

STORM ON THE ISLAND by Seamus Heaney

BACKGROUND TO THE POET

- ✓ Heaney was an Irish poet, born in 1939.
- ✓ He grew up in a very rural setting in Northern Ireland and latterly lived in Dublin.
- ✓ He taught at Harvard University and served as Professor of Poetry at Oxford.
- ✓ He won the Nobel Prize in 1995 for 'works of lyrical beauty'.
- ✓ Nature and identity were major themes for some of his early poetry.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

- ✓ The poem is written about a group of Islands, the Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland.
- ✓ The weather on the islands can be bleak, and the islanders that live there need to be resilient and prepared.
- ✓ Another important aspect of the poem was the social unrest in Ireland, often referred to as 'The Troubles'.
- ✓ For much of Heaney's life there was an ongoing conflict between the Protestant and Catholic communities who disagreed on Northern Ireland's position in the UK.
- ✓ This unrest included a significant period of violence where bombings and riots frequently occurred between the sides.

WHAT IS THE POEM ABOUT?

- ✓ The themes of power and conflict are strong in this poem. The poem, on the face of it, describes the island's stormy climate and how the community has had to adapt to this. The strength of the storm comes through in Heaney's descriptive use of language.
- ✓ However, the violent imagery that Heaney uses is an allegory for Ireland's stormy political climate at the time the poem was written.
- ✓ Northern Ireland's main government building is called 'Stormont' (the first eight letters of the title of the poem).

THEMES

- ✓ **Conflict:** There are two elements to this: the conflict between the weather and the island as well as the subliminal references to the political unrest.
- ✓ **Power of Nature:** The storm is savage and batters the island. People are scared of it.
- ✓ **Oppression and Inequality:** The islanders have become oppressed by the weather, as many that lived in Ireland throughout the troubles felt oppressed by the unrest there.

COMPARISONS

Conflict	Power of nature	Oppression
London, Charge of the Light Brigade, Exposure, Bayonet Charge, Remains, Poppies, War Photographer, Kamikaze	Ozymandias, Tissue, The Prelude, Exposure, Bayonet Charge	Ozymandias, Checking out me History, London, My Last Duchess, Charge of the Light Brigade, Bayonet Charge, Kamikaze

FORM

- ✓ The poem is an example of a dramatic monologue. It is written from the perspective of one person, in the style of a story being told to another. The person telling the story has all the power which can be seen to be representative of the imbalance of power between the storm and the islanders.
- ✓ There is no real rhyme scheme to the poem (only some half-rhyme); it is written in free verse which gives an impression of chaos.
- ✓ Within the poem there are lots of long and complex sentences which run across lines (enjambment). This makes the reader feel breathless and overwhelmed whilst they are reading it; almost as though they are caught up in the storm themselves.
- ✓ The poem appears on the page as rather short and squat – visually not unlike the cottages Heaney describes on the island: Heaney is painting a visual picture as well as a literary one.

STRUCTURE

- ✓ Much like many of Heaney's poems the language used is very conversational. He uses everyday language which gives the events a feeling of normality; as though they have become an expected part of life. This contrasts strongly with the form of the poem; the free-verse and lack of rhyme scheme create chaos, but by using everyday language Heaney makes everything feel 'normal'.
- ✓ This is echoed in the half-rhyme that Heaney uses within the first and last couplets. The first- and second-lines half-rhyme, as do the last two lines. This creates a cyclical structure which implies that once it has finished it will only start again; the storms will just keep on coming.
- ✓ The rhythm of the poem is that of iambic pentameter, which is, on first thought, an unusual choice for a poem where the rest of the form and structure is about chaos. However, the strict use of iambic pentameter creates a clever juxtaposition; the storm is chaotic but the people controlled and ordered? Similarly, in a political sense the everyday conversational tone juxtaposes the strict iambic pentameter, which mirrors the differences between the Catholics and Protestants at the time of the troubles.

LANGUAGE / QUOTES

- ✓ Heaney uses words like 'squat', 'stacks' and 'stooks' which are rough, rural terms which gives the poem an agricultural feel.
- ✓ Throughout the poem Heaney refers to 'we'; rather than write in the first-person ('I'). This shows he is referring not to an autobiographical experience, but rather something which impacts wider society. It gives a community feel to the poem.
- ✓ The use of 'we' also gives a sense of 'them' and 'us'; referencing the conflicts between the storm and the islanders, as well as the Catholics ('we') and the protestants ('them').
- ✓ 'The wizened earth had never troubled us' personifies the earth; like an old friend, like someone you can rely upon.
- ✓ Repetition of the word 'company' when referring to nature again shows how he is personifying nature.
- ✓ There is a distinction between nature in terms of the 'land' which is supportive and neighbourly (company) and nature as the weather, which is violent and brutal; 'blows full blast', 'pummels'.
- ✓ 'We are prepared' shows how the islanders (and the Irish community) have adapted to live with the chaos caused.
- ✓ 'Exploding comfortably...' is an oxymoronic term. The sea is brutal and violent as it explodes but nature (the cliffs) are protective and comforting.
- ✓ 'Spits like a tame cat turned savage'. This use of a simile creates an image of something friendly and familiar (a tame cat) that can hurt us if we let down our defences or do not give it the respect it deserves.
- ✓ 'Salvo', 'strafe' and 'bombarded' are military terms used to describe an air attack. This draws comparison between the damage the wind causes to that which is experienced in battle.
- ✓ 'Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear'. Another oxymoron which suggests that what we are afraid of is actually nothing; it is an invisible wind and so is nothing.