

# **"Tearless Sighs": The Unspeakable Grief in Seamus Heaney's "Mid-Term Break"**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the theme of grief in Seamus Heaney's 'Mid-Term Break'. An inspiring and suggestive work, the poem consists of eight stanzas depicting a profound experience of grief and pain undergone by the speaker's family after losing their youngest child in a tragic accident. For the paper's theoretical framework, the researcher sheds light on the definition of grief in psychology, distinguishing it from bereavement and mourning, its kinds, and various stages. An overview of Seamus Heaney, his works, and the dominant themes in his poetry is also given. Then, a detailed analysis of the poem under discussion is presented, showing how it reveals the theme of grief, particularly when the griever finds no words to express his state. Expressively, Heaney employs his poetic techniques to reflect the details of the grieving process in the poem.

## **Keywords:**

"Mid Term Break", grief, loss, Seamus Heaney, tearless sighs.

## تنهدات بلا دموع: الحزن العصي على التعبير في قصيدة "عطلة منتصف الفصل الدراسي" للشاعر شيموس هيني

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### ملخص البحث:

تتناول الدراسة بالشرح والتحليل موضوع الحزن في قصيدة "عطلة منتصف الفصل الدراسي" للشاعر شيموس هيني، خاصةً عندما يكون هذا الحزن عميقاً وصادقاً بحيث تعجز الكلمات عن البوح به أو التعبير عن تفاصيله. وتصور القصيدة بشكل أمين تجربة الحزن والفقد التي يعيشها الشاعر وأسرته بعد أن فقدوا صغيرهم ذا السنوات الأربع، الذي راح ضحية حادثٍ أليم أودى بحياته تاركًا وراءه جرحًا غائرًا أوجع قلوب أهله وذويه، وألقى بظلاله الحزينة على كافة جنبات المنزل. تبدأ الباحثة دراستها بعرض مفهوم الحزن لدى علماء النفس موضحةً أنواعه المختلفة ومراحله المتنوعة التي يمر بها الشخص الذي يخوض تجربة فقد العصبية. يلي ذلك عرض موجز عن الشاعر وأعماله الأدبية والموضوعات السائدة في شعره. بعد ذلك، تقدم الباحثة تحليلًا شاملًا للقصيدة موضوع الدراسة مركزةً على موضوع الحزن فيها وكيف يتناوله الشاعر ويصور تفاصيله المختلفة، وكيف يوظف أساليبه الفنية المتنوعة بطريقةً بارعةً تعكس الفكرة وتوضح المعنى الذي ترمي إليه أبيات القصيدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: "عطلة منتصف الفصل الدراسي"، الحزن، الفقد،

تنهدات بلا دموع، شيموس هيني

...my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.

— (Heaney, 'Mid-Term Break', *Death of a Naturalist* 28)<sup>1</sup>

"Not all grief is given public expression," states Gary VandenBos, the professor of Clinical Psychology and the editor of the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, defining grief as "the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person" (470). This grieving experience causes a deep sense of sorrow and places a heavy burden of agony on both heart and soul. Psychologists and scholars often distinguish grief from bereavement and mourning. Bereavement is "the experiential state one endures after realizing a loss....Whereas bereavement represents the state of loss, grief represents the particular reactions one experiences while in that state" (Sanders 4). On the other hand, mourning refers to "the external expression of the internal experience. It is the outer manifestation and public demonstration of grief. Mourning is bereavement shared publicly (Abi-Hashem 310).

Grief has three main types. It can be anticipatory, normal, or complicated. Anticipatory grief, as its name suggests, refers to the reaction to a loss an individual anticipates, as when a loved one suffers a long term or serious illness. In this case, the individual expects that the sick person may die anytime and accordingly, begins to grieve. Normal grief refers to an individual's typical reactions and feelings after a loss. As time passes, the intensity of feelings decreases, and the griever gradually moves towards accepting the loss and practicing his daily activities in an ordinary way. Deeper in nature, longer in time, and more intense in emotions than the two previously mentioned types, complicated

<sup>1</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *Death of a Naturalist*. London: Faber & Faber, 1991, p.28. [All quotes from the poem "Mid-Term Break" are from this edition, the same page, and hereafter cited between square brackets as line numbers only.]

grief "occurs when individuals are in a chronic state of mourning and unable to accept the reality of the loss," Staymon Braithwaite explains, pointing out that "without treatment, the condition can persist indefinitely, leading to problems such as substance abuse, suicidal thinking, sleep disturbances and impaired immune functions (11).

