

Seamus heaney's
work – 'follower' and
'mid-term break'
essay sample



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After reading and analysing numerous poems, I have chosen two examples of the famous Irish Poet, Seamus Heaney's work: 'Follower' and 'Mid-Term Break'. Both poems relate to the poet's past, and are certainly associated with a specific 'loss' of a loved one - one a literal loss, and the other a subconscious loss.

'Mid-Term Break', which I found to be a very touching and poignant poem, describes the loss of the poet's younger brother, Christopher when Heaney was a child, hence the poem is of a childhood tragedy as well as a loss. It's set in three places - the introduction is situated in the college sick bay; the main body of the poem is set in Heaney's brother's funeral, and the final setting is the small child's bedroom. The poet is awaiting his neighbours' car in the college sick bay, as they're going to escort him to the funeral.

Evidence is given of 'death' in the second line: -

"...Counting bells knelling classes to a close..."

This metaphorical sentence creates a morbid atmosphere from the out-set, and the alliteration and hard consonants suggest that the 'wait' for his neighbours' car is excruciatingly long and daunting which underlines two things - childhood impatience and the fact that something is troubling him. 'Change' is sensed here also due to the fact that his neighbours are driving him home - as we know, the negative change is Christopher's death. Within the aspect of 'change', this is merely the 'tip of the iceberg', as many more unfamiliar experiences await him.

The 'child's prospective' is cleverly brought into the second, third, fourth and fifth stanzas as a consequence of the poet's confusion and the

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contradictive scenes he witnesses as he walks into the family home. Firstly, he sees his father, a steady and strong figure breaking down in the porch: -

"...I met my father crying -

He had always taken funerals in his stride..."

Heaney must've been confused with dread as to what was before him; if his father, one of his childhood heroes was crying, what on Earth was he himself going to do? Also, we acknowledge that this isn't just any ordinary funeral - someone very dear has been lost, a small treasure; a small treasure who's absence has caused the strongest of rocks to crumble into an emotional state.

A double meaning is presented in the final line of the second stanza: -

"...Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow..."

The 'hard blow' may be referring to the actual 'blow' that killed Christopher (as he was killed by a car), or the fact that it's a 'hard blow' to the family.

Either way, one fact becomes apparent: the Heaney family have the support and love of everyone around them, but that doesn't counteract for the tragic loss of Christopher - it may help clean the wound, but the scar will forever be visible. We also attain the knowledge, due to his very 'personal' identity, that Big Jim Evans is a family friend, and that he himself is shaken by the situation considering his very plain and yet meaningful comment. Again, the sadness and incredibility of the incident is underlined - not only family members are grieving.

Another detection of change is seen in the third stanza, and this time it's a very uncomfortable change: -

"...I was embarrassed

By old men standing up to shake my hand..."

I find this stanza conveys the 'child's confusion and mind' perfectly. The poet has just entered his brother's funeral (a terrifying experience for anyone), and all of a sudden, unfamiliar things are happening to him and he doesn't get a chance to adapt to them. With the sadness of losing a sibling, the fear of what's to come, the confusion of such scenes as seeing his father crying, little does he need an extra emotion - embarrassment. It's utterly traumatic, and the poet's simple way of conveying his emotions gains our sympathy greatly.

Perhaps the only sense of normality is the baby's behaviour: -

"The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram..."

This may be some sort of relief for Seamus Heaney - at least someone's acting as they always do. Children's lack of understanding is underlined here; the baby hasn't an inkling of what's going on around it, and neither has the poet. He too was a child when this occurred, and his confusion and vulnerability are utterly obvious in this poem.

I found the way that Seamus Heaney inter-rolls the third and fourth stanzas cleverly appeals to the senses and creates a sense of panic: -

" ...they were ' sorry for my trouble',

Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,

...as my mother held my hand..."

Many incidents take place in unison as it were. We see the old men shaking the poet's hand; we hear the whispers; we feel the poet's mother's tenderness as she holds his hand. My opinion is that this fast-paced situation is cleverly hinting the nature of the car-accident that killed Christopher - all happening at once - no time to stop and take it all in; one hard blow.

Irony plays a part here: even though the ' hard blow of the car' initially had an affect on Christopher, just like a row of dominoes, it affects everybody else who had a relationship with him. Many a world crumbles at the bonnet of that car.

Indeed, so much pain as a consequence of something that need not have happened. I find that Seamus Heaney transmits this message strongly and rather touchingly in the fifth stanza: -

" ...[my mother] coughed out angry tearless sighs..."

