

Love of land
in seamus heaney's
digging



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In Seamus Heaney's short autobiographical poem, *Digging*. Heaney describes his strong feeling towards the land on which he grew up on and the role that he and his relatives played on it, but also his untraditional choice to write rather than dig. He grew up on a farm and the family of ten (Heaney being the oldest of eight) was supported by the father who sold cattle and dug soil for a living. The poem enables a reader to understand how Heaney felt towards his father and grandfather, the land that has supported them, and the act of digging or working the farm. It also describes how Heaney doesn't want to follow the same path as they did and instead will metaphorically use his pen to dig. This is evident in the different use of tense, the use of a very significant metaphor; and very vivid imagery used to create contrast between the spade and the pen.

Through the structure and tense of the poem, Heaney's strong feelings towards the land and the work of his father and grandfather are quite apparent. The poem begins in a reflective mood in present tense and features Heaney looking out of his window, watching his father dig. Then the poem switches into past tense. This emphasizes Heaney's strong feelings towards the land and the work that his father and grandfather did because it proves that he isn't just witnessing events but also remembering past events. This is also when Heaney states " But I've no spade to follow men like them." (line 28) This means that Heaney doesn't want to dig like his father and grandfather but still has large amounts of respect for them (as seen in line 15 and 16), " By God, the old man could handle a spade | Just like his old man." Heaney then links back to his original statement of " Between my finger and my thumb | The squat pen rests." (line 29-30) but

adds the line “ I’ll dig with it,”(line 31) to further reinforce his choice of writing.

The pen in this poem strikes a very important role in the delivery of Heaney’s message. It symbolizes Heaney’s work and how he will leave a mark in the world. For Heaney potato farming and digging is important and he sees it as an exact craft, but he doesn’t feel that it is right for him. In line 31 the metaphor of “ I’ll dig with it,” is used to finish the poem. The digging in this example refers to writing, or more specifically digging with words to create emotions, and ‘ it’ refers to the pen he uses or writing in general. In other words, Heaney describes himself as being able to dig with the pen metaphorically and stepping away from his family’s traditional tool. Also, the spade as a whole may represent a traditional, respectable and down to earth way of earning money. The reason Heaney compares digging with writing may be him trying to prove that what he is doing is equally as important as digging. The metaphor of the pen and the spade work well to describe Heaney’s feelings towards digging and the choice he had to make.

The difference between the pen and the spade is highlighted by Heaney’s use of imagery. He continually uses very vivid language to describe his father’s and grandfather’s exceptional ability to use a spade, which furthermore creates contrast between the pen and the spade. For example, the digging is described as “ The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap | Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge” (line 25-26) and “ Under my window, a clean rasping sound | When the spade sinks into gravelly ground.” (line 3-4) When the spade is described, a reader will feel as if they are almost there with the author and are witnessing the sounds and smells.

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While the pen is being described as, “ Between my finger and my thumb | The squat pen rests; snug as a gun” (line 1-2). The pen represents a creative, calm and intellectual power, whereas the spade represents a strong, active, physical power. The contrast between the two and the use of imagery highlights Heaney's strong love for both the pen and the spade.

In conclusion, Heaney's love towards both the land and digging is very well mirrored with his perhaps untraditional preference to writing. The three language features that promote this view are; the different uses of Tense, the use of a very significant metaphor; and very vivid imagery used to create contrast between the spade and the pen. This autobiographical poem is very significant to Heaney's upbringing, and has inspired many of his people, along with people from around the world to take similar choices to his and essentially chose the ' pen' over the ' spade'. Although Heaney may not be with us anymore his legacy will continue for years to come.