

# 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, **stanced** 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.



**knelling:**  
*ringing slowly  
(like funeral bells)*

**stanced:**  
*stopped the  
flow of blood*



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**What line from the poem matches this picture?**

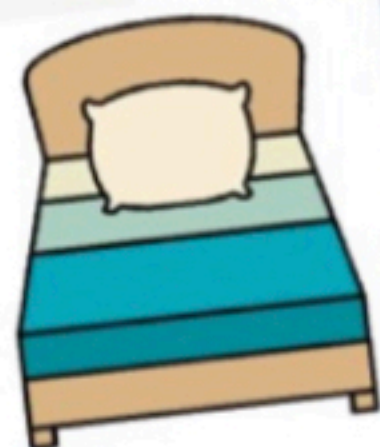


**Write the stanza that matches these images**

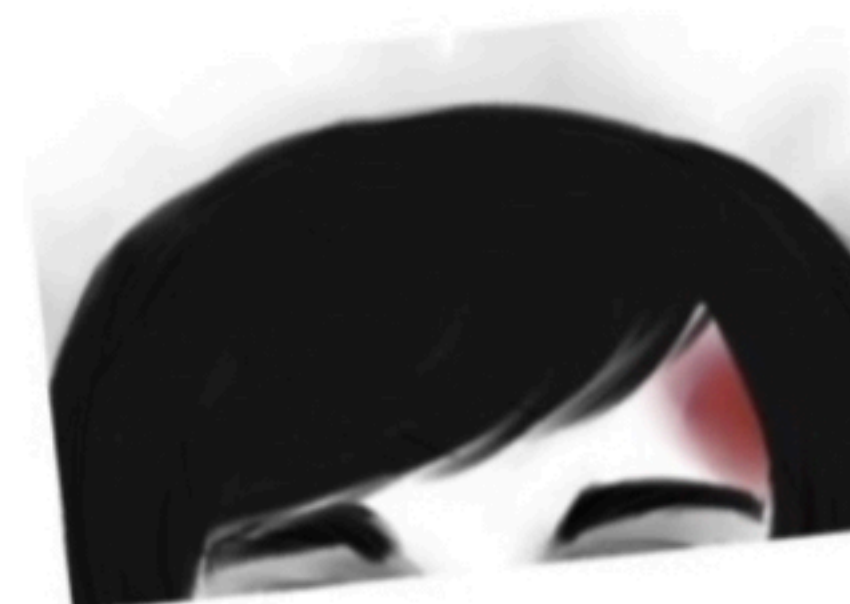
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## **Mid-Term Break by Seamus Heaney**



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## Mid-Term Break by Seamus Heaney

- This poem explores the **themes of loss and grief**. Heaney writes about his experience of losing his younger brother to a car accident while Heaney himself was away at school. He describes how this traumatic event affected his family.
- The first stanza tells us that Heaney was waiting in school to be collected for the funeral, hinted at by the use of alliteration and onomatopoeia in the line: "counting bells knelling classes to a close"
- In the next stanza, Heaney meets his father who is 'crying' even though he was usually very strong at funerals and didn't cry often: "always taken funerals in his stride"
- The youngest sibling is too innocent and unaware to understand the grief the family is going through, which is communicated through the use of onomatopoeia: "the baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram"
- Heaney is embarrassed by friends and family shaking his hand, and his mother "coughs out angry, tearless sighs", perhaps because she has cried so much that she has no tears left at this point, or maybe she is trying to stay strong for the poet, Seamus Heaney.
- The ambulance arrives with "the corpse" - Heaney hasn't accepted his brother's death yet. He is detached from the situation.
- In the final stanza Heaney visits his brother who is laid out peacefully. Heaney says "him" which shows he is beginning to grieve and accept that his brother has passed away. There is a calming atmosphere created with the use of sibilance "snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside"
- There is vivid imagery when Heaney compares the bruise on his brother's head to a red poppy flower, which is a flower associated with funerals.
- We find out how tragic the situation was when we learn how young his brother was when he died. This is communicated to the reader with the use of repetition, alliteration and rhyme in the final lines:

"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."





