

SACAI ENG FAL Poetry Support Material: Digging (Seamus Heaney)

Digging (Seamus Heaney 1939–2013)

- 1 Between my finger and my thumb
2 **The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.** → Simile/Comparison
- 3 Under my window, a clean rasping sound
4 When the **spade sinks** into gravelly ground: → Alliteration
5 My father, digging. I look down
- 6 Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
7 Bends low, comes up twenty years away
8 Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
9 Where he was digging. → Enjambment-lines flowing without any punctuation
- 10 The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
11 Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
12 He rooted out **tall tops**, buried the bright edge deep → Alliteration
13 To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
14 Loving their cool **hardness in our hands.** → Alliteration
- 15 By God, the old man could handle a spade.
16 Just like his old man.
- 17 My grandfather cut more turf in a day
18 Than any other man on Toner's bog.
19 Once I carried him milk in a bottle
20 Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
21 To drink it, then fell to right away
22 Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
23 Over his shoulder, going down and down
24 For the good turf. **Digging.** → Why standing alone?
- 25 The cold smell of potato mould, the **squelch and slap** → Onomatopoeia (and Alliteration)
26 Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
27 Through living roots awaken in my head.
28 But I've no spade to follow men like them.
- 29 Between my finger and my thumb
30 The squat pen rests.
31 I'll dig with it.

The poet's background

Seamus Heaney is recognized as one of the major poets of the 20th century; Born in Northern Ireland; lived for many years in Dublin; The impact of his surroundings and the details of his upbringing on his work are always visible. He was the author of over 20 volumes of poetry and criticism, and edited several widely used anthologies. He won the **Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995** "for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past."

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Heaney taught at Harvard University (1985-2006) and served as the Oxford Professor of Poetry (1989-1994). He died in 2013.



As a poet from Northern Ireland, Heaney used his work to reflect upon the many troubles of the country and the often-violent political struggles that happened while he was growing up. Heaney is known for writing about the Irish struggles but especially looking at the effect it had on the Irish people. A quote by a critic: *"And his is the gift of saying something extraordinary while, line by line, conveying a sense that this is something an ordinary person might actually say."*

Summary

The poem begins with our speaker at his desk, his pen in his hand to begin writing. He gets distracted by the sound of his father outside, working in the garden, and this sends our speaker into a spiral of memories about his father working in the potato fields when the speaker was a young boy. The memory stretches even further back to his grandfather and the hard work he did as a peat harvester (there's all kinds of hard work going on). Eventually, our speaker snaps out of his daydream, and we find him back at his desk, ready to get to work on his writing.

Analysis

Lines 1-2: *Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.*

- The poem begins with an image of a hand (specifically the fingers) holding a pen. But the focus is all on the pen. The hand doesn't hold the pen; the pen rests in the hand.
- *Simile:* In his hand, the pen feels like a gun. Although it doesn't quite look the same, both holding a pen and a gun require your finger (on the trigger if you're holding a gun) and your thumb, of course.
- We typically think of writing as something peaceful and contemplative, which is what the word "snug" makes us think of – snuggled up, tight, secure.
- BUT the speaker grabs our attention by saying that writing is like holding a gun, which conjures up images of violence and unrest.
- *Assonance:* Repetition of the same vowel sound: "pen rests." Or "snug as a gun." The vowel sounds are the same, almost to the point of creating an internal rhyme.

Lines 3-4: *Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:*

- Someone outside is digging, using a spade, or shovel, and it's making a rasping sound when it cuts into the earth. Why rasping? Well, the shovel probably makes a horrible, grating sound when it enters the ground because the shovel is skimming against lots of tiny stones that make up the "gravelly ground." (Example of **alliteration**)

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• "Clean" and "rasping" is another interesting pairing of words. "Rasping" and "gravelly" work well together because they're similar in meaning – rasping means coarse and gravel actually is coarse. "Clean" however, would much more likely make us think of something smooth and polished. So how can a sound be both coarse and smooth? A "clean rasping sound" is something that makes sense. Think of a shovel being thrust quickly (and cleanly) into the ground. The sound is quick and clean, but you can detect the subtle rasp of the metal passing the tiny stones in the soil's gravel.