This tells us that Christopher's death was something that most definitely could've been avoided. The anger displayed by the poet's mother may be rooted to this, along with many other things: she may be angry with herself due to the fact that she wasn't there to protect her son, or she may be angry with God for taking her son away from her at such a young age. Perhaps this anger overcomes her mourning for her son, which is suggested by the '

coughing out of tearless sighs' - the fact that she's coughing these sighs indicates that she's holding back her tears and trying to appear brave for the sake of other members of the family; the father has already deteriorated into a sobbing shell, therefore it's almost her duty to appear collected and strong. This is tragically sad, and certainly gains our emotional support - why does God cause us to face such abysmal and feared situations in life?

As well as questioning God's motives, onomatopoeia is introduced in this line. I personally could hear Seamus Heaney's mother coughing out 'angry tearless sighs', and this underlines the sadness of this tragic situation that could've been avoided.

Considering that the poet doesn't provide the identity of the 'dead', he keeps us wondering throughout his poem; even though different scenes and situations are presented to us on proceeding through the poem, it remains in the back of our head 'who's funeral are we witnessing'? I found the fifth stanza quite intense when 'the corpse' is actually mentioned: -

"...the ambulance arrived

With the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the nurses..."

Rather ironic and extremely clever is the fact that we've been awaiting the answer to our query, and here it is, delivered to us from the back end of an ambulance; this is similar to the family's agonising wait for one of their youngest member's dead body, and it too is delivered from the back end of an ambulance wrapped in bandages.

Another interesting technique used by Seamus Heaney in these lines is to cause his readers to feel a certain way. As I've mentioned, the intensity and anticipation of finally receiving some sort of answer to the identity of the deceased gripped my attention fully, but as more information is revealed of who 'the corpse' is in later stanzas, the relief and excitement of knowing transforms into guilt - our wait for the answer we crave is relieved, but the Heaney family's excruciating wait for Christopher's body confirms the fact that he is forever gone.

We are presented with a suggestion of the extent of the poet's pain and sadness due to the extremely impersonal name he gives to his brother - 'the corpse'. This is suggesting that he's in denial; he can't believe little Christopher's dead, and he doesn't want to believe it either. I deeply sympathise with him - we must keep in mind that losing a family member at any period in life can be traumatic, but losing a loved one when you're a child is one hundred times worse, and the loss of Seamus Heaney's younger brother is no exception.

The poet must confront his denial in the sixth and seventh stanzas: -

" Next morning I went up into the room..."

This quick change of scene, from the funeral to the room in which Christopher's body is resting, shocks us as readers. One moment we're being lead through a fast-paced occurrence of numerous events in the funeral, and the next we're walking on the path to 'the corpse'. It may sound quite odd, but it's as if we as readers are not prepared for it; differently to us, the poet has prepared himself for the scene that's ahead.

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A heavy purpose is given to the phrase ' the room'. It's the room the poet has been dreading of entering; the room that holds a deeply emotional and traumatic scene; the room that has been on everybody's minds; the room in which little Christopher is peacefully slumbering in death.

Ironic is the sight that's seen in front of them: -

" ...Snowdrops

And candles soothed the bedside..."

We receive the feeling from Seamus Heaney that ' the room' in which his brother's body is kept is a place of a fearful nature, but notice the calming and ' soothing' atmosphere of the room. The bedside, where mourners usually break down into an emotional wreck, is soothed by candles, hence there's nothing to fear; this is a chance to say farewell to a loved one for the final time. A well-suited and appropriate atmosphere's created here, and it perfectly contributes to the undisturbed image of Christopher's dead body all wrapped up in a bed.

The technique of ' reduction' is used in the seventh stanza - i. e. the poet uses softer descriptions and uses ' nice, beautiful' adjectives in place of harsh sounding adjectives; pain is converted into peace: -

" Wearing a poppy bruise..."

Christopher [in Seamus Heaney's eyes] hasn't got a big red ' patch of pain' on his left temple; it's a pretty little red flower indicating that he is still beautiful, even in death. Despite the fact he was ran over by a car, there

were no gaudy scars. Also, the fact that the flower used in this effective metaphor is a poppy suggests the idea of 'remembrance'; Seamus Heaney shall always remember his little brother, Christopher.

Interesting is the way the poet's attitude towards his brother's death changes: the whole thing confuses him in the first four stanzas, then he tumbles into a state of denial by the fifth stanza; by the sixth and seventh stanzas he accepts it at first, but once he sees his brother in his peaceful state, he doesn't see Christopher as being dead. The poet sees Christopher 'sleeping heavily', and indeed, it's a beautiful sight: -

"...He lay in the four foot box as in his cot..."

