

Compare central child
characters in the
poems we



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In this assignment I will analyse two poems, 'Mid-term break' and 'We are Seven' and study the ways in which each of the children in the poems deal with the death of a family member. In Seamus Heaney's poem, 'Mid-term break', he shares his thoughts about the death of his little brother and his feelings on the wake and the funeral.

In William Wordsworth's poem, 'We are Seven' we learn how a little girl reacts to the death of her brother and sister and her attitude to her experience of death. The first poem I will analyse is 'We are Seven' written by William Wordsworth. William Wordsworth is a famous pre-nineteenth century English poet. He was one of the most accomplished and influential of England's romantic poets, whose theories and style created a new tradition in poetry.

Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770, in Cockermouth, Cumbria, and educated at St John's College, Cambridge University. He developed a keen love of nature as a youth, and frequently visited places noted for their scenic beauty. Poetry, he believed, originates from "emotion recollected in tranquillity". He began to write his own unique style of poetry, he abandoned the dull, wordy, intellectual style used by previous poets and adapted his own simplified poetry which was suitable for everyone, poems about the glory of the world, the beauty of nature and the mysteries of life.

By doing this however, critics attacked his work and style. Wordsworth, however, was not discouraged, continuing to write poetry that spun his imagination. As he advanced in age, Wordsworth's poetic vision and inspiration dulled; his later poems cannot be compared to the lyrics of his

youth. To Wordsworth, God was everywhere in the harmony of nature, and he felt the connection between nature and the soul.

Critical opinion turned in his favour after 1820, and Wordsworth lived to see his work universally praised. In 1842 he was awarded a government pension and became Poet Laureate. He died at Rydal Mount, on April 23, 1850, and was buried in the Grasmere churchyard. "We are Seven" isn't one of Wordsworth's most acclaimed poems but it still reflects his unique and colourful style of poetry. "We are seven" is a poem based on a conversation Wordsworth had with a little girl who lost four of her siblings.

Two died and two were sent to work at sea. On first reading, I thought the title was quite deceptive. "We Are Seven," gave me the impression of a close group of people working together like a team. But despite the fact that all the siblings aren't still together, the little girl still maintains that they are still seven. Wordsworth himself questions the idea - four aren't really a part of the group as they're dead and gone - shouldn't it be "we were seven? Well, according to the girl, "we are seven", whether alive, dead or away from home. This is the main idea of the poem.

Does the little girl really understand the concept of death? The first three lines of the poem show the beauty of "a simple child, that lightly draws its breath and feels its life in every limb," Wordsworth highlights the energy and vitality of life in its most innocent form. He portrays the child as someone who is energetic and full of life. Line four is a rhetorical question, "What should it know of death?" and it is also the first mention of death in the poem. It is a sharp contrast between the first three lines of the poem and the

title which were so bright and fresh. Thus, Wordsworth has the reader of the poem gripped by the introduction of death, as he emphasises the question in the beginning stanza. Stanza two introduces us to the “ little cottage girl”.

She is eight years old with thick curly hair that is” clustered around her head. ” Again, we see Wordsworth’s love for nature and children portrayed so peacefully and fresh. Stanza three reinforces Wordsworth’s suffice of poetry about beauty. The little girl is described as being, “ wildly clad” which suggests that she wore mismatched clothes and was scruffy, possibly from a poorer family, despite this being based pre-nineteenth century where lower classes would have been regarded as inferior, Wordsworth shows that class has nothing to do with the beauty of the child whose “ beauty made me glad.

” In stanza five we learn about the fate of four of the little girl’s siblings, two are dead and two are working at sea. On reading the poem for the first time I was quite shocked to learn this as in stanza three I was lead to believe that a group of seven, meant they were alive and together. This is not the case, though. Another thing which puzzled me was the fact that the little girl never viewed working at sea or being dead as a separation from being ‘ away from home’. In fact, she doesn’t make a distinction between these ‘ states’ throughout the poem. This would suggest to me that she has little knowledge and understanding of what death actually means.

I will return to this idea later in my assignment. In stanza six the little girl clearly states how close she feels to her siblings in the graveyard. (Conway dwell) She refers to the dead as, “ us”, another word which makes me feel

that they are still very much a part of her life. Strangely, the girl also feels that, " I dwell near them with my mother.