Line 5: *My father digging. I look down*

- So far, there have been three different tools mentioned: the pen, the gun, and the spade.
- When we step back, we see the speaker (the son) indoors, pen in hand, and outside, the father works digging at the rocky soil. Those are two very different activities

Lines 6-7: *Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away*

- Our speaker watches from the window as his dad bends, digging among the flowerbeds.
- The father seems to be working pretty hard. He is "straining," after all.
- In line 7, when the speaker's dad comes up from his gardening crouch (position you are in when digging) the speaker imagines him twenty years ago.
- What is the father digging? Flowerbeds.

Lines 8-9: *Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.*

- Our speaker remembers 20 years ago when his father was digging potatoes; Potato drills = evenly spaced rows of potatoes in a field; Can also refer to the act of drilling into the earth to make a hole in which you plant the potato.
- It seems the rhythm of the father bending and rising in his garden has caused the speaker to think back – it's the same pattern he used to follow in the potato drills, dipping down into the ground, then coming back up.
- It seems that the speaker (also the poet in this case) is the son and already grown up – making the father an old man.
- Note: there is a shift to the **past tense** here. Before this moment in the poem, we've been working in the present tense, but this shift to the past tells us we've entered a memory.

Lines 10-11: *The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.*

- The coarse boot belongs to the father, and it's probably coarse because it's a beat-up old work boot. A **lug**= top of the blade of the spade, which sticks out on either side of the shaft, or handle. Stepping on the lug and putting all your weight on it helps sink the tool into the ground, so you can dig your hole.

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- When he says the shaft is levered firmly on the inside of his father's knee, it just means that he has a good hold on it, so he won't lose his balance when he digs the spade into the earth.

Line 12: *He **rooted** out tall tops, **buried** the bright edge deep*

- The "he" still refers to the father, and we're still in that memory from twenty years ago, which we can tell because the speaker is still using the past tense.

- The speaker's father is still working on the potato drill. "Rooted out" means he found the potato tops by digging them up.

- The "bright edge" is the edge of the shovel's blade, and our speaker probably calls it bright because it's made of some sort of metal, as most spades are.

- Alliteration: "tall tops"; "buried the bright edge". The repetition of the harsh consonant sounds could make the poem and also the father's actions sound more mechanical: as if his dad is a machine as he works.

Line 13-14: *To scatter new potatoes that **we** picked,
Loving their **cool hardness** in our hands.*

- Up until this point, our speaker was talking about his father as if he were alone, but the word "we" in Line 14 shows us that there is more than one person – maybe the father and son are doing this work together. Or at the very least the son is hanging around while the father works.

- The "cool hardness" refers to the way the potato feels when it's pulled from the earth, almost like a rock. Note, too, that again the speaker is talking about the way something feels in his hand, only this time instead of a pen, it's a potato.

- hardness in our hands** = alliteration

Lines 15-16: *By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.*

- It seems that the speaker's father was really good at digging up these potatoes, and apparently his grandfather was also very good at digging. (The speaker's grandfather)

- There is another comment about tools and trade. The speaker seems to think the ability to work with one's hands is a good thing; he is paying his father and grandfather a compliment.

- "By God" is an exclamation. It grabs our attention and shows us just how much enthusiasm and admiration our speaker has for his father and grandfather's skill. Not only does work seem important to our speaker, but tradition, too – or work as part of the family tradition. He comes from a long line of diggers, and he seems pretty proud.

- These TWO lines from their own stanza – meaning these words are very important.

Lines 17-18: *My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.*

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- The speaker thinks further back into the family history to the time when his grandfather dug for turf, and evidently, was very good at it.

- A **bog** is a patch of wet, muddy ground, covered in peat, or turf, which forms the grassy top layer. The peat makes for a great fuel and fertilizer, so Irishmen used to (and some still do) harvest the peat by cutting it from the bog and saving it for later use.

- Remember: Potato farming was (and still is) huge in Ireland.

- The grandfather is digging neither for flowers nor for potatoes – he is digging for peat. So instead of decoration or food, he is digging for something that is turned into fuel.

Lines 19-20: *Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up*

- Our speaker enters the scene with his grandfather now, and he's probably quite young in this memory. It looks like the speaker takes him fresh milk with paper shoved in the top as a stopper while his grandfather works in the bog, and his grandfather takes a brief break from all his hard work to have a sip.

Lines 21-22: *To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods*

- The grandfather only allows himself a quick break for drinking the milk before getting right back to his work.

- Heaney describes how he cuts into the ground with his spade – "nicking and slicing neatly." It seems as though it is very hard labour. The grandfather's technique and efficiency are similar to what we saw from the father earlier in the poem.