This simile confirms that Christopher remains the same for eternity in Seamus Heaney's view; he shall always remember his brother fast asleep, all snuggled up in a bed with snowdrops and candles filling the room, where nothing can harm him. A setting similar to some sort of Avalon is created here, which is the complete opposite of the confusing, unordinary and traumatic atmosphere created in the first stanzas.

Despite being an intensely emotional poem throughout, the final single line is the poignant climax to 'Mid-Term Break'. The fact this line is alone and stands out from the rest suggests that this occurrence is one of the most significant in Seamus Heaney's life: -

"A four foot box, a foot for every year."

It's so simple, and yet extremely powerful, and conveys the sense of 'loss' in a very dramatic and compact sentence. This significant comparison presents <https://assignbuster.com/seamus-heaneys-work-follower-and-mid-term-break-essay-sample/>

the heart-rending idea that Christopher's short-lived life can be fitted into a box whose size accommodates for each year of his life. What's so distressing about this idea is that you can compare someone's life span to the size of his or her coffin; the poet underlines how tragically short his little brother's life was - you don't need a 77 foot long coffin for a 77 year old person, hence the fact that a coffin the size of Christopher's life exists poses the reader a very strong and interesting closing statement, and gives ' Mid-Term Break' a very memorable and somewhat disturbing ending.

Indeed, loss is a very strong and significant theme present throughout ' Mid-term Break'; another poem of the same poet's work that is based on a ' loss' is ' Follower', except this is a subconscious loss.

' Follower' describes the contrast of life - how the roles we play during our time on Earth are reversed. It's a poem that recreates an era when Seamus Heaney was a ' tripping, falling, yapping' toddler and his father a farmer of great expertise, and contradicts it with the current situation where it's the poet's father who exists as ' the stumbling nuisance who won't go away'. ' The loss' is quite clearly the loss of energy and soundness of the mind as one increases with age - the loss of Seamus Heaney's father to old age.

Similarly to ' Mid-Term break', this poem contains some of the poet's childhood memories, namely, helping his father on the farm. Hence, this poem's set in the countryside.

A feeling of ' the good old days' is created in the opening line: -

" My father worked with a horse-plough..."

Focussing on the fact that this is a recollection of ' days gone by' which were indeed days of happiness, there's a suggestion here that perhaps the current status isn't perfect at all.

Instantly, we know that the poet's recollecting about his past with his father in this poem. He describes his father's shoulders as being ' globed like a full sail', suggesting strength and power, and yet, elegance. This is the first hint of his father's perfection when he was in his prime, and it's such a different image of him compared to the broken man we meet crying in the porch in ' Mid-term Break'. He's the hero in this poem.

Seamus Heaney shows his true admiration of his father and how highly skilled he was in the final line of the first stanza and the entirety of the second stanza: -

" The horses strained at his clicking tongue.

An expert..."

He's not only ' good' at his work, he is an ' expert' working at the highest level of quality possible. We see more and more evidence of his perfection throughout the second and third stanzas: -

"...The sod rolled over without breaking

...with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round..."

No mess. No fuss. This man is completely and utterly remarkable in his work, and it's no wonder that he has his young son's full admiration, whereas in 'Mid-term Break', Seamus Heaney shows no admiration for his father whatsoever. An image is created here of a 'strong, graceful ship of power', which is quite the opposite to the image created in 'Mid-Term Break', which is of a 'strong, graceful ship of power' that has crashed upon the rocks: -

"...I met my father crying -

He had always taken funerals in his stride..."

The degree of accuracy of Seamus Heaney's father's work is effectively described in the third stanza: -

"...Mapping the furrow exactly."

There's absolutely no room for error - everything must be precise and exact, and the admiration Heaney felt towards his father when a child shines through; he cannot fault his father. To some extent, the poet portrays his father as an invincible hero; we can see those 'eagle eyes' narrowing and angling at the ground, making sure that everything is perfect. Indeed, this perfect image of life is quite the contradiction of the depressing atmosphere of bereavement present in 'Mid-Term Break', which shows how our lives are full of ups and downs - however dismal our days become, we must be strong and pull through, and perhaps Seamus Heaney subconsciously has based his work upon this message, or at least his autobiographical poems.

Perhaps this message is interlinked to the fourth stanza: -

"...Dipping and rising to his plod..."

