

# Digging

## Seamus Heaney

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.  
Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down  
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.  
The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.  
By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.  
My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods

Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.  
The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.  
Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

## Summary and Analysis:

"Digging" opens Seamus Heaney's first collection and declares his intention as a poet. The poem begins with the speaker, who looks upon himself, his pen posed upon his paper, as he listens to the noise of his father digging outside the window. The speaker looks down, both away from and at his father, and describes a slip in time; his father remains where he is, but the poem slips twenty years into the past, indicating the length of his father's career as a farmer. The speaker emphasizes the continuity of his father's movement, and the moment shifts out of the present tense and into the past.

The speaker then changes his focus to his father's tools, saying, "The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft/Against the inside knee was levered firmly." These lines, describing how his father's shovel fits against his boot and leg, echo the first lines of the poem, which describe the speaker's fingers around his pen. The speaker then describes the picking of the potatoes using the pronoun "we," indicating that other characters populate this memory; possibly this refers to Heaney's siblings or his family in general. The tone is reverential toward the potatoes and the work.

The poem then breaks back into couplet form: "By God, the old man could handle a spade./Just like his old man." This part of the poem feels less formal than the lines that come before it, more like something a person might say out loud to another. The speaker commits personally his story with an oath ("By God"), emphasizing his personal connection to rural Ireland.

In the next lines of the poem, the speaker describes his grandfather as a strong digger who dug for fuel. He recalls approaching his grandfather with a bottle of milk as a child; his grandfather downed the milk and returned to work with more vigor than ever. This moment clearly still stands out to the speaker as an example of his grandfather's hard work and skill. The language here is precise and mimics the sound of digging in its bobbing rhythm and with phrases like "nicking and slicing" and "going down and down."

The next stanza continues the evocative language and uses alliteration freely. "The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge/Through living roots awaken in my head," the speaker says, explaining the impact his rural upbringing had on him. He ends the stanza by saying he has no spade to follow men like his father and grandfather.

The final stanza, however, returns to the pen mentioned in the first, replacing the spade with the pen in the speaker's hands. "I'll dig with it," is the final line of the poem; this vow feels directed at the speaker's family, like a promise to follow in its stead, though in his own way.

## **Analysis**

The first couplet of "Digging" begins by using iambic pentameter and a rhyme. The iambic pentameter, however, is interrupted by the trochee in "snug as," and the following stanza does not follow the couplet form as the first one does. However, the three lines of this stanza all rhyme; Heaney rhymes "sound," "ground," and "down." The simple, monosyllabic rhymes used in this and the preceding stanzas appear to create the blueprint for the rest of the poem to follow, but Heaney chooses to move away from those rhymes mid-poem, as if their purpose has been served. Since the poem deals with the complex feelings that arise when one breaks from tradition, this choice bears some significance.

The speaker ends the second stanza and begins the third with the line, "I look down/Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds/Bends low, comes up twenty years away." This stanza communicates the continuity of the speaker's father's digging, but while in the present he digs in flowerbeds, in the past he was digging amongst potato drills. The goal of digging has changed, but the action itself has not. To make clear the journey we have made through time, the speaker switches mid-sentence into the past tense.

The following stanza is clearly rooted in the past. The first sentence describes the speaker's father's body interacting with the spade, but the speaker's voice distances the body from the father, treating it as an extension of the shovel. "The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft/Against the inside knee was levered firmly," the speaker says. By calling his father's boot and knee "the coarse boot" and "the inside knee," instead of connecting them directly to his father, the speaker suggests how intrinsic the act of digging is to his father's nature. Since we the readers know that the speaker is comparing his father's work as a farmer to his own work as a writer, we can conclude with some certainty that the speaker is thinking of how intrinsic his own trade is to himself.

Other characters, though unnamed, also appear in this third stanza. "He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep/To scatter new potatoes that we picked,/Loving their cool hardness in our hands." Though the speaker never says who the other people referred to by the first-person plural are, the wistful tone of this sentence suggests that the "we" refers to the speaker and his siblings. The wonder the speaker describes that stems from touching the potatoes comes off as nostalgic and childlike; clearly, the speaker feels a deep personal connection to farming, a connection that stems from his own experiences, not just those of his father and grandfather.

The following stanza returns to the couplet format, though not to the rhymes, of the first stanza. The speaker begins by uttering, "By God," a moment notably more colloquial than the first

several stanzas. This expression seems to burst from the speaker naturally, suggesting that he truly feels impressed by his father's and grandfather's skill.

By bringing his grandfather into the poem, the speaker makes clear that he is talking about something beyond just the dichotomy between his own career and his father's. He appears to celebrate the way of life that his father and grandfather, to an extent, shared, and the nostalgia represented in this poem suggests that the speaker's feelings toward his career as a writer are not cut-and-dry.