" Which gives me the feeling that her absent siblings sleep next to her and their mother every night, as if they were still a family. The word " dwell" can also mean " live", but of course, if two of her siblings lie in the graveyard, how can they " live" anywhere? Stanza seven sees Wordsworth ask the questions to the little girl, in a way, he asks the questions the readers would ask out of curiosity if they had the chance to talk to the little girl. Usually, an adult would help the child understand death, but in this poem there is a role reversal with the girl helping Wordsworth with her ' understanding' of death. The girl explains that two of her siblings, " in the church-yard lie, beneath the church-yard tree.

, this makes me imagine that her two brothers and sisters are just around the corner sitting under a church tree but in reality they are in graves, under a tree, dead and still, without any location. Stanza ten reveals that the children's graves " are green, they may be seen. ", this may mean that the children have possibly only been buried for a short time and that the little girl cannot accept that both are dead as they were very alive before they died. Line thirty-nine in stanza ten, " Twelve steps or more from my mother's door, and they are side by side. " is a phrase used metaphorically and literally by Wordsworth.

The literal part of the poem is that sure enough twelve steps away her brother and sister lie in coffins. Stanza eleven and twelve shows how much

time the child spends around the graves, as if she was staying there all day in their company. " And often after sunset ...

And eat my supper there. " The fact that she still spends time with them may be that she refuses to let go of them and won't move on and accept the deaths. Drawing to the end of the poem, in stanza thirteen and fourteen, the little girl elaborates on her sibling's death in a childish, simplistic, almost unselfish attitude. Regarding her sister's death, she is very unselfish, instead of asking God why she took her sister away, the little girl looks on Jane's death in a different light, in that, " In bed she moaning lay, till God released her of her pain. " The simple way she looks on the death can be seen in line 52, instead of feeling that Jane was dead and buried she realised it was the best.

However she only recognised that, " Jane had gone away," It almost seems as though Jane has just left for a while and will be returning as the tone is so light. In stanza fourteen, " the ground was white with snow," another clear example of Wordsworth recalling nature's amazing beauty, the snow might almost represent the purity and peace of a child, even in a sad part of the poem where we read about John, her brother's death. I don't think the girl is very upset that her siblings have died because she was preoccupied by the games in snowfall " I could run and slide," but this doesn't mean that she is glad they are dead, I just feel that she doesn't see them as being gone and never returning, but almost as if death is another adventure, another game for her and her six siblings. Finally in Stanza sixteen and seventeen, Wordsworth continues to ask the girl questions although it is a waste of time as he puts it, " T'was throwing words away," he cannot comprehend how all

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seven children can still be part of a group. But, as throughout the whole poem, the little girl is still brave and adamant that “ we are seven” and this phrase is emphasised in the last line of the final two stanzas.

No matter where the group are, dead, alive or away, they are still seven to the little girl. The next poem I will look at is titled “ Mid-term break” and is written by a well known poet of today, Seamus Heaney. Heaney is an Irish poet and critic. He was born in County Derry, son of a Catholic farmer and the eldest of nine children and son of a Catholic farmer. Heaney was educated at Queen’s College, Belfast, where he lectured before becoming a full-time writer. Heaney moved to County Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland, in 1972, and taught in Dublin.

He was appointed Professor at Harvard in 1984, and from 1989 to 1994 was Professor of Poetry at Oxford University. As well as writing poetry he has also written plays and translations and produced collections of critical essays. In 1995 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He also won two Whitbread Book of the Year Awards- firstly in 1996 and then in 2000.

Heaney’s poetry has usually been sparked by events or memories from his childhood. “ Mid-Term Break” is a very emotional poem written by Heaney in relation to his brother’s tragic death. When Heaney was a teenager, his four year old brother was knocked down by a car and killed. Heaney’s feelings of reflection, unease and sadness are combined into this poem. I felt the poem’s title was very misleading, as the usual reference to ‘ mid-term break’ would envisage feelings of youthfulness, happiness and freedom.

But when I think of the poem it is a stark contrast to the holiday feelings. Although the title seems unsuitable, it was a purposeful choice from Heaney, to have a 'disarming' effect on the reader. One would least expect to be reading a sad poem after reading a prosperous title. In a way, Heaney is meddling with the readers' emotions, to make the poem more content more shocking just as the death of his little brother was.

