Storm on the Island

📝 SUMMARY

We are ready for the storm. Our dwellings are short and wide, built into rock and covered with high quality stone. The barren land doesn't provide us with many crops, and there's no hay that might blow away in the storm. There are no trees on the island. If there were, we would hear the storm blowing through them when it arrives. It would be like an Ancient Greek chorus, and we would hear the storm from the safety of our home, which it would be trying to destroy. There is no natural shelter here at all. If you think living by the sea is pleasant, you're wrong. When the waves hit the cliffs, sea spray attacks our windows. Like a pet cat turned wild again, it spits at us. Meanwhile, we huddle together. The wind blows violently around the island. Space is like a military onslaught, and empty air rains down on us. It's weird, how what we fear is a kind of great absence.

⊙ THEMES

☁ HUMANKIND VS. NATURE

On the surface, at least, "Storm on the Island" is a poem about humankind and nature. Though people may build their protected communities to live in, nature is so powerful that no community is ever completely safe from destruction. The poem, then, shows humankind as being in constant negotiation with its environment.

Nature in poetry is often portrayed as idyllic and beautiful. "Storm on the Island," however, presents another side of the natural world. The poem opens with the speaker describing the architecture of this rural, isolated community. Speaking on the community's behalf, the speaker outlines how they build their dwellings in a way that they hope protects them from the natural elements. Their houses are "squat," meaning low to the ground, and this low center of gravity makes them more stable. The walls are reinforced with rock and the roofs are covered with slate. These facts are evidence of the way that this community tries to protect itself from the more extreme aspects of nature (like storms).

On the one hand, then, the poem celebrates human resourcefulness. The speaker's "island" seems to be a fairly inhospitable environment, yet people live there anyway—perhaps in a testament to their strength, perhaps to their foolishness. Either way, those in the speaker's community live where they live despite the barren condition of the land ("the wizened earth") and the lack of trees. The poem thus builds a sense of both isolation and community. The speaker's

people survive through cooperation and preparation. And in this isolated island society, nature remains a constant yet unpredictable threat.

On the other hand, the community also knows that when the storm does come, it will be overwhelming. At that point, the community will truly be tested and maybe even destroyed. The sea, something that people often enjoy, will "spit[]" at them like a "savage" cat, underscoring the poem's sense of threat. The poem's final lines are ambiguous about whether the storm has arrived yet; the "wind" that "dives" could be the storm itself, or it could just be a windy day that makes the islanders think of storms. When the speaker says that "Space is a salvo," it could mean that the wind (which is essentially empty space) is now battering the buildings—or it could mean, [paradoxically](#), that the *lack* of a storm is a kind of bombardment. According to this second reading, the community projects its fears onto their imagination of the storm, showing how even just the *idea* of nature's power can be overwhelming. Either way, it's clear that the people on this island, despite all their careful preparations, can't actually be certain of staying safe in the storm.

"Storm on the Island," then, speaks to humankind's ability to be resourceful and make its home wherever it goes. But this survival, the poem implies, is always something that requires an element of luck, with nature *always* retaining the power—through storms or similar—to undo people's hard work.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

💣 CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

Though the poem doesn't make specific references to Anglo-Irish political tensions, a number of factors suggest that the poem can be interpreted as an examination of these tensions (alongside the more literal interpretation outlined in the other theme). The poem was published in Heaney's first collection in 1966, which is just before what's generally agreed upon as the outbreak of the Troubles conflict—a complicated situation that involved ongoing tension and violence between those who wanted Northern Ireland to join with the rest of Ireland, and those who wanted it to stay part of the United Kingdom (this is explained further in the Historical Context section of the guide). Though the Troubles officially started shortly after the poem's publication, it's hardly even [metaphorical](#) to consider that conflict the arrival of a kind of storm. Furthermore, tensions were already high in the 1960s—indeed, they had been for hundreds of years!

Though the poem never makes explicit reference to the Irish

situation, there are several clues that lend weight to this interpretation. First, there's a hidden word in the title: "Storm on the Island." The letters highlighted in bold spell "Stormont," which is the name of the building that houses the government of Northern Ireland. A subtle signal, perhaps, that the poem is more politically engaged than it initially appears. Furthermore, "Ireland" itself is an island *and* these two words are homophones (they sound almost the same when said out loud).

Another important element in this reading of the poem is the way that it uses so much conflict-based language. The key words here are "pummels" (relentless punching), "shelter" (like a bomb shelter, perhaps), "strafes" (which can be a type of sideways machine-gun fire from a jet), "salvo" (an intense burst of fire), and "bombard[ment]" (a rapid series of shots or artillery). In an otherwise generic, almost mythical setting, these words tie the poem to the 20th century. They form a kind of world out of words (a fancy term for which would be a *lexical field*) that relates specifically to violence and military conflict.

Finally, it's worth noting that there's nothing in the poem that explicitly rules out this reading. For instance, the "squat" houses described in the opening *could* be the kind of buildings found in an urban environment like Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland. Indeed, the lack of trees could signal that this island is actually less rural than readers might expect. Perhaps, then, it's fair to see this poem as an expression of the fear that grips a community when tensions run high—when potential violence lurks like a storm on the horizon.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-2
> - Lines 3-10
> - Lines 11-19

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

> *We are prepared: ...*
> *... can be lost.*

The poem opens with a small but important word: "we." This first-person plural pronoun signals immediately to the reader that this is a poem about community and togetherness; coupled with the slightly menacing title, already there is the sense that this will be a poem that examines the relationship—and sometimes conflict—between humankind and nature.

