



Mycroft Lectures.

Adapted Transcript for:

Seamus Heaney's *Mid-term Break.*

(Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture also presents extra information to enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. As the Mycroft lectures are not read from a script, a transcript of a lecture contains the imperfections of a spoken presentation. To avoid the embarrassment of having the spoken performance thought to be an essay and being quoted as such, I have made occasional changes to the spoken lectures for the purposes of clarification. What follows is the transcript of a lecture, not an essay.)

Chronology of the lecture:

1. The poem *Mid-Term Break* is initially analyzed as a piece of suspense writing. The first time we read the poem we do not know what has happened or what is going to happen. We should not forget that each time a new reader approaches the poem, that reader's reactions to the work will be similar to those of our first reading.
2. The poem is read through.
3. Various complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:
 - The change of locations in the poem. From the sick bay, to outside the house, to inside the house, to a specific room in the house.
 - When do we first assume someone has died?
 - The literary technique of inference is explained due to the way it affects our understanding of what is happening in the poem.
 - What happens to "embarrass" the young boy?
 - In what way can what is happening be seen as a right of passage ceremony for

the young boy?

- What does “coughed out angry tearless sighs” mean?
- What is the relevance of the poem’s title?

4. This lecture also includes an analysis of some poetic devices within the work. This lecture demonstrates:

- How a poet can create a calming mood with long vowel sounds and sibilance.
- How enjambment can work to add to a poem when introduced at revealing moments.
- The possible ways to read the poem’s last line. Do we hear it as passive or aggressive? **Warning:** The section examining the effect of the hard stress on the F sounds in ‘four foot box, a foot for every year,’ contains profanity.

5. The poem is read through again before the lecture concludes.

Transcript of the *Mid-term Break* Lecture.

This is a wonderful poem for your introduction to poetry to find out how poetry works. It has a clearly identifiable narrative structure that runs through it. We are genuinely interested the first time we read the poem to find out what happens next in the poem. Something has happened and we want to know who it has happened to. This makes us want to read on. The fiftieth time we read the poem, or even the second time we read the poem, we'll be looking at different things. But the first time we read it, we're interested in what is going to happen next in it.

Like all of the Mycroft lectures, what I'll do is read the poem through, and I'll give you a line-by-line analysis to give you the poem in the simplest English that I can. This will enable you to appreciate the content of the poem - what the poem is actually saying. I'll then look at some of the poetic devices the poet is employing, and demonstrate these to you to show that the way the poet wrote the poem is better than the way I have explained it in simple prose.

Okay, so this is our first reading, our first read-through of Seamus Heaney's *Mid-term Break*.

*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.

Now, this is a very sad poem. It's wonderfully, wonderfully done. For those of you who do not know the poem very well, I won't tell you what it's about now. I'll reveal it to you as the reading progresses, because I think this poem operates with a degree of suspense in

that the first time you read it, you don't actually know what has happened. Obviously, the second time you read it, you've realized what has happened, and the tenth time you read it, those sensations of surprise at what has occurred in the poem are no longer there for you. But let's unpack those sensations as we go through the poem. So a line-by-line reading then, of Seamus Heaney's *Mid-term Break*.

I sat all morning in the college sick bay

Where is he? Plainly, he is in a 'college sick bay'. A college sick bay is a room in a college wherein the students who are too ill to attend classes can sit out the lessons.

*I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.*

So our narrator, Seamus Heaney, is *in the college sick bay counting bells knelling classes to a close*. We can presume that he is ill. There is something wrong with him for him to be in the sick bay in the first place. We know that he's upset because he hears the bells that ring the classes to a close as 'knelling'. Knelling is the sound made by a funeral bell. It's the 'dong, dong, dong' of a funeral bell.

That sound is a knell.

Now, even in the Northern Ireland of Heaney's youth, where the poem is set, school classes are not closed with a dong, dong, dong of a funeral bell. They are closed with a ting-a-ling-a-ling of bells that close classes everywhere else in the world. So, why do we assume that this boy is hearing the classes close with the knell of a funeral bell? Plainly, he has death on the mind. He is thinking about death to such an extent that all bells that he hears sound like funeral bells to him.

So plainly, someone has died.

Now, for our first reading, at this point we don't know who it is that has died. We must assume that it is somebody close to him because he is unlikely to be in the college sick bay hearing the classes ending as funeral bells if it's somebody he doesn't know. But at this point, we do not know who it is who has died, and we won't find out until the end of the poem, which is why I say, the first reading of this poem is actually unusual, there's a suspense story that goes through it.

