***Rhyme & Form:*** Iambic Pentameter

***Tone:*** Sombre

***Imagery:*** Death, Grief

***Themes:*** Death, Frailty of Life, Growing up

***Poetic Techniques:*** Onomatopoeia, Alliteration, Assonance, Simile, Metaphor

**Summary**

A boy sits in the school’s medical area waiting to be given a lift home – the ringing of the school bell further enhance the fact that he is waiting for something. When he finally arrives home he sees his father on the porch, crying. The house is packed with neighbours and strangers who offer their condolences. He notices his baby sister in a cot laughing and cooing while his mother takes his hand – she is so overcome with anger and grief that she is unable to cry. Later, the body of his younger brother arrives in an ambulance. The next morning, when the house is quiet, the boy goes up to the bedroom to see his brother for the last time.

**Theme**

‘Mid-Term Break’ is a first-person account of the experience of facing death for the first time. This death is especially tragic as the dead boy was only four years old, and this is driven home as we find out, by delving into Heaney’s past, that the incident in the poem actually happened. As he confronts death for the first time he sees how it affects those he loves. In the porch he meets his father *“crying”,* and later his mother holds his hand. She is too upset to cry, instead she *“coughed out angry, tearless sighs”*.
There is also a sense in the poem that the boy has been forced to grow up by what has happened. When he comes to the house we read:

…I was embarrassed/ By old men standing up to shake my hand…

In the next stanza he tells us,

Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school.

As the eldest in the family, he is treated as an adult by neighbours and seen as a comfort to the family. Since he does not shed tears like his father, or appear severely grief-stricken like his mother, he emerges as the strongest character in his family.

**Imagery**

A mid-term break is usually associated with time off school, holidays and fun. The poem’s title suggests a holiday but this “break” does not happen for pleasant reasons as we find out that there is a death in the family.

‘Mid-Term Break’ is told over the course of three main parts. In the first the boy waits in the college sick bay to be brought home by a neighbour, the reason for his father not collecting him could be due to his family not owning a car (this was in the 1950s). The second occurs in the family home where he meets his grieving parents, family friends and neighbours, who have gathered for the wake. The final scene takes place the following morning when the boy sees his little brother’s body laid out surrounded by flowers and candles.

In the opening stanza there is an ominous atmosphere as the bell is *“knelling classes to a close”*, however at this stage we do not know what has happened.
The second stanza begins with the stark, sad image of the poet’s father waiting for him to return:

In the porch I met my father crying

The patriarchal image of the father-figure in the 1950s is torn down here as we see his father crying – we know now that something personal and terrible has happened.
His father, apparently always strong at other funerals, is distraught by his child’s death, while *“Big Jim”* says that it was a *“terrible blow”*. The young Seamus is made uneasy by the baby’s happiness on seeing him, by hand shaking and euphemisms *“Sorry for my trouble*”, and by people whispering about him.

Inside the house, the boy notices his baby sister lying in her pram *“cooing and laughing”*; too young to understand what has happened or to realise why the house is filled with strangers. Old men stand up to shake his hand, treating the young boy as a mature male member of the family. The boy meets his mother who is in shock and too upset, even to cry.

Finally in the fifth stanza we learn of the cause of the tragedy: an ambulance arrives with the bandaged body of his brother who was killed by a car:

At ten o’clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse

In the last two stanzas the boy goes to the room where his brother’s body is laid out. This is the encounter that the entire poem has been moving towards, the climax of the whole piece. There is an almost peaceful feeling in the poet’s description of the room: “snowdrops and candles” soothe the bedside scene. His brother is paler than he remembers, and the only sign of his fatal injury is the “poppy bruise” on his left temple. The young boy sees his brother for the last time and faces death for the first.
In the final image the poet compares the small size of his brother’s coffin with the shortness of life:

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.
A four foot box, a foot for every year.

**Language**

The sombre mood of ‘Mid-Term Break’ is established in the opening lines as the boy sits in the college sick bay with nothing to do but count the bells *“knelling classes to a close”*.
Notice how the poet uses the word *“knelling”* instead of ringing. This gives us a hint of the mood: the bell, which is bringing classes to an end, reminds the boy of a church bell *“knelling”* for a funeral mass, and perhaps is forewarning him of the death he is about to face.
‘Mid –Term Break’ is about death and naturally the mood throughout the poem is sombre. The boy meets his father *“crying”* in the porch and his mother *“coughed out angry tearless sighs”*. The shocked sense of sadness is lifted for a moment in the third stanza when the boy sees his sister in her cot. She coos and laughs, too young to understand what has happened.

As well as this central feeling of loss and sadness in the poem, there is also an interesting secondary mood. The boy feels awkward and uncomfortable at being expected to behave like the *“eldest”* in the family and says:

*…I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand*

His brother’s death, as well as being a great tragedy, is a rite of passage for the boy. He is treated as an adult and perhaps as a support to his parents in their terrible grief – he is the only member of the family not crying.

In the final two stanzas the mood is heightened as the boy goes alone to see his brother’s body. Heaney’s language now is much more poetic than it was when he referred to his brother as a corpse: note the personal pronouns “*him”, “his”, “he”* – as opposed to *“the corpse”*. The calm mood is shown in the serene picture of *“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 as a symbol of new life, after death. The bruise is seen as not really part of the boy – he is *“wearing”* it, 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). The child appears as if sleeping, giving us a simile. The ugly *“corpse, stanched and bandaged”,* 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 flippant name for a coffin.
The shock, sadness and confusion of the earlier stanzas give way to an almost peaceful, calm feeling: *“snowdrops/ And candles”* by the bed soothe the boy. And finally, there is also a great tenderness and intimacy as he looks at his dead brother for the last time lying in his coffin.

**Rhythm**

*“The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in…”*

The quick pace of these lines make the poem seem more light-hearted for a moment as the boy sees his baby sister in the pram. But when the poem returns to the room of mourners the lines again become slow and heavy.

**Structure**

In stanza 5 there are instances of half rhyme (sigh/arrived) (corpse/nurses) however it is in the final two lines of this stanza that the poet uses the only full rhyme found in the poem. This helps bring closure to the poem and gives the ending a sense of finality, emphasising the theme of death:

*No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.
A four foot box, a foot for every year.*

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