

Mid-Term Break (1966)

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.

Seamus Heaney

1. What does the title suggest about the content of the poem?
2. "Knelling" is a verb – bells "knell" at a funeral. How does this foreshadow the event of the poem?
3. What is the speaker confused about in the 2nd stanza?
4. What is the pun in stanza 2?
5. Stanza 3 – what are the two contrasts here?
6. Stanzas 3-5 run on. What does this show us about the emotion of the narrator?
7. How does this contrast with stanza 6?
8. What does the use of "corpse" and "four-foot box" show us about the narrator's state of mind?
9. Find a language feature in stanza 7.
10. How does this language feature create effect?
11. Identify the consonance and assonance on the second line. How does this feature relate to the bells?
12. What is the significance of the final stanza only having one line?

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