*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.*

Now that last line is one of those, actually quite rare ones in poetry, whereby to translate it down, to change the wording in it, to make us understand in the most simplistic terms possible specifically what the poet means, is actually very easy to do, because there's no simpler way of saying, *at two o'clock our neighbours drove me home* than *at two o'clock our neighbours drove me home*. Well, we could say, 'our neighbours drove me home at two o'clock', but basically, that's all we need to know about that line. But the question we ask ourselves from *at two o'clock our neighbours drove me home* is - why don't his parents drive him home?

And I see three possibilities.

The first of which is that his parents are dead. One or both of his parents are dead. And this is why the boy is in the college sick bay. *Counting bells knelling classes to a close*.

The second possibility is that something so traumatic has happened to his parents that they are unable to get behind the wheel of a car.

And the third is that his parents don't own a car.

Now, the third one sounds comic but, biographically, it's actually the true reason why his parents didn't drive him home. I happened to read this in an interview with him once. And that biographical fact for me tends to dilute the power of the suspense being created. The fact is that his parents didn't drive him home in reality is because they didn't own a car. I prefer to believe that, as far as the poem tells us the story, his parents didn't drive him home because they are too traumatized by what has happened to do so.

And in the next line, we find for the first time that it's not his father who has died. We know this because the first line of the second stanza is

*In the porch I met my father crying -
He had always taken funerals in his stride -*

Heaney uses a poetic device here called 'inference', which means to make a conclusion from evidence given. That sounds much more complicated than it need be. I can give you a very simple example of the way inference works. Imagine I see a painter painting

a picture, I look at the painter painting the picture, and I say, 'could you paint my picture?' Is the picture that the painter has painted any good?

I never told you it was good, and I never told you it was bad.

So is it any good?

Plainly, the picture must be quite good, because I wouldn't look at the picture and think, 'well that's a rubbish picture. Would you paint one of me?' unless I was an idiot. But since I'm not an idiot, you can infer that the picture itself is quite good.

In the porch I met my father crying -

He had always taken funerals in his stride -

Why is the father in the porch?

In the porch I met my father crying -

Presumably the father is crying because he doesn't want to be inside the house weeping in front of his family. It's a strange moment for a boy when he sees his - or it should be a strange moment for a child when he first sees his father weeping. Men tend to weep less, and - that sounds really bad, doesn't it? It sounds really patriarchal, but it's a standard truth that for many young men, watching their fathers cry is not something they witness on a regular basis. And here the boy comes home, and he realizes that something very traumatic has happened because this unusual event of seeing his father cry is occurring. This father is a man who had never been bothered by funerals before.

In the porch I met my father crying - He had always taken funerals in his stride -

Now, to 'take something in your stride' means to - literally, it means you're walking along and there's something in your way, and you don't have to alter your step to overcome it, to step over it. To 'take something in your stride' means it doesn't bother you. To 'take funerals in your stride' means that funerals have never bothered you before. So his father is not seemingly a man given to emotion much. Or seemingly not a man for whom funerals, at least, bother him.

But something important has happened here.

Whoever has died, is sufficiently close to the boy's father that it has made the man

cry.

*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.*

Big Jim Evans is obviously a large man, he's a big man. It's a sort community in which people are known by their size. You know, 'Little John', 'Fat Harry', 'Big Jim'. His name is not 'Big Jim', it's a nickname, 'Big Jim'. So Big Jim Evans says 'it's a hard blow'. A hard blow means it's a hard problem. It is a relevant, important thing that's difficult to deal with that has actually happened.

We know that what has happened has made the young Heaney upset enough to go to the sick room and hear all bells as funeral bells. We know that it has reduced his father to tears. But we - as of yet - do not know what it is, on this first reading, that has happened.

*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".*

It's a nice touch this, *The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram*. Cooed is the sound of a dove. Babies go 'coo, coo, coo'. It's a nice, happy sound, the baby is quite happy. But what is the relevance here of the baby being happy? It's that the baby doesn't understand what's going on. The baby is the only one there who is happy. We get a nice contrast between the young baby not understanding - he doesn't understand because he's a baby, and babies don't understand things. So the baby's quite happy, and outside, the older father, who understands what's going on, is in tears. We get the contrast between innocence and experience here. The experienced is in tears, the innocent baby is cooing and laughing.