In her book *On Death and Dying*, a significant work in the studies of death and grief, the Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identifies five stages of grief. Those stages "are known by the acronym DABDA-Denial; Anger; Bargaining; Depression; and finally, Acceptance" (Levine 160). Denial is a defense mechanism through which the individual refuses the reality of the situation related to a loss. When the individual, for example, receives the news that a loved one has died, it is natural to reject the idea initially and strongly resist accepting it. The second stage is anger. After realizing that a loss has existed, the individual begins to feel angry with oneself or other people. Bargaining is a stage of grief in which the individual attempts to change the circumstances by adopting irrational thoughts. For example, the individual who has lost a brother in an accident may resort to creating 'if only' statements and say, "If only I had been with him in the car, he would not have died."

The fourth stage of grief is depression. According to Kübler-Ross, this stage is also referred to as "preparatory grief" (84). In this stage, the individual withdraws from life, feels low in energy, wants to remain in bed all day, becomes unwilling to talk to others, and is extremely dominated by feelings of despair, sadness, emptiness, and hopelessness. Though heavy and stressful, this stage gives an indicator that the grieving individual has at least started to accept reality. The last stage of grief is acceptance. The individual finally comes to terms with the situation of loss, emotionally admits it, and practically copes with it.

Widely recognized as an eminent poet, critic, and translator, Seamus Heaney was born in 1939 in County Derry, Northern

Ireland, and died in 2013 in Dublin, Ireland. He worked as a professor of poetry at both Oxford and Harvard. A distinguished writer, Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995. *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) is Heaney's first and most well-known poetry collection. Other poetic works include *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *Sweeney Astray* (1983), *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Selected Poems* (1998), *Electric Light* (2001), *District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010).

Heaney published three collections of prose and essays, namely, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–1978* (1980), *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001* (2002), and *The Redress of Poetry* (1995). His translation of *Beowulf* appeared in 1999 and was a great success. Other translations by him include *The Cure at Troy* (1991), his version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*; *The Midnight Verdict* (1993), a translation of selections from both *Metamorphoses* by Ovid and *The Midnight Court* by Brian Merriman; and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), his translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Heaney's poetry reveals a variety of themes. Childhood memories, the natural world, and the Irish landscape are the focus of many poems such as 'The Harvest Bow', 'Blackberry Picking', and 'The Peninsula'. Allusions to Irish past, history and myth appear in 'Bogland', 'The Tollund Man', and 'The Lindow Bodies', among other poems. Political violence and sectarian conflict that were tearing Northern Ireland at Heaney's time is the concern of poems like 'Punishment' and 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing'. The poet's preoccupation with Irish Identity and tradition shows itself in more than one poem such as 'Kinship' and 'The Forge'. The significance of place is a topic that features heavily in Heaney's poems such as 'Toome', 'Broagh' and 'Digging'. Family life, loss, and grief are the main themes of poems like 'Clearances' and 'Mid-Term Break'. Thus, Heaney's poetry evokes various

themes, addresses different issues, and conveys many significant messages. To quote Maurice Harmon,

His poems link to its landscape in loving recreations of activities and customs and in troubled assessment of sectarian divisions. Poetry becomes a means of redressing wrongs, of balancing opposing tensions. The question of the poet's responsibility and of the value of poetry itself becomes central. Ultimately he must be true to himself, have freedom to express himself, and live-in the republic of his own conscience. (11).

'Mid-Term Break', a poem from the collection *Death of a Naturalist* that was published in 1966, is an elegy in which *Heaney* laments the early death of his younger brother, Christopher, a four-year-old child who died in a road accident. The poem consists of eight stanzas, each of which is a tercet containing three lines, except the last stanza which contains one line only. The poem's title suggests a vacation, a break that comes in the middle of the semester, especially when we know that the speaker is a school student. However, we come to recognize that this break is not a happy one; it is a break meant for grief and sorrow due to the sudden death of the speaker's younger infant brother. Thus, the title of the poem "ruefully points beyond the usually happy associations of a break from school to the premature ending of a child's life and the rupture it causes in his family (Regan 11). The poem contains a condensed dose of grief that cannot be overtly expressed by the child's family, particularly the mother, but is vividly depicted by the poem's impressive language and poetic techniques. The poem, exploring a deep experience of loss, opens as follows:

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. [1-3]

As shown above, the opening stanza sets the mood of the whole poem. The speaker is boringly waiting at the school medical center,

'counting bells knelling classes to a close'. However, the word 'knelling' is very significant here as it implies a church bell of a funeral and not a school bell that announces the end of lessons. Accordingly, the speaker keeps waiting alone 'in the college sick bay' from morning 'till two o'clock' in the afternoon when his neighbours pick him up and take him home to attend the funeral rituals. A sense of community and social support is felt as the family's neighbours show their help and consolation at that hard time of grief and loss.

Alliteration and assonance are used in the above stanza, revealing the theme of the lines. For instance, it is noted in the second line that the consonant sound /k/ is repeated at the beginning of the words 'counting', 'classes', and 'close', creating an example of alliteration that connects the three words and reveals how the speaker is monotonously counting bells that come one after another to mark the end of lessons. This meaning is further clarified and given a new dimension by the instance of assonance in the same line as the vowel sound /e/ is repeated in the two words 'bells' and 'knelling', directing attention at the way a bell knells, reflecting the sound of church bell which is often rung solemnly for declaring a death or funeral. In addition, symbolism is evident throughout the stanza. The phrase 'knelling bells' suggests that a severe event is to take place, usually, an event related to death and loss. It is known in Christianity that knelling bells are symbols of funerals.

From the very beginning, the thoughts of death and grief seem to preoccupy the speaker. The school medical center implies health failing and indirectly refers to a time of trouble and suffering. In addition to the school ringing bells that bring to mind the church bells ringing to signify death, the speaker's confused waiting at the medical center implies that he is dwelling on a painful experience of loss and grief.

When the speaker arrives home, he observes the impact of the loss on his family and how their neighbours attempt to console them. Heaney writes:

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. [4-6]

Though known for being strong in situations like funerals, the father is distraught by the death of his baby who was killed in a sudden car accident. The situation is different this time; the lost one is his own child. Inspired by the poem's title, one can regard this different reaction as a 'break' in the father's attitudes toward funerals. Not all deaths are reacted to the same way, particularly when the victim is a dear one. At his child's death, the poor father cries, unable to express the hidden grief that fills his heart or the agony that saddens his soul. As the narrator recounts, many strangers come to sympathize with the family in such 'a hard blow', to quote 'Big Jim Evans', one of the consolers who attend the funeral. The poet uses carefully selected vocabulary that suits the atmosphere of the poem and reveals the idea posed in the lines. Expressions and words such as 'I met my father crying', 'funerals', and 'a hard blow' reflect the great distress of the family, especially the father who cannot bear the heavy burden of the loss despite his long experience and strong attitudes in reacting to the situations of death and mourning.

It is worth mentioning that Heaney was fourteen years old when his younger brother died. Inexperienced with such occasions of mourning, he faces an awkward situation. He narrates:

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 that I was the eldest,  
Away at school... [7-12]



The moment the speaker enters the house, his attention is captured by a baby, apparently the child of one of the funeral attendants, smiling at him, shaking the baby carriage, thus adding an ironic touch to the situation. The unexpected laughter of the baby is sharply juxtaposed with the mourning scene described by the poet. Furthermore, the speaker feels embarrassed and uncomfortable to find older people standing up to shake his hand and express their sorrow for the loss he has been experiencing. He does not know how to act or what to say. On the other hand, other people whisper, as sometimes happens in funerals, telling one another that the speaker is the family's eldest child and that he was 'away at school' when the accident occurred. Sad and shocked, he is unable to utter a word.

Perhaps the most moving moment of this tragic tale is when the speaker meets his mother. He states:

... 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. [12-15]

As soon as the mother sees her eldest son, she holds his hand in hers and begins to cough out angry tearless sighs.' She is too heartbroken to say a single word. For her, the loss is indeed great. She has lost her youngest child, and it seems that she has also lost the ability to express herself in words. Grief is sometimes unspeakable. All the poor mother can do is produce sorrowful sighs that are furious and deep but without tears. Unlike the father, who cries, breaking into tears, the poor mother cannot even weep or show tears as a sign of the unbearable pain that overwhelms her heart and soul. Perhaps if tears accompany her sighs or she can speak and communicate her grief, this may provide her with some relief.

