

'mid-term break' by
seamus heaney and
'second opinion' by
douglas dunn



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'Mid-Term Break' by Seamus Heaney is a poem about the tragic loss of a young boy. Heaney wrote it as a result of his own infant brother's (Christopher) death. Its content is dramatic and heart rendering in describing the feelings, emotions and reactions of Heaney himself, his relations and others post the tragic event. 'Second Opinion' by Douglas Dunn is another personal attempt, which is taken from Dunn's award winning collection of poems called 'Elegies'.

Its content is again dramatic with an element of foreboding and portrays a husband's response and anger to the news that his wife has been diagnosed with cancer. This mirrors Dunn's real life tragedy, as his wife died from cancer in August 1981. Mid-Term Break The title, 'Mid-Term Break', is one of certain positive connotations, such as holidays and happiness. This certainly is incongruent to the content of the poem, as this "break" does not happen for pleasant reasons.

The poem begins with the first person pronoun "I". Clearly, this shows the narrative is written in the first person, giving a personal and intimate edge to the composition and shows the reader that Heaney is the narrator. An impression of inactivity, waiting and boredom is conveyed as the young Heaney "sat all morning". The noun "morning" could be interpreted as the verb "mourning" to mean an action of grief, thus linking with the following events.

The place where Heaney waits~ "the college sick bay" has overtones of illness and disease, and seems to pass the time by "counting bells knelling classes to a close". Heaney uses assonance~ "knelling" to create a sombre

atmosphere as knelling is the sound of a bell ringing at a funeral mass.

Throughout the poem, Heaney uses words with connotations of certain colours to create atmosphere and feeling. It may strike younger readers as peculiar that the young Seamus' neighbours drove him home, but this can be explained easily~ during the period that the poem takes place (1950's), few families possessed a car. The time that Heaney was picked up is specified exactly as " two o'clock". This is part of the lexical set of time that is present throughout, e.

g. " morning", " ten o'clock", " six weeks". As well as having the effect that the time goes slowly, it calls to mind the notion that Heaney deliberately conveys harsh, precise facts with no warmth, which mirrors the mood of the poem. The second stanza sees the arrival of Heaney at his family home. Firstly, " in the porch" he meets his " father crying". Again the use of assonance~ " crying", provides a distressing image of sadness and grief, emphasised by the following statement that he usually takes " funerals in his stride".

By this, Heaney shows the reader that the ordeal has had an immense impact on his father's normally strong demeanour. The reactions of others; strangers as well as family members, play an important role in the narrative.

In stanza two, a man, namely " Big Jim Evans", makes an unfortunate pun about it being a " hard blow", obviously meaning it be a metaphorical " blow", but unwittingly used by Big Jim forgetting or unknowing that a blow had killed the child. Heaney describes an uncomfortable atmosphere in stanza three when " old men" shake his hand. As this is a mature gesture,

Heaney remarks that he felt " embarrassed", the only example of Heaney's
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emotion in the narrative. Furthermore, the same men apologise for the incident in stanza four~ " sorry for my trouble".

The neutrality of this is striking and also, it is laid out in the poem as direct speech, as if Heaney is mocking their traditional euphemisms regarding his brother's death. Their apologies are of no worth to the grieving family. The idea of traditions and their worth is a very important one in the poem. Once again, Heaney uses assonance in stanzas four and five to describe atmosphere. " Whispers" are used to create an evasive, uncomfortable atmosphere that continues from stanza three.

The examples of assonance in stanza five are " coughed" and " sighs". Heaney uses these when describing his mother's reaction~ " coughed out angry tearless sighs". As well as continuing with his lexical set of sound, he continues with his lexical set of negative language in this powerful phrase~ " angry tearless". Literally it means his mother was too angry to cry, which implies that she is suffering from guilt.

The facts of the ordeal return as we read~ " at ten o'clock the ambulance arrived". Again, he uses the precise time to convey the harsh reality of the experience. He refers to his dead brother as the " corpse", which implies an attitude of disbelief and denial. It seems as if he does not believe (or want to believe) that under the bandages is not his brother but a corpse, quite a usual reaction to the death of a loved one.

In stanza six, Heaney continues with the earlier idea of traditions and their worthlessness. The reader is told that " snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside" which has a spiritual aura of peace and tranquillity. The noun "
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bedside" is significant as it shows the reader that Heaney feels that these traditions/rituals have no effect on his dead brother. Their effect only soothes those who stand by the bedside.

It is striking that Heaney used snowdrops and candles as these mirror the life span of his brother~ his brother's life ended quickly, just like snowdrops and candles do. The white innocence and purity contrasts with the red poppy bruise in the seventh stanza. The poppy bears significance as it is the flower of pain relief~ opiates are derived from poppies, and it is also the flower of remembrance~ poppies are worn as a remembrance to war victims.

Heaney's attitude of denial arises once more as his brother is said to be "wearing" the bruise (a metaphor), as if it can be removed at any time. Apart from the bruise there are no overt injuries~ "no gaudy scars", therefore providing Heaney little evidence that his brother is dead.

The last stanza is very unlike the other stanzas. Firstly, it does not follow the conventional structure of the poem as all other stanza are made up of three lines that flow into each other; the last line is only one line in length. It is distinguished perhaps to stand out to the reader in order to have the strongest emotive effect. This is certainly true of its content.

Also, another idea is that Heaney deliberately shortened the stanza to mirror his brother's life~ a shortened stanza for a shortened life. The line emphasises his age and smallness~ "a four foot box, a foot for every year", which in turn emphasises the tragedy. It has the strongest emotive effect, as it is at this point of the poem when the reader is told, subtly, that it was a four year old who was killed. The enjambement present throughout the

poem (when the meaning carries over to the next line without punctuation) builds up to this line. It is like a car motoring along until it hits an obstruction, which mirrors the accident that killed the boy.