- Look at the enjambment: - no punctuation break between the two lines: it's all one, continuous phrase, separated only by a line break. It's a little tricky because the line before ("He straightened up") seems like it could stand on its own. But here we have the rest of the thought.

Line 23-24: *Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.*

- We see the grandfather continuing to toil away in Toner's bog, throwing the turf over his shoulder as he goes. The "good turf" that he is trying to get hold of is the nutrient rich stuff that's good for using as fuel or fertilizer.

- Both the father and the grandfather seem to be pretty hard-working, tough men, and these lines continue to emphasize that fact by calling our attention to the grandfather's constant effort.

Lines 25-26: *The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge*

- These lines are the first half of a sentence that will be completed in line 27 – it lists the smells and sounds of digging for potatoes and peat. He brings up the smell of potato mould, the sounds of the peat bog, and the cuts of the spade as it digs down into the earth.

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- It is interesting to say that a **smell is cold**, because we usually associate hot or cold with our **touch** sense. But still, this mixing of our smelling and feeling senses doesn't seem to be too crazy. For example, when it's about to snow, there's a smell in the air that you could associate with coldness. The smell of fire might also bring up a feeling of warmth. In this case, for the speaker, the potato mould (mould) is a cold smell, probably because it could become quite cold in Ireland.

- So overall, we've got a lot of senses going on here. Our speaker is making use of sight, smell, sound, and touch imagery to give us a sense of how **this memory** makes him feel.

- Example of alliteration and onomatopoeia: We can just hear the "squelch" of the peat and the "curt cuts" into the ground.

Line 27: *Through living roots awaken in my head.*

- All the things he has just listed in lines 25-26 pop up in his head. That sounds simple enough – after all, he is watching his father dig, so why not remember these things? But what is the meaning of the line – "through living roots"?

- He's talking **literally** about the roots of a plant – flowers, potatoes, etc. But you could also definitely read "roots" to mean the **roots the speaker has to his father and grandfather's work** – as in origins, or heredity, or tradition. They are "living roots" because the memories are alive in him, our speaker, as he watches his father in the flower bed.

Line 28: *But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

- Based on how much he admires his father and grandfather, it would be easy for us to assume that the speaker would follow in their footsteps and become a digger, too.

- But that is not what happens. The speaker becomes a writer.

Lines 29-31: *Between my finger and my thumb*

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.

- The ending: The speaker circles all the way back to where he started and repeats the first two lines of the poem.

- In doing so, he manages to show he is following in the tradition of his father and grandfather. He is just using a different tool and a different method. While his dad and grandpa dug with spades, our speaker plans to dig with his pen.

- When Heaney writes "I'll dig with it," we see that the speaker is different from his father and grandfather in what and how he digs, but he is also similar in that he is trying to "get to the bottom" or "unearth" certain things too. And just as his father and grandfather dig down into the earth, perhaps our speaker wants to dig down into his past, his roots, to give proper recognition to awesome men like his dad and grandpa.

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GCSE Powerpoint Presentation

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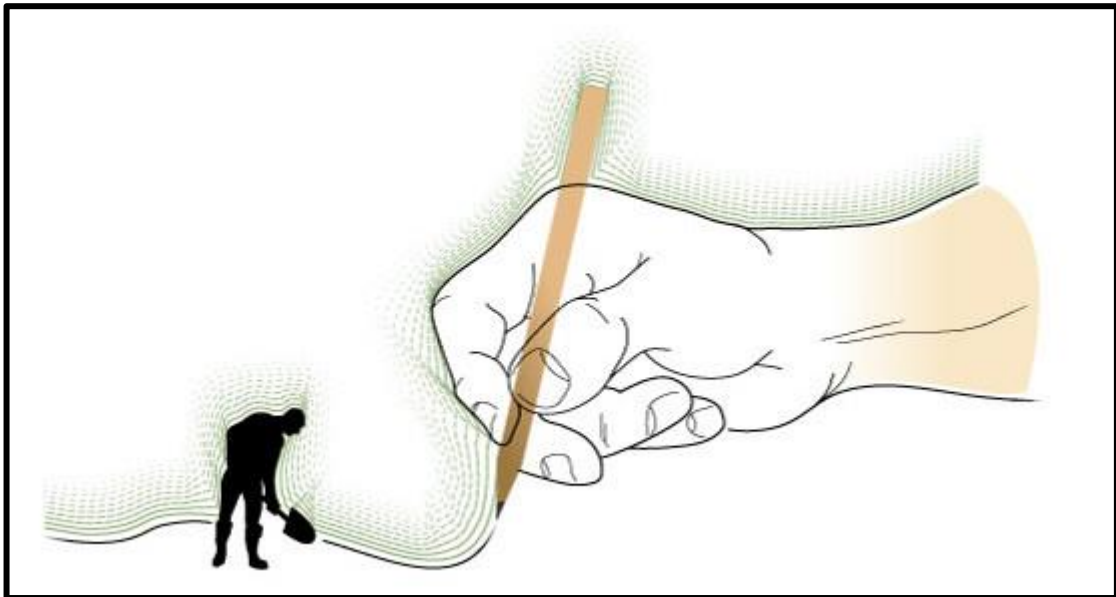
•The last lines of the poem show how the speaker carries on the tradition of work and "digging" in his own way.

