

Comparing and
contrasting "digging"
by seamus heaney,
and "he was" by
richard wil...



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' Digging' and ' He was' both examine father-son relationships with a sense of pride and admiration. However, both poems can also be read as an exploration and a challenge to what is considered to be " art". Throughout the two poems there are repeated references to the artistry of poetry and working in the field.

The essay will explore how this is achieved, the similarities and differences of two poems. The connection between the poetry writing and working on the field is repeatedly linked in both poems. Indeed a variety of poetic devices are used to reinforce this, for example, the " hoe" in ' He was' is the father's tool, just as the " squat pen" is the writer's tool in ' Digging'. This emphasizes the closeness between writing a poem and digging. Stanza three of ' Digging' and stanza two of ' He was', both refer to the physical labour of their father's work. Indeed the connection between digging and poetry is once again reinforced by the " rhythm" and " sound" of the father's work.

The father's work has a rhythm to it just as it is often necessary for the poet to find a rhythm through his or her choice of words. For example, in ' Digging', the poet describes the movements made by his father as " When the spade sinks into gravelly ground" and " Nicking and slicing neatly", and in ' He was', the poet describes the sounds of his father working, " The chug, choke, and high madrigal wheeze". Both poets feel a deep sense of admiration and respect for the fathers. The speakers admire the way in which their fathers work, and are astounded at their skillful movements.

I think there is a hint of jealousy, but the level of respect beats that. In ' Digging', the speaker describes his grandfather as the best; " My

Grandfather cut more turf in a day / Than any other man on Toner's bog". It is true that the speaker appears boastful to a certain degree, but I think the speaker wishes to express his true feelings towards his grandfather, that he was a man who tried his best. In ' He was', the speaker describes his father as " But he was all but dumb" and this remark certainly appears boastful.

There is also a child-like tone of voice in that quote; it is as though the speaker believes his father is the supreme, just like a child thinks that ' Action Man' is the best. It underlines the deep awe and praise the speaker has for his father. The skillful artistry of the fathers working is clearly highlighted in both poems. In ' Digging', the speaker describes his grandfather as working extremely skillfully, as he states, " Nicking and slicing neatly, ...

going down and down / For the good turf. Digging. " It is true that a poet also has to ' dig' for words in his head, " going down and down / For the good" words. The same points has been made in ' He was' when the speaker describes his father planting " a young orchard with so great care / In that last year that none was lost," The poet also has to search for appropriate words and " plant" them with " great care" in order to write a poem. The childhood memories of the speaker are frequently reinforced through the use of onomatopoeia.

The child-like sounds of " Chug, choke" and " madrigal wheeze" in ' He was' and the " clean rasping sound" in ' Digging' emphasizes a happy and content childhood memory. Both poets describe the sounds of the fathers' work, and once again the use of alliteration reinforces the childhood memories. For

example, "The spade sinks into gravelly ground" in 'Digging' and "Of the spray-cart bumping below" in 'He was' highlights the memories of sounds the speaker heard when he was young. Certainly the first two stanzas of 'Digging' and the first stanza of 'He was' emphasizes a secure, warm, and safe atmosphere. In particular, this sense of security reinforces both the very close relationship between father and son and the two art forms.

In both poems there is a sense of magic and fantasy. In stanza three of 'Digging' this occurs when the poet imagines his father as he works on the flower beds twenty years ago. The digging brings on a magical quality, "He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep". This dream like atmosphere is also repeated in 'He was' when it states, "Until he went in the dead of fall / To the drowsy underground." It is as if in 'He was', his father is not really dead, rather he lives on and his voice can be found in the "young orchard", just as the poet's voice is heard in his work. I feel strongly that both poems hint an underlying sense of growing and working extremely hard, to raise a family under whatever the condition.