Also note the geography of the poem here. The poem starts off in the sick room, we then come to Heaney's family house, where his father is outside in the porch, and now we've come into the room.

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".

So what has happened here? There is a lot happening here. Heaney comes into the room, and basically let's imagine there's a table, because the old men have got to stand up. Let's imagine there's a table there and there's a lot of men older than Heaney there. (The young Heaney, the narrator of the events in the poem.) And as he walks in, they stand up and they say, 'We're sorry for your trouble, Seamus. We're sorry for your troubles, Seamus. We're sorry, son. It's bad news. It's a hard blow.'

They stand up and they shake his hand, and this embarrasses him.

So why does it embarrass him?

Heaney, in this poem, is a school boy, and he comes into the room and he doesn't know the way the men older than him are going to react to him, because, him being a school boy we must presume that up to this point, they have just ignored him. And they have ignored him because he's a child. And old men do not stand up and shake the hand of the child. They just ignore the child. But something has happened here that presumably for the first time, because the boy is embarrassed by it, for the first time he is taken seriously by the adults. The adults don't ignore him. The adults stand up when he enters the room. When the boy enters the room, the adults stand up and say, 'We're sorry for your troubles!'. Whatever has happened, it's so serious that it has begun to act as a rite of passage ceremony for the young Heaney. A rite of passage ceremony is traditionally when - when a boy becomes a man. It's a symbolic situation, it's not one day, boy -snap- man now; but in this instance, the trauma that Heaney experiences makes other people see him as a man.

He sees his father crying, he enters the room, the old men stand up to shake his hand, and treat him as an adult. And then something else occurs.

The next stanza tells us

*Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand
In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.*

There is a lot going on in this bit.

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

Let's do that bit first. That's quite easy to imagine. Heaney has come into the room, and he hears whispers in the background, 'This is the eldest son, this is Seamus. He's been away at school. Very clever kid. Going to be a fantastic, famous poet one day, win the Nobel Prize.' All that sort of stuff he's going to hear in the background. Well, he's not going to hear exactly that, but you get my point.

*Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand
In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.*

This is a terrific piece of acoustic observation. The way that Heaney is able to put across a sound here - *held my hand in hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs*.

First off, why is the mother holding his hand? Traditionally, a boy is upset, he comes home, his mother holds his hand because she needs - she wants to comfort you. So we may assume the mother is holding the son's hand due to a desire to comfort him. Which is plausible.

But is she?

Because as she's holding his hand, *My mother held my hand in hers she coughed out angry tearless sighs*. And really the only way to do this is to try to make that sound.

There's no way I'm going to do this... well.

Here goes. A sigh is easy. -sigh-

A tearless sigh. 'Tearless' doesn't really make any difference to the sound, but it does raise the question to us of, why is she tearless? And either she is tearless because she has not cried at all and isn't crying, which seems highly unlikely to me, or she is tearless because there are no tears left. She has cried so much, her eyes are dry and she is cried out. That's what 'tearless' means for me here.

Coughed out angry tearless sighs

So, angry, tearless sigh would be, -sigh-

Obviously, I'm not going to get that perfect but you can imagine what I'm aiming for

here.

Okay, 'coughed out angry tearless sighs' becomes -coughing sigh-

However badly I do that, suffice to say that anybody making anything approximating that sound is not *offering* help to anyone. The person making that sound needs help from someone else. When Heaney tells us *My mother held my hand in hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs* we only have to hear what coughed, angry tearless sighs sound like and we get this wonderful acoustic demonstration of distress. Which, once again, brings up this idea of the rite of passage ceremony that the boy is going through; the father is crying outside, all the old men are taking him seriously as an adult, his mother is asking for help from him. And then, the body comes back.

At this point we know it's not his father, we know it's not his mother who has died.

At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived

With the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the nurses.

'Stanced' means cleaned. This is very easy to put in simpler English, At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived with the dead body in it.

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,

Here the poem has changed in geography, once again. We are now no longer downstairs in the family room, we're upstairs in a room - and this is the room where they are going to keep the dead body. The body will be kept there for a wake, and in some cultures, this is unheard of. I taught the poem in Hong Kong once, and the whole idea that you would get a body and bring it into the house for the wake was totally unheard of.