The [caesura] in the first line indicates that the speaker intends to explain just how the islanders are "prepared" for a storm. They build houses "squat"—which means these dwellings do not go very high—which helps protect them from potential damage from high winds. The [consonance] and [alliteration] (which is itself a form of consonance) across this line and line 2

reinforce that idea of a solid structure:

> We are **p**re**p**a**r**e**d**: we buil**d** our hou**s**e**s s**qua**t**,
> **S**ink walls **i**n **r**ock a**nd r**oof them with goo**d s**late.

The selection of sounds here feels deliberate and methodical, gently suggesting the building of "squat" houses. That said though, the numerous /s/ sounds (also called [sibilance]) have a windy quality to them as well, which suggests the threat of a potential storm.

Lines 3 to 5 offer the reader more information about the island in question. The earth upon which the islanders have built their homes is "wizened," which means shriveled with old age. This makes it sound like a barren, near-inhospitable environment—which is confirmed by the fact that this same earth "has never troubled" the islanders with "hay." The speaker is being [ironic] here—hay would be useful to them, but it seems that the island doesn't provide anything useful.

The mention of trouble also foregrounds the way that, at some point, the islanders *are* expecting trouble. It's worth noting here that this specific word—"trouble"—can be taken as a subtle hint to the reader that the poem is an [extended metaphor] or [allegory] about the tensions in Northern Ireland. Though the poem was published near the beginning of the 20th-century period known as the Troubles, the name had been used to describe earlier Irish conflicts too. The Troubles is best known as the term that describes ongoing violence and tension in Northern Ireland (Heaney's home nation) during the late 20th century between, put simplistically, those who wanted to unify with the rest of Ireland (the Republic) and those who preferred to stay part of the United Kingdom.

LINES 5-10

> *Nor are there ...*
> *... your house too.*

After the [caesura] in line 5, the poem begins a sentence that technically lasts all the way through line 10. As with the speaker's mention of the island's lack of hay, this section emphasizes the barrenness of the environment. That is, even trees don't grow here. (This could be a clue that the poem is indeed about the Troubles conflict, which took place mostly in a more urban—and therefore less green—part of Northern Ireland). Trees, often symbols of ancientness and wisdom, *would* be good "company" on the island and offer some shelter from storms—but there just aren't any.

To emphasize the violent threat of a storm, the poem momentarily ramps ups its [consonance] and [alliteration]:

> **W**hich might prove company **w**hen it **bl**ows **f**ull
> **Bl**ast: you kno**w w**hat I mean - **l**eaves and **b**ranches

These sounds are noticeably loud, evoking the physical and

aural impact of an extreme weather event. But "blast" is also a word strongly linked to bombs, perhaps providing the reader with another signal that this poem isn't exclusively about a rural island community, but about Northern Ireland (and its conflict) too. Indeed, the knowing nudge to the reader that immediately follows—"you know what I mean"—suggests that the speaker is actively asking the reader to consider the poem's subtext—the things that are left unsaid—alongside the more literal information provided throughout.

The rest of this section focuses on the sound made by trees during "a gale." The speaker alludes to Ancient Greek theater by mentioning a "tragic chorus," which is a choir that comments on the action of a play. This is also, then, a form of personification, casting the trees (which don't actually exist!) as a group of singers who sing the song of wind rustling the leaves. Considering that a chorus's role in Ancient Greek plays was often to provide information, commentary, and interpretation to a play's main action, perhaps this is another subtle hint that the reader should take this poem to be as much about Ireland as it is about the "Island."

The speaker continues this long sentence by talking about storms in a hypothetical sense. Being sheltered in a home that is surrounded by trees means that you can hear a storm without feeling its full effects. This hypothetical storm is also personified, capable of "pummel[ing]" people's houses—as though deliberately trying to destroy them. This makes it sound as if nature (sometimes) actively wants to destroy humankind's communities. This sense of intention again indicates that these lines might relate to the human actions (and intent) involved in war and conflict, since literal storms don't *intentionally* harm people.

LINE 11

> *But there are ... no natural shelter.*

Line 11 restates what lines 5 through 10 have already said—"there are no trees," and therefore "no natural shelter."

The reader might wonder why the speaker spends almost half of the poem talking about something that is *not* there, but these absent trees are an important part of the poem. First, they emphasize *negative* space, creating an image of barrenness and inhospitality (which, cleverly, could also be interpreted as the more urban environment of cities like Belfast in Northern Ireland). The speaker's community is defined as much by what it lacks as what it has.

Furthermore, the trees also foreshadow the poem's closing lines, which characterize fear as the anticipation of something that isn't actually there—something essentially immaterial, like wind, or something that is threatening but hasn't arrived yet. This could be a literal storm, or it could be the metaphorical storm of violence in Northern Ireland. The quiet between storms—between breakouts of violence—is not comforting, but fearsome, just as the empty space where the trees *aren't* is

shown to be a reason for the island's vulnerability.

This line reinforces its meaning through both caesura and alliteration:

> But there are **n**o trees, **n**o **n**atural shelter.

The caesura makes the line sound as if it is surveying the surrounding landscape, pausing to glance around and yet finding no shelter. Similarly, the three /n/ sounds make sure that the emphasis of the line is on negative space, the word "no" ringing out loud and clear.

