

# "mid-term break" grief



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"Mid-Term Break," by Seamus Heaney, traces the emotional progression of a teenage boy after finding out that his little brother has died in a horrific accident. The harsh realities of life force him into a despondent blur, and he is not able to truly interact with his own emotions and receive solace due to the inadequacy of the various appropriate and expecting coping mechanisms of others. However, as he begins to interact with his brother, he develops his own coping mechanism, and begins the process of accepting reality. Heaney uses the speaker's isolated despondency and inability to find comfort to show the true grief caused by his brother's death, forcing him to realize the legitimacy of his restrained coping process and the integral role acceptance plays in moving forward.

The speaker's inundation with shock, isolation, and grief stress the difficulty in processing traumatic events such as death. The speaker, using the personal pronoun "I" (1), is isolated and alone after receiving the news of his brother's death, forcing him into an inconsolable grief. Though he tries to avoid processing reality, he can't help but count the "bells knelling" (2) around his college. Knelling is a slow ring of bells that accompanies a funeral service, showing that even the most mundane is turned morbid in the speaker's unconscious. This inability to escape thoughts of death stresses the intense grief the speaker is grappling with. The bells being described as "knelling" also reinforce the themes of finality, which the speaker cannot escape. Furthermore, the assonance of "bells knelling" creates a feeling of repetition, which almost distorts time, revealing the speaker's true shock as he temporarily loses grasp of reality. The introduction of a specific time, "two o'clock" (3), reveals the traumatic nature of the event, as often specific

obscure details such as these are what are stick in the mind the most during times of shock and disbelief. Lastly, his parent's apparent inability to pick him up, and reliance on "our neighbors" (3) to do so, reveals both the intense trauma of the event, which has incapacitated his parents, and also the lack of consolation the speaker has received, as he has been detached from his family "all morning" (1) until past two, when he is finally able to return home. The speaker's shock and grief are yet to be dealt with or comforted, and inability to cope with the trauma his brother's death has caused leads the speaker to feel despondent and distant from reality.

The speaker, now desperately searching for solace, is unable to obtain it amidst various forms of appropriate and expected coping mechanisms, leaving him distraught and lost. As the speaker returns to his home, he notes that encounters his "father crying" (4), despite him always being able to take funerals "in his stride" (5). The fact that the figure who is usually expected to be composed cannot remain so only emphasizes the perception of grief the speaker gives off, as if the strong leader of the family is broken, the teenage son can only be feeling exponentially more lost, and this is only compounded as it is made clear that he will receive no consolation from his distraught father. Furthermore, the truly unusual and horrific nature of the event, revealed by the father's sudden inability to deal with funerals easily, as he did before, only accentuates the grief the speaker must be feeling. As the speaker is met with attempts to be consoled, he notices the baby "cool[ing] and laugh[ing] and rock[ing] the pram" (7). The boisterous and energetic rhythm that the baby has, encapsulated by words such as "cooed" and "rocking," contrasts the somber tone and slow pace of the poem thus

far. However, this seemingly strange behavior, given the circumstance, is actually to be expected and is appropriate from an infant, only highlighting the reality of the speaker's situation and exacerbating the speaker's grief. He searches for any possible coping mechanism, but all prove inadequate, as he was "embarrassed by old men" (8-9), who appropriately offer to "shake [his] hand" (9). Though this process is entirely appropriate, and expected to offer solace, it provides little, leaving the speaker feeling "embarrassed." There is a disconnect between the speaker's own emotions and the ways in which they need to be assured, and his inability to receive comfort from guiding figures in his life only magnifies his confusion and grief. This disconnect is further revealed by the enjambment between lines 9 to 10, which intensifies the idea of the evasiveness of comfort and the disconnect between expected responses and appropriate coping mechanisms, and the coping mechanism the speaker truly requires. The "whispers" and "strangers" (11) that overwhelm reveal the lost daze that he has been thrown into, and show his inability to comprehend his surroundings as his currently inconsolable grief engulfs him, just as the whispers and strangers do. Even his mother attempts to comfort him, but alas she too is unable to, as despite the physical connection between their held hands, she could only "cough[ed] out angry tearless sighs" (13). She has cried so much that she cannot physically express her grief with intense emotion any longer, and her muted effort to console her son is unsuccessful, yet again leaving him searching for an adequate way to interact with his emotions and discover an adequate coping mechanism. Yet another enjambment, between lines 12 and 13, stresses another disconnect between what the speaker feels and how the expected coping mechanisms attempt to console him, and the

distance between others' ability to deal with their emotions and grief, and his. However, the family is now forced to receive "the corpse" (16), indicating that the speaker is going to have to interact with both the reality of his situation and his own emotions. He is still despondent and detached from his feelings and grief, and the description of his brother as a corpse, which completely lacks a personal connection, or even, humanity, highlights this. The speaker has yet to find comfort or an adequate coping mechanism, but forced interaction with his brother may soon change his experience.

