this spatial detail is palpable. The porch is a place "outside" the main activities of the home. It is a retreat from home's designated roles: from the masculine "composure" of maleness. He is no longer the bold, capable figure of "Digging". He has become a stranger.

The unreality of the poet's feeling is accentuated by the disjunction between the baby's joy at all the animation in the home and the reason for all this sudden animation. The poet's admission of being "embarrassed" works relates to both his sibling's seemingly "inappropriate" joy at seeing him and the now adult way he is greeted and perhaps expected to behave as a chief mourner.

How ironic that the seemingly innocuous bruise on his brother's temple should have killed him? The translation of the bruise as a "poppy" is very revealing. For not only might it highlight the arbitrary ways in which our existence may be extinguished but also the ways in which we need to reshape reality in order to survive. Thus the deadly bruise is retranslated as a "poppy": a symbol of poignant remembrance and wasted life.

He returns into a topsy-turvy world which he cannot understand because of its new unfamiliarity. Although he old enough to understand the permanence of death, he is not experienced enough to understand the customs of a funeral and is describing the events as though he is a traveller in a strange land. In a way it is once he is away from other people and with his brother, Christopher, that reality intrudes and he faced with the ordinariness of death which he explains in a matter-of-fact description of what he sees. To me that last line shows a sudden maturity as he connects with the symbolism of the four feet for four years. Behind that connection I hear the question why? Children would ask why a someone dies, but an adult would ask why a child dies so young. I feel that in that instant he himself lost his childhood.

The way in which this is written is so effective. The death of a child is one of the saddest subjects for poetry and has often been visited with emotional words and a self-conscious aim to make you the reader, or listener, react emotionally. Heaney has done the opposite. In the matter-of-fact observational retelling of the sequence of events he plays no poetic tricks so it is possible to visualise the scene without becoming emotionally involved. He maintains this detachment throughout the poem, almost holding you at arms length. With that final devastating line he almost kicks you in the stomach, invites you to feel the full emotional impact of what the whole poem has been describing. It flows naturally from the rest of the poem, it provides the heart-wrenching full stop at the end, and it is all done so skillfully that you don't notice how he has played with your reactions so, despite knowing exactly where the poem is leading the end still comes as a shock. Masterly!

Note shifts in space (in the college sick bay / home / in the porch / I came in / the ambulance arrive / up in the room ... beside / the four foot box) and time (all morning / two o'clock / whispers .. as my mother held my hand / at ten o'clock / next morning).

Big Jim makes an unfortunate pun – he means to speak of the metaphorical "blow", of course (not the literal car accident/blow).

Note the personal pronouns (him, his, he) as opposed to "the corpse". The calm mood is beautifully shown in the transferred epithet (snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside) – literally they soothed the young Heaney). The bruise is seen as not really part of the boy – he is "wearing" it (a metaphor) as if it could come off. Heaney likens the bruise to a poppy, a flower linked with death and soothing of pain (opiates come from poppies). The child appears as if sleeping (a simile). We contrast the ugly "corpse, stanced and bandaged" which becomes a sleeping child with "no gaudy scars" – dead, but, ironically, not disfigured. The last line of the poem is most poignant and skillful – the size of the coffin is the measure of the child's life. We barely notice that Heaney has twice referred to a "box", almost a jokey name for a coffin.

Overall, we note the contrast between the embarrassing scenes earlier and the final section where, alone with his brother, Heaney can be natural.

The poem has a clear formal structure, in three line stanzas with a loose iambic metre. There are occasional rhymes but the poem's last two lines form a rhyming couplet, and emphasize the brevity of the child's life. Many of the lines run on – they are end stopped only in the last line of the stanza, and in three cases the lines run on from one stanza to the next. As in much of Heaney's poetry, there is no special vocabulary – most common register of spoken English.

With whom, do you think, is the mother angry?

How does the poem contrast the fuss of the homecoming with the calmness of the scene when Seamus sees his brother's body?

Note: historically and culturally in many places it is customary to display a body in the home before burial so that friends and family can say a last goodbye (compare to Robert Frost's "Home Burial" poem)