

# The 'treatment' of death essay



Death is a controversial topic that has been the subject of many poems as almost every person is curious to what happens when they depart this life.

The three poems that I am studying have very different views of what happens after life and each one has its own individual outlook towards death.

The three poems that I am studying are 'Mid-Term Break' by Seamus Heaney, 'In Memory of my Mother' by Patrick Kavanagh and Emily Dickinsons poem, which still remains untitled. 'Mid-Term Break' is about the sad and disquieting subject matter of death. It is a view from the poet Seamus Heaney as a young boy being confused as to how to react to the tragic death of his four year old brother. Heaney wrote this poem as an adult looking back at the time of his brother's death and his thoughts and feelings of his first experience of death as a young boy. In the first stanza, Heaney recalls his memories of sitting in school waiting for his neighbours to drive him home - "Counting bells knelling classes to a close" The school bells could imitate the sound of a funeral bell giving the reader a partial view into the following events.

The young boy is not thinking about the awful tragedy, his childish mind is counting the bells ending the classes as if his mind had gone blank. He is too young to take in the true horror of what has happened. This line referring to the school bells could also reflect the sound of a funeral bell tolling. In the second stanza he meets his father standing in the porch as his neighbours leave him home.

The young boy is confused and frightened to see how devastated and upset his father is, he had never seen his father cry before, he had always taken

funerals “ in his stride. The third stanza describes how innocent and unaware his baby brother/sister is of what has happened. It describes how the baby “ cooed and laughed and rocked the pram. ” It also describes his sheer embarrassment of the older male visitors who stood to shake his hand as if he was unworthy of such gestures. Throughout the poem the entire poem there is not a word of sorrow or sense of bereavement on the part of the writer.

Instead, the young boy is shocked and baffled toward the days events. This was his first experience of death and he is only now facing up to the real horrors and reality of death and its effects on a family. The young boy feels embarrassed and baffled by the numerous amounts of adult visitors who have invaded his home whilst his mother coughs “ out angry tearless sighs. ” This is a most poignant and moving image in stanza five of Heaney’s mothers who is so contorted by grief and shock that her anger leads to “ tearless sighs. ” The poet is more amazed by the reactions of his family and neighbours than by his own loss of a brother. In stanza six when he goes up to the room where his brother's corpse is, he can only notice the details in the room - the bruise, the coffin, the snowdrops and the candles.

He does not cry, instead he appears numb with shock. This stanza and the following one contains some very vivid phrases, the items surrounding the coffin symbolise the innocence and purity of the dead boy. The line “ candles soothed the bedside” gives an impression of the mellow, gentle candlelight softening the colours of the bedspread and wallpaper. The snowdrops are symbolic as they symbolise purity and miniature, white beauty. The other symbolic flower mentioned is “ a poppy bruise”.

Poppies are the flowers of commemorated, youthful, needless death in war and are used to convey the mood of sorrow and the waste of a life within so much innocence and potential. The poppy is also suggestive of redness (anger) and is also visually correct as it gives the impression of the swollen red flesh of a large bruise with the dark colour of the centre where the most internal damage has been done. The poem ends with the most striking and outstanding line. The poem has up until the last line, been made up of three line stanzas each with 10 or 11 syllables in length but now one line stands alone and the poem ends with Heaney's observation of how the boy's coffin corresponds to his age - " a four foot box, a foot for every year. " The line " a four foot box, a foot for every year" is important as the alliteration makes it stand out as a stanza on its own, telling the reader in a very indirect and pathetic way that the child was only 4.

The alliteration also enhances the rhythm as the line consists of 2 clearly separated statements and the abrupt, sudden ending reflects the abrupt sudden ending of a young life. The overall poem is full of valuable descriptive language used to portray the shock of discovering that one's brother has been horrifically killed in a car accident and the young boy's first ever experience of bereavement. The poet proves that he can convey how a young boy might feel in the face of the great and startling mystery of death. The poet expresses his experience of death through this poem and this memory is one that he cannot and will not forget. My favourite line in the poem is the last one " A four foot box, a foot for every year.

" I like this line because it is chilling and shocking to find out that the young boy died at only the age of 4. This line is very well written and lingers in your

mind for a while after reading it. The next poem I am going to look at is "In Memory of my Mother" by Patrick Kavanagh. "In Memory of my Mother" is a poem about a son reminiscing of times with his mother who has died, not wanting to let go of the memory of the times they spent together. As the title suggests, Kavanagh wrote this poem in memory of his mother. He was very close to his mother and loved her dearly and wrote this poem as a mark of respect and admiration for all she did for him and the rest of his family.

The poet writes using colloquial language, language that one would use in everyday converse with another. The rhythm is like that of an everyday conversation although there is only one person talking. In the first stanza, the opening line is "I do not think of you lying in the wet clay of a Monaghan graveyard." This line is a definite indication that the poet does not want to forget his mother and feels that she lives on in his mind and in the hearts of all that loved her. The whole stanza is quite a positive view of death as the poet imagines his mother going about her usual activities such as "walking down the lane among the poplars on your way to the station.

.. " The rhythm used in these stanzas is an example of colloquial language. The second stanza begins with a reference to the poet's mother's religion, "Or happily going to Mass on a summer Sunday" This line also contains an alliteration.