Realizing the legitimacy of his own restrained and serene coping process, the speaker finally begins the process of acceptance and his return to reality. As the speaker confronts his brother's dead body, he initially ignores it, fixated on "snowdrops and candles" (16-17). These items both symbolize life, but to the same extent they are reminiscent of a funeral. However, these items "soothed him" (17), showing that although they are meant to accompany the body, they also serve as a coping mechanism for the speaker, and they place death on the periphery as he focuses on these funereal aspects. Additionally, enjambments between lines 16 and 17, and 17 and 18, mimic the peaceful reflection that is occurring and the gradual process of acceptance and realization that is beginning. To do this, he continues obscuring his brother's death, and notices the differences between when he last saw him and now. He observes that his brother is "paler now" (18), showing that he is still unable to process the reality of his situation. He also minimizes the horror of his brother's corpse by describing an obviously significant, possibly life ending injury as his brother "wearing a poppy bruise" (19). This diction works to obscure reality as it is referred to as a flower, a peaceful and

beautiful image, but also the notion that his brother was "wearing" the bruise implies that it could be removed. The speaker is again separating himself from reality, but doing so in order to be able to be in the presence of his dead brother and not be destroyed by grief. Furthermore, the serenity that is endemic in his descriptions also hints at the success of his coping process, which restrains his emotions and lessens the import of this horrific situation on his reality. He then uses this peace found in his coping mechanism to gradually begin to process his brother's death, describing his coffin as a "cot" (20), as well as using pronouns such as "his," "he," and "him" (19-21). Though still not fully accepting reality, by equating the coffin to a baby's bed, he is finally accepting that this corpse is indeed a person, and realizing the personal connection he has with the dead body. Then, with the final line of the poem, his true process of acceptance has clearly been initiated. The "four foot box" (20, 22) shows that like previously, he still seeks to minimize the effects of this traumatic event and stay detached from reality, completely taking the morbid connotation out of the coffin. However, as he has begun to interact with his brother, as well as his own emotions, this becomes impossible, and a caesura highlights the significant pause he takes, finally jumping from his obscured reality, which was created by his coping mechanism, to his actual reality. The box had very specific measurements, four feet long, and as the speaker has begun to interact with his brother, he cannot ignore the fact that there is a "foot for every year" (22). Furthermore, the final line being on its own stresses the realization that has been made, and the finality that the speaker must accept. However, it also signifies the beginning of a moving forward. Reality has finally overpowered him, and his process of acceptance, that his four-year old

brother has indeed died, has finally been initiated. However this is necessary, and in truth beneficial, as it can subside the grief, which was left not dealt with, and can help more past these detrimental emotions. The title reinforces this entire notion, as a Mid-Term Break, unlike a summer or winter break, is but a short, temporary pause from schooling, and within it there is the idea that a return to school, or in the speaker's case, reality, is imminent, and unavoidable. Additionally, the fact that Heaney ends the poem with a singular, unique couplet, again pointing out the finality of the last line, but also because the rhyme scheme has slightly changed, from half rhyme to full rhyme, the couplet signifies a break from the inescapable emotions that were previously pervasive, and that the process of progress has truly begun. Thus, the speaker's coping mechanism proves vital, as it allows him to begin to accept his brother's death and begin to move forward in his life.

The speaker's despondency and distressing search for comfort show the difficult nature of accepting traumatic events, but the speaker's ability to realize his own legitimate, solitary coping process allows him to finally accept his brother's death and live in reality once more. Despite the intense grief and despondency throughout the poem, which never truly leaves, the speaker is able to realize these emotions in his own personal context, as well as the context of reality, and escape the anguish, confusion, and sense of being lost that tormented him during his experiences with traditional coping mechanisms. Life indeed does go on, and although grief is an emotion that cannot be avoided or ignored, it must be dealt with, in order to cope with the

harsh realities of life and be able to live prosperously without the hindrance that harrowing events can cause.