

# Literature review on revelations in the ordinary

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## Seamus Heaney's "Mid-Term Break"

Seamus Heaney's poem, "Mid-Term Break," dramatizes the conflict of denial and acceptance, as the speaker, a boy, returns from school for the funeral of his younger brother. The reader witnesses the literal events as the boy waits at school, returns home to the mourning family, and sees the body of his little brother in the coffin. While the events in the poem seem ordinary and there is little question of what happened, Heaney had good reason to tell this story as a poem and not in prose.

A clue to this reason for poetry versus prose comes from literary scholar Jonathan Allison, who discusses Heaney's poem "Fosterage." Allison writes, "'Description is revelation!': this excited, opening gambit indicates that the relationship between style and insight or visionary possibility will be central" to the poem (62). That "description is revelation" is also true of "Mid-Term" break. Heaney has several methods in which he uses description and physical texture to turn his poetry for his readers from a simple relaying of events to an in-depth experience.

The structure of the poem is seven stanzas of three lines each followed by a single line. There is no particular rhyme scheme, although there are many near rhymes such as "close" and "home" at the ends of lines two and three, "crying" and "stride" in lines four and five, and "pram" and "hand" in lines seven and nine. The absence of a regular rhyme scheme or particular meter to the words does not make the poem awkward; Heaney uses other methods such as sound and diction to make his words flow smoothly. The significance of the form of the poem is that the regular stanzas represent an attempt to bring order to the situation of conflict, in which the boy must stop denying

and accept his brother's death. The final line standing alone at the end of the poem shows how the boy comes to accept what has happened and illustrates it in his own mind. Finally, he sees both the life and death of his brother at the same time.

The overall tone of the poem is established in the first stanza, in which the boy-speaker is sitting in the college sick bay "counting bells knelling classes to a close" (2). The sick bay is never a pleasant place to be, and the bells give an even more somber aspect to this time of waiting. In the second stanza, the boy returns home and says, "In the porch I met my father crying" (4). If there were any question before that tragedy has occurred, there is none now. Interestingly, the boy does not explicitly reveal many of his own feelings or displays of emotion in the poem, although he describes those of others such as the baby, his parents, and strangers. His aspect appears to be contemplative.

This contemplative aspect leads to the rhetorical situation implied by the poem. The boy is neither speaking to the reader directly nor to anyone else encountered through the poem. As he waits at school, returns home, and sees the body of his younger brother, he is observing and reflecting. He is seeing and feeling things through his observations in a new way. For example, when he says, "In the porch I met my father crying--/ He had always taken funerals in his stride" he implies that he has never seen his father cry before (4-5). As he enters the house, he says, "I was embarrassed/ By old men standing up to shake my hand" which is likely the opposite of what usually happens, where the younger man is expected to stand up and shake the hand of his elders out of respect (8-9). The next day

as he looks at the body of his brother, he says, " I saw him/ For the first time in six weeks. Paler now" (17-18). He observes his brother as being very different now from the young boy full of life that he last saw. The poem's rhetorical situation is introverted and reflective.

The importance of diction and sound in the poem is revealed in an interview with Heaney in which he said, " When I was at college and later at university it was poetry with a thrilling physical texture I loved" (Randall and Heaney 14). The words are ordinary but not colloquial, because the speaker is a boy who has had some education. Heaney makes liberal use of alliteration, consonance, and assonance throughout the poem. The line " Counting bells knelling classes to a close" is a superior example of Heaney's use of the sound of words to make the sentence flow (2). The sounds of the words show the boy's heightened senses, giving the ordinary things like school, bells, and so forth a new feeling of importance and connectedness. Because of his inner conflict of denying and needing to accept his brother's death, he is keenly aware of each detail in his life, and the emphasis on diction and sound helps heighten the senses of the reader to match the boy's feelings about being alive in a world without his brother. There is the use of alliteration in the last stanza, " four foot box, a foot for " (22). The alliteration in this final line emphasizes how young the speaker's brother is, and how it is unfortunate for him to have died at such an early age. The short, one-syllable words in the concluding sentences coupled with the alliteration help emphasize the abrupt end of the boy's life.

Heaney also uses words and phrases that can have double meanings. The most obvious example is when the speaker says, " In the porch I met my

father crying” which leaves it to the reader’s imagination whether the speaker is crying, the father is crying, or both (4). In the next line, he says, “ And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow” (5). At first, this appears to explain only why the father is crying. However, later in the poem when he is looking at his brother’s body and says, “ Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,/ He lay in the four foot box as in his cot./ No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear” it is apparent that his younger brother also took a hard blow when a car hit him (19-21). The title of the poem itself, “ Mid-Term Break,” also has more than one meaning. Although such breaks are usually thought of as a respite from school and studies, in this case the break is not a scheduled one, giving the title a darker meaning.

Because, as Heaney wrote in his poem “ Fosterage,” description is revelation, visual and audible imagery contrasts offer insight into the conflict the boy feels between denial and acceptance concerning his brother’s death. Seeing his father cry although he never cries, hearing the laughing baby as people mourn, having his hand shaken by his elders, and seeing his brother lay in silence are all unusual things the speaker observes that oppose what he normally expects to see. The poem resolves the conflict between denial and acceptance as they speaker finally views his brother in his coffin. The speaker feels the contrast between life and death and can now accept the reality of what has happened. As a poet, contrast is important to Heaney. In his interview, he said, “ I had had some notion that modern poetry was so far beyond the likes of me - there was Eliot and so on - so I got this thrill out of trusting my own background” (Randall and Heaney 14). If the poem is not autobiographical, Heaney certainly witnessed similar situations in his own

life. By taking an ordinary situation from his own background and showing the contrasts in the situation to the reader, using sound, and figurative language, Heaney makes the moment extraordinary.

### **Works Cited**

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