Heaney sets the scene for the poem in stanza one, in the first line, the reader immediately detects something is wrong when they find Heaney in "the college sick bay," this conveys to the reader that he is unwell for some reason or something is wrong. Stanza one, line two refers to Heaney's anxiety at the prospect of getting ready to return home to his brother's funeral. He describes hearing "Counting bells", which portrays a sense of dread. Heaney is dreading going home. The classes draw to an end with a "knelling" sound.

This could easily be used to describe the toll of funeral bells that seem to signal another ending, much closer to home. The clever use of "close" at the end of stanza two also means that something is definitely ending or that something is already over. It provides a sense of finality. Heaney also uses alliteration "class to a close" and assonance ("drove" and "close") in the first stanza.

This makes the poem more interesting for the reader. In stanza two we learn that there are very serious circumstances. "I met my father crying" Heaney's father is crying. At this point we suspect there has been a death in the family. "Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow" big means strong or

brave but even he was shocked or affected by the death, also “ big Jim Evans” personal touch, there seems to be a sense of community.

Hyphens are used to emphasise the situation. In stanza three and four, “ The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram. ” The baby’s reaction is in stark contrast to the mood of the rest of the poem. There is an evident sense that life continues for everyone else. Heaney was “ embarrassed” that his elders were being respectful and sympathising with him.

Heaney must be embarrassed and uncomfortable with this. Adolescent embarrassment. “ As my mother held my hand” there is ambiguity about his mother’s feelings, this is taken literally and metaphorically holding onto the last son she’s got. There is a stereotypical role reversal between his mother and father, as the mother is the ‘ strong’ one, while the father is the one who is breaking down. Stanza five, illustrates the mother’s anger at her son’s unnecessary death, as she “ coughed out angry tearless sighs” The description of his brother’s body is rather impersonal, “ the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the nurses” Heaney probably wanted portray the lack of emotional attachment to this as it was hard to engage that this lifeless body was now his brother.

Stanza six, refers to “ snowdrops” which symbolise the innocence and purity of his four year old brother. “ Candles soothed the bedside” create a peaceful, calming and reverent atmosphere which heightens the sense of loss. Stanza seven comments on his “ poppy bruise” This signifies the colour of remembrance. “ in his cot” adds to sense of disbelief and unreality. The final line of the poem is the most hard hitting line, as it leaves the reader

with the distressful image of a small coffin only “ a foot for every year” It reinforces the disbelief of what has actually happened. Both “ We Are Seven” and “ Mid-Term Break” are captivating and interesting poems.

They also deal with death of a sibling but in very different ways. This may be because they are separated by more than a century. Death in the pre-nineteenth century was more common, especially in children. Families were larger in the hope that some of the children would survive. In Wordsworth’s, “ We are Seven” two of the seven children die. In Heaney’s poem, death is taken very seriously, it seems that Heaney and his brother were the only two children in the family and in the 20th century it would be rarer for a child to die as young as four.

That’s why it is so shocking and unexpected. Another reason for the difference in the poem is that the circumstances of death are very different. In the little girl’s case, both her siblings were taken sick and in one of the cases, we are told that her sister Jane “ in bed she moaning lay”. Her death was somewhat expected and almost provided a sense of relief as her suffering ended. However, Heaney’s brother’s death was totally unexpected. He was knocked down by a car and probably had a sudden death as “ the bumper knocked him clear.

” Of course Heaney’s poem and Wordsworth’s are written from the perspective of two different children, in different times, under different circumstances, but the age gap between both children dealing with a death does affect the poems, In “ We are seven” the girl is only eight years old and may not understand the full extent of her sibling’s deaths. Seamus Heaney

was slightly older when his brother of four died and he would have had a different reaction. With age, comes experience and maturity, something which Heaney seems to show during the poem, he is much more absorbed into what has happened and takes a lot more hurt. But both poems are very different even though they both deal with the tragedy of losing a young child.

The little girl in “ We are Seven” sees her siblings death completely different in contrast to Heaney’s brother’s death. The little girl accepts her siblings death and celebrates their life, she sees heaven as a place, almost as if her brother and sister are alive and happy. However, Heaney looks on his brother’s death as the end. His approach is much more solemn and portrays a definite sense of loss.

I think for that reason I preferred “ We Are Seven” as it has much greater brightness to it. It is happy and reveals a refreshing way to celebrate someone’s life. Wordsworth’s talent is also quite unique and adventurous which was a step up from the duller poetry I have read in the past. It seems much more heartfelt and soulful.