As the stanza continues, the practical side of the poet's mother is revealed in the line "Don't forget to see about the cattle-" and ends with the line "Among your earthiest words the angels stray" which expresses the inner goodness of the mother. Stanza three conveys the peace and composure of

the mother and of how contented and happy their lives were. " And I think of you walking along a headland of green oats in June, so full of repose, so rich with life" The fourth stanza describes how the poet and his mother meet up accidentally in town and how they walked " together through the shop and stalls and markets free in the oriental streets of thought. " This is also another example of the beautiful thoughts the mother and son shared.

In the final stanza, the line " O you are not lying in the wet clay, for it is harvest evening now and we are piling up the ricks against the moonlight and you smile up at us - eternally" is another example of the positive visions of his mother that he still has. There is a mood of love and warmth throughout the poem. There is six separate glimpses of the mother when she was alive. The impression of the mother expressed by her son is that she is practical and content. She was active, not bound to the house; she takes an active part in running her farm.

The whole poem demonstrates a very positive, tranquil, peaceful view of death. My favourite line in the poem is "... so full of repose, so rich with life" because it paints a mental picture of the mother being a happy and positive woman so full of life, and now so sadly missed by her son and all that loved her. The final poem I am going to look at was written by Emily Dickinson and it still remains untitled.

Dickinson wrote this poem expressing her view of what happens after life. Dickinson's view of death is chilling and alarming although her view does actually have a religious likeness in the sense that the poem tells of eternity and immortality. In the first stanza, Dickinson conveys the idea that one is

too busy to stop and consider dying or indeed even die so death itself obliges and stops for you. " Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me-" This image is striking and strange. The second stanza expresses Dickinson's idea of death not being a sudden ending but comes over a long time period.

" We slowly drove - He knew no haste. " This stanza also tells of how all normal human activities become irrelevant on the journey to eternity. " And I had put away, my labour and my leisure too, for his civility. " Stanza three is about how the carriage passes through the different stages of human life." We passed the School, where children strove at recess - in the ring-" The line " We passed the Fields of gazing grain - we passed the setting Sun.

represents the objects surrounding of the speaker coming alive as her thoughts of death approach - even Gods fields of ripening grain gaze towards the carriage. The grain is also a common symbol of maturity and the grain is calmly staring at death as it passes, unlike the children at the school. Stanza four describes how the speaker becomes cold as the journey towards eternity progresses. " The Dews drew quivering and chill -" The individual has no mortal protection from the experience and is fragile. In stanza five the carriage pauses " before a house that seemed a swelling in the ground-" The ' house' is not what it seems, it is a grave. The house is a place associated with comfort and security but is now the grave is the persons ' home'.

The line " The roof was scarcely visible - the cornice - in the ground" describes how the burial vault is just visible in the ground. The final stanza

describes how the journey seems to have lasted for centuries but yet “ feels shorter than the day” and how the carriage does not stop as the grave but the horses pulling the carriage point at the direction of eternity. “ I first surmised the horses’ heads were toward eternity. “ The images portrayed in this poem are powerful and lingering and describe the realisation in the speaker’s mind that the carriage didn’t stop at the grave. Eternity is present but what renders her poem different, is the absence of God.

This poem is very chilling and frightening although it does reassure the reader that there is a better place and that life does continue after death. My favourite line in the poem is “ We passed the setting sun. ” I like this line because it is a common emblem of old age and the image portrayed of the sun setting symbolizes that as the sun goes down, a life ends with it. This line is sad and poignant although it is represented by a happy, joyful symbol – the sun.

Each poem has its own individual view of death. “ Mid-Term Break” is a heart-breaking poem with a very negative approach to death whereas “ In Memory of my Mother” and “ Because I could not stop for Death... ” have quite optimistic views of death. “ Mid-Term Break” is very negative when compared to the other poems as it is about the tragic death of a young family member, “ In Memory of my Mother” is also about the loss of a family member it is not seen to be a tragedy as the person died of old age.

While these two poems are written about the poets precious experiences, “ Because I could not stop for Death” is a view on what the poet thinks happens after death and is optimistic as it talks about Immortality and



Eternity. "In Memory of My Mother" reminisces of the deceased as if she was still alive. The poet writes about his mother and what kind of person she was and tells of her everyday activities like shopping and working on the farm, whereas "Mid-Term Break" has no references to the deceased. Instead it describes the atmosphere of the family home at the time of the death and only 3 of the stanzas are about the dead boy himself. Each poem represents death in different ways so none of the views are particularly similar.

The most obvious similarity is between "Mid-Term Break" and "In Memory of my Mother" as they are both written in memory of particular family members. My favourite poem is "Mid-Term Break" by Seamus Heaney because it is a very sad and heart-felt poem. It was written from experience and is therefore very realistic. Heaney has presented his memories in this poem very well and I sympathise with him having to experience his younger brother dying at the age of four. The poem is written in such a style that it is like reading a story of events.

As the poem progresses the story gets more and more heartbreaking and shattering to think of the pain and hurt that the poet and his family must have went through. The fact that the poet wrote this poem with so much detail, many years after the death happened, tells us that the memory lives on vividly inside him and is one that will never leave him. The realistic quality of this poem is the reason why I like this poem the best and the detail used in describing the events really saddened me and made me sympathise with anyone who had to endure that kind of horrific experience.