The next stanza is longer than any of those that come before it, and it works to describe the speaker's grandfather. The speaker asserts that his grandfather cut "more turf in a day/Than any other man on Toner's bog." Though the speaker is very firm in his characterization of his grandfather, this assertion has a slightly childlike tone, suggesting that the speaker still sees his father and grandfather through the adoring eyes of a child. Furthermore, the speaker's grandfather dug for turf, a source of fuel, while the speaker's father dug for potatoes. The speaker then outlines a day when he brought his grandfather "milk in a bottle/Corked sloppily with paper." This image evokes the pastoral landscape in which the speaker grew up.

The stanza ends with the lines, "He straightened up/To drink it, then fell to right away/Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods/Over his shoulder, going down and down/For the good turf. Digging." The language here moves rhythmically and smoothly for a number of lines, mimicking the movement of digging.

This stanza also quietly revives rhyme in the poem. The lines "My grandfather cut more turf in a day/Than any other man on Toner's bog" rhyme with the lines "To drink it, then fell to right away/Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods" with several lines that do not rhyme between and around them. Why the speaker returns to rhyme is not entirely clear, but the return reminds the reader of the speaker's specific line of work, as a poet.

By separating the word "Digging" into its own sentence, the speaker makes the action a mythical gesture. Digging is beyond his own reach, it seems, so to an extent he idealizes it. However, he seems to believe that he can reach the same transcendental place through his own hard work as his forbearers did through theirs.

The next stanza, the second to last stanza in the poem, reads, "The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge/Through living roots awaken in my head." The speaker, using lots of alliteration to evoke the sounds and smells he associates with digging, winds through those sensations and, at nearly its end, pulls the reader back into the present tense, paralleling how those sensations bring the speaker back to the past. "But I've no spade to follow men like them," he continues. This moment could indicate a disheartening direction, but the speaker does not take any time to consider the merits of writing as a skill versus the merits of digging. He seems to consider them absolutely equal.

Those "living roots" could be interpreted as a metaphorical reference to the speaker family, his living roots. Of course, he describes them to describe how they are cut through; this, appropriately, seems like a reference to the speaker's choice to move away from the farming occupation.

The final stanza begins by repeating the first stanza exactly: "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests." But instead of comparing the pen to a gun, this time he simply says, "I'll dig with it." One important part of this image is that he says he will use his own tools, his pen, to dig; his point is not that digging is meaningful when it is like writing, but that writing is meaningful when it is like digging. Both actions are sacred to the speaker.

## Important Explanatory Passages:

### 1) Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

This couplet, which starts the poem, seems to indicate a certain poetic formality that the rest of the poem may follow, for the two lines rhyme in a simple, familiar fashion. The first line is iambic, and the second line starts with iambs as well. The phrase "snug as a gun" breaks that rhythm by using a trochee, or reversing the syllabic emphasis that had been steady until this point; even the break out of pentameter is not something uncommon in a metered poem, so this first stanza seems to indicate that the rest of the poem will follow a similar form, meter, and rhyme scheme, perhaps also in couplets. However, the rest of the poem contrasts with these lines by not following suit. This choice to start one way and then shift into another may parallel the way the speaker has broken away from his family's line of work. It could also suggest that the speaker is more concerned with the subject matter of his writing than the form.

### 2) My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Bends low, comes up twenty years away

Stooping in rhythm through potato drills

Where he was digging.

This is the moment where the speaker slips into the past; he finds himself twenty years earlier, watching his father dig potatoes. He works now among flowerbeds, but he farmed potatoes when the speaker was young.

### 3) My grandfather cut more turf in a day

Than any other man on Toner's bog.

In this moment the speaker marvels at his grandfather's strength and calls him the most efficient man on the bog where he worked. This may be an exaggeration, but it demonstrates the speaker's conviction about his family's hardworking nature. Furthermore, by referring to the bog by name and without further explanation, the speaker pulls us in to the world of his family history, giving us intimate access to the memory of the speaker's grandfather.

### 4) He straightened up

To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods

Over his shoulder, going down and down

For the good turf. Digging.

In this stanza the speaker looks at his grandfather through the eyes of an awestruck child. He remembers his grandfather mostly for strength and endurance; he also remembers the way his grandfather drinks the milk the speaker brought him. Milk often symbolizes sustenance, and this moment is no exception; this moment shows the cyclical connection between sustenance and work, because sustenance allows one to produce more sustenance, to provide for one's family.

5) The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap

Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awaken in my head.

But I've no spade to follow men like them.

These lines are perhaps the best example in this poem of Heaney's talent with evocative language. Here he also alludes to his intention to bind himself to his heritage. By referring to "the curt cuts of an edge/through living roots," a sound that "awakens in [the speaker's] head," the speaker refers to the sound of a spade cutting plants out of the dirt. However, the phrase "living roots" also works metaphorically as a nod to the roots that the speaker tries to access in his family and the way he relates his own work as a writer to the work of his ancestors.

## Themes

### Inheritance

This poem focuses strongly on what the speaker has inherited from his father and his grandfather. Their work ethics and consistency stand out to him the most; he thinks of how long his father has been doing the same thing over and over, and the strength with which his grandfather dug. When the speaker says he has "no spade to follow men like them," his voice is tinged with sorrow. Yet he feels he has inherited the spirit with which they dug, even if he has chosen a different path. He tries to liken writing to digging, perhaps because breaking away from the tradition makes him feel like an outsider, like he cannot fully understand his father and grandfather. This poem is his attempts to tie himself into his heritage.

