Digging

SUMMARY

I hold a short pen between my fingers, where it fits tightly, like a gun.

Outside my window I hear the clear sound of a shovel working the pebbly earth. It's my father out there, digging.

Looking down, I see my father straining as he bends low to tend to the flowerbeds. When he comes back up, I think of him twenty years in the past, bending down in a steady rhythm to dig in the neat rows of potatoes.

His booted leg is placed sturdily and comfortably on the shovel, the shaft of which is secured against the inside of his knee. He pulls potatoes up from the ground, and then digs deeply into the ground again. This time he's replanting all the potatoes that we'd help him pick. We loved feeling how hard and cool they felt in our hands.

My God, my old man was incredible with a shovel. So was his father.

No one could beat my grandfather when it came to cutting turf on the swampy land that he worked. I remember once bringing him milk in a bottle, which I'd sealed messily by using some crumpled up paper as a cork. He stood up straight and drank it all, and then got back to his work right away. He cut neat slices in the turf, throwing the heavy surplus earth over his shoulder, digging deeper and deeper to get to the best stuff.

I remember the chilly smell of the potato mould and the squishing sound of the wet earth. Those memories are still alive in my mind. Unlike my father and grandfather, though, my labor doesn't involve a shovel.

I hold a short pen between my fingers. It's my tool—this is what I'll dig with.

THEMES

LABOR AND CRAFT

Most simply, "Digging" is a poem about work. As the speaker, a writer, holds a pen in one hand, he hears his father, a former farmer, working the ground outside. The speaker admires his father for his determination to work tirelessly and the skill with which he uses a spade. Though the speaker metaphorically digs for *words* rather than into the earth, he still draws inspiration from the work ethic and expertise of his father (and grandfather). The poem, then, elevates manual labor by imbuing it with a sense of craft and artistry, while also insisting on the act of writing itself as a kind of work.

In the opening of "Digging," the speaker is poised to start writing, his pen hovering above the page. But when he hears the sound of his father digging in the flowerbeds beneath the speaker's window, it brings back memories of his father digging potatoes many years before. Though to some people digging might seem like a pretty dull and repetitive task, the speaker presents it as a kind of artistry. He focuses admiringly in minute detail on his father's technique, while also acknowledging the physical difficulty of the work.

Digging is presented as a complex and technical process, one involving neat "potato drills" (the rows of potatoes in the ground), the strength to send a shovel deep into the earth again and again, and the knowledge of how and when to scatter crops. "By God, the old man could handle a spade," the speaker says, emphasizing the expertise required of his father's labor.

Thinking about all this prompts the speaker to reflect on his grandfather too. Like the speaker's father, the older man provides an example of how best to approach work: through determination and skill. The speaker recounts how he once took some milk to his grandfather while he was digging—the grandfather drank the milk and got straight back to work, demonstrating his total commitment to the job at hand. Through the memory of these two men, then, the poem shows appreciation for dedication and effort—seeing the physical act of digging as an inspiration for writing poetry.

That's why the first and last stanzas are very different, even though they are almost identical on first look. Both focus on the same image—the speaker holding a pen above a page—but it's in the final stanza when he resolves to actually write. Except he doesn't say "write"; he says "dig." His father and grandfather provide a model for a way for the speaker to approach his work. And though the two types of work—manual and imaginative—are very different, writing *is* presented as its own kind of labor—one that that, though it may not require blood, sweat, and tears, certainly requires commitment and effort.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 6-9
- Lines 10-14
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 17-24
- Line 28
- Lines 29-31

FAMILY AND TRADITION

"Digging" explores the relationship between three generations: the speaker, his father, and the speaker's grandfather. The speaker lives a very different life to his forebears—he's a writer, whereas his father and grandfather were farmers. But even though he isn't a digger of the earth, the speaker realizes that he can still honor his heritage by embracing the *values* of his elders. The speaker's life and art are shaped by his history, and in that history he sees a model for how to approach his own craft. In doing so, the poem argues, the speaker is in fact paying tribute to his father and grandfather. One doesn't have to follow in their ancestors' footsteps exactly to honor and preserve their heritage.