I think that both poems are about the poet reconstructing the pieces of memories which they think their fathers had to do to raise them up to what they are at present. In 'Digging', the speaker describes the hard works done by his father and grandfather. His father digged "potatoes" his grandfather digged "turfs" and also the words, "Through living roots awaken in my head" which I think means that Seamus Heaney's family tree has continued through the hard work done by the poet's ancestors. In 'He was', the writer describes the work of his father as "Having planted a young orchard with so great care" which I think refers to all the work done by his father to raise
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him, the " young orchard". Although both poems possess somewhat similar qualities, there are also many differences between two poems.

Initially the structure of both poems is very different. ' He was' is very structured with an ' ABCBCA' rhyming scheme. For example, in the first stanza; " a brown old man with a green thumb: I can remember the scream on stones of his hoe, The chug, choke, and high madrigal wheezeOf the spray-cart bumping below The sputtery leaves of the apple trees, But he was all but dumb" It is fairly clear that the first line rhymes with the last line, and the second line rhymes with the forth line, and the third line rhymes with the fifth line, i. e. , the " ABCBCA" scheme. The effect of this subtle and complex rhyming scheme is that it hints at the father's creative and rhythm of work! It is highlighted by the fact that the speaker's father does not communicate a great deal about his work, for example, " For all I heard / Of all his labors, I can now recall / Never a single word".

In contrast, ' Digging' appears far more conversational and has no continuance rhyming scheme. The irregular length of lines to each stanza reinforces a series of hesitation and checks, which emphasizes the perfecting of an art form just like poetry and father digging. For example, By God, the old man could handle a spade. / Just like his old man.

" The full stop at the end of the first sentence makes the reader pause a little while before reading on to the second sentence. This interrupts the fluidly of the poem, and conveys a sense of interlude, just like the way a person stops to think about the past memories, and there is also a hint of underlying sense of deep pride, emphasized by the word, " By God". This stresses the

fact that writing and digging can not be achieved through one standard process with just no thought attached to it. ' He was' focuses upon religious imagery in order to compare how Jesus' work still lives on through Biblical stories, just as his father's work lives on through the orchard, and the speaker's work lives on in poetry.

The last stanza is also reminiscent of the resurrection, just as Jesus rose from the dead, so does the speaker's father through the " livening clay". The effect of religious imagery is uplifting and rejoiceful. There is no sense of sadness or of closure, because the poet believes his father's voice lives on. Indeed even though both poems appear at first to be commenting on the break up of the male line, after studying the poem my response changed, and I read it as a description of past male voices which can still be heard and consequently this becomes a cause or reason for commemoration. Both poems recount memories of the past, but they do so in different ways.

' Digging' draws on historical recollections in order to accentuate his father's skill. The poet refers to the Irish famine and the way in which " My Grandfather cut more turf in a day than any other man on Toner's bog". Ireland is the one of only countries in Europe that still have turf bogs. In this quote the reader can sense a lot of pride and admiration on the part of the Grandson.

He informs us that there used to be a lot of turf cutters in his day. So, when the poet writes, " But I've no spade to follow men like them", there may be several reasons for this. For example, one of the reasons could be that he does not want to dig, even though he shows a great respect towards his

father and grandfather digging. It may be because turf cutters are no longer needed, thus the world is changing and "men like them" are no longer required.

As there is a clear link between Ireland and digging turfs, it is as though his grandfather represents the best of his country in his skillful work and the speaker represents Ireland in the past and now through his poetry, for example, "But I've no spade to follow men like them", but his "squat pen rests". Furthermore, 'Digging' also brings in the unpleasant memories and problems, the conflicts in Ireland. 'Digging' begins with the lines, "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun." I think these two phrases are important and meaningful. It is simile, comparing a pen to the gun.

I think he is trying to tell us that he feels holding a pen is as comfortable as holding a gun. This suggests several points; initially, it could mean that the speaker could have some experience using guns - it is true that Ireland had a lot of conflicts and battles, and Seamus Heaney may have been involved in one of them. It could also mean that the writer has seen the gun for a long period of time. Perhaps, he may be implying that he have tried holding a gun and he felt comfortable holding it at that time, but he decided to choose the pen rather than the gun to represent and fight for his country, as a different sort of weapon - a non-violent weapon.

