Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’
by Seamus Heaney
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o’clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying-
He had always taken funerals in his stride-
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were "sorry for my trouble".
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o’clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.
First impressions:

1. Where is Heaney waiting?

“I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o’clock our neighbours drove me home.”

Heaney was born in 1939, and is here at boarding school, so this is the 1950s.
First impressions:

2. Who is he waiting for?

“At two o’clock our neighbours drove me home.”

The modern reader may be struck by the neighbours' driving the young Seamus home - his parents may not have a car (quite usual then) or, more likely, were too busy at home, and relied on their neighbours to help.
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

First impressions:

3. Who is the corpse and how old is he?

“A foot for every year.”

The poem is about the death of Heaney’s infant brother (Christopher)
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

First impressions:-

4. How did he die?

“At ten o’clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses……
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear”

He appears to have been knocked down by a car.
“I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o' clock our neighbours drove me home”

• Which words show Heaney’s boredom?

Why do you think the school put him in the sick bay?

• What word is reminiscent of a funeral?
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

Look at the different ways the parents react to the tragedy.

“..as my mother held my hand
In hers and **coughed out** angry tearless ***sighs.***”

“In the porch I met my father crying-
He had always taken funerals in his stride-”

All death is sad, a young death is particularly tragic, and in these circumstances, a four year old boy killed in a road accident.

•Which words show her emotions?

The father had always been seen as the controlled and strong leader of the family (see ‘Digging’ and ‘Follower’). For Heaney to see his father distraught with grief would be a new, and shocking experience.

What emotions do you think the mother would feel? Guilt? Anger? Shock?
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

There are aspects of Heaney’s homecoming which embarrass and confuse him.

- His father’s grief
- His mother’s reaction - who is comforting whom?
- The baby (another sibling) ‘cooing’ and ‘laughing’, emphasising his oblivion to the sad occasion. This contrasts with the solemnity of the adults.
- And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow. An unfortunate choice of words!

Remember……Heaney was a boy and didn’t know how to feel or respond to family and neighbours. This is an adult, reflecting on a childhood memory. He did not live at home and share the daily life of his family. He may feel isolated and not feel genuine grief at this point.
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

“...I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were "sorry for my trouble".
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,"

• Underline significant words which show his confusion and embarrassment

Notice the euphemism for death used by the neighbours. People find it hard to use the brutal word ‘death’. How many euphemisms for death can you think of?
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

Notice the contrasting language describing the body of his brother.

**Line 15:**

“With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.”

**Lines 16 - 21**

“Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot. No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.”
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

This embarrassment of the public ‘wake’, contrasts with the final section of the poem, where he is alone with his brother.

• Note the use of personal pronouns – him, his, he. His brother has now become a real person to Heaney instead of the detached and impersonal word ‘corpse’.

• The calm mood is beautifully shown in the transferred epithet; “Snowdrops/And candles soothed the bedside”. Literally they soothed the young Heaney.

• The flowers are a symbol in the poem, but also in reality for the family (a symbol of new life, after death).

• The bruise is seen as not really part of the boy - he is “wearing” it (a metaphor), as if it could come off. Heaney likens the bruise to the poppy, a flower linked with death and soothing of pain (opiates come from poppies).

An epithet is a word which makes the reader see the object described in a clearer or sharper light. It is both exact and imaginative.
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

“He lay in the four foot box as in his cot. No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

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

Which lines and images do you find the most poignant (sad) in these three lines of the poem?

We are reminded how young and small the dead child is; how much growing and living he has missed. We associate a cot with sleeping babies, not death. Does this soften the poem or make it more poignant?

• Why do you think Heaney chose to describe the coffin as “a four foot box”?

© 2004 www.teachit.co.uk
Death in poetry

‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney

- The child appears as if sleeping (a simile). We contrast the ugly “corpse, stanched and bandaged”, which becomes a sleeping child with “no gaudy scars” - dead, but, ironically, not disfigured.
- The last line of the poem is most poignant and skilful - the size of the coffin is the measure of the child’s life.
- We barely notice that Heaney has twice referred to a “box”, almost a jokey name for a coffin - do you agree? Is it another euphemism?
- Most lines in the poem are not ‘end-stopped’ that is, they do not end with a final punctuation mark, but run on to the next line - enjambment (from French - to jump).

Why do you think Heaney chose to finish the poem with a rhyming couplet?

Rhyme makes something memorable - you will remember these lines and feel a pang of sadness as they emphasize the smallness of the child and the brevity of his life.
Death in poetry

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

• ‘Mid-Term Break’ by Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (Faber & Faber, 1990)
• Andrew Moore’s study guide – http://www.universalteacher.org.uk