## Understand

1. Why is the speaker taken home from school unexpectedly?
2. Describe the actions of **(a)** the father, **(b)** the mother and **(c)** the baby in the poem.
3. How does the speaker feel in the third stanza? Why does he feel this way?
4. How long has it been since the speaker last saw his brother?

## Explore

1. In the first stanza the speaker suggests that tragedy will follow. What are the signs that something bad has happened at the start of the poem?
2. Do you think the title 'Mid-Term Break' is an unusual one for a poem like this? Explain your answer.
3. How did this poem make you feel?

Find an example of each of the following poetic techniques in the poem *Mid-Term Break*:

- Alliteration
- Onomatopoeia
- Sibilance
- Repetition
- Assonance
- Rhyme



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At two o'clock our neighbours **drove** me home.

Alliteration

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.

Assonance

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

Onomatopoeia

**knelling:**  
ringing slowly  
(like funeral bells)

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.  
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**stanced:**  
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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,

Sibilance

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.

Rhyme

Repetition  
(Also alliteration)



### **Alliteration/Assonance:**

- "He lay in the four foot box as in his cot" the assonance of the "o" creates a mournful effect.
- "A four foot box a foot for every year" The "f" sounds are harsh and angry which give the emotion of the death.

### **Foreshadowing**

- "Counting bells knelling classes to a close" Heaneys heavy use of foreshadowing of these bells leads us to think something is wrong. The way he describes how the school bells "knell" are similar to how you would describe a funeral bells sound.

### **Enjambment**

- "As my mother held my hand, in hers" The way this is split between two different stanzas gives us a rush effect and almost a tension and anxiety of what is going to happen next

### **Simile**

- "He lay in the four foot box as in his cot" It shows us how his dead brother is lying in a coffin just as he did in his own cot, this is powerful imagery.

### **Sibilance**

- "Snowdrops, And candles soothed the beside; I saw him, For the first time in six weeks" The soft "s" sound softens the room and gives a peaceful, calm mood. This mood created helps us to imagine Seamus looking at his brother in his coffin in silence.

### **Onomatopoeia**

- "The baby cooed and laughed and rocked in the pram" The word "cooed" better describes the silent scene in the house and it shows us how the baby is so innocent and is oblivious to what is happening outside the pram

### **Imagery**

- "Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple" This imagery shows us the result of the collision and the bruise which has killed the child is still on his head.

### Onomatopoeia

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### Imagery

- "Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple" This imagery shows us the result of the collision and the bruise which has killed the child is still on his head.

### Juxtaposition

- "Coughed out angry tearless sighs" The placement of the two words angry and tearless show us that the mother is so devastated that she has cried herself dry. This helps us to imagine the emotion in the poem and sets the mood

### Why do you like the poem?

- Very descriptive

- Written in the first person therefore giving a better insight
- There are many emotions, it is very emotionally written and conveys emotion well. There is also very strong imagery

### Tone of the Poem

The tone is one of anger from the death of his brother but is also one of sadness as it is such a tragedy

### Mood of the poem

The Mood would be one of sadness as everyone in the poem is mournful towards the death

### Themes

- youth
- death
- sadness
- accidents



1. **"In the porch I met my father crying"**: Striking image. In 1950 Ireland was a patriarchal society and men were expected not to cry. The fact that Heaney's father was crying shows the gravity of the situation
2. **"The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram"**: Shows the obliviousness of the baby, innocence, and contrast
3. **"Snowdrops"**: Spring flowers that symbolise youth. White symbolises innocence and purity.
4. **"A poppy bruise"**: Poppy is a red flower associated with memorial of the dead.
5. **"corpse"**: Poet uses an impersonal word as he is too hurt to say his name
6. **"knelling"**: An example of onomatopoeia in the poem. The sound of bells, especially funeral bells, creates a sense of foreboding
7. **"counting/classes/close"**: alliteration with a hard c, creates a harsh sound which warns us of what is to come
8. **"a hard blow"**: Casual language shows how personal the loss is
9. **"snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside"**: sibilance, creates a calming scene
10. **"the bumper knocked him clear/ A four-foot box, a foot for every year"**: Full end rhyme to emphasise the sorrow
11. **The poem has a melancholic tone (melancholic means depressing)**: "knelling" "angry tearless sighs"
12. **There's a sense of the poet being uneasy and awkward**: "old men standing up to shake my hand"