However, in 'He was', there are no accounts of any conflicts or problems, but it appears that this poem focuses on the personal issues and aspects of the speaker's father. I think the way or method each poem illustrates the

memories of the past is different. In ' Digging', the speaker often writes certain words to intensify a certain movement or action. For example, " the coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft / Against the inside knee was levered firmly. " The use of words, " Levered" and " firmly" makes the whole phrase seem more realistic. Another example is, " The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch, slap / Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge.

" The two words which strikes the reader's mind is " squelch" and " slap". These two words suggest someone moving through thick mud, and it also suggest that it was a very cold day. I think these two lines are very interestingly described by the speaker because the scene is clearly conjured up in my mind, almost like seeing a photo. I think these lines have such an effect because the writer uses the words such as " cuts", " soggy", " edge" and " curt". I feel those word are sharp and as a result of this, they make a clearer and sharper picture in my head.

Therefore, I think that ' Digging' shows a more direct and clear pictures of the past memories. However, ' He was' has a slightly different effect on the reader. I think every line is like a dream or a fantasy - almost magical and unreal. The use of rhyming scheme underlines this feeling, because as a result of the rhyming scheme, the poem is read very smoothly and soothingly. In addition, the some words accentuate this ambience, such as " drowsy underground", " high madrigal wheeze" and " rose in sparrowy air" which conveys a sense of almost relaxing and heavenly atmosphere.

Furthermore, the religious context at the last stanza reinforces this atmosphere, the idea of Jesus rising from the dead, " And found voice of his

buried hands / Rose in the sparrowy air" which is also associated with the religious imagery and the image of heaven, where Jesus is.

Perhaps it is as a result of the above point, but I think ' He was' poem is mysterious and enigmatic. In ' Digging', the poet clearly indicates who he is writing the about - his father and his grandfather. However, there is no one specifically mentioned in ' He was' poem, but just " He was a brown old man with a green thumb". The reader is not absolutely sure who it is that the speaker is referring to, but I assumed that it is his father because of the close relationship illustrated in the poem.

In addition, the " brown old man" seems as though he has never been noticed by anyone else than the speaker, like an enigma. He appears to have been seen working for the good of the nature, and gone, just like the wind. I think the poet meant to convey this impression, that his father was like the nature and an important part of the nature, almost like a saviour who saves the nature and dies, resembling the leaves a little, which grows in summer, and then dies and returns to the soil in autumn, as the poet states, " Until he went in the dead of fall", that his father was a part of the nature as he dedicated himself solely to gardening; " Of all his labors, I can now recall / Never a single word". I think one of the major difference in two poems are that in ' He was', the speaker's father is dead where as the father in ' Digging' is still well and alive, even though he has now retired. The death of Richard Wilbur's father is suggested by the phrases, " He was a brown old man" which is clearly a past tense and " Until he went in the dead of fall" which clearly highlights that the speaker's father is deceased. I think this is

the reason there are more uses of religious imagery and the writing is more poetic, where as ' Digging' is more conversational and direct.

In ' Digging', the speaker ends the poem with the words, " I'll dig with it". I think the poet reflects on what he can do as an individual. I think the poet is trying to illustrate the connection between his father and grandfather digging and himself, that they are all skilled in what they do as a job. In ' He was' however, the ending of the poem has some sort of cathartic feeling and atmosphere. The fact that he links his poem to the religious imagery has an effect of cleansing the mind of the speaker, rather than firmly deciding what the speaker is going to do as demonstrated in ' Digging'. Both poems express a true sense of awe and respect for their ' father' work, and there is a very real sense of celebration running through each poem.

This theme lends itself to very powerful historical and religious images which emphasizes the legacy of fathers work to the soil. The closeness between father and son is repeated in the connection between writing and working in the field.