



STORM ON THE ISLAND

KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



Context – *Storm on the Island* was originally published in Seamus Heaney's 1996 *Death of Naturalist* collection.

Seamus Heaney – Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) was a Northern Irish poet and playwright, who received the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. He is recognised as one of the major poets of the 20th Century. His poems were usually written in a traditional style about passing ways of life. His poetry is accessible, using a simple diction and a range of poetic devices to build imagery. Heaney often used his poetry to reflect upon 'The Troubles', which plagued the country throughout his early adulthood.



The Troubles – The Troubles is the name given to the conflict in Northern Ireland during the late 20th Century. Over 3,600 people were killed and thousands more were injured. Two separate factions fought over the constitutional status of the country, with the goal of the unionist side to remain part of the UK, and the nationalist side to become part of Ireland. As a result, the violence also spilled into Great Britain and Ireland. It was settled in the Good Friday agreement of 1998.



Ireland – Ireland is an island in the North Atlantic, separated from Great Britain by the North Channel, the Irish Sea, and St. George's Channel. The island is made up of the Republic of Ireland (often shortened to 'Ireland'), which makes up about five-sixths of the island, and Northern Ireland, which is a part of the UK. The Irish climate is heavily influenced by the Atlantic Ocean, which borders it to the east. Ireland is the second-most populous island in Europe, with about 6.6 million inhabitants.



Irish Islands – There are several hundred islands off the coast of Ireland, many of which harbour extremely small populations; on a number of these islands, the population is below 100 people. Often isolated tens of kilometres off the Irish mainland, these places are often fully exposed to the elements of the Atlantic Ocean. Some islands report long periods of time in enforced solitude from storms. It is important for these people to live in tight-knit communities, looking out for one another.



Language/Structural Devices

Extended Metaphor – *Storm on the Island*, on a literal level, details an event perfectly summarised by the title. However, on a deeper, more figurative level, the storm is representative of the political storm that raged across Northern Ireland at the time. The storm pummeling the island is a metaphor for the violence that was taking place in Northern Ireland.

This is evident even in the title (island is a homophone of Ireland). Furthermore, the first 8 letters of the poem's title spell out the word 'Stormont.' Stormont is the name given to the government buildings in Northern Ireland in Belfast. This makes it clear that this poem also carries a political message. Imagery associated with terrorist violence can be found throughout several other sections of the poem, for example words such as 'blast', 'exploding', 'fear', and 'bombarded' not only represent the manner in which the storm attacks the island, but also the horror that was ensuing in Northern Ireland through the terrorists' violence.

Quote: "Blast: you know what I mean - leaves and branches Can raise a chorus in a gale"

Structure – The poem is written in one solid block of 19 unrhymed lines, ending with a half-rhyming couplet. Each line of the blank verse contains ten or eleven syllables, following the natural pattern of English so that the reader feels as though Heaney is talking to them. The form itself mirrors the houses, squat and solid, bearing the brunt of the storm. It also presents the storm as one single event.

Quote: "We are bombarded by the empty air. Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear."

Personification/Similes – In order to demonstrate the sheer power of nature throughout the poem, Heaney chooses to personify several aspects of storm. For example, the speaker shares that the storm 'pummels' the houses – presenting the storm as some kind of fighter or bully. Later on in the poem, the sea is personified as it is presented that it 'spits like a tame cat turned savage' – also using a simile to demonstrate that all of nature appears to be against them.

Quote: "So that you can listen to the thing you fear Forgetting that it pummels your house too."

Interesting Vocabulary – Heaney uses a wide variety of interesting vocabulary choices to show the power and effect of the storm. Many of these words have meanings within the semantic field of warfare, for example: strafes, salvo, bombarded, exploding, shelter, and company. All of this combines to create vivid sight and sound imagery that is befitting both the scene of the storm and a warzone.

Quote: "Turned savage. We just sit tight while wind dives And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo."

Enjambment and Caesura – Heaney employs enjambment and caesura to break up and fragment the poem in some places, and to build it to a crescendo in others. This creates an uneven rhythm, rather like the storm itself. The enjambment picks up the rhythm, which then hits an abrupt stop at each moment of caesura – granting power to hard monosyllabic words such as 'blast' and 'lost.'

Quote: "Which might prove company when it blows full Blast: you know what I mean - leaves and branches"

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Nature – As the islanders have become acutely aware, humanity is easily overpowered by the forces of nature – The natural world can make man feel extremely small and insignificant. Despite being relentlessly 'pummeled' and 'bombarded' by the storm, the islanders just have to 'sit it out', knowing that they are no match for the storm.



Fear/Isolation – The people on the island are out of touch with anyone beyond the island (and in fact beyond their own house) during the storm. Their isolation is demonstrated through the lack of trees, which the speaker suggests could offer some company, and the now 'savage' nature of the ocean. This is bare, barren, and lonely.



Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	We are prepared: we build our houses squat,	Lines 1-4 – The speaker describes how the community prepares for the storm. The collective personal pronoun 'we' to start the poem shows the strength of the community. The way the houses are built suggests storms are regular, and that they survive them through their collective strength – hard 'k' and 't' sounds reflect this. The word wizened shows that the land is dried up/ shrivelled, but what is ironic about the lack of vegetation that the barren land offers is that there is little that would take flight and become a danger in a strong storm.
	2	Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate.	
	3	The wizened earth had never troubled us	
	4	With hay, so as you can see, there are no stacks	
	5	Or stooks that can be lost. Nor are there trees	Lines 5-8 – The poem begins to shift in tone, towards one of fear and danger. The speaker suggests that the trees may prove 'company' in a strong storm, as if aspects of nature comforting – this emphasises the loneliness of the land. Blast isolated by the enjambment and caesura, enhancing its strength. The sound of word is onomatopoeic, and makes the reader consider a bomb. The personal pronoun 'you' encourages the reader to reflect on their own experiences of violent storms. The 'tragic chorus' narrate the events in a Greek tragedy, in which a catastrophic ending is inevitable – security is eclipsed by sounds of fear.
	6	Which might prove company when it blows full	
	7	Blast: you know what I mean - leaves and branches	
	8	Can raise a tragic chorus in a gale	
	9	So that you can listen to the thing you fear	
	10	Forgetting that it pummels your house too.	Lines 9-13 – The tone has now clearly shifted from one of safety to one of danger as the intensity and violence of the storm is described. The word 'pummels' means to strike repeatedly with the fist – the storm is therefore being personified into an aggressive and persistent fighter that bullies the islanders. 'No trees' is repeated, to emphasise the feeling of isolation. 'No natural shelter' suggests that nature is entirely against them. An oxymoron is used to show the nature of the sea – it is 'comfortable' with its violence (exploding) – once again, there are connotations here of bombs detonating.
	11	But there are no trees, no natural shelter.	
	12	You might think that the sea is company,	
	13	Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs	
	14	But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits	
	15	The very windows, spits like a tame cat	
	16	Turned savage. We just sit tight while wind dives	
	17	And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo.	
	18	We are bombarded by the empty air.	
	19	Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.	Lines 14-16 – From this point onwards, the fear of the islanders is conveyed through the increasing imagery of war. Caesuras (e.g. after 'But no') prolong the storm. Even domesticated nature now seems to be against the islanders, as in the simile used to compare the sea and the tame cat 'turned savage.' The cat, much like the weather, turns from tame to savage. Furthermore, the water is personified through the imagery of the water 'spitting.' The villagers must simply let it pass.
			Lines 17-19 – The final lines continue to employ images of war. 'Strafes' means to attack with gunfire, once again showing how the storm mirrors the violent conflict. The use of the adverb 'invisibly' suggests that the attack is by stealth – the wind cannot be seen and this in some ways makes it worse. The interesting verb 'bombarded' shows the people are trapped and feel attacked from all angles. 'Empty air' is a play on words, meaning a mere threat, but this is more than that. The last line shows that the people do not know what to expect.

Poems for Comparison

	Poems for Comparison	Words from the Poet
Exposure	<i>Storm on the Island</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem through its presentation of the weather and nature.	<i>All of us, Protestant poets, Catholic poets - and don't those terms fairly put the wind up you? - all of us probably had some notion that a good poem was "a paradigm of good politics", a site of energy and tension and possibility, a truth-telling arena but not a killing field. And without being explicit about it, either to ourselves or to one another, we probably felt that if we as poets couldn't do something transformative or creative with all that we were a part of, then it was a poor lookout for everybody. In the end, I believe what was envisaged and almost set up by the Good Friday Agreement was prefigured in what I called our subtleties and tolerances - allowances for different traditions and affiliations, in culture, religion and politics. It all seems simple enough. Seamus Heaney Interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, The Guardian, 2008.</i>
The Prelude (extract)	<i>Storm on the Island</i> can be compared and contrasted with these poems through its presentation of fear and isolation	