The speaker's father worked the earth, just like his father before him. Both men used a spade skillfully and were engaged in tough manual labor. Between *those* two men, then, there's an obvious sense of continuity, of skills and heritage being passed down from one generation to the next. The speaker, however, represents a break with this tradition. Though he remembers the "squelch and slap" of "soggy earth" and the "cold smell of potato mould," he either can't or doesn't want to follow his elders into the same kind of work. Instead, he is a writer—something that, on the surface at least, is about as far removed from physical labor as is possible.

The speaker acknowledges this—he knows he has "no spade to follow men like them." But just because he is breaking with tradition in a literal sense, in another way he resolves to embody the *values* of that tradition. Hard work, grit, concentration, persistence—all of these are traits that the father and grandfather figures have taught to the speaker, who can now use them in his own way. This shows that the speaker *is* a part of his family tradition, just in a different way, and also demonstrates that the people someone grows up with can have a huge impact on how they see the world in later life (even if they led very different lives).

Accordingly, the poem ends on a plain-sounding expression of the speaker's intent: "The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it." Just as the speaker's father and grandfather approached their work with diligence, the speaker will do the same in his writing. The use of "dig" as the main verb here makes it clear that the lessons the speaker learned from his father and grandfather will have a great role to play in what is to come—ensuring that tradition, in one way or another, is honored.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Between my finger ...
... as a gun.

The poem opens with an image of the speaker poised over a page, about to start writing. A pen "rests" between his fingers, implying that he is quite comfortable with writing; at the same time, this pen is "snug as a gun." This unusual simile in line 2, introduced after the caesura's brief "rest," introduces a sense of tension. Guns, of course, *do* fit well in the hand, and their use, equally obviously, has serious consequences. Perhaps, then, this is subtly arguing that literature has tangible consequences too, and that the writer therefore occupies a position of responsibility.

For now, though, nothing is happening. This is a moment of quiet before activity, suggesting that what follows is partly a meditation on the act of writing itself. That is, the speaker is taking a moment to *think* about something before he actually puts pen to page. This allows for the introduction in the following stanza of the outside "digging" sound, which will offer another type of work to which the speaker can compare his own.

In part, "Digging" is about being true and committed to what you do—to working hard. Everything about these opening two lines suggests the close relationship between the speaker and his craft. These lines are packed full of alliteration, consonance, and assonance, as though every syllable has been carefully selected by a master craftsman (which, in fact, is true!):

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

The way in which every sound seems to fit with another (/ee/, /eh/, /uh/, /t/, /m/, /n/, /s/, /g/, /t/, and /th/ sounds all repeat in just two lines!) suggests the way that the pen fits perfectly in the speaker's hand, almost as if writing was what he was born to do. This anticipates the speaker's admiration for his father's ability to "handle a spade" in line 15—both men have a close relationship with their respective tool.

LINES 3-5

Under my window, ...
... I look down

In the second stanza, the speaker hears the sound of his father digging into the ground outside with a spade. While some might imagine noise to be a distraction, in actual fact it is this sound that really sets the poem in motion. From here on in, the speaker will delve into the memories provoked by the digging sound—and compare his own life and work to that of his father and grandfather.

As with the opening stanza, the sounds in this stanza are tightly controlled:

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

Mining language for meaningful consonance, alliteration, and assonance is the speaker's own way of digging, and that work is already underway in the poem. Indeed, the sounds in the above seem carefully selected to suggest physical effort. Just as the speaker's father uses *his* body to dig into the ground, the poem seems to be reminding the reader that language is not entirely separate from physical existence—when we speak, we use our muscles. The three instances of alliteration here—"spade sinks," "gravelly ground," and "digging ... down"—are so clear that they draw the reader's attention to the *construction* of language itself, the work and effort that go into the poem, and the physical movement involved in reading that poem.

