

A comparative  
analysis of 'digging'  
and 'follower' by  
seamus heaney  
essay sample



In considering these two poems, it is important to recognise their context within Irish literature and the history of the country. Many critics, including Robert Lowell, deem Seamus Heaney to be 'the most important Irish poet since Yeats'. The Northern Ireland disputes between the Catholics and Protestants have often inspired Irish literature. William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney were both awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for work derived from their experience of the struggles.

Yeats believed his poems and plays could 'engender a national unity capable of transfiguring the Irish nation' often through themes deeply rooted in Irish history and mythology. Heaney also had great interest in the conflicts, and felt himself to be 'symbolically placed' deep in the cultural divide, since his birth in 1939. He spent his childhood as the eldest in a strongly Roman Catholic family, living on a farm that bordered a large Protestant estate in Belfast.

However, unlike Yeats, who hoped his work would be capable of unifying the Catholic and Protestant cultures, Heaney simply provided a much-acclaimed account of the tragedies, unbiased of any political inclination. His work typically encompasses two main themes: feelings of anger and grievance for those whom he lost as victims to the country's divide, and recollections of his childhood. 'Follower' and 'Digging' are both poems about his experiences as a boy. The verse incorporates his renowned use of colloquial language and agricultural terms, such as 'sods' and 'furrow'.

This use of expression makes his poems more accessible to those who relate to his characteristically Irish upbringing in a farming community. Seamus

Heaney is sometimes compared to the English poet and novelist, Thomas Hardy, for his rich rural imagery, used to convey universal themes. However, in these two poems this imagery is used to communicate the more personal aspects of character and relationships. In 'Follower', his father's precise and proficient nature is reflected in the 'polished sod[s]', which 'rolled over without breaking', that he created.

Yet, Heaney 'stumbled in his hob-nailed wake, Fell sometimes on the polished sod', indicating his feelings of inadequacy in relation to his father, 'An expert' in the agricultural domain. At the end of the poem it is '[his] father who is 'stumbling behind [him], and will not go away'. I feel this is a reference to the memory of his father, symbolising Heaney's guilt that he will not fulfil expectations to continue the family tradition of farming, or bitterness that his father's reputation will not allow him to break free from his perception of his own 'stumbling' inadequacy.

The sombre heavy sounding assonance of words such as 'furrow' and 'ground' supports this interpretation that 'Follower' is a poem of regret and disappointment. 'Digging' proves to have a more positive tone. It shows Heaney's realisation that he 'has no spade to follow men like them [his father and grandfather]', yet recognises he can wield the tool of his own profession, 'the squat pen'. In fact, his use of the simile of the pen resting 'snug as a gun' 'Between my finger and my thumb' suggests that his literature is more powerful and potentially dangerous.

He is determined that his work could have an even greater impact than 'the spade [that] sinks into gravelly ground', by its power to influence the mind.

Both poems denote Heaney's admiration for his father and grandfather. In 'Follower' the majestic phrase, 'His shoulders globed' suggests not only the size and shape of the figure that the young Seamus Heaney looked up at, but also the metaphorical notion that his father meant 'the world' to him. A nautical theme is also developed throughout the poem, continuing the concept of the respect he had for his father.

His father is symbolised as a ship, with his globed shoulders 'like a full sail strung'. His father represents the sanctuary and security in his life similar to a sailing ship in the vast ocean. The metaphor is extended in describing the ship leaving a 'hob-nailed wake' in the sea, mirroring the 'shafts and furrows' imprinted on the fields by his father's plough. In 'Digging' Heaney uses the monosyllabic, colloquial phrase 'By god, the old man could handle a spade' to emphasise the impression his father made upon him as a child.

In 'Follower', the use of harsh crisp sounds such as 'fit' and 'pluck' imitate the 'clicking tongue' of Heaney's father, used to control the horses, and the atmosphere of expertise and accuracy surrounding him. In both poems Heaney uses literary techniques to create vivid portrayal of labouring on the land. In 'Digging' onomatopoeic sounds are used to conjure direct images of the 'nicking', the 'squelch', the 'slap' and the 'rasping' of the activity.

Heavy sounding words, such as 'lug' emphasise the intensity of the manual work. 'Follower' uses a rolling, unforced rhythm, echoing that of the horse-plough's gentle plod. In summary, study of these poems reveals ideas stemming from Heaney's childhood. His feelings of regret and inadequacy that he cannot continue in his family's agricultural tradition are

demonstrated by the use of language, metaphor and sombre assonance in 'Follower'.

'Digging' shows a progression in his thoughts to positive aspirations of success in an alternative vocation, and hope that he will someday achieve the sound integrity and craftsmanship that he admired in his father. Both poems express Heaney's need to disregard 'stumbling' memories of his father and cut 'Through living roots' of past generations, in order to fulfil his own destiny as a writer. His poems offer optimism to many who may feel unworthy in their ancestors' 'broad shadow', that we may all find our own satisfaction in life, whilst honouring the achievements of past generations.