

# Analysis of "mid-term break" by seamus heaney essay sample

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## **Analysis of “ Mid-Term Break” by Seamus Heaney Essay Sample**

In 1995, the Nobel Committee praised Heaney’s poems as “ works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past. ” In this essay, we will be analysing Heaney’s poem “ Mid-Term Break”. More specifically we will be looking at the content, use of language and imagery, poetic voice, tone and mood in the poem. We will therefore be examining three broad questions about “ Mid-Term Break”: what is the poem about? How is it written? What is our response to the poem? Let us examine, then, the content of the poem, and look closely at its meaning and significance.

The poem is essentially about the death of Heaney’s infant brother (Christopher) and his reaction to the tragedy. Much of Heaney’s earlier work is, to a degree, autobiographical, and “ Mid-Term Break” is no exception. It may therefore be of benefit to us to look at the biographical context, as this could help us to gain a better understanding of the poet and therefore of the mood, meaning and connotations within the poem. Heaney led an idyllic existence as a child, living on the family farm, Mossbawn, in County Derry, the eldest of a sprawling brood of nine children.

This family idyll came to a sudden stop when Heaney was twelve: he then won one of the new Education Act scholarships and left Mossbawn for a Catholic boarding school in Derry, St. Columb’s, a school mainly devoted to training priests. Heaney was terribly homesick, and yet he was stuck there term after term, with classes six days a week, and with the chance to go into Derry one Saturday in three. At Christmastime or for summer holidays,

Heaney might go back home, go fishing with his father, try to learn the crafts of the farm, or attend Irish classes in Donegal, but otherwise had nothing to look forward to other than schoolwork.

After he'd been at boarding school two years, Heaney was called home in February for the funeral of his four-year-old brother, Christopher, killed by a car. Heaney's poem about this death was his first publication, issued some fifteen years after the actual event. This could be an indication of how deeply Heaney was affected by Christopher's death. The poem, therefore, captures a boy's unfolding consciousness of death by recounting the particulars of his experience: being kept in the sick bay until his lift arrived, his father's crying, the awkward behaviour of the old men, the "poppy bruise" on the corpse's temple.

The theme of "Mid-Term Break" is not immediately clear from the title. However, from the opening line in the first stanza, "I sat all morning in the sick bay" we are aware that all is not well. A bleak picture of a youth waiting to be taken home from school to his brother's funeral emerges. The lad notes his father's crying as being unusually emotional, "He had always taken funerals in his stride". A baby unaware of the tragic scene, and apologetic adults, "sorry for my trouble", add to the boy's uneasiness.

Whispered explanations about the youth increase his embarrassment, as his mother holds his hand she "coughed out angry tearless sighs." The corpse arrives, but it is not until the next day that the boy sees his brother "For the first time in six weeks." He is laid out in his small coffin, pale and bruised hit

by the bumper of a car, just four years old. Now that we have looked at what the poem is about, we can begin to examine "Mid-Term Break" in more detail, and in particular at the scenes the poet evokes, at family members, mood and imagery. Reading a story or poem about death is usually gloomy and overtly predictable.

However, Heaney inverts this mundanity to deliver a poem that is initially shrouded in mystery. The title itself does nothing to hint at the poem's subject matter. The words "mid-term break" suggest images of holidays, of homecoming, lazy days of summer idyll, of cosy everyday events, and not of death. However, Heaney uses a number of conceits to build a feeling of unease in the reader, a feeling that grows and escalates with each stanza of the poem, until we are told, in the fifth stanza, that there is a corpse, borne to the house by an ambulance.

Looking at the title again after an initial reading of the poem, we understand the cruel irony in the words. Not only has the poet had an unexpected break in his stay at boarding school, but this break is due to that fact that his brother is dead: his life has been "broken". The opening stanza is set in the boarding school, with a young boy (the poet) waiting in sick bay. The very first word in the poem is "I", and this immediately brings the reader into the poem: we identify with the poet.

