

Digging, death of a  
naturalist, the barn,  
blackberry-picking,  
churning day, follo...



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Seamus Heaney was a poet who, as a child, grew up in a catholic Irish family in protestant Northern Ireland. His family was a farming family which lived in a rural environment, and thus this is the sort of world which surrounded Heaney as child growing up. The time is also important. Heaney was a child through out the 1940's, and the early 1950's. Therefore, technology was extremely limited, especially in rural areas, and the environment surrounding Heaney was a very traditional, farming one.

Heaney presents us with a view of his childhood world which is complicated and deep, and which contains several aspects. The first of these aspects is how he sees things differently to their stereotype. When presenting us with his view of the world surrounding him as a child, he tends to employ a sense of imagination and the use of a different perspective. An example of this is available in the poem, 'The Barn', where he takes standard farm tools and items and describes them as "implements" in an "armoury" hoarded by "the musty dark".

Churning Day is another example, where he takes what seems to be a standard, ordinary action, and describes it as something brilliant and special. However, his different perspective of certain objects and actions are more apparent in other poems. In the poem 'Digging' he takes, what would be described as a normal situation where he was sitting in his room watching his dad digging, and changes it into something perfect, something beautiful.

The use of words such as "nestled" in lines such as "The coarse boot nestled on the lug," clearly show how Heaney is taking a standard action and describing it to us as an art form. He does it again, later in the poem, when <https://assignbuster.com/digging-death-of-a-naturalist-the-barn-blackberry-picking-churning-day-follower-the-diviner-thatcher-the-forge-undine-and-at-a-potato-digging-essay-sample/>

describing to us his grandfather, and how he “ fell to right away nicking and slicing neatly”, having paused only briefly for a drink. By describing his grandfather’s work in this way, he suggests there is a sense of professionalism and creativeness through something which is normally seen as mundane and ordinary.

He displays this sense of a perspective different to that of the ordinary in another poem, Undine, where he describes how the simple action of clearing drains can be perceived as a physical, loving and even sexual relationship between the female water spirit Undine and the farmer, clearing the drains out. The poem is set as if it was from the perspective of the water spirit and lines such as “ gratefully, dispersing myself for love” and “ Then he walked by me. I rippled and churned” clearly show how Heaney is trying to present this as such an apparent relationship.

Examine how, the water flowing through the drains is actually Undine, dispersing herself for love, and how when the farmer walks past her she ripples and churns. Of course, there is no actual relationship involved here, however, Heaney provides us with a perspective that sees things differently and therefore portrays such a relationship. The second aspect of the view presented to us by Heaney is the continual referral to a sense of change. Time and time again throughout his poetry, Heaney refers to change.

If we are to provide examples of this, then we are once again taken back Heaney’s poem, Digging. At the beginning, Heaney presents himself as sitting at his desk in a room, with a “ squat pen” resting between his finger and thumb, “ snug as a gun”. This is describing the pen as something  
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negative and essentially bad. However, after describing his father and grandfather's work to us, he tells us that he is still sat there with the pen and that he'll "dig with it". This represents a sense of change, as he has now not described the pen as gun and therefore not described it negatively.

There seems to be a sense of realisation that Heaney will be unable to dig physically, and thus he'll dig with his pen. Of course, his digging will be digging into the past and unearthing himself. This sense of digging and self-exploration is portrayed throughout all his poetry, however, we will approach this later. A second example of this is presented in the poem 'Death of a Naturalist'. This poem is presented from the child's perspective, and this can be determined from the use of phrases such as "the mammy frog" and "the daddy frog", which are of course childhood phrases.

In the first verse of the poem, we are told how the frogspawn of "jellied specks" would be collected into jam jars and then placed in school where the "fattening dots burst into nimble-swimming tadpoles". This is all fine and very well in the first stanza of the poem, however, the second stanza changes. The very use of the word "Then" as the first word of the second stanza suggests a change. Suddenly, everything turns very negative. There is a "coarse croaking that I [Heaney] had not heard".