It's also worth noting the use of perspective here. The speaker looks *down* on his father from a window, a similar vantage point to the one the father has over the ground. Both men look down on the area where they perform their labor, needing to dig deep in order to achieve their aims. But there's one more character doing the same thing—the reader themselves! The reader, too, looks down on the page from above, performing the work of understanding, interpreting, and imagining the poem's world. Also note that the final line here is enjambed, adding a sense of anticipation—what, exactly, does the speaker look down on?

LINES 6-9

> *Till his straining ...*
> *... he was digging.*

Stanza three picks up from the second stanza through enjambment. That enjambment forces the reader's eye down the page, just as the speaker himself looks down at his father.

This stanza then contrasts two moments in time. The first is the poem's present, in which the speaker seems to be observing his father digging "among the flowerbeds." The phrase "straining rump" is somewhat comical, and implies that the father is now an old man who finds it more difficult to work the land like he used to. The fact that he does it nonetheless, however, reflects his dedication and skill when it comes to this kind of labor.

But when the father stands up straight, it's now "twenty years away" (ago), when the father would dig "potato drills" (a "drill" is a small part of land that has been dug for planting crops). In other words, the sight of his father working in the flowerbeds prompts the speaker's mind to jump back in time, back to when his watched his father farm the land. The speaker's observation of his father—and observation is one of the speaker's most important tools—allows him to travel deep into his childhood memory.

Though twenty years apart, the two images present continuity—in both, the father is digging. Perhaps the fact that he now digs "flowerbed" signals that he is in retirement age, whereas the potatoes were dug during his time as a manual laborer. The point is, the father presents an image of uncomplaining determination, grit, and the willingness to see a task through to its completion (and put himself through pain along the way). Though the poem hasn't yet explicitly drawn the link between actual digging and figurative digging (through writing), this extended metaphor is already subconsciously underway. The speaker describes the way that his father "stoops[] in rhythm"—working *in rhythm* is a key part of the poetic craft.

The consonance in this stanza is coarser than earlier in the poem:

> Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
> Bends low, comes up twenty years away
> Stooping in rhythm through potato drills

The slightly harsher—but no less well-organized—percussive sounds here convey the earthiness of the father's work. It's also worth noting the poem's highly effective use of end-stopping throughout. Sometimes, the lines are allowed to enjamb, suggesting a kind of continuous effort from the start of a phrase to the end. But, like somebody digging in a field, sometimes the poem has to take a brief rest before it goes on. The full-stop at the end of line 9 ("Where he was digging.") is therefore an important pause—indeed, it is one of three instances in the poem in which the word "digging" is followed by a full-stop (line 5's example is technically a caesura; the other example is line 24).

LINES 10-14

> *The coarse boot ...*
> *... in our hands.*

In this stanza, the speaker offers a childhood memory of his father—digging then as he is now. This memory is observed in minute detail. This isn't just for the sake of it—it's about showing the way that digging—or *good* digging—is not as easy or simple as it might seem; instead, this kind of manual labor requires skill, knowledge, and genuine expertise. The speaker elevates his father's labor to the level of *craft*—honoring its intensity, physicality, and, of course, usefulness (the father is cultivating food!).

Lines 10 and 11 ("The coarse boot ... firmly."), then, are about the father's digging technique. It's a combination of brute force and tender care, just as the production of poetry requires intense effort and attention to detail. It's not comfortable or easy work—the boots are rough, it takes firm leverage to push the shovel into the ground—but it's done with a clear expertise.

There is something quite sensuous about this stanza, which

culminates in line 14. Here, the speaker tells the reader how he (and his other family members) would pick the potatoes, and how they "lov[ed] their cool hardness in our hands." The potatoes are cool because they've been buried deep in the earth until now. This "love" in part speaks to the close relationship between human beings and the land on which they live, with the childhood speaker's love for the potatoes borne out of the knowledge that they are the product of his father's hard work.

This admiