

Mid-term break by
seamus heaney and
the lesson by edward
lucie-smith



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 'Mid-Term Break' by Seamus Heaney and 'The Lesson' by Edward Lucie-Smith a similar impact is achieved through alternative means; Heaney uses language to set up a contrast whereas Lucie-Smith uses irony. Both techniques are striking and subtly interwoven throughout the poems, in order to describe the devastating theme of death from a child's perspective. The techniques selected introduce this emotionally draining theme from a perspective not often considered, therefore forcing the reader to empathise with the persona, and begin to question their views on specific issues.

In 'Mid-Term Break', contrast was used to represent how the persona's life has changed and will never return to its normal state. First of all, the father's reaction in the second stanza: 'In the porch I met my father crying - He had always taken funerals in his stride' indicating that the father wouldn't usually be crying at a funeral. This is a different matter, a new experience, which has come as a shock. Then the baby 'cooed and laughed and rocked the pram', at a wake no one laughs, this is incongruous.

The idea being that his family are acting in such an alien way. 'Old men standing up to shake my hand' is another contrast; normally the children would stand up to respect their elders. This shows the reader how alien an experience this is for the persona. Another contrast, his mother 'coughed out angry tearless sighs' we would expect a stereotypical mother to be crying her heart out when her child had died.

Heaney uses the technique of contrast throughout the poem to continually convey the fact that this event has changed the boy's life forever by showing the contrast of the strange way the family act compared to the expected

behaviour of stereotypical characters at this sad event. Through this technique, Heaney evokes sympathy for the persona from the audience because the persona has a child's perspective and with each contrast the reader empathises with the persona. Striking use of symbolism is developed in stanzas six and seven of 'Mid-Term Break', when we finally realised who was killed and how.

Symbolism, of death and sacrifice through 'a poppy bruise on his left temple', is used to convey the idea that the young boy was sacrificed like during war. 'Snowdrops... soothed the bedside' these are wonderful, young examples of nature (much like the young boy who died) killed in their prime, however, then the poet goes on to talk about another aspect of nature, representing death and sacrifice. 'Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple', the word poppy being the symbolism of the sacrifice and death of the little child, even though a poppy is a wonderful flower of nature.

Heaney is using these two examples of symbolism so close together to indicate how even nature in its prime can die; this is symbolism of the boy of only four being killed. In 'The Lesson' symbolism is also developed towards the end of the poem, however, this time to convey how the persona finally gains control over his grief 'in school assembly' and the 'Lesson' he has learnt by the end of the poem. 'Some goldfish in bowl quietly sculled', the persona notices the goldfish, which are beautiful, unique and proud creatures, as suggested by the 'gold' in their name.

He realises that the characteristics of the goldfish could apply to him, "They were indifferent", the goldfish aren't paying attention to the boy's outburst

of grief, and they are at ease and accept all emotions. It is then “Pride like a goldfish, flashed a sudden fin”, for the persona. He realises that he should be proud and accepting of his emotions “like a goldfish”, he develops “pride” and confidence to express his grief willingly no matter what everyone else thinks.

The goldfish are a symbol of how you should never bottle up your emotions, express all that you feel, the persona has this epiphany ‘in school assembly... Pride like a goldfish, flashed a sudden fin’. Another important technique in ‘The Lesson’ is the use of irony throughout the poem to convey the double meaning of the word ‘lesson’. ““Your father’s gone,” my bald headmaster said’ The headmaster treats this like a lesson, he uses the word ‘gone’ which could mean anything and is a really insensitive way to tell the boy this devastating news.

Learning to deal with death and grief is a vital lesson in life; however, this is the only lesson that school doesn’t teach. Therefore, it is ironic how this poem is set in a school, and the message relates to an essential skill not taught by the teachers under the headmaster’s direction. Therefore, this subtle use of irony conveys the message of the poem. Heaney’s intention here is to evoke feelings of anger towards to school and the headmaster in the poem, because they are teaching the boy to stifle his emotions, instead of express them.

In the poems ‘Mid-Term Break’ and ‘The Lesson’ the poets convey the idea that, grief is a very strong emotion that even adults do not know how to deal. They do this through the important techniques of irony, contrast, and

symbolism. This can be seen most obviously when the persona's parents are acting differently in 'Mid-term Break' and when the headmaster conveys the news of the persona's father's death so insensitively in 'The Lesson'.

Through these important techniques, the reader can now see the complexity of grief and understand that dealing with grief as a child, is extremely harsh, even devastating.