The "dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked"; which suggests that these frogs were cocked and poised like guns or weapons. And then, finally, Heaney "sickened, turned, and ran". Here there is a clear sense of change from the first stanza where Miss Walls the teacher would sit and tell the children how the "daddy frog was called a bullfrog". There are several other examples of <https://assignbuster.com/digging-death-of-a-naturalist-the-barn-blackberry-picking-churning-day-follower-the-diviner-thatcher-the-forge-undine-and-at-a-potato-digging-essay-sample/>

this sense of change, such as the change from the past to the present in the poem 'The Forge' where the once empty road is now full of traffic and cars and where time has therefore moved on.

Another example would be 'Blackberry-Picking' where the beautiful blackberries picked change into rotting, stinking fruit, and almost make young Heaney in the poem cry. However, the other major example of this sense of change is within the poem 'At a Potato Digging'. 'At a Potato Digging' goes through several different sections, each one bringing a sense of change. The first section tells of the present (you can tell this from the description of objects such as mechanical diggers) and how the labourers work in an almost religious way when their "heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black mother.

The second section provides a detailed and sensory description of the potato, which show "white as cream" when split by a spade. The third section details the potato famine of 1845 and how millions of people starved to death as they were dependant on the potato ("a people hungering from birth"). The fourth section takes us back to where the poem started, with the modern day workers gratefully consuming their lunch. The poem essentially describes the differences between the present and the past, and in doing so provides many messages.

This is a perfect example of the sense of change Heaney places in his view presented to us. 'At a Potato Digging' describes the differences between how dependant the people of the 19th and early 20th century were on the potato crop, not only for economy but for survival, whereas the farmers now <https://assignbuster.com/digging-death-of-a-naturalist-the-barn-blackberry-picking-churning-day-follower-the-diviner-thatcher-the-forge-undine-and-at-a-potato-digging-essay-sample/>

who have mechanical diggers etc. simply rely on the potato for economical purposes. Heaney, throughout the view he presents to us, identifies with an apparent relationship between the labouring/farming man and the actual land itself. This relationship is described through his poetry in a primarily religious way.

However, he also, in the poem Undine, tells us of a physical and loving relationship that can be seen, through either his imagination or through his perspective. Lines in Undine such as " Then he walked by me. I rippled and churned", as mentioned before, illustrate this apparent relationship. The religious relationship he portrays to us can be seen in many poems. ' The Diviner' tells us about a man, known as the Diviner, who held a " forked hazel stick" which was " cut from the green hedge" by the " arms of the V" and circled the terrain professionally.

This ' diviner', through a special relationship with the land, as described to us through the poem, is able to tell, through the vibration of a stick, where water is underground. However, when " bystanders... ask to have a try" the rod lies " dead in their grasp" until the diviner holds their hands and as a result, " the hazel stirred". The religious relationship is described well in the poem ' At a Potato Digging'. Here, Heaney compares the work of labourers in a potato field as religious worship.

Examine the following verses: Tall for a moment but soon stumble back To fish for a new load from the crumbled surf. Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black Mother. Processional stooping through the turf.

Rekurs mindlessly as autumn. Centuries Of fear and homage to the famine  
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god Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees, Make a seasonal altar of the sod. " In the third line of the first verse the use of words such as bow, bend and fumble suggest a certain sense of humility and worship towards the ' black mother' or Mother Nature.

This is only strengthened by the use of the phrase ' processional stooping' in the fourth line. In the second verse, the phrase ' Recurs mindlessly as autumn' suggests that this work is not thought about and is repetitive, like worship. The referrals to humility and the fear and homage of the famine god later on in the second verse simply strengthen the image of a religious relationship between the workers and the land. The fact that the labourers are reliant on the land, Mother Nature and the famine god for economics and survival, in this situation, is ironic.

The final aspect of the view presented to us by Heaney which must be examined is the constant feel of alienation between himself and the agricultural world of farming and rural lifestyle. He provides us with several examples of description which indicates to us he feels/felt this way. For example, in ' The Barn', he takes an ordinary farm barn, a building which almost every single farm has, and converts it through his poetry into something horrifying and evil, using lines such as " cobwebs clogging up your lungs" and " the dark gulfed like a roof space".

In ' Death of a Naturalist' he describes later in the poem how evil the frogs had become with their " blunt heads farting" and how they were " angry frogs" who were " dam gross-bellied". Many of his poems air this feeling of

alienation he has with the rural world, even in ' Digging' he describes how  
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his father and his grandfather worked so hard digging, and probably farming etc. yet he is working inside, with a “squat pen” resting between his finger and thumb, instead of a spade.