### Work

Work might be the most important theme in this poem. [The speaker](#) focuses on his own craft, as well as the crafts of his father and grandfather. He distinguishes between the different types of digging—for flowers, potatoes, or peat—and much of his language expresses the strenuous nature of the farming work. The speaker does not spend as much time explicating his own craft, but that may be because the poem itself is meant to be evidence of his skill as a writer.

### Sustenance

Sustenance appears as a significant theme in this poem. Since his father and grandfather dig for different things, the speaker focuses more on how the work they did that sustained their families than on the particular objects of their labor (though clearly the potatoes and the peat play

important roles in the speaker's memory). The bottle of milk that the speaker brings his grandfather emphasizes the importance of sustenance through sources like food, but the speaker's role carrying the milk tells the readers that family plays an important part in the idea of sustenance: sustaining a family is the goal of work, but it is also the foundation upon which every person builds his or her career.

## **Manual labor**

This poem, though its descriptions of farm work are visceral and precise, portrays farm work and digging romantically. Though the work is clearly strenuous, the speaker does not mention the toll it may have taken upon his father and grandfather. This may signify some oversight on the part of the speaker, but perhaps the speaker deliberately focuses on the work ethic and strength of his family members, instead of the cost of those attributes.

## **Speaker or Narrator, and Point of View**

An unnamed person tells the poem from a first-person perspective; whether or not Heaney means for the speaker to be himself is not clear.

## **Form and Meter**

This poem follows no specific form or meter.

## **Metaphors and Similes**

"The squat pen rests; snug as a gun" (simile)

## **Alliteration and Assonance**

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Throughout this poem Heaney uses alliteration to express the physical nature of digging; this is a little ironic, since the speaker himself does not dig and notes that he is a writer, not a farmer. He uses repeated "s" sounds in phrases like "squelch and slap/Of soggy peat" to imitate the squelching and slapping that he describes. The phrase "curt cuts of an edge" also mimics the very thing it describes with its sound. Repeated "g" sounds replicate the grinding sounds of digging.

## **Irony**

The irony in this poem is that the speaker gives a detailed description of the process of digging while acknowledging that, unlike his father and his grandfather, he is not himself a digger.

## **Genre**

Poetry

## **Setting**

The poet describes himself and describes a landscape where his father and grandfather both work, linking landscapes in the present, twenty years before, and even before that (when his grandfather worked)

## **Tone**

The tone of this poem is wistful yet firmly rooted in the present as well as the past.

## **Protagonist and Antagonist**

This poem does not have a clear antagonist; however, the speaker, his father, and his grandfather are all central to the poem.

## **Major Conflict**

The major conflict in "Digging" seems to arise from the contrast between the poet's work in the present and his ancestor's work in the past.

## **Climax**

This poem has no clear climax, but its tension comes to a head when the speaker describes his grandfather, who could "cut more turf in a day/Than any other man on Toner's bog," drinking the milk his grandchild, the speaker, has brought him and then falling back to digging. These images "awaken" in the head of the speaker, who clearly feels a very physical connection to the action of digging. He uses this memory to shed light on how his position as a writer allows him to connect viscerally to his memories of his father and grandfather, yet that same position also sets him apart from those men.

## **Foreshadowing**

The poem does not directly use foreshadowing, but the speaker says, "By God, the old man could handle a spade./Just like his old man." This suggests that the speaker will follow in the footsteps of those who come before him, if not in his choice of tool, in his mastery of his chosen tool.

## **Understatement**

## **Allusions**

## **Metonymy and Synecdoche**

## **Personification**

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.

## **Hyperbole**

### **Onomatopoeia**

Though this poem does not include any direct examples of onomatopoeia, much of the language works with sounds meant to evoke the physical tasks being described.

### **The act of digging (allegory)**

To the speaker, the digging his father and grandfather did proved their worth; he brags that his grandfather dug better than anyone else working on the same bog, and this is a point of pride for him. He compares what his grandfather and father did to his career as a writer; he says his pen is like his shovel.

### **The pen (symbol)**

The speaker's pen is the subject of an interesting transition in the poem. The first lines of the poem describe it and compare how it fits in the speaker's hand to how a gun would. The way it fits strikes a parallel, however, with the description of the shovel fitted with his father's legs and boots. This group of images is used to develop the speaker's idea of work and what symbols he associates with it.

### **Potatoes (symbol)**

Potatoes in 20th century Ireland were an important dietary staple, and they are central to the speaker's family's way of life. The speaker describes them in a manner that makes them very tangible; they root the speaker in his past. However, this is undercut by the memories of the Great Potato Famine, which the poet does not mention but that nevertheless serves as the implicit backdrop to this poem.

### **Milk (symbol)**

The milk that the speaker remembers bringing to his grandfather symbolizes sustenance and reflects the rural way the speaker grew up; by having the bottle corked "sloppily with paper," the speaker tells the reader that this milk likely came from their farm, not from a shop.