LINES 12-16

> *You might think ...*
> *... Turned savage.*

From line 12 up to the caesura in line 16, the poem focuses on the sea. As with line 7, the speaker is responding to the reader's assumptions that the sea might somehow be a kind of "company." The assonance and alliteration in lines 12 and 13 have a sing-song quality to them that (ironically) suggests comfort and playfulness (which the speaker then undercuts in line 14):

> You might th**i**nk that the **s**ea is **co**mpany,
> Explod**i**ng **co**mfortably down on the **cl**iffs

The notion of "exploding comfortably" is also an oxymoron, which helps build the poem's sense of unease and tense peace (again possibly relating to the political tensions in Northern Ireland).

The speaker then pauses this phrase abruptly with line 14's "But no:". The caesura is sudden and almost violent. Just as the similarly placed caesuras in lines 1 and 7 allowed for the speaker to clarify their meaning, this line stops the reader in their tracks and forces them to confront the reality the speaker is describing. What follows is the speaker's description of the sea, and the way it seems to spit on the islanders with an unnerving menace. The clustering of stressed syllables in line 14 has a spitting, aggressive quality: "the **flung spray hits**[.]"

The simile that the speaker uses here is unusual, likening the sea-spray to a "tame cat" that has become "savage." This image requires a little bit of unpacking. Cats in the western world are mostly domesticated, once-wild animals turned house pets. In a way, then, cats are like symbols of comfortable, cosy interior spaces. The return to "savage[ry]" here helps intensify the poem's quiet sense of threat and violence. Indeed, this can also relate to the way that violence interrupts tense periods of peace time in Northern Ireland. In other words, the poem is hinting at a kind of regression of civilization—it may be saying that through this conflict, humans are returning to violence and wildness, just like the pet cat becomes a beast again.

The consonance of numerous /t/ and /s/ sounds here gives the

lines a spitting sound that reinforces their meaning and heightens the drama of the speaker's words:

> But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits
> The very windows, spits like a tame cat
> Turned savage.

The enjambment also plays an important role in lines 13-16, exposing the line-endings to the white space of the page, mirroring the way that the island is exposed to the natural elements at its edges. Earlier lines do this too, as in lines 5 through 9, which described the island's lack of natural shelter.

LINES 16-19

> *We just sit ...*
> *... that we fear*

This final section ends the poem on a cliffhanger, depicting the islanders either hiding out as the storm's first winds hit or, alternatively, waiting in anxious anticipation of the coming storm; the poem doesn't make it totally clear what the timeline is here.

This is perhaps the most tense section of the poem—and it uses the least enjambment as a way of bringing to life the community's sense of being trapped and enclosed. The placement of caesuras is also intentionally awkward, helping build suspense. When the speaker says that "Space is a salvo," it could refer either to an eerie calm before the storm or, alternatively, to the way the powerful wind is actually made up of just empty air. In either case, the speaker and their community seem to be afraid because they know that the storm's destruction is inevitable. The variety of /i/ assonance is an important feature in lines 16 and 17:

> Turned savage. We just sit tight while wind dives
> And strafes invisibly.

These sounds cling to the line, mirroring the way that the islanders huddle together in an effort to stay safe.

This section also marks a significant shift in the poem's word choices. Most of the language used earlier in the poem, with the exception of "blast," "exploding," and perhaps "pummels," has focused on fairly generic natural imagery. Those three aforementioned words, though, now seem to have foreshadowed this final section, in which the language of warfare is suddenly an obvious presence. The combination of "dives" and "strafes" subtly hints at the image of a war plane or bombs coming from above; a "salvo" is a burst of rapid artillery; and a "bombard[ment]" is an intense onslaught. These words, then, support the idea that the poem is not just about islanders on some vaguely-defined barren land, but also about violent conflict (or potential conflict) in Northern Ireland. Indeed, perhaps the *lack* of specific reference to the Northern Irish

situation is in itself a way of critiquing the conflict. That is, by choosing not to include the particulars (and by suggesting that they're part of a "huge nothing"), the poem says that the categories of identity at the root of the conflict—Catholic/Protestant, Republican/Unionist—are not as meaningful and important as people think they are.

All of the natural features discussed here—the wind, "space," and "empty air,"— are also elements of the "huge nothing" that the islanders fear. This "huge nothing" is, of course, an oxymoron, because technically speaking, "nothing" cannot have a size or shape. But this description speaks to the islanders' fear about the storm that is already beginning or will soon arrive: no matter what's actually happening in the moment, the storm already feels enormous; it is already defining the daily lives and psychological states of the people on this island. Similarly, the *threat* of conflict in Northern Ireland might be as affecting—though in a different way—as its actual presence. Perhaps, then, the poem is subtly discussing the psychological price that people pay while trying to live through violent times.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is first used in the opening two lines. Here, the speaker discusses the kind of dwellings that the islanders have made on their land:

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

These /s/ and /r/ sounds draw attention to the poem's construction, in turn suggesting the building efforts of the islanders. That is, by making the reader more aware of the poetic line as something that is *made*, the poem conveys a sense of effort and method in keeping with the discussion of building sturdy houses. Interestingly, though, the /s/ sound (which is also known as sibilance) in these lines is airy, reminiscent of the wind that howls across the island. Accordingly, the alliteration simultaneously speaks to the quality of the houses *and* to nature's ability to potentially destroy them. The /s/ alliteration in lines 4 and 5 supports this idea further.

The next significant example of alliteration is in lines 6 and 7:

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

These /b/ sounds are the equivalent of the poem turning up its volume, happening just as the speaker discusses the loud noise of a storm blowing through trees (and possibly alludes to explosive devices). The two /c/ sounds in line 8 are similarly loud and hard, as are the two /f/ sounds of "fear" and

"forgetting" in 9 and 10.

