

# Digging up the past



Seamus Heaney's poem "Digging," an eight-stanza poem written in free verse, is the first in his collection of poems entitled *Death of a Naturalist*, which was published in 1966. Written in first-person narrative, this circularly structured poem utilizes formalistic elements to reconcile the fact that the speaker will not follow in his forebears' footsteps as a common laborer. However, subtle hints that the speaker does not meet certain aspects of the male stereotype manifest themselves throughout the poem. The poem's vivid imagery helps reveal that the speaker is trying to rationalize and justify his career choice, but it also unveils his respect for digging, the trade of his ancestors. In the second line of the poem, the speaker describes the pen as resting between his thumb and index finger "snug as a gun" (line 2). This simile suggests that the pen feels warm and comfortable in his hands, yet at the same time, it hints at the pen's capacity to powerfully fire words, much like a gun powerfully fires bullets. The poet continues this same idea of something fitting when he refers to his father's boot as "nestled on the lug" of the spade (10). The speaker wonders whether or not he — a well-educated writer — fits in with his ancestors, manual laborers whom he admires. His admiration shines through in the other key image in "Digging": the father's "straining rump," which is described as "stooping in rhythm through potato drills" (7-9). The precision and rhythm of his movements match the precision and rhythm of his spade at work. At this early stage of the poem, the speaker questions whether writing can match the precision, productivity, and odd beauty of manual labor. The poet uses language to accentuate his thoughts on this subject. For example, all of the words in line two — the line that describes his "squat" pen — are short and squat to emphasize the description of the pen (2). When the speaker hears the sound of his father's

spade digging, he allows the reader to hear it too in the word “rasping” (3), an onomatopoeia, and in the hard alliterative sound of “gravelly ground” (4). The speaker also utilizes alliteration to highlight the sharp, precise sound of his father’s spade entering the ground when he describes the “tall tops” and how his father “buried the bright edge deep” (12). The precision of his forebears’ blade is captured again when the poet writes of the “nicking and slicing,” an onomatopoeia that brings the blade’s motion to life to the reader. As the speaker’s father digs deeper, the words become more metallic, and the hollow phrase “down and down” produces an echo that emphasizes the depth of the hole (23). When the smell of potato mold surfaces, the descriptions shift, evoking an image of dampness. The sounds change to words such as “squelch and slap,” an alliterative and onomatopoeic device used to mimic the noise made in wet clay (25). This richly detailed language clearly illustrates the poet’s admiration for the work of his forefathers, but it also begs the question, Why is the speaker so uncertain about being a writer? A gender critic would answer that writing is not as masculine a profession as digging or any other type of manual labor. The almost surfeit of admiration of men certainly warrants a gender-based criticism. Indeed, Heaney’s descriptions of the speaker’s father and grandfather embody the male stereotype of the strong and sturdy man. He describes them with words such as “straining” (6), “coarse” (10), “firm” (11), and “rooted” (12). While a Formalist might construe these words as evidence of the speaker’s adoration for his forefathers, the gender critic notes that these descriptions create an image of roughness, strength, and sturdiness — the alpha male stereotype at its height. Yet interestingly, this description stands in stark contrast to the speaker’s own image, that of a meek, weaker man.

While the language describing the spades is full of praise and admiration, Heaney's pen is only "squat" and is wholly unimpressive (2). At the beginning of the poem, the reader sees Heaney far removed from manual labor, looking down from his window where he is writing as his father works in the garden below. The next time the reader sees Heaney, he is delivering milk to his grandfather instead of working in the fields himself. These differences between Heaney and his forefathers highlight the male stereotype promulgated in the poem. However, also noteworthy is that Heaney does not seem to actually feel pressured to conform to the male stereotype; in the end, he determines that writing is a legitimate profession — and one worthy of his time and pursuit. For example, the poem starts and ends with the same lines "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests" (1-2), but the first stanza ends with "as snug as a gun" (3), while the last stanza concludes with "I'll dig with it" (32). Here Heaney has discovered that his pen is just as powerful of a tool as a spade, breathing life into the age-old axiom, "the pen is mightier than the sword." In doing so, Heaney affirms that he is going to choose his own unique career path as a writer. However, according to Heaney, though he is pursuing a different career, he is still a digger, just like the rest of his family. While his forefathers literally dug into the earth, Heaney realizes that by choosing the pen over the spade, he is in fact digging up the memories of his ancestors. The extended metaphor of digging and roots in the poem helps Heaney convey his conclusion: while we should remember and consider our roots, we should chase our own dreams.