As we have already seen, from the opening line in the first stanza, "I sat all morning in the sick bay" we are aware that all is not well. This feeling of apprehension and fearful expectancy is intensified with the second line of

the opening stanza: " Counting bells knelling classes to a close". Notice how Heaney uses alliteration to emphasise the funereal sound of the tolling bells and the feeling of time dragging. The hard " c" sounds point to a brutal finality, like a slamming door, whereas the long, gentle " l" sounds suggest a drawn out passing of time.

Indeed, the stanza begins with the " morning" in line one, but it is " two o'clock" when the neighbours arrive in line three, showing that hours have passed while the young poet was waiting. In addition, the boy doesn't just hear the class bells ringing, he counts them. This is a powerful indication of time passing and conjures an image of a boy using the school bell to tell what time it is, to try to guess how long he has been waiting. The suspense of waiting is then broken somewhat by the arrival of the neighbours, because at this point we learn of the boy's destination: he is going home.

The feelings of anxiety and unease are perpetuated, however, by the fact that we have yet to be told what has happened, and why the boy is being taken home. The scene changes in the second stanza, which begins with the image of Heaney's father crying as the poet meets him in the porch of their house. The confined space of the porch suggests a feeling of claustrophobia, as the young poet enters a house unexpectedly crowded with people, and an ambience filled with their feelings of grief and sorrow.

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. As if to underline this, the reader is further

reminded, almost as an aside in parenthesis, that Heaney's father had "always taken funerals in his stride". It is a further indication to the reader that a frightful event has occurred, a suggestion of a tragedy that is still away in the distance and that we can not yet see clearly, although we sense that it is there.

Heaney then skilfully takes the reader with him as he walks through the house - 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". The reader enters the house with the poet, and the feelings of shock and slow, final realisation come over both reader and poet simultaneously. Jim Evans' line, "it was a hard blow" is especially significant, as it is invested with multiple meanings.

Jim Evans obviously means to speak of a metaphorical "blow", caused by the loss of a son and a brother. However, we later learn that Christopher was, ironically, dealt a fatal blow by a speeding car. We do not know, therefore, whether Jim's speech is a cruel and unfortunate pun, yet another hint at the tragedy to come, or a stark illustration of the inadequacy of such platitudes when expressing grief. The third and fourth stanzas convey the poet's unease and discomfort at the atmosphere inside the house, in a rapid and disjointed series of images.

It is as if the poet is in shock: he sees clearly the things around him, and almost as if sleepwalking, notes them in a daze, but cannot make sense of anything. He notices that the baby, too young to comprehend what is

happening, is cooing happily and rocking in its pram. The contented sounds of the baby, a new life, act as a jolting counterpoint to the grief-stricken silence in the room. The boy clearly feels uncomfortable with the atmosphere of stiff, mournful formality and the attention he receives: " I was embarrassed/By old men standing up to shake my hand".

The fourth stanza begins with another platitude used by the old men to express their condolences: they tell the lad that they are " sorry for his trouble". This expression is strangely unfeeling and detached. It is an evasive euphemism alluding to the death, and perhaps another indication of the inadequacy of expressions of condolence. The poet is acutely aware of having been away from his family, and is ill at ease with people whispering about him because of this: " Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest, /Away at school".

It is also possible that there are underlying feelings of guilt and regret in the young lad, at having been absent at a time when his family needed him. This theme of the poet's anguish at his forced absence is reprised in the sixth stanza, which we will examine later. The fourth stanza ends with the poet's mother holding his hand. This image almost serves to move the reader on from the stiffness and formality of the old men's handshakes, to the more intimate and personal grief of a mother, comforting her son, but also holding on to him, perhaps fearing, in her grief, that she will lose him also.

It is also significant that the poet was greeted at the door by his father, but then had to move through a room of strange people, before reaching the

centre, the core of the grieving host: his mother. The three lines of the fifth stanza are a turning point in the poem, as they finally reveal that there has indeed been a death in the family, and that the remains have been brought to the house. The first line is a striking image of the nature of the mother's grief. It is not an idealistic, romanticised image of a woman sobbing softly, with warm and copious tears at the death of her son.

