

# AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict  
Storm On the Island - *Seamus Heaney*



## STORM ON THE ISLAND

Seamus Heaney

### Brief Summary

Heaney has authored a poem about a community of islanders who are preparing for a storm, investigating the battle of **nature vs man**. It centres on their experience of the storm, and how they appear to get them regularly, and then how this impacts life on the island as they wait inside for it to pass.

### Synopsis

- Island community preparing for a storm.
- They have designed the island to withstand storms and nature.
- The land is barren of crops and trees.
- In a storm nature seems to turn against them.
- They stay hiding inside waiting for it to pass - they are powerless and scared.

### Context

#### Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

Heaney is a **Northern Irish poet** who was born in Northern Ireland but Catholic and moved to the Republic (nationalist). He wrote mostly about the landscape and rural life of Ireland, and grew up in a village as part of a farming community, leading to most poems about normal rural life. His early poems focused on ancestry, identity and nature, with nature as a metaphor for human nature, using it to explore identity.

#### From “Death of a Naturalist” (1966)

Storm on the Island is part of a three-poem segment in the collection ‘Death of a Naturalist’ which was focused on the Aran Islands and how nature shows its power there. The Aran Islands are used traditionally in Irish poetry as a **symbol of Irish culture**, and are home to some of Ireland’s oldest remains and archaeology

‘Death of a Naturalist’ was **Heaney’s first collection**, and the title is to demonstrate the violence of nature rather than a romanticised view of its beauty.

### Summary

**Context** – Catholic, but lived in Northern Ireland // republican // mostly wrote about rural life and landscape // from Death of a Naturalist // Aran islands // published in 1966 // start of the troubles  
**Structure** – cyclical structure through rhymes (futile/inevitability of fear) // enjambment (barrage/relentless) // Volta “but no” (calm before storm)

**Form** – dramatic monologue (isolation/unbalanced power) // iambic pentameter (conversation) // lack rhyme scheme (but half rhyme start and end)

**Language** – military semantic field // plosives // simile (nature turned against them) // personification // tragic chorus // island personified but turned against them

**Key idea** – death of a naturalist // not a romanticised view of nature but a realistic image of its danger and violence // allegory for the political storm to come // conflict between community and isolation



## Storm On The Island

*Arrogance in the declarative "we are prepared" – too confident, shown by how bold and declarative, they are confident in their ability to overpower nature. BUT also betrays their fear – they have completely adapted their lives to the purpose of resisting nature*

*Heaney relies on conversational colloquialisms to connect the reality of the islander's lives to the readers.*

*Continues the theme of community vs isolation in the situation of a natural disaster.*

**We are prepared:** we build our houses squat,

Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate.

This **wizened earth** has never troubled us

With hay, so, **as you 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 **tragic 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.

*connotes wisdom and respect*

*no way to judge damage*

*Plosives give sense of violence and aggression, and suggests nature is attacking the island - the plosives also resemble bullets – shows weather is as deadly as a weapon.*

*Mistaken belief they had tamed nature – then the cat turns against its owner.*

*Replicates how the islanders never owned nature – it was always more powerful than them. Split the tamed and known nature before from the violent aggressive storm*



## The title “Storm On The Island”



## Perspective

### Dramatic Monologue

The Aran islands are seen traditionally in Irish poetry as a symbol of culture as they are known for ancient sites such as the remains of forts. This exposes their isolation.

Through setting his poem here Heaney is using the poem as an **autobiography** of Irish culture. This is demonstrated by his depiction of a **collective experience** of an island by using the pronoun **“we”**.

The **dramatic monologue** structure means the poem is like a one way conversation which reflects the position of the islanders who have no one to help during the storm because they are isolated and alone.



## Structure

### Iambic Pentameter

**IAMBIC PENTAMETER** | Technique where the poet uses ten syllables in each line, with pairs of sounds going da-DA with the emphasis on the second syllable.

By using Iambic Pentameter, the poem is maintaining a constant rhythm which could be argued to reflect a conversational tone. This is alongside conversational tags such as **"you might think"**, **"but no"** and **"you know what I mean"** which helps the reader to feel involved and engaged. This concept reflects that only as a community can the storm be endured.

### Rhyme Scheme

There is **no consistent rhyme scheme**, which reflects how order cannot be enforced upon nature, it is more powerful than humans, so humans have no way to control it. The lack of rhyme scheme relates to the **omnipotence of nature**. This contrasts with the very **controlled rhythm**, which works to show **human power resisting power and chaos of a storm**.

There is some **half rhyme** which shows that nature only allows for **partial organisation**, and also that humans can only ever partially control and tame nature.

### Cyclical Structure

The **half rhyme** between the first and last **couplet** [**"houses squat / good slate"** and **"the empty air / huge nothing that we fear"**] creates a **cyclical structure** that connects the preparation for the storm at the start, to the fear of the storm's power at the end.

The cyclical nature of the poem shows the resilience of the islanders. Storms will come again and again, and they have to learn to live with them and endure it: the **cycle of preparation, storm and recovery is never ending**. However, due to the fundamental insufficiency of human power, no matter what humans do there is always the possibility that nature will destroy it because **nature's power is greater**.

### Volta

The poem begins optimistically but the **tone** shifts to one of **fear**. This shift could reflect the final calm before a storm, and also the inability for the islanders to prepare for it properly because they cannot see it coming.



### Enjambement

The lines overflow which implies the constant **barrage of information** or alternatively the constant barrage of the storm. This is reflected in the arrangement of the poem into one **single stanza**, as it mirrors the overwhelming power of storms. The reader becomes overwhelmed by the size of the poem and the breathlessness created from the enjambment replicates the panicked feeling of the islanders as they are faced with the storm.

### **Language**

#### Semantic field of military language and violence

Nature is referred to in **military terms** throughout the poem. For example, the air **"strafes"** and **"salvos"**. By comparing the storm to a military plane Heaney shows the speaker that the islanders are **under attack from nature**. This creates a **tone of violence and aggression**. The excessive use of **plosives** such "blows full blast" could be reflective of bullets.

#### Colloquialisms

Heaney also uses many **conversational tags** (typical of Northern Irish speakers) - **"you might think", "but no", "you know what I mean"** - which draw the reader in and include them in the poem. This may suggest that everyone can experience the impact of nature.

**COLLOQUIALISM** | An informal phrase common at its time of utterance.

#### Similes

Heaney uses **similes** such as **"spits like a tame cat//turned savage"**. This seems **oxymoronic** because a tame cat shouldn't be aggressive. If the **cat is a simile for nature**, Heaney is suggesting nature has a tame and docile side so it is not always like this.

**OXYMORON** | When two opposing terms are placed next to each other.

#### Personification

Heaney **personifies nature** by making it seem like it intends to attack the island. For example, it **"pummels"** and the island is **"bombaraded by"** which implies that the storm has a **malicious intent to harm and damage**.

#### Focus on natural language

Heaney suggests throughout his poem that the **power of nature is unknown** and the islanders have no indicators of the storm's power. The line **"no stacks or stooks that can be lost"** shows that there's no way to judge damage. Here, the poet is



commenting on the tragedy and devastation of the storm. This could also reflect the political storm in the form of the Northern Irish troubles.

### Isolation vs Community

The **contrast between the unification of a community and the isolation of the island** is heightened by the structure of the poem. As the poem is written in **dramatic monologue** there is no reply to the speaker which emphasises the isolation of the islanders. On the other hand, it is **written in collective voice** (first person plural) which shows the islanders are speaking as a **community**: they are all united community against a common threat, yet **isolated by their individual fears**. The contrast between the two perspectives increases the tension for the reader.

The **informal tone** of the poem suggests that the islanders have become used to the storm and that part of life on the island is enduring nature. The storm doesn't earn any special occasion, it is a regular occurrence.

- There are repeated references to **nature as company** such as trees "**might prove company**" and "**sea is company**" - however both these references are proved wrong.
- Heaney also implies that nature has **betrayed** them. In the line "**tame cat turned savage**" the cat has betrayed its owner by turning from its usual docility to an unknown and wild cat which intends to cause harm.

### Comparisons

Storm On The Island	Exposure
"less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow"	"it is a huge nothing we fear"
Cyclical structure	Motif / refrain of "nothing happened"
Both poems show nature as powerfully aggressive, with a constant barrage of attack, and this attack is often inescapable.	

### Storm On The Island & Ozymandias

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both poems suggest that the <b>power of nature is greater than the power of humans</b>, demonstrated in Ozymandias when nature takes over the statue through the symbolism of the desert, and in SOTI how nature is <b>attacking</b> the islanders.</li> <li>• Both connect power with isolation: in Ozymandias, the isolation of the statue is to show loss of power, whereas in SOTI it is the isolation of island during and due to the storm.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whilst they both connect power with aggression, in Ozymandias the military power of Ramesses II is connected to <b>aggression</b>, whereas in SOTI the power of the storm is connected to <b>aggression</b>.</li> </ul>



Storm On The Island & The Prelude

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both poems show nature as powerful - in SOTI, it is due to violence of nature – military metaphors - and in The Prelude, it is due to size and extent of nature, for example <b>“huge peak”</b>.</li> <li>• The speakers in both discover truths about the world through their encounters with nature. In SOTI, the islanders realise inability to control the storm, displayed through the poem’s cyclical content and narrative as the islanders always end up afraid. It could also potentially be about the Northern Ireland conflict. On the other hand, in The Prelude, there is spiritual development of a poet explored, as the speaker realises their own insignificance</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The conflict with nature is displayed differently in each poem - in SOTI it is <b>physical</b>, as if they are being attacked by nature, whereas in The Prelude it is <b>psychological</b> – nature is inciting fear and redefining their view of the world.</li> </ul>