So, the body is there in the room, and Heaney gives one of my favorite lines of poetry to describe the body lying there, and the atmosphere within the room. He tells us,

Snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside;

I saw him for the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

The way that this effect is achieved is actually very simple; but if you can imagine,

first off, what we are seeing. Snowdrops are a flower. *Snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside*. So there are candles there, and there are snowdrops, being white flowers, white flowers and candles are there by the bedside, and he sees him for the first time in six weeks. So we know it's a he who has died. The effects of this I'll come back to later, when we look at the way Heaney can do something by his choice of words. But remember that line,

*Snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside;
I saw him for the first time in six weeks. Paler now.*

He's paler now because he's dead. Your body loses pallor when - when you die. Heaney has not seen this person in six weeks because he has been away at school.

Incidentally, the title of the poem, *Mid-term Break*. A mid-term break is usually the time when the student at boarding school comes home to see his family. The irony of the situation here is that this boy's mid-term break is to come home and see his family, for the death of one of them. For the funeral of one of his family.

*I saw him for the first time in six weeks. Paler now,
Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,*

There's a bruise on the boy's forehead. Your temple is on your forehead. There's a poppy bruise on his temple. Heaney calls it a poppy bruise. Poppies are associated with death. Anyway, he gets that image out of it. But there's also the whole idea that the boy doesn't look ugly. He doesn't even look like he's been scarred by death in any way. He is lying calmly in this tranquil room, almost as if there's nothing wrong.

*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.*

Now, the four-foot box is a coffin. He lay in his coffin, as in his cot. A cot is a bed for a child, so plainly the child who has died was very, very young.

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A bumper is at the front of a car. What should become apparent to us here is that Heaney's brother has been run over in a car accident. He is hit once, the bumper has knocked him clear of the accident. He has not been run over and mangled, and seemingly, with nothing wrong in the body, he is lying there - dead, and Heaney is looking at the body,

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Terrific ending to the poem, this.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

The brother is only four years old when he dies. And Heaney's mid-term break is to come home to attend the funeral of his four-year-old brother.

Now this is, biographically, a truthful poem. Heaney did actually return home for a mid-term break to attend the funeral of Christopher, he was called; his younger brother who was run over in a car accident when he was four years old. And, we get this - he gets this beautiful poem out of the experience. So what we have here is Seamus Heaney's highly biographical poem about him returning home as a student, to - on a mid-term break - to attend the funeral and wake of his younger brother, Christopher who died in a car accident.

Now some of the poetic devices that Seamus Heaney employs in this, and they are beautifully done, they are great examples of the form imitating the content. The form, of course, is the way the poem is written, and the content of the poem is what is actually written. So we will look at the way in which Heaney writes this - imitates and enhances what he's actually writing about. And poetry, when it's at its best, this is for me the difference between poetry and prose, the 'form imitating content' element of it.

Let's give you a few examples.

This *snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside* part I mentioned earlier. Here, the poet Heaney who is writing the poem wants to tell how - he wants to explain to us what it's like to walk into the room where his younger dead brother lay, in a very tranquil, serene state. And he does this with this line:

Snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside;

I saw him for the first time in six weeks. Paler now.

Heaney achieves this feeling of tranquility and serenity in us, the reader, as we read these lines, because as we read these lines, we are using sounds which create the feeling of tranquility and serenity in us. For example, Heaney uses sibilance a lot here. Sibilance.

Sibilance is the use of repeated 's' sounds. It does more than one thing - if you wanted to write a poem about the sea, you might wish to have, 'crash', 'bash', 'smash', 'mash', in it. 'The waves crashed on the shore.' Onomatopoeically, the 'sh' sounds sound like the sounds of the sea. So there's an onomatopoeical way you can use sibilance.

Also, for example, if you wrote a poem about a snake, you may want lots of 'ss' sounds in it. D.H. Lawrence's poem *Snake* has lots of double 's' hissing sounds in it. But also, if you want to create a feeling of quiet in a poem, sibilance is very useful for this, because as you read the poem, as the reader reads the poem, they're going 'sh, sh, sh, sh', so it's almost as if, as I read the poem, I'm holding a finger to my lips, going, 'shhhh', so I don't read the poem loudly. If I read it loudly, it wouldn't sound right.

*Snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside,
I saw him for the first time in six weeks.*

These aren't words that you feel comfortable shouting, because the sibilance is telling you to 'shhhh' as you do it.