In line 11, the three /n/ sounds emphasize the poem's focus on negative space—on the *lack* of something rather than its presence (the threat of the storm as opposed to an actual storm). They place weight on the word "no," anticipating the "huge nothing" in the last line.

In lines 14-16, the poem likens the coming storm (which *may* be an extended metaphor for violence in Northern Ireland) to a "tame cat / Turned savage." These lines also go in heavy on hard /t/ and harsh /s/ sounds, as well as a repeated /b/ that recalls the "Blast" of line 7:

> 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

This alliteration combines with internal consonance based on the same sounds to give the lines a spitting, menacing quality. Line 17 picks this up, with three words that also start with /s/.

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Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "W," "w," "s"
- **Line 2:** "S," "r," "r," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s"
- **Line 6:** "b"
- **Line 7:** "B," "b"
- **Line 8:** "C," "c"
- **Line 9:** "th," "th," "th," "f"
- **Line 10:** "F"
- **Line 11:** "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 12:** "th," "th," "th," "c"
- **Line 13:** "c," "c"
- **Line 14:** "B," "b"
- **Line 15:** "s," "t"
- **Line 16:** "T," "s," "W," "s," "t," "w," "w"
- **Line 17:** "s," "S," "s"
- **Line 18:** "W," "w"

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ALLUSION

"Storm on the Island" makes one allusion, found in line 8. Here, the poem likens the sound of a storm blowing through trees to a "tragic chorus"—a key component of Ancient Greek tragedy. A chorus is a group of actors who speak (or sometimes sing) together and whose role is to comment on the action of the play. The chorus often explains events or put them into context, as well as foreshadowing the tragic events to follow.

First, the sheer mention of the chorus places the poem within the context of potential tragedy. That is, though the storm—literal or metaphorical—hasn't yet hit the island with its full force, when it does it will have dire consequences. But

considering the way that the chorus would typically provide extra information to the audience, perhaps this allusion is also the poem's way of saying that nature's violence (and perhaps the violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland) is a kind of senseless tragedy—it's devastating and perhaps meaningless as well.

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Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "tragic chorus"

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ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sparingly throughout "Storm on the Island." The first especially notable example is the subtle /i/ and /o/ assonance in the second line (though "walls" and "rock" use different vowels, they make the same vowel sound). These create a gently stable sound in the line, anchoring it to these particular vowels (and working together with similar consonance and alliteration effects) to suggest the solid construction of the islanders' dwellings:

> Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate.

Though the "oo" in "roof" sounds different than the one in "good," the matching appearances of those two words also underscore the same effect.

The next significant example of assonance is in line 8. Combined with the alliteration in the previous two lines, the three different /a/ sounds here turn up the poem's volume. This helps the speaker personify the trees and bring to life their multiple voices as they rustle in the wind:

> Can raise a tragic chorus in a gale

Then, long /e/ assonance in lines 12 and 13 has a sing-song quality to it:

> You might think that the sea is company,
> Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs

This assonance is ironic and deliberately playful. Here, the speaker is making an assumption about the "you" of the poem (the reader)—that this "you" would think the sea would make good "company." The jolly-sounding assonance sets up the suddenness of the "no" and the caesura in line 14, wrenching the poem back towards bleakness and the menacing threat of the storm.

The assonant /a/ sounds in lines 15 and 16 emphasize the idea of the cat turned savage and also work with the /s/ and /t/ sounds to create an aggressive spitting sound:

> The very windows, spits like a tame cat

Turned savage.

The final key example of assonance continues on from the rest of line 16:

> Turned savage. We just sit tight while wind dives
> And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo,

These various /i/ sounds cling to the line, just as the islanders cling to their land. Indeed, perhaps the islanders cling to their hopes and fears too, living under the assumption that a storm is on its way.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ou," "ou"
- **Line 2:** "i," "a," "i," "o," "i"
- **Line 3:** "ea," "e"
- **Line 4:** "o," "o," "a"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "a," "ea," "ea," "a"
- **Line 8:** "a," "a," "i," "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 9:** "ou," "o," "i," "ou"
- **Line 10:** "i," "i"
- **Line 11:** "o," "ee," "o"
- **Line 12:** "ea," "o," "y"
- **Line 13:** "o," "o," "y," "o," "i"
- **Line 14:** "o," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 15:** "i," "i," "a"
- **Line 16:** "a," "a," "i," "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 17:** "a," "i," "i," "i," "a," "i"
- **Line 18:** "e," "a," "a," "e," "y"
- **Line 19:** "i," "i," "i," "e," "ea"

CAESURA

Caesura is used frequently throughout "Storm on the Island." On three occasions (the colons in lines 1, 7, and 14), it serves the same function. In each of these examples, the colon allows for the speaker to clarify their point and add further information to their account of life on the island. These caesurae also add a sense of drama and force. This is especially in line 14, where the caesura brings the reader up short in the idea that life by the sea might be comfortable; it's as if the speaker is forcibly stopping the reader in order to correct this misperception.

The caesurae in line 4 are not especially significant, forming part of the speaker's generally conversational rhythm. Line 11 is the next key caesura, with the comma pause after "trees" adding extra emphasis to the following "no." This gives that particular a word a heavy stress, which foreshadows the "huge nothing" in the poem's final line.

