

## Seamus Heaney (1939-)

### Digging

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; as snug as a gun.

Under my window a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade,  
Just like his old man.

My grandfather could cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, digging down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

1. Who is the speaker? What is he doing in stanza 2?
2. Where is he?
3. Read stanza 6. What is the narrator saying here?
4. What is the simile in the first stanza? What is it saying about the pen?
5. Find a language feature in the 8<sup>th</sup> stanza – what is the effect? How does this link with the theme of memory?
6. Consonance is used in 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza and the 8<sup>th</sup>. What is the effect of this?
7. What is the extended metaphor used in the final stanza? What is the narrator saying here? How does it link to his forefathers?
8. Would you say the language in this poem is difficult? How does this compliment the overall purpose of the poem? Does it link back to the narrator's ancestors?
9. "Between my finger and my thumb" is used twice – how does the meaning evolve?

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