The poem *Digging* by Seamus Heaney is amongst other things, a celebration of men working. His father and grandfather were good with wielding a spade to dig turf or potatoes. But Seamus is a writer, and therefore does his digging with a pen.

Digging



By Seamus Heaney



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The following has been compiled and added by Imbila:

DIGGING - QUESTIONS

Read all the notes on the web page about the relevant poem.

Answer these following questions.

QUESTIONS:

1. Explain the meaning of the simile in line 2. 2
2. Re-write lines 3-4 in your own words. 2
3. From lines 1 – 5 we read about three different tools. Mention them and describe the symbolism of each. 3
4. The speaker indicates that he might be feeling inferior to his father and grandfather. Explain this statement. 2
5. Give two reasons why you would think lines 15 – 16 is written as a separate verse. 2
6. Referring to lines 21 – 22, the poet describes his grandfather's work as 'nickling and slicing neatly', explain what you think is meant therewith. 1
7. Describe the use of the senses as the poet uses in lines 25 – 26. 3
8. Discuss the ambiguity of the possible double meaning of the word: 'roots' in line 27. 2
9. The poem end with a repetition of the first lines of the poem. Why is this significant? 3

TOTAL 20

DIGGING - MEMORANDUM

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:

1. Explain the meaning of the simile in line 2. 2

The writer is holding the pen so comfortably it feels as if he is about to shoot with a gun, which means he is ready to start writing seriously although a gun means violence, writing happens peacefully.

2. Re-write lines 3-4 in your own words. 2

Outside someone is digging with a spade. it makes a rasping sound 'gravelly ground' means small stones so it is not a soft sound.

3. From lines 1 – 5 we read about three different tools. Mention them and describe the symbolism of each. 3

*pen: the speaker is indoors busy with his pen
gun: a weapon used when ready to pull the trigger, to start something
spade: referring to the tool the dad is using outside digging the potatoes*

4. The speaker indicates that he might be feeling inferior to his father and grandfather. Explain this statement. 2

The speaker is not a farmer as his ancestors have been, he does not have a spade to dig with but he can use his pen to work with.

5. Give two reasons why you would think lines 15 – 16 is written as a separate verse. 2

*The stanza starts with the words: "By God, ..." which is an exclamation and the tone could be of admiration for the poet is pretty proud of his father and grandfather.
He is paying them a compliment because they have the ability to work with their hands.*

6. Referring to lines 21 – 22, the poet describes his grandfather's work as 'nickling and slicing neatly', explain what you think is meant therewith. 1

He describes how neatly his grandfather would cut the ground and his technique is fast and efficient.

7. Describe the use of the senses as the poet uses in lines 25 – 26. 3

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The poet refers to the senses of sound, smell and touch. Sound we can hear how the digging takes place.

Smelling he clearly describes the smell of the potato mould and peat touching: he feels the cold of the potatoes and of the temperature outside in Ireland as it snows.

8. Discuss the ambiguity of the possible double meaning of the word: 'roots' in line 27. 2

Literally it could be the root of the plant, or it could be the roots as the traditions he has with his father and grandfather. It is described as 'living roots' meaning he has living memories.

9. The poem end with a repetition of the first lines of the poem. Why is this significant? 3

The poet links the first and the end and through that he manages to show that he is just like his father and grandfather also going to work hard, just using different methods. They were working with spades and he is going to work with his pen.

TOTAL 20