



*Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article*

**THE “BREAK” IN SEAMUS HEANEY’S “MID-TERM BREAK”**

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**Abstract**

The term “mid-term break” is frequently attributed to a short vacation season between two half terms in an education year for students. However, as one of Irish poet Seamus Heaney’s poem, represents a new period, a characteristic transition from one situation to another. Through this autobiographical poem narrating his brother Christopher’s death, Heaney presents a moment of death which may happen to anyone, as far away from emotions as possible, with all its nakedness. Contrary to the event’s ordinariness, the grief triggered by death within the family causes unusual reactions, in other words, “breaks”, in all members. Even though all people within the impact circle of the event have been intensely influenced by culture and religion and accordingly they shaped their characteristics in these ways, they display unexpected behaviors as a result of these breaks. In this study, including a versatile analysis of the poem from history to religion, Heaney’s sudden stepping into the nature of an adult from adolescence, and how personalities shaped by culture take on different roles in the situation of pain and grief are examined.

**Keywords:** Mid-term, Ireland, Heaney, break, Christopher

**SEAMUS HEANEY’İN “MID-TERM BREAK” İSİMLİ ŞİİRİNDE “KIRILMA”**

**Öz**

“Mid-term break” (sömestr) terimi, sıklıkla, öğrenciler için bir eğitim yılında iki yarıyıl arasındaki kısa tatil sezonuna atfedilir. Diğer yandan, İrlandalı şair Seamus Heaney’in şiirlerinden biri olanrak—“Mid-term break”—yeni bir dönemi, bir durumdan diğerine karakteristik geçişi temsil eder. Kardeşi Christopher’ın ölümünü anlatan bu otobiyografik şiirle Heaney, herkesin başına gelebilecek bir ölüm anını, duygulardan olabildiğince uzak, tüm çıplaklığıyla sunmaktadır. Olayın olağanlığının aksine, aile içinde ölümün tetiklediği yas, tüm üyelerde olağandışı tepkilere, yani “kırılmalara” neden olmaktadır. Olayın etki çemberi içindeki tüm insanlar, kültür ve dinden yoğun bir şekilde etkilenmiş ve buna bağlı olarak karakterlerini bu yönde şekillendirmiş olsalar da, bu kırılmalar sonucunda beklenmedik davranışlar sergilemektedirler. Şiirin, tarihten dine çok yönlü bir analizini içeren bu çalışmada, Heaney’nin ergenlik döneminden bir yetişkinin doğasına ani adım atması ve kültürün şekillendirdiği kişiliklerin acı ve keder durumunda nasıl farklı roller üstlendiği incelenmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mid-term, İrlanda, Heaney, kırılma, Christopher

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**Başvuru Tarihi** (Received): 25.08.2021 **Kabul Tarihi** (Accepted): 20.01.2022

## Introduction

Death—in all of its forms—is at the heart of Heaney's first autobiographical collections of poetry (Stephens, 2014, p. 156). It is frequently used in Heaney's poems as a means of reflector showing the troubles of his country, and people affected from those troubles. One of from those poems, "Mid-Term Break" also depicts an extraordinary and heartbroken case. It recounts the poet's brother Christopher's being killed due to a car accident, and how that incident affects his family members in the way of "break". According to Altman: "The poem itself describes the "break": a moment when social standards break down(2019), in a way, the "break" causes people to act in an unconventional way.

In "Mid-Term Break", Heaney sequentially details the gloomy day, starting with being picked up from school to his standing near Christopher's coffin the next day. Although the work presents a fragment of his one day, Heaney conveys it in plain language, as impassive as possible and he does this as if he were telling about someone else's death. Regarding the ecclesial influence of the period, through the poem, he makes use of various religious symbols from bells to candles, from snowdrops to puppy bruises in his descriptions. After all, Heaney reveals in the poem how people break the roles assigned to them, and how they assume their natural personalities in times of sadness and grief. In other saying, it illustrates how people belonging to different backgrounds and sections including religious, coultural, or social are united when an occasion considered as a "break" occurs.

When examining Heaney's "Mid-Term Break"<sup>2</sup>, it is necessary to be familiar with the context of the society he lived in, and with his family. Otherwise, the poem's "break" theme may not give much meaning to the reader.

Seamus Heaney was born on April 13, 1939, in Moobawn, Northern Ireland, as his Catholic farmer family's first child (Law, 1986, p. 92). In the following years, eight sibilings were added to the poet. With the effect of the crowded home environment, Heaney grew up in a caring family atmosphere with solid bonds (Leo, 2018, p.39). Considering family relation, Corcoran utters: "Everything has himself written about his childhood reinforces the sense of intimate domestic warmth and affection as its prevailing atmosphere" (1986, p. 235).