Also note the way Heaney uses long vowel sounds. Long vowel sounds. Imagine this sentence, 'The baby waded slowly through the water.'

All the vowels are long.

'The baby waded slowly through the water.' Which means it's very difficult to say that sentence quickly. 'The baby waded slowly through the water.' It just doesn't sound right. You say it slowly. In this line, Heaney creates this feeling of tranquility and serenity for us by giving us a line that we feel uncomfortable reading loudly, and uncomfortable reading quickly. We must read it as:

*Snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside;
I saw him for the first time in six weeks. Paler now.*

It's wonderfully done. I explained that to somebody once and I said, 'Do you think

Heaney did that deliberately?' Well, it took me less than five minutes to explain it to you. You now know how to do it. I'm sure that Seamus Heaney can do that with his brain closed.

Now, another device he uses very well here is to do with enjambment. Enjambment is also known as the 'run-on line', and it happens when a stanza does not end with a full stop. Notice how the first and second stanzas of this poem do end with a full stop. The sentence is fully contained within the stanza.

*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.*

Full stop.

*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.*

Full stop.

Third stanza:
*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".*

The stanza has not ended with a full stop. The sentence has run on to the next line. Now it's conspicuous that Heaney has done this, because the first two stanzas have so obviously ended with full stops. The third stanza doesn't, and neither does the fourth.

*Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand...

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.*

The stanza doesn't end with a full stop, it runs on. Now we can either say that this is just an accident and that Heaney couldn't finish the sentence and kept on writing, or we say that there is a reason that he did it. And I think there is, it's that the form is imitating the

content; the way that Heaney is telling the poem is doing something to what is happening in the poem.

Those changes in stanza length occur when changes occur in the boy. It's as if the young Heaney, the narrator of the poem, the young boy in the poem, as he experiences these things in the poem, is getting such an overload of information that he finds it difficult to contain the information in the same way that the stanzas in the poem can no longer contain this overload of information, so the information has to run on into the next line.

That seems very contrived if you are aware of it, but it's not exactly difficult to do and I think that when you've become expectant of the stanza to end with a full stop, when it doesn't end with a full stop, something happens, and the something that happens, this overload of information, running onto the next line, imitates what's happening to the narrator of the poem at that point. It works for me.

Here's my final word on the poem. How does the boy feel at the end of the poem about what he's seen? In many ways, he is very deadpan through the poem, he's very solemn about it. But, the final line, for me at least, this final line does something strange.

The final line of course being,

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

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

Now how do you hear that being said? Should it be said calmly?

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

That doesn't seem out of place to me, to say it like that. But I have a slight problem with this. If you've read Tom Paulin's book, *The Secret Life of Poems*, he really brings attention to this type of specific attention to word sounds. It's very difficult to stress 'f'-sounding words, without bringing profanity to mind. When you stress, 'f-, f-, f-, f-', it is very difficult not to hear the word 'fuck' in your mind.

So when you go through this,

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Heaney has deliberately put the stress on the most aggressive, and obvious associated sound in the English language.

A Four foot box, a Foot for every year.

And I hear it as if he's saying, 'what a fucking waste'. And I hear anger in the last line of it.

No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Of course you don't have to hear that in it. We can read it both ways, but the deliberate stress on the 'f' sound in the final line, to me, indicates that in the end, the writer is justifiably angry.

And bitter, at the waste of life that has occurred.

Okay, I'll read the poem through, one more time for you, and hope that you've gleaned enough from this to be able to appreciate it in a way that you didn't when I read it for you the first time.

Okay, this is the final reading for Seamus Heaney's *Mid-term Break*.

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."

Thank you very much, hope you enjoyed the lecture.

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Some other Notes

1 On the final couplet,

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

This is the only example of a perfect rhyme in the poem. 'year' and 'clear' form a perfect rhyme. I would suggest that the perfect rhyme here creates an effect. The rhyme is loud. It seems to loudly slam the poem shut, a fact that adds to my reading of the narrator being angry and bitter at the poem's conclusion.

2 On the work break, in the title. “The "break" no longer a school term holiday as first inferred; now a break in normality, a breaking of the heart, a fractured family unit, break as loss, a break in a boyhood (for both boys, one from boy to man, one from boy to untimely death), a broken neck (which would explain the little boy's lack of obvious injuries). So much, from even that one word.” (Thanks to Helen Louise M).