Even though this sentence is referring to Heaney's father's 'plod', perhaps the 'he' mentioned is God - our lives 'dip' and 'rise' according to God's movements. Is this a suggestion therefore that Seamus Heaney's a great believer of fate? Considering the fact that his four year old brother was killed by a car (something quite difficult to comprehend and understand why it happened), the poet may believe in the fact that things must happen for a reason, and that certainly would put his mind at rest whilst pondering over why little Christopher was taken away at such an early age. The use of onomatopoeia in this line caused me to hear and feel the 'dipping and rising', with the dipping of a depressing sound and the rising a more light sounding word - this is exactly my point suggesting how this line is interlinked to the highs and lows of life.

Due to the fact that he idolises his father, it's no surprise that Seamus Heaney wanted to emulate his father when a child; every little boy wants to follow in his father's footsteps, and the poet is no exception, literally: -

"I wanted to grow up and plough..."

...All I ever did was follow

In his broad shadow..."

Certainly, the fifth stanza displays the full extent of the infantile Seamus Heaney's 'wanting' to be his father when he comes of age. Notice how accurately similar to his father he wants to be: he wants to 'close one eye' so that he too can 'map the furrow exactly'; there's no end to the praise he
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showed to his father when a child, which adds to the shocking contradiction in his attitude towards his father in the sixth stanza.

The onomatopoeia used in the opening of the final stanza I found to be very effective and appropriate: -

“ I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,

Yapping always...”

We can hear the constant annoying voice of the little boy tripping and falling over behind his father's ' broad shadow', and considering he describes himself as a nuisance, we can imagine the scene perfect - the difference between the calm, strong adult and the small, noisy child.

In a shocking turn of events indicated by the word ' BUT', the imperfect child trades places with the perfect adult: -

“...But today

It is my father who keeps stumbling

Behind me...”

Seamus Heaney has lost his father to old age; the shafts of the plough that he stands between when a young, strong farmer have turned into shafts enclosing him in his elderly self. I find the link between his father stumbling in this stanza, and himself ' stumbling in his father's hob-nailed wake' in the fourth stanza very effective: the reversal of roles shows that our way of showing gratitude to our parents for caring for us by caring for them when

they're elderly. Within both poems, Seamus Heaney matures; in ' Mid-Term Break' his brother's death makes him a stronger person by making him confront his fears: -

" Next morning I went up into the room..."

In ' Follower' he's caring for his father, and has literally matured into a man both physically and mentally; he's followed in his father's footsteps as a person, but not in the professional sense. I find that there's a metaphor behind ' Follower' - the perfect furrows that his father has mapped out are for Seamus Heaney to follow on the path to adulthood, suggesting (due to the high level of perfection of the furrows) that the poet's father wanted only the best in life for his son. Another possible metaphor is when the potent father carries the clumsy infant upon his back - parents have to carry their children through their childhood in order to protect them and to nurture them, similar to the poet's mother's tender holding of his hand during Christopher's funeral in ' Mid-Term Break'. This again contributes to the idea of child admiration and appreciation towards their parents.

The contrast between the ages is cleverly displayed in the final stanza of ' Follower': -

" I was...

It is..."

Seamus Heaney was the nuisance; his father is the nuisance now, and when the poet describes his father as something ' that will not go away', it's quite tragic how young adults see their elderly parents as a burden. When it was <https://assignbuster.com/seamus-heaneys-work-follower-and-mid-term-break-essay-sample/>

his father who had to look after him, the burden was there, but as the poet developed into a young man the burden decreased; in this instance where the poet must care for his father, the burden increases as his father grows older and deteriorates. Quite ironic is the fact that Seamus Heaney would've wanted to look after and care for his younger brother, but undoubtedly doesn't want to care for his father. Is this linked to how the eldest of a 'pair' feels responsibility towards the younger of the two?

The uses of language used in both poems create very contrasting atmospheres. Words such as 'knelling', 'hard blow', 'angry', 'corpse', 'stanced', 'bandaged' etc. create a very morbid and deathly atmosphere in 'Mid-Term Break', which adds to the effect when the tenor of the poem changes to a softer, peaceful mood. 'Follower' includes such words as 'expert', 'bright', 'exactly' etc. creating a completely different atmosphere of admiration, idolisation, and perfection, which cause us as readers to be utterly shaken by the downfall of the hero with 'globed shoulders' by the end of the sixth stanza (and also when the poet describes his father weeping in the porch in 'Mid-Term Break').