In a broad sense, given the country and its history, the notorious sectarian conflict, which started with Ireland's occupation by England in the 1600s, experienced one of the angriest times during Heaney's childhood (Fitzpatrick, 2013, p. 644). On the one hand, Catholicism inherited from the Irish ancestors; on the other, Protestantism that the colonial British adopted by their separation from the Catholic Pope, they imposed them to new regions that they conquered (Badham, 1988, p. 52). Even if those religious sects are different, in an environment where they are adopted and defended in such a way, it is quite possible to talk about the dominance of religion, that is, Christianity. In this society, which is shaped according to Christianity's teachings, individuals' identities that make up the society are shaped with certain limits (White, 2010, p. 32). For example, the father in the house is a serious, responsible person who has little contact with his children, while the mother is more devoted to the members with emotional patterns. Likewise, the self-culture of the Irish is a secondary factor that frames its citizens' identities. Parker states that "in the Irish psyche, ancestry is a potent force, steadyng the individual, and shaping his or her sense of identity" (1994, p. 4). Being specific to Heaney's parents, his father is reported to have a tough character in expressing his emotions, whereas his mother had an "animated, imaginative personality" (Parker, 1994, pp. 2–3). Therefore, in a setting where religion and culture are so dominant, people cannot get out of the roles foreseen, and thus, they fulfil their

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<sup>2</sup> (Heaney, 1966/2006)

responsibilities in society with their false identities. To sum up, religion was therefore an important component of Irish society. When the poem was written in the 1950s, religion often impacted how people viewed issues like gender and mourning. People’s social lives, attitudes, and rappings were all influenced by it. In that context, the poem actually portrays a “break”: a point at which such societal ideals collapse. Because the death of a child is such a devastating tragedy, some of the characters in the poem behave in ways that contradict gender and sorrow norms.

### 1. Looking deep into “break”

“Mid-Term Break” first appeared in Heaney’s collection—“Death of a Naturalist” in 1966, and has been regarded one of the best of Heaney since then (Marks, 2019, p.21). Though it is not a highly appreciated work by researchers due to its straightforward and artistic-free style, the poem can generally find a tiny place inside the books that tell Heaney biographically (Parker, 1994; Vendler, 2000; O’Brien, 2003). Having been written in three-line stanzas, “the setting of “Mid-Term Break” starts first at school:

*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, 1966, ll. 1-3)

From the beginning, the “bell” symbol indicates that an undesirable event is imminent. Knelling bells are known to be used to mark funerals in Christianity. Then, Heaney might feel the death to such an extent that the ringing bells at his college signal uneasiness. The affiliation of bells with death shows how Heaney was exposed to religion. In a way, he is well aware of that the ringing bells is a type of rituals for funerals in Christianity. Regardless of the situation he is in, the speaker does not show any signs of rush; on top of that, his presenting details, such as “two o’clock”, indicates how calm and stable character he has. However, the foreshadowing immediately becomes untied by his coming across with the father:

*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)

As it might be observed in almost all societies, in Ireland’s social surroundings of the 1950s, too, men’s crying, especially fathers being seen weeping by their children, is a behaviour that is not highly approved and regarded as non-manly. McKeown et al. state for the father figures in Ireland: “The Irish father was the hard-working bread-winner, who was typically unavailable, both emotionally and physically, to his children” (1998, p. 2). Therefore, the speaker must have considered his father’s lamenting is weird. Also, the inference referring to the father’s familiarization with funerals emerges as a downgrading factor upon his mourning. So that he takes funerals in his stride many times, he should not have bothered himself with this one. However, the father reacts in the opposite direction of the expectations. Although he is experienced in funerals and knows that he shall not cry, he loses himself due to his son’s sorrow. This behaviour is a break that puts him outside the norms of society as he digresses from the typical role of fatherhood. The starting break goes on prevailing in the rest of the poem:

*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’.* (7-10)

Here, Heaney sets a perfect contrast mirroring life itself. Upon the speaker’s coming in, his baby sibling begins stirring by the excitement of seeing the distant brother. Having been unaware of the setting’s atmosphere, the baby laughs and makes sounds; whereas, the father is filled by sadness outside the house. The ambiance reveals the states of innocence and experience. In other

