

Seamus Heaney, Digging with the pen

Seamus Heaney, recipient of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature, was born in 1939 into a large catholic farming family in country Derry, Northern Ireland. From the outset Heaney's poetry has negotiated the concerns of a divided land and its religious conflicts the poet's approach being to delve into history and myth, all with a keen ear for the rhythms of Irish speech and for the rich possibilities of poetic language. First appeared in Heaney's first poetry collection, Death of a Naturalist (1966), "Digging" can be described as vocation poem, in which a poet declares a firm decision to pursue a life in writing.

This poem gives voice to Heaney's desire to explore or delve into, the past, while serving also to embark. "Digging" shifts seamlessly to childhood, and through memory and allusion, to the more distant past, evoking the continuity of life in a small farming community, and, within that community, the importance of the family and its sense of history and time, defined by a certain permanence over the long years.

A non-rhyming couplet, the opening lines set the scene giving a close up for the reader of the speaker's finger and thumb holding a pen (with which he is writing). This pen is powerful and full of life changing potential the reference to a gun suggests that it can fire bullets symbolic ones of course.

Note the slant rhyme of thumb/gun which loosely binds the lines, whilst enjambment sends the reader straight from the end of the first line onto the second.

The next 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 speaker can hear someone digging into a soil. It's his father. It must be a familiar sound to the speaker, he knows it's him even before he looks down. Again enjambment helps the flow of meaning between lines and also between stanzas.

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 fourth stanza is rich in description, as the speaker paints the image of his father digging through the potato beds. Five lines, the close up culmination of all his father's spade work over the years. The speaker was there, observing the hard work, the detail as his father went about digging up the new potatoes.

Verbs like nestled, rooted and buried sit firmly in the rural landscape, whilst boot knee and hands bring a strong, physical dimension.

The fifth stanza is comprised of just two simple lines as the speaker marvels at his father. The reader is then transported even further through time as the speaker then conjures images of his grandfather performing a similar task.

There's a kind of rough pride in the way the speaker boasts about their ability. You can picture the family out in the field, working away in primitive fashion, the father digging, the children helping out, picking up the 'spuds' as they were unearthed.

The eight lines contained in the sixth stanza are the longest in the poem. The opening two lines are a child's tribute to an idealized iconic figure within the family, the local hero, the grandfather, champion turf cutter. Toner's bog is the name given to a piece of peat bog not far from Heaney's birthplace, the village of Bellaghy in country Derry.

This stanza brings the reader intimately into a detailed scene where grandfather is out on the bog with his spade and in comes someone with a drink, milk in a bottle. The memory is vivid, the speaker's observation as keen as the slicing edge of the spade.

Heaney's use of enjambment in this stanza is particularly apt, working within the syntax to produce relevant flow and pause. Note the repeat of the title word.

The seventh stanza returns the reader to present day, as the speaker sits at his writing desk. The memories are so vivid and alive in the speaker that he can actually smell the freshly dug potatoes and the "soggy peat". He can hear the sound the peat made as it was cut. The speaker realizes that unlike his father and grandfather, he has no spade to follow in their footsteps.

The family roots are cut, metaphorically and, in his memory, physically. He no longer nods the spade because he is not made of the same stuff as the men of old. This is the enlightenment, the acknowledgement.

What he does have, however, is revealed in the eighth and final stanza, which contains only three lines. Much is contained in these three simple lines. First, Heaney uses repetition, as once again, he describes holding his pen between his finger and thumb. Heaney's diction here is also curious, as he uses the word "squat" to describe his instrument. While it can describe the physical appearance of the pen itself, Heaney could also be showing the connection between himself and his father and grandfather, both of whom would have to squat in order to properly dig for the potatoes and peat moss. The last line, "I'll dig with it", signifies that while Heaney realizes his instrument is different from previous generations, he is still completing an arduous task. While his father and grandfather dug for potatoes and moss, he is digging for the right word, constantly attempting to create sustenance through his words.