It is noted that enjambment is used in the above lines of verse in a way that clarifies and enriches the meaning intended by

the poet. For instance, there is a run to the next line and even to the next stanza in lines twelve and thirteen:

... my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.

This example of enjambment suggests that the mother strongly desires to continue holding her eldest child's hand. She does not want to leave his hand for a moment and likes to remain connected with him all the time. This act relieves her, gives her a feeling of safety, and provides her heart with the tranquility that the eldest child will not be lost like his younger brother. Another example of enjambment can be seen in lines fourteen and fifteen:

At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived  
With the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the nurses.

Late at night, the dead child's body arrives in an ambulance. The enjambment here reveals the speed of the ambulance car in bringing the corpse directly without stopping at any place other than the child's house. Having previously known that the child has died in an accident, we are now told by the speaker that no serious injuries or apparent wounds can be observed in the body as it has already been 'stanced and bandaged by the nurses'.

Unlike the earlier scenes of shock, embarrassment, and discomfort, the final scene of the poem, where Heaney is alone with his brother, is characterized by acceptance, relief, and serenity. Flowers and 'candles' add a sanctified touch to the lines, creating an atmosphere of peace, rebirth, and satisfaction. This is the last stage of grief identified by psychologists, in which the grieving individual begins to accept reality and come to terms with the situation of loss. Heaney recounts:

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

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

A four foot box, a foot for every year. [16-22]

Attempting to give a farewell look to his younger brother, whom he has not seen for a month and a half, the speaker, on the next day, goes up to the room where the body of this loved one lies. As soon as he enters the room, he observes the 'snowdrops and candles' beside Christopher's bed, a peaceful atmosphere that significantly relieves the grieving brother.

Skillfully, the poet employs his technical devices to reflect the themes and meanings he poses in the lines. Snowdrops are white flowers associated with purity, beauty, innocence, sympathy, and renewal of life. A snowdrop is "the first of the spring flowers to bloom... When the flower opens, it has three inner petals that are covered by three outer petals. The head of the flower will collapse in freezing temperatures and reopen when the weather gets warmer"(Barker). Thus, Heaney's use of snowdrops in this scene is suitable and evocative.

On the other hand, the use of 'candles' suits the occasion of death, refers to prayer rituals in Christianity, and reflects the atmosphere of peace and sacredness evoked by the lines. Moreover, there is an example of personification in Snowdrops / And candles soothed the bedside;' flowers and candles are personified as human beings who gently calm the speaker, heal the wound of his soul, and provide him with a sense of relief after the agony he has undergone due to the loss of his beloved brother. This

healing process occurs in the peaceful room where the little body is serenely kept.

Though the dead child seems 'paler' than before, the speaker observes, he is depicted as if symbolically wearing a bruise on the side of his head. The bruise is red coloured, precisely like those poppy flowers. The baby looks like a sleeping person, not a dead one. What was previously referred to as 'a corpse, stanced and bandaged' has now turned into an innocent child sleeping peacefully in his 'cot'. As Kayaalt puts it,

Christopher's physical appearance seems so natural that the speaker as an observer finds it difficult to suppose him dead. Since poppies are red coloured flowers, the poppy-like scar creates contrast on his paler face. It ensures him such an almost vivid image that he, as if, is sleeping on his small bed (96).

Despite the fact that the child has been killed in an accident, ironically, his body is not disfigured; it has 'no gaudy scars' or apparent injuries, perhaps because he has received one single blow from the bumper' of the car which , as the poet narrates, 'knocked him clear' from the larger accident.

The last line in 'Mid-Term Break' stands alone in one stanza that is separate from the other stanzas, exactly like the dead child who is kept alone in his room, away from the rest of his family. Consisting of pitiful and lamentable words, this concluding line reveals many meanings. Heaney writes:

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

The coffin has four feet, each representing one of the four years that form the age of the dead child as if the coffin's size is the exact measure of the years he has lived in this world. In other words, the coffin is short and small, like the little child whose life has been

short and brief, a fact that has deepened his family's grief, considering that he was killed in an accident. Accordingly, this closing line sums up the whole poem. The poet's expressive techniques further reveal the brevity of Christopher's life. Though the poem does not have a regular rhyme scheme, the last two lines, even if in two different stanzas, create a rhyming couplet highlighting the shortness of the baby's life.