words, Heaney displays the baby's innocence with the laughs, while the father's experience is presented with tears. The following line is the only point where the speaker discloses his feeling, saying that he was "embarrassed". He expresses the discomfort at being viewed as an adult by the older men who have come forward to share their condolences. Likely, for the first time, he is being taken seriously by adults. Therefore, the "break" here may be viewed in two ways: On the one hand, older men do not ignore an adolescent boy, and respect him by standing up; on the other hand, the speaker feels compelled to act like a mature in front of the oldies. Both parts' acts are an attitude that they have hardly ever experienced before, which is unfamiliar to them. The unpredictable manners are also observed on mother in the following lines: "Away at school, as my mother held my hand / In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs" (12-13). Usually, due to their sentimental nature, females tend to lose their self-control easily in such heartbroken cases. While she is full of rage over her son's loss, yet, unlike her husband, she does not show any sign of crying. Although it is not convenient to the traditional expectation, that unexpected reaction is welcomed by others, and nobody interrupts her. As a female and having a lively character (as stated in the introduction by Parker), she breaks the traditional pattern that society placed on her by her relatively calm but at the same time sullen stance. Vendler speaks for the situation: "[She is] not idealized or swooning in her sorrow..., she is upright and contained, even though overmastered by emotion" (2000, p. 35). On this wise, gender roles in the poem seem to be replaced in that the father breaks into tears, and the mother goes berserk.

Formerly mentioned, Heaney's "Mid-Term Break" is influenced by social norms as well as the religious dominance of the period. The religiosity in the poem becomes more evident in the last tercets:

*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. (16-20)*

Snowdrops and candles are two objects that are widely used in rituals in the Christian faith; and, for Marks, they are associated with "the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Christ in the temple" (2019, p. 22). Heaney's reason for using these symbols in his poem is presumably because of the belief that Christopher will be resurrected in the afterlife. He reinforces his creed in rebirth with literary devices like "poppy bruise" and "four-foot box as in his cot". 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. Upon the poet's portrayal, a feeling of denial can be mentioned here. He underlies that the injury on his brother seems almost fake, as if it could be removed at any point, which makes poet suppose that the death is unreal. Other than that, these descriptions in the lines reveal to what extent Heaney and his family were affected by religious belief. The decoration of Christopher's room with flowers and candles indicates his family's devotion to Christianity, and Heaney's presentation of metaphors through these objects reveals that he is heavily influenced by the teachings of Christianity, just like his family. For the issue, McConnell narrates Heaney's interaction with the religion: "The nature of Heaney's Catholicism—theologically and aesthetically, as well as politically—is worth consideration. Catholicism has been read as a marker of Heaney's northern minority status and southern majority status; as a metonym for Irish nationalism; or as an influence behind 'the numinous' in his poetry" (2014, p. 52). In this regard, "Mid-Term Break" is one of Heaney's poems proving his affinity to Christianity.

Heaney ends the poem with a single pathetic statement: “A four-foot box, a foot for every year” (22). As Christopher is just four years old when he dies, his coffin is only four feet long. In another saying, his coffin is short because of his short life. This expression might be commented as the core of the “break” in the poem. Accordingly, as a result of the misery resulting from a small child’s death, both the family and the society experience different personalities and emotions that they are not accustomed to.

## 2. Conclusion

First, it shall be noted that this study has been prepared to show how social judgments and religious culture, particularly in Ireland, encircle individuals, and how individuals in that community break this circle when necessary. The religious events and the dominant Irish tradition that Heaney was exposed to during his lifetime are reflected in his personality as well as in his works. More specifically, “the personality of a poet is governed and guided by the trends, tendencies and tastes of the times in which he lives...” (Yadav & Yadav, 2018, p. 1352). Considering the Ireland of the 1950s, there were significant conflicts between the Catholic and Protestant sects, and this situation used to occupy an important place on the agenda of the whole country. As a result of it, individuals at that time, regardless of their denominations, acquired identity according to religious teachings, and their lives were built in line with this guidance. With Heaney’s utterance, religion was “part of the texture of growing up” and “whole life was permeated with it” (qtd. in Williams, 2018). Taking that social pattern into account, Heaney’s “Mid-Term Break” serves a facilitator enabling the community to reshape their personalities and moral values. In other words, Christopher’s death—though it is a break, help people express themselves without being attached to any prejudice or coterie.

In the end, through “Mid-Term Break,” Heaney demonstrates that even though individuals have settled personalities as a result of culture and religion, they potentially may step out of the stereotypical roles when their self-emotion overcomes the public pressure. Naturally, any parent cannot be indifferent to their child’s death, and experience the sorrow in their own ways without considering others’ moral judgments, which is named “break” by the poet. In the poem, both Heaney’s parents and the neighbours undergo unavoidably that break. Finally, this “break” is experienced for Heaney as reaching maturity from puberty. This process, which spans months or even years, takes place within a day for Heaney. Before his brother’s death, he is a child who is not respected much by other people because of his young age, but after the death, he turns into a respected individual.

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