On the contrary, it is a gritty and realistic portrayal of a woman who is angry about being cruelly robbed of her young son. As a consequence, her crying has become a brutal coughing-up of sighs, harsh and tearless, as empty and barren as her feelings of loss. The second line brings the reader back to the action in the poem. The poet once again emphasises the importance of the moment by informing us of a definite time, ten o'clock, for the arrival of the ambulance. His brother is not referred to in personal or emotive terms, but merely as a bandaged corpse that has been brought to the house by ambulance.

This image indicates how alienated and remote the poet feels from events, as if he is still in shock and experiencing feelings of denial and disbelief. He does not see his brother as a person, but as a corpse. In addition, his brother is shrouded in bandages, and is not clearly seen or described. Therefore, the image also brings home the shocking truth that the young poet's brother is indeed remote from him: in death he is irrevocably removed and inaccessible. The scene changes for the third and final time in the last two stanzas of the poem. It is the next morning, and the poet finally describes seeing his dead brother for the first time.



Just as he waited alone in sick bay to be collected by the neighbours at the beginning of the poem, the poet is once again alone at the poem's conclusion. This time, the description is more personal and affecting, and the feelings towards his brother seem to be more real, and less frozen by shock. The first things that the poet notices upon entering the room where his brother is lying are snowdrops and candles. This image is striking and significant, as it is here that the poet contrasts images of life and death. The snowdrops represent renewal, growth and new life, whereas the candles recall funeral rites, stillness and death.

We know that the poet's brother died in February, so the flowers are also a poignant reminder of the time of year in which the death occurred, and it may be that snowdrops were the only flowers available to the family as an offering to the dead boy. We then learn that this was the first time in six weeks that Heaney had seen his brother, having been away at school. As previously touched upon, this is a reprise of the ideas put forward in fourth stanza: that the poet regretted not being home with his family when his brother was killed.

We also know from biographical material that Heaney did not like being away at boarding school, and was terribly homesick, so it also suggests that Heaney missed his brother and is now terribly anguished that they must meet again in this way. The final two words of the sixth stanza, "Paler now" suggest a comparison. It is as if the poet is comparing an image of his brother as he remembers him, with what is lying in front of him now. It is another device by which the poet juxtaposes images of life and death: the

lad remembers his brother as he was when he was alive, and compares that image to the still, cold little figure in front of him.

The final stanza begins with more flower imagery, as the poet describes his brother " Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple". Poppies are obviously a reference to death and remembrance, but this image serves more than one purpose. The contrast of the vivid red bruise on pale skin reminds us that the infant's pallor is that of death. We are further reminded of the dead boy's pale skin when we are told of the lack of " gaudy scars" on the little body. It is as if the poppy bruise, the colour of death, has marked the lone spot where the fatal blow was dealt. The dead infant is then described lying " in his four foot box as in his cot".

It is probably the most shocking and pitiful line of the poem, for it is only now that the reader realises that the dead child is little more than a baby, and the allusion to the " bumper" knocking him later on in the stanza, points to a tragic and senseless road accident. The line is once again filled with images of death: the cot and the coffin are juxtaposed, as if to emphasise that the boy lies in the slumber of death. It also echoes the image of comparison in the previous stanza, as if the poet remembered his brother asleep in his cot, and compared this image to that of him lying in his coffin.

In conclusion, we can say that " Mid-Term Break" is an autobiographical work about the death of Heaney's young brother, Christopher. Heaney uses various conceits to build up a sensation of apprehension throughout the poem, evoking feelings of foreboding and unease in the reader. We are

made to feel that something is amiss, we may even guess that someone may have died, but we are never sure until the concluding part of the poem. The poet also uses a wide variety of imagery to illustrate his feelings of incomprehension, shock, grief and anger at the loss of his brother, and to describe the reactions of family members and those close to them.

The final brief and understated line stands alone. Its very brevity, and the abrupt ending it gives the whole poem, after Heaney has spent so long building feelings of misgiving in the reader, is meant to reflect feelings of overwhelming shock, anger and grief at the loss of such a young child. The line is also an expression of finality. The box is four feet long, a foot for every year of the dead child's life. The box will not grow, just as the child can no longer grow: both are still and frozen in time.