Heaney instils grief into his reader by the poignancy and skill of this subtle but effective line. Second Opinion 'Second Opinion' opens with the third person pronoun "We". Obviously this suggests that there are two or more characters, but also a sense of togetherness, as if there were a bond between the characters, namely Dunn and someone else. Following this, the poem seems to jump into action~ ".

. went to Leeds for a second opinion". The title is used in this sentence, which has overtones of illness and disease, a prominent lexical set in the narrative. Dunn raises questions about what will follow. The collective pronoun in the first line quickly changes to the singular pronoun "I".

This makes Dunn alone; he has been separated from the other character (who seems to be female judging by the prior sentence "after her name had been called"), giving a sense of isolation. Similar to 'Mid-Term Break', Dunn appears to be waiting, however this time "among the apparently well". "Apparently well" is part of the lexical set of illness and suffering and also, by noting the modifier "apparently", it suggests that appearances can be deceptive. Some illnesses, such as cancers are not overt. This idea arises later on in the poem. However, he waits with others who have "bandaged eyes and dark spectacles", the lexical set of eyes creates the impression that Dunn is waiting for someone to be seen in an ophthalmic clinic.

The lexical set of illness and suffering continues in the second stanza as Dunn notices, " a heavy mother shuffled with bad feet and a stick, a pad over one eye". This description lacks dignity and creates an impression of social awkwardness. He describes the atmosphere in the next line by the simile " the minutes went by like a winter". On a literal level it shows that time is going slow as he waits, but as winter has connotations of a cold, dark and depressive time and has a link to illnesses. This is supposed to mirror the atmosphere of the poem.

The waiting ceases in the stanza three when Dunn is called into, seemingly, a Doctor's consulting room. The doctor is described as " young", the pre-modifier gives the impression that Dunn feels he lacks experience, is possibly incompetent and perhaps gives incorrect opinions. Dunn's relationship with the doctor is socially awkward, their conversation is abrupt with minor sentences and interrogatives to raise questions about the illness, for example " what is? " Dunn's manner is both confused and desperate. He is told that she has a cancerous tumour~ " malignancy" which links with " apparently well", as this illness is not overt. The language is evasive, her cancer is referred to as " it", which contributes to the idea of social awkwardness and furthermore, Dunn's disbelief in that she has cancer.

At this point the reader may feel that this woman is close to Dunn due to his reactions. There is a subtle physical reference~ " she's an artist! " that draws attention to her profession to give a clearer picture of where the tumour is. The reader is inclined to believe it is in her eye, due to this, plus references to eyes earlier on in the narrative. An artist has certain social

expectations (i. e. to entertain, to express feelings in an artistic way, dedication etc) so therefore is a positive influence to society.

By the reference to her profession, Dunn shows that she will be sorely missed on a social level and on a personal level. It is as if he wonders why her, since she has done so much good? In stanza four, the evasive language continues as the doctor tells Dunn that " it" may spread, causing him to remark that his body " ached to suffer like her twin". Again this is part of the lexical set of suffering and shows that Dunn wishes he could take her place and showing the closeness of their relationship. The reader is provided with a counteraction of healing and curing~ " touch the cure with lips and healing sesames", meaning he wishes that he could kiss her better.

Sesames were chosen, as these seeds have healing properties and also connotations of new life. Dunn becomes increasingly distraught in stanzas five and six, coming out in the frequent use of caesura, that slows down the rhythm of the narrative. The use of minor sentences also helps to create a sense of his deteriorating mind. Likewise, the language is distressing~ " no straw to support me-nothing to see or hear", a statement that again hints at Dunn's state of mind. He says he has no support and the earlier idea of his isolation arises once more.

The metaphor used in this stanza ~ " the antiseptic whiff of destiny" has overtones of medicine. However, Dunn takes this and transforms it into something deeper, a metaphor to describe his worst fears- of her dying. It means that it is her destiny to die and his to be alone. Similarly to ' Mid-Term Break', a sense of rituals/traditions arise in the final stanza. The doctor is

said to have " professional anxiety" as he shows Dunn to the door, an act of courtesy and concern, which would provide Dunn with reassurance.

Furthermore, the description that the man has " medical fingers" suggests he has hands of healing. The " scent of soap" gives confidence that the doctor has high standards. Dunn's notice of the doctor's " wedding ring" shows that the doctor has (or had) a wife and should have empathy with Dunn's feelings of fear, anxiety and concern for his wife's health and their future together. Both of these poems deal with tragedy, grief and sensitivity to, or fear of death and the unknown. Their subject matters may seem similar but they are very different.

Heaney's describes a tragedy and the grief of the loss of such a young child, not far from babyhood. Dunn's conveys a husband's anger and frustration at the news of the disease that a loved one has contracted. Their emotions are mirrored in their structure. In ' Mid-Term Break' it seems that Heaney is in control of his emotions, however distressing. In ' Second Opinion', Dunn's emotions differ as he gives into his emotions, the caesura marking his distraught demeanour.

Both of the poems have similar ideas of rituals~ Heaney's description of the laying out of the body and the funeral. Dunn's meeting at the clinic/hospital, the professionalism and etiquette of the doctor. With the differences in the ages of Heaney's brother and Dunn's wife, the reader is inclined to feel slightly more sympathy for Heaney, as it is his young brother who was tragically killed and the fact that in ' Mid-Term Break' the event has happened. In view of this, it can be said that Dunn's ' Second Opinion'

conveys anger and that Heaney's poem most effectively communicates the sense and feeling of grief.