Line 15's caesura is also particularly effective:

> The very windows, spits like a tame cat

This momentary break means that two /s/ sounds collide together from either side of the comma. This creates a sibilant spitting sound, bringing the simile that follows to life.

The three caesurae in lines 16 to 19 make the section unfold with a tense awkwardness, as if the speaker is stumbling through these words. This helps convey the atmosphere of an island living in fear, the inhabitants "sit[ting] tight" in anticipation of the coming storm.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "prepared: we"
- **Line 4:** "hay, so, as," "see, there"
- **Line 5:** "lost. Nor"
- **Line 7:** "Blast: you," "mean - leaves"
- **Line 11:** "trees, no"
- **Line 14:** "no: when," "begins, the"
- **Line 15:** "windows, spits"
- **Line 16:** "savage. We"
- **Line 17:** "invisibly. Space"
- **Line 19:** "Strange, it"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is an important part of "Storm on the Island," appearing multiple times in every line of the poem. In the first two lines, the poem grounds itself in /s/, /r/, and /t/ sounds (some of which are examples of alliteration too). This makes the lines feel secure, like the "squat" dwellings they describe. However, the /s/ sound *also* subtly conjures the sound of wind, hinting at the threat of the storm that runs throughout the poem. Indeed, this /s/ sound is used expressly for this latter meaning later in the poem.

The next key example of consonance (and alliteration) is in the phrase "blows full / Blast" in lines 6 and 7. Here, the sounds are intentionally louder, evoking the noise of a "blast"—this blast refers to a storm blowing through trees, but it could also be interpreted as referring to a bomb and thereby relating to the conflict in Northern Ireland (though it's worth noting that the poem was published slightly before the officially agreed-upon start of the Troubles). Further /s/ sounds in the same stanza (e.g., "leaves and branches") combined with hard /c/ sounds ("can," "tragic," "chorus,") evoke the image of a wind-whipped island, the stormy air careering through the trees (though it's important to note that this is the speaker's description of what it *would* be like if the island had trees, which it doesn't).

Next up are the plosive consonants found throughout lines 11 to 14. These /t/, /b/, and /p/ sounds are subtly violent, helping the poem build a sense of menace and threat. Hard /c/ sounds contribute to this too: "company," "comfortably," "cliffs." Collectively, these sounds suggest the intensity of the

storm—but it's important to remember that the storm hasn't actually arrived yet, so the sounds are as much about how the speaker (and by extension the other islanders) *imagine* that the storm will be when it does come.

The /s/ sounds—also known as sibilance—also intensify over the last seven lines: "cliffs," "begins," "spray," "hits," spits," "strafes," "space," "salvo" and so on. These evoke the wind and the sound of the water spray as waves smash against the coast.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "W," "r," "p," "p," "r," "w," "r," "s," "s," "q," "t"
- **Line 2:** "S," "n," "k," "s," "n," "r," "c," "k," "n," "r," "s," "t"
- **Line 3:** "r," "s," "r," "r," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "t," "ck," "s"
- **Line 5:** "st," "ks," "t," "st," "r," "r," "r," "t," "r," "s"
- **Line 6:** "bl," "s," "ll"
- **Line 7:** "Bl," "s," "l," "s," "b," "s"
- **Line 8:** "C," "s," "c," "c," "h," "s"
- **Line 9:** "th," "th," "th," "f," "r"
- **Line 10:** "F," "r," "tt," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 11:** "r," "r," "n," "t," "r," "n," "n," "t," "r," "l," "lt," "r"
- **Line 12:** "th," "n," "th," "th," "s," "s," "c," "p," "n"
- **Line 13:** "x," "p," "d," "c," "f," "d," "n," "n," "c," "ff"
- **Line 14:** "B," "n," "n," "b," "n," "s," "f," "s," "p," "ts"
- **Line 15:** "n," "s," "s," "p," "ts," "t," "c," "t"
- **Line 16:** "T," "s," "W," "st," "s," "t," "t," "t," "w," "w," "d," "d," "s"
- **Line 17:** "n," "st," "s," "n," "s," "l," "S," "c," "s," "s," "l"
- **Line 18:** "r," "b," "m," "b," "r," "d," "d," "m," "r"
- **Line 19:** "S," "t," "t," "s," "n," "t"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment shows up in most lines of "Storm on the Island." In fact, only seven lines *don't* enjamb into the following lines.

The main effect of this frequent use of enjambment is to create lines that appear to be exposed to the elements, the same way that the speaker's community is exposed to the storm. That is, most lines meet the whiteness of the page, rather than the (metaphorical) protection of periods or commas. This helps build up the poem's main image of a community living in fear of a coming storm. Over the course of the poem, the reader gets the sense that, when the storm *does* eventually come, there's little that the islanders can really do about it (especially as they have "no natural shelter").

Two good examples of the way the poem conveys this exposure to the elements are found between lines 5 and 6, and lines 15 and 16. Both of these enjambments leave their end words appearing isolated and vulnerable. The first example highlights the lack of trees on the island, while the second adds dramatic power to the poem's single simile: that sea spray during a storm is "like a tame cat / Turned savage." Line 16, too, adds a sense of dynamism and unpredictability in its enjambment between

"dives" and "And," as if the word "dives" is itself diving.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "us"
- **Line 4:** "With," "stacks"
- **Line 5:** "Or," "trees"
- **Line 6:** "Which," "full"
- **Line 7:** "Blast," "branches"
- **Line 8:** "Can," "gale"
- **Line 9:** "So," "fear"
- **Line 10:** "Forgetting"
- **Line 13:** "cliffs"
- **Line 14:** "But," "hits"
- **Line 15:** "The," "cat"
- **Line 16:** "Turned," "dives"
- **Line 17:** "And"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

At first glance, "Storm on the Island" seems to be a poem about exactly what its title suggests: a non-specified storm on a non-specified island. Indeed, the poem offers little by way of specific contextual details. This could almost be anywhere, at any time. However, given Heaney's position as a prominent Irish poet and the fact that this poem was published just before the outbreak of the Troubles (the late 20th-century conflict in Northern Ireland), it also makes sense to read the poem as a commentary on a very specific sociopolitical situation. The thematic relationship between the poem and the Troubles is explored in the Themes section of this guide, so this section focuses more on possible clues that validate this particular reading of the poem as an extended metaphor.

First of all, there's nothing in the poem that specifically *negates* the idea that it is as much about Northern Ireland as a whole as it is about a generic island. The "squat" houses could relate to the urban environments of Belfast, where much of the Troubles conflict played out, and the "wizened" (old and grizzled) state of the earth might also relate to the fact this is actually an urban environment rather than a rural one. Indeed, the lack of trees (which is emphasized in lines 5 and 11) might support this, since the natural environment in a city like Belfast would be mostly replaced by concrete and bricks.

It's also worth noting that a variant of the word for the Irish conflict itself appears in line 3: "troubled." Though the main 20th-century Troubles violence is generally agreed to have started around 1968 (just *after* the poem's publication), previous conflicts in Ireland had been called by similar names. The notion of a "tame cat" turning "savage" towards the poem's end also suggests a civilization going backwards, descending into violence. Indeed, the poem's final stanza borrows the language of warfare—for example, "strafes," "salvo," and "bombarded"—which also supports this reading.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

OXYMORON

"Storm on the Island" uses two [oxymorons](#). The first of these is "Exploding comfortably" in line 13. Explosions are, almost by definition, not comfortable things. The phrase seems to capture the strange state in which the islanders live their lives, which is on the one hand quite peaceful because no storm has yet arrived, but is on the other hand extremely tense due to their fearful *anticipation* of such a storm. The only kind of explosion that is comfortable, perhaps, is one that is far away. The point that the speaker is making, then, seems to be that when the storm does come, the island won't be able to escape its reach.

The other oxymoron is in the last line. Here, the speaker describes the thing that the islanders fear as a "huge nothing." Nothing is by definition not a thing, but rather an absence—and therefore it doesn't have a size or a shape. The idea, then, of it being "huge" is contradictory. However, this speaks to the way that fear works on the human mind. Fear, too, is characterized by absence; it is the anticipation of something bad that hasn't actually arrived yet. Fear, though abstract, has very real and tangible consequences, almost feeling like it too has a shape and size. This oxymoron, then, shows how the non-arrival of the storm (or, alternatively, the fact that it is simply made of wind, which has no physical shape) doesn't make it any less powerful in the minds of the islanders. Considering the poem as a [metaphorical](#) take on the Troubles conflict in Northern Ireland, this could also relate to the ongoing tension during days when there isn't any actual fighting.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "Exploding comfortably"
- **Line 19:** "huge nothing"

PERSONIFICATION

[Personification](#) is first used in the third line of "Storm on the Island." Here, the speaker describes the earth as "wizened," adding [ironically](#) that it has "never troubled" the islanders with good crop-growing conditions. "Wizened" means something like "shrivelled with age," implying that the earth on which the islanders live is somehow past its prime.

The poem then personifies trees, though there aren't actually any trees on the island. Trees—if they *were* there—"might" help the islanders when storms come by providing shelter. The poem likens these imagined trees through [allusion](#) to a "tragic chorus" (a choir from Ancient Greek theater), which would sing the song of the storm. Like the first example of personification, this one is characterized by a kind of absence or negative quality: just as the "wizened" earth *can't* grow crops, these

trees don't actually exist.

This idea of nature providing "company" extends to the sea in line 12, when the speaker assumes that the reader (the "you" of the poem) would think that the sea would be a kind of companion. It's not, of course—the sea, too, is another reminder of the potential devastation that the islanders face from the elements, which spit at them like a cat that was once friendly but is now "savage."

The fact that each of these instances of personification turns sour one way or another suggests that maybe the speaker is saying something about people more generally. If everything that the poem compares to people proves to be untrustworthy, then perhaps *people* are untrustworthy too. This reading aligns with the idea of the poem as an [extended metaphor](#) for the Troubles in Northern Ireland, as if the speaker is criticizing humans in general for getting themselves into this mess.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "This wizened earth has never troubled us / With hay"
- **Lines 5-8:** "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"
- **Lines 12-16:** "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."

SIMILE

The poem makes use of one [simile](#), found across lines 14, 15, and 16:

> But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits
> The very windows, spits like a tame cat
> Turned savage.

Here, the speaker compares the spray of the sea to the spit of a "savage" cat that used to be tame. It's a suprising and intriguing image. This figurative cat was once tame. In other words, like a pet cat, the sea was once a comforting and domestic presence on the island. But when the storm comes, it becomes menacing and aggressive, as though it actively wishes the islanders harm.

Looked at from a more zoomed-out perspective, the simile also describes a shift from civilization and peacefulness to "savage[ry]" and violence. The cat was domesticated, but it doesn't stay that way; it goes back to the way it used to be before it became part of human civilization. Perhaps this can be read as a subtle comment on the Irish conflict, hinting at the way that such battles bring out the more animalistic and less civilized instincts of humankind.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-16:** "when it begins, the flung spray hits / The very windows, spits like a tame cat / Turned savage."

