

SMALL PAIN IN MY CHEST

‘Small Pain in My Chest’ by the American poet Michael Mack is a remarkable poem about a soldier’s death and the narrator’s feeling at his death. The title is an ironical one. The soldier repeatedly says that he has a small pain in his chest. But he finally died of his injury that he received at the battle. This poem reveals the anti-war attitude of the poet Michael Mack.

The poem ‘Small Pain in My Chest’ is written in very simple language. It consists of nine stanzas of four lines each. It follows a regular rhyme scheme. The first two and the last two lines of each stanza rhyme. The lines of the poem are rather longer. Apart from the first stanza, the last two lines of each stanza have the same rhyme pattern, and all the eight stanzas end with the phrase ‘small pain in my chest’ with a couple of slight variations.

Small Pain in My Chest: line by line analysis

Stanza 1: The soldier boy...by morning’s light.

The poem “Small Pain in My Chest”, begins with the meeting of the narrator with a soldier boy, who was sitting under a tree. As the narrator was nearing him, the soldier invited him waving his hand. The narrator then gives us an idea of the battle. He says, it was ‘long and hard’ and ‘lasted through the night’. He also sees a number of bodies lying still on the ground. These are the bodies of the soldiers who had died in the battle.

Stanza 2: “I Wonder if...in my chest.”

When the narrator went to the wounded soldier, he smiled at his best to hide his pain, and asked the narrator for some help. He says he will surely be feeling well if he gets ‘a sip of water’ in this fine morning, as he was fighting all day and night without any rest. Moreover he needs some water because he is having ‘a small pain’ in his chest.

Stanza 3: As I looked...in my chest.”

Though the soldier speaks of a small pain in his chest, the narrator looks at him and finds a large reddish-brown blood-stain on his shirt. It has been a mixture of his blood and the local Asian soil. The soldier assures the narrator that his wound is not so serious and he considers himself luckier than his fellow soldiers as they have already died whereas he has survived with only a small pain in his chest.

Stanza 4: “Must be fatigue”...in my chest.”

This time the soldier smiles ‘weakly’. He consoles himself saying that he is feeling weak because he is too tired and he is growing older. The boy tells the narrator that though there is bright sunlight, he is feeling cold. He then gives an account of what happened the previous night. He says that a troop of two hundred soldiers climbed the hill. When they reached the top, there was an explosion and he got the small pain in his chest.

Stanza 5: “I looked around...in my chest.”

The soldier continues his story. He looked around and tried to get some help. But he could only find some deep craters in the ground caused by the explosion, and the dead bodies of his fellow soldiers. He went on firing at his enemies as long as he could. He tried his best to win the battle. But he could not do that and finally sat down with the ‘small pain’ in his chest.

Stanza 6: “I’m grateful, sir...in his chest.”

The soldier expresses his gratitude, “I’m grateful, sir” when the narrator gives him his flask of water. The soldier again smiles, and this time so heartily that the narrator felt it to be the brightest smile he had ever seen. It reveals the soldier’s mental strength. He is hiding his pain by his smile. The soldier then expresses his regret. It seems silly

to him that a powerful, brave and energetic man like him is now 'defeated' by a 'small pain' in his chest.

Stanza 7: "What would my wife...in my chest?"

The soldier now wonders what his wife would think of him, if she found him in such condition. The soldier knows that his wife considers him a hero, a strong and grown-up man. So she would not believe that a small pain in his chest could make him so weak. He also thinks of his mother. His mother, while holding him close to her chest in his childhood, had never imagined that his son would be sitting 'HERE' one day with this small pain in his chest.

This stanza of the poem 'Small Pain in My Chest' has an implied meaning. The poet makes us think about the evils caused by the war. The readers sympathize with the soldier's situation. This is even intensified by the mention of his wife and mother, who depend a lot on the soldier. The word 'HERE' is written in capital letter to indicate the battle field, which is of no use to the humanity. War doesn't have any productive potential; it only destroys. The soldier wouldn't mind to even die for a noble cause, but to be sitting here without a good reason seems silly to him.

Stanza 8: "Can it be getting...in his chest."

The ill-fated soldier boy can no longer withstand the fatal wound and the great pain. He is nearing his death. The boy now looks up at the sun and everything is getting dark in his eyes, even in the bright morning. He wonders, "Can it be getting dark so soon?...I thought that the day had just begun." The lines have some greater implications. 'The day' here also indicates the life of the soldier, which had just begun, and he had a long future ahead. He could not believe that it was ending so soon. Here 'getting dark' indicates the end of the day as well as the end of his life.

Then he tells the narrator that he would take some rest before he goes further. And then, 'the boy' dies from that small pain in his chest. The

narrator realizes that the soldier succumbed to his injury, and the pain was not really 'small'.

Stanza 9: I don't recall...in his chest.

The narrator says he cannot recall what happened thereafter. The narrator thinks he might have cried, put his arms around the dead soldier boy, pulled him to his side and held him to his body. Then comes the narrator's feeling. He also felt a pain in the soldier's death, and that was a big one unlike the soldier. He says, their wounds were pressed together. The soldier received a physical wound. So it was a rather small pain in a sense. But the wound the narrator received was in his heart. So it was a large one. He felt extremely sad in the futility of war which takes away so many great young lives.