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Furthermore, the caesura in the last line provides readers with a stop to consider and contemplate this early loss that filled the house corners with great grief and cast a sad shadow on all family members.

So evocative, the concluding line of 'Mid-Term Break' brings into mind a poem by William Wordsworth entitled 'The Thorn'. In his poem, Heaney suggests how a dead child's life has been short by comparing it to the measurement of something, namely, a small-sized box, '*A four foot box, a foot for every year*'. Likewise, Wordsworth in 'The Thorn' uses a similar measurement, the height of a child who is only two years old, to show that the thorny tree of his poem is very short, '*Not higher than a two years' child*'. Another thread that connects Wordsworth's poem to Heaney's, other than the idea of measurement, is that it also speaks of a dead child and presents an experience of grief. Wordsworth's 'The Thorn' tells the story of an old thorn tree growing on the top of a hill. A woman whose name is Martha Ray often visits the place because her dead child has been buried under this thorn tree. This is how Wordsworth describes the thorn tree, referring to the grieving mother who sits beneath it and bitterly laments the death of her child:

There is a Thorn-it looks so old,  
In truth, you'd find it hard to say

How it could ever have been young,  
It looks so old and grey.  
Not higher than a two years' child  
It stands erect, this aged Thorn;  
....  
A Woman in a scarlet cloak,  
And to herself she cries,  
'Oh misery! oh misery!  
Oh woe is me! oh misery!' (197-198)

Again and again, Heaney uses his poetic techniques in the poem to reveal the intended themes and meanings. In other words, he professionally makes the poem's form reflect its content. An interesting example is how the poem's structure reveals the speaker's emotional state and reflects his feelings. As previously stated, the poem consists of eight stanzas, all of which are tercets of three lines except the last stanza which consists of one line only. This technical aspect conveys a thematic implication:

Throughout this poem, the speaker has done his best to maintain emotional control in the face of what is clearly an upsetting loss. That contradiction between control and devastation has in part been expressed through form. Even while describing grief, Heaney maintains a steady, unbroken stream of tercets with ten-syllable lines. In [the] second half of the poem, as the reality of the loved one's death is made increasingly vivid, upsetting, and inescapable, the speaker's control slowly crumbles, dissolving by the final line. (Stern).

This means that the stanza pattern of tercets remains the same without any change throughout the poem reflecting the speaker's 'emotional control in the face of' his 'upsetting loss' till he reaches the last stanza where the death of his 'loved' brother "is made increasingly vivid, upsetting, and inescapable.' At this moment, he has lost 'control,' and his 'steady' 'emotional' management of the

situation has collapsed. Accordingly, 'the steady, unbroken stream of tercets' has also collapsed with the speaker's sudden loss of 'emotional control' and changed into a one-line stanza at the end.

In conclusion, this paper has discussed grief as a prominent theme in Seamus Heaney's 'Mid-Term Break'. Sometimes inexpressible in words or even tears, grief makes it difficult for the person in distress to cope with the experience of loss easily, exactly as what has happened with the speaker's mother in the poem; she has been unable to utter a single word or show a single tear after the sudden death of her infant in an accident. On the other hand, the father, though he has finally burst into bitter cries, still has something inside, a lot of hidden grief that he cannot express in words. The early death of his child has made him deviate from the norm and led to his collapse at the funeral despite his long experience and firmness in mourning times. Heaney suggests in the poem that the language, though rich in words and expressions, is sometimes inadequate to deal with grief or express it.

As for the speaker, he remains silent throughout the poem: at school, at home, at the funeral, at meeting his crying father, and at joining his mother in her unspeakable grief. All these stages, with their condensed doses of sorrow and heartache, have made it hard for him to give any speech that can reflect his agony, especially when we know that he is the eldest child, and now the only one, of the grieving parents. Perhaps his confused self and agonized heart finally find relief in his dead brother's room when he sees the little one resting in peace with snowdrops and candles around him, a scene that greatly 'soothed' him, as he states in the poem. Indeed, all the moments of grief throughout the first five stanzas and those of serenity and relief in the last three are expressively reflected by the poetic techniques which the poet expertly uses throughout the poem.

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