VOCABULARY

Squat (Line 1) - Short and wide, with a low center of gravity.

Wizened (Line 3) - Gnarled or shriveled with age.

Stacks (Line 4) - Piles of hay.

Stooks (Line 5) - A pile of hay specifically arranged to keep the heads of the grain off the ground.

Prove Company (Line 6) - Be a good companion.

Tragic Chorus (Line 8) - A chorus is a group of actors in a play who form a choir-like group and are outside of the main action. This was an important technique in Ancient Greek theater.

Pummels (Line 10) - To pummel something is to punch it repeatedly.

Strafes (Line 17) - A sideways movement that can also include machine-gun fire from an aircraft.

Salvo (Line 17) - The fire of multiple weapons at the same time.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Storm on the Island" takes the form of one long unbroken stanza made up of 19 lines. Generally speaking, it starts and ends on a similar note: an atmosphere of tension and potential destruction and/or violence. The poem quite literally takes place in the calm before the storm, which the speaker—and the other islanders—seem certain is going to come before long. Perhaps the lack of stanza breaks—the lack of white space on the page—signals this ongoing tension. The lines also seem to huddle together, like a community of people "sit[ting] tight," fearful of what might lurk over the horizon.

The single stanza also creates a single mass on the page. Entertaining the idea that this mass of text is like an island, the white space of the page around it looks like the sea. Indeed, the poem itself is surrounded by a kind of "huge nothing"—in the same way that the absence of the storm is almost bad as its actual arrival. It's also worth noting that some publications break this poem up into separate stanzas.

METER

"Storm on the Island" is written in blank verse. This means each line is iambic pentameter (with some variations here and there): five feet of unstressed-**stressed** syllables (which sound like a da DUM rhythm).

Line 3 provides a typical example of this meter at work:

> This **wi**- | zened **earth** | has **nev**- | er | **trou**- | bled **us**

Generally speaking, blank verse gives a poem a fairly steady tone—depending on what else is going on, this can seem authoritative or have the flow of conversation. The meter in this poem seems to work somewhere between the two, with the speaker acting as a spokesperson for the islanders while also speaking casually and familiarly ("you know what I mean"). But the regularity of the meter also feels a little tense, as though the speaker can't fully relax (what with the predicted literal or metaphorical storm on the horizon).

There are a couple of important variations to consider. In line 7, the poem swaps the first iamb for a trochee, bringing the stressed syllable forward to the start of the line ("Blast"). This has the effect of conveying the strength and violence suggested by the word "blast," hinting at the destruction that will come when the storm does eventually arrive.

Lines 15 and 16 also use effective variation—between them they manage to group four stressed syllables together:

> The **ver**y **win**dows, **spits** like a **tame cat**
> **Turned sav**age.

These stresses are surprising after so many lines of mostly regular meter, and the change gives these lines a kind of wildness, matching the image of a menacing, spitting cat. This variation creates the sudden presence of violence in the poem's sound, mirroring the islanders' fear of the storm.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no rhyme scheme in "Storm on the Island." Instead, the poem is mostly written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter). A rhyme scheme would probably get in the way of the poem's balance between conversational tone and tense atmosphere.

There are a few end words that *nearly* rhyme, however. For example, "squat" and "slate" in the first two lines *almost* have the solidity of full rhyme, but not quite. This perhaps suggests that the islanders' dwellings are not as secure as they might think.

The poem's last two end words nearly rhyme too: "air" and "fear." (This type of rhyme is known as slant rhyme.) This mismatch reinforces the speaker's point that what the islanders fear at the moment is a "huge nothing"—the islanders are terrified, but the thing they're afraid of doesn't even have a material shape; it's either still on its way or made of out of empty wind.

👤 SPEAKER

The speaker in "Storm on the Island" is not specified. The speaker has a fairly conversational tone that is also suffused with fear and tension based on the potential arrival of the storm. The speaker is also a kind of representative of their island, telling the "you" of the poem (the reader) about the island: how there's no shelter, and how the islanders fear a "huge nothing." Often, the speaker speaks in the first-person plural ("we"), highlighting that the speaker is only one of many people who share the same experience.

Just as the setting of the poem is kept deliberately vague, so too is the speaker's identity. There's no real sense of this person's age or gender, other than that they seem to be some kind of community leader or at least someone who knows this place well. The speaker expresses the fears of the islanders in vibrant language, painting a vivid picture for the reader. It's almost as if the speaker is giving the reader a guided tour of the island, though most of the tour is characterized by what is *not* there, rather than what actually is.

🌄 SETTING

As the title suggests, "Storm on the Island" is set on an island. Interestingly, though, there are no real details offered beyond the title. That is, the reader doesn't learn anything about the era in which the poem is set or the exact geographical location. The only specifics mentioned by the speaker don't really tell the reader much, other than that there are "squat" houses on the island, that little seems to grow there, and that the sea whips the island with spray. This gives the poem an almost mythic quality, a feeling that what it discusses is somehow universal. The islanders' fear is all the more relatable because it isn't tied to anything too specific.

That said, though, there is a case to be made for considering the poem's setting to be the island of Ireland—though it can't be confirmed for sure. The poem's title actually contains a place name—Stormont (**Storm on t**he Island). This is the parliament building in Northern Ireland, and its presence in the title subtly suggests that the poem may be more politically specific than it appears on first glance. Furthermore, the use of modern military language in the last stanza—"strafes," "salvo," and "bombarded"—seems to tie the poem to the 20th century. Finally, the poem's setting also seems unnervingly accurate as a prediction of the near future (at the time of its publication). Soon after this poem was published in Heaney's first collection, tensions erupted into violence in Northern Ireland, initiating the stormy conflict known as the Troubles (which was to last almost until the end of the century).

ℹ️ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Seamus Heaney was an Irish poet who lived from 1939 to 2013. Aside from W.B. Yeats, there is probably no other Irish writer whose work is read—and treasured—so widely. Heaney was born and raised in Northern Ireland, growing up in a Catholic household in a society that was largely Protestant. Education was important to Heaney; his teachers encouraged his taste for literature at an early age before he went on to study the subject at Queen's University in Belfast. Indeed, Heaney said of his own early years that he lived "a buried life and [then] entered the realm of education."

Heaney felt an affinity for poetry that used the poet's local environment as a kind of raw material; his early influences include Robert Frost, Patrick Kavanagh, and Ted Hughes. This poem is an exception in Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, which is otherwise firmly rooted in Heaney's youthful—and local—experiences (e.g., picking blackberries, or watching his father dig in the garden). In fact, this poem seems to deliberately do away with any specifics of time or place, making it feel almost mythical (and perhaps thereby making the fear it describes more universal).

Death of a Naturalist, published in 1966, was well received and helped Heaney gain international recognition. Indeed, it set him on the path of an illustrious career. Some of the poems in this collection were workshopped in a group known as The Belfast Group, which at one time or another included other important Irish poets such as Paul Muldoon, Ciarán Carson, and Michael Longley. Heaney published numerous books of poetry throughout his life, as well as plays and translations. He was the recipient of literature's highest honor, the Nobel Prize, in 1995.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

One of the most notable aspects about "Storm on the Island" is the way that it *doesn't* seem to have a specific historical or geographical context. This lends the poem a mythic, almost universal quality—as though it could be happening anytime and anyplace. So on the one hand, the poem can be read literally as an account of humankind's fear of nature—and the power that nature holds to destroy.

But it's also important to consider an alternative reading, and to place the poem into the historical context of the time of its publication. Growing up in Northern Ireland and as an Irish poet, the political situation of Heaney's home country is a key feature of his poetry—even if it isn't always alluded to explicitly. The full story of Ireland's complex, centuries-long political landscape is beyond the scope of this guide, but, put simply, Northern Ireland was (and remains) a country divided between those who would prefer to unify with the rest of Ireland (the Republic) and those who are loyal to the United Kingdom (and

its monarchy). By and large, the former group are Catholic (like Heaney's family), and the latter are Protestant.

This situation has roots that stretch back over the centuries (which perhaps makes it even more difficult to resolve). Ireland was one of England's earliest colonies, and England sent a large number of people to its northeastern corner to settle there during the 17th century. This largely Protestant group was soon larger than the population of local Catholics, and in 1801 the Act of Union formalized Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. The Catholics fought back, striving for independence from what they saw as their British oppressors. Eventually, this conflict brought about the settlement that *most* of Ireland could regain independence—with Northern Ireland staying instead as part of the United Kingdom.

Tensions did not end there, however, and Catholics in Northern Ireland felt that they were persecuted because of their religion and political beliefs. For example, business owners (who were largely Protestant and thereby loyal to the monarchy) were granted two votes rather than one in government elections. If interpreted as an allegory for this ongoing conflict, "Storm on the Island" is frighteningly accurate in its prediction of looming violence on the horizon. It was published just before the somewhat debated starting point of the Troubles conflict, which lasted from the late 1960s until nearly the end of the 20th century.

The Troubles was a battle over the identity and status of Northern Ireland. Put simply, it was a fight between those who wanted Northern Ireland to unify with the rest of Ireland—the Republic—and those who strongly felt that Northern Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom (which remains its status to this day). The latter group are known as Unionists, whereas the former group are known as Nationalists or Republicans.

The Troubles has been described as a "low-level war," not because it wasn't deadly and frightening, but because of the nature of the conflict. Explosives were often homemade, and fighting would break out on the same streets where people would usually go about their daily business. To this day, Belfast is divided by so-called "peace walls," attempts to keep the two communities apart. A hard-won and tense truce between the two sides culminated in the Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998. This attempted to put into place a political power-sharing agreement, with the U.K. government relinquishing some of its powers to Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish situation remains fraught with difficulties, which are currently exacerbated by the problem of Brexit—the Republic of Ireland is and will remain a member of the European Union, regardless of the status of the United Kingdom (including Northern

Ireland).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poetry and the Troubles — An interesting article about the response of Irish poets to the Troubles conflict. (https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/northern-ireland/2017/12/songs-dead-children-poetry-northern-ireland-s-troubles)

- Heaney Looking Back — Heaney reflects on his life and career shortly after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WT-dub5v4YA)

- Heaney's Life and Poetry — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney)

- Heaney Reads Aloud — Heaney reads some of his own poetry, including the first poem, "Digging," from the same collection as "Storm on the Island." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvneazagsRI)

- An Animated History of Irish Conflict — This animation gives a quick summary of conflicts in Ireland over the centuries. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcH6sDWR-wA)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SEAMUS HEANEY POEMS

- Blackberry-Picking
- Death of a Naturalist
- Digging
- Follower
- Mid-Term Break

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