

Storm on the Island



Who is Heaney?

- Born in Northern Ireland in 1939
- His father farmed 50 acres in rural County Derry.
- Much of Heaney's poetry is centred on the countryside and farm life that he knew as a boy.
- Therefore, strong natural images and content both positive and negative run through most of his poems

Storm on the Island

We are prepared: we build our houses squat,
Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate.
The wizened earth had never troubled us
With hay, so as you can see, there are no stacks
Or stooks that can be lost. Nor are there trees
Which might prove company when it blows full
Blast: you know what I mean - leaves and branches
Can raise a chorus in a gale
So that you can listen to the thing you fear
Forgetting that it pummels your house too.
But there are no trees, no natural shelter.
You might think that the sea is company,
Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs
But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits
The very windows, spits like a tame cat
Turned savage.
We just sit tight while wind dives
And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo.
We are bombarded by the empty air.
Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.

Storm on the Island

The title is blunt and explicit. The poem is about a storm on an island. Yet because there is no article ('The' or 'A') before the title, there is a sense that Heaney is not writing about one storm in particular, but about many similar storms. It is an experience he is used to.

The poem describes the experience of being in a cliff-top cottage on an island off the coast of Ireland during a storm. Heaney describes the bare ground, the sea and the wind. The people in the cottage are extremely isolated and can do nothing against the powerful and violent weather

The ideas in this poem concern our uneasy relationship to powerful natural forces, and the feelings of vulnerability and fear we feel in the face of the potentially destructive might of a storm.

Structure

The poem consists of nineteen lines of blank verse - unrhyming lines each containing five beats or feet. This verse form (much used by Shakespeare) follows the natural patterns of spoken English, so we feel that Heaney is talking to us.

The poem is written in the present tense. This creates a sense of drama and also reinforces the idea that storms happen all the time

There is some alliteration in the poem to create different effects. The strength of the houses is reinforced with "rock and roof"

We are prepared: we build our houses squat,
Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate.

We do not know who is in the cottage with Heaney. He is certainly not alone because he refers to We throughout, but he chooses not to provide us with more details. The wind and waves are the 'characters' in the poem.

The poem begins in a confident tone "we are prepared." Heaney seems to have a "grit your teeth" attitude. Storms are obviously expected because houses are designed to be "squat" especially to withstand them.

dried up, shrivelled

Heaney talks in a friendly tone here to involve us, draw us in.

Personification makes the earth out to be a considerate friend

The **wizened** earth **had never troubled us**
With hay, **so as you can see**, there are no **stacks**
Or stooks that can be lost

Haystacks/sheaves
of corn

This is not farmland – which is a blessing because the storm would cause even more havoc if there were crops,

Trees are personified: this is a bare and desolate landscape

nor are there trees
Which might prove company when it blows
full
Blast

Enjambment here conveys the impression of a gust of wind suddenly 'blasting' in at the start of the line.

Conversational tone – maybe emphasising how isolated he is – the need to speak to someone, anyone, us

you know what I mean - leaves and branches
Can raise a chorus in a gale
So that you can listen to the thing you fear
Forgetting that it pummels your house too.

The earth now does not seem so welcoming to the speaker

But there are no trees, no natural shelter.

Conversational tone

Heaney expects us to imagine the sea "exploding comfortably" (line 13). This seems like a contradiction - how can an explosion be comfortable? Is Heaney pointing out to us how little we actually know.

You might think that the sea is company,
Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs
But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits
The very windows, spits like a tame cat
Turned savage

Enjambment: the surprise of finding the cat "Turned savage" at the beginning of the line enacts the shock of the cat's sudden change in temperament.

He uses the simile of "a tame cat / Turned savage" (line 15) to illustrate what the sea is really like. It is not gentle, but spits angrily so that the spray hits the windows of the cliff-top house

Strafes = bombs with artillery shells

The wind is seen in metaphor as an enemy fighter plane that "dives / And strafes" .

We just sit tight while wind dives
And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo.
We are bombarded by the empty air.
Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear

Salvo= simultaneous firing of artillery

Despite the confident start, by the end of the poem Heaney admits being afraid: "it is a huge nothing that we fear" . Perhaps this suggests that the ultimate power of the storm is that it is an unknown quantity. No one knows what the wind will do and what each storm will bring.

the s and f sounds in dives and strafes invisibly mimics the sound of the wind