

Casualty Summary

Writer: Seamus Heaney | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

The poem "Casualty" is about an ordinary man—a fisherman—who is killed in an explosion during the violent time of *The Troubles* in Northern Ireland. Heaney writes about this man with deep respect and sadness. The poem shows how political violence destroys innocent lives.

The poem has three parts, and each part shows a different side of the story—the man's life, his death, and Heaney's memories of him.

Part I: The Fisherman's Life

The poet begins by describing a fisherman who used to sit alone in a bar. He drank quietly. He never made a noise. He ordered his drink with small signs, like a lift of his thumb or a glance of his eyes. He did not talk much but had a calm, polite manner. He was poor and unemployed, living on government money. Yet he loved work and was a skilled fisherman.

Heaney liked and respected this man. He admired how confident and observant the man was. But this man did not really understand the poet's world. He did not know much about poetry or art. When they talked, and poetry came up, Heaney quickly changed the topic to fishing, horses, or politics. The poet did this to make the man comfortable.

Then tragedy came. The poet tells us that this fisherman was "**blown to bits.**" He was killed by a bomb one night when there was a curfew. It happened three nights after Bloody Sunday, when thirteen men were shot dead in Derry by British soldiers. Heaney describes how the city was full of fear. Everyone was silent and scared after the violence.

Part II: The Funeral and the Guilt

The poet now describes the funeral for the men who were killed on Bloody Sunday. It was raining and quiet. Coffins came out of the cathedral one after another, like flowers floating on water. Everyone felt united in grief, "**like brothers in a ring.**"

The fisherman did not stay home during a curfew. Even though his friends and family warned him not to go out, he went to a pub that night. The poet imagines his face in the flash of the explosion. His face would look like a mix of guilt, fear, and courage. Heaney wonders if the man was really to blame for what happened.

The fisherman was just living his simple life. He was trying to find warmth and company. He loved to drink and talk with others. He was not political or violent. But he died because he broke **“the tribe’s complicity.”** It means he did not follow the rule of staying home.

The fisherman had once asked Heaney a deep moral question. And now, after his death, the poet is still trying to answer it.

Part III: The Poet’s Memory

The poet says he missed the fisherman’s funeral. He describes the quiet mourners walking slowly behind the hearse. Then he remembers another day, when he was with the fisherman in his boat. Heaney recalls that morning on the water. It was calm, foggy, and peaceful. He remembers the joy of fishing with him. He remembers pulling the net, feeling the rhythm of the sea, and finding freedom out there, away from land, away from violence and politics.

In the final lines, Heaney seems to speak to the fisherman’s spirit. He calls him a **“dawn-sniffing revenant”** (a ghost who still walks in the early morning). He asks him to **“question me again.”** It means the poet wants the man to question him about life, guilt, and what is right, because Heaney still does not have the answer.

Main Idea: *“Casualty”* is about friendship, loss, and violence. The fisherman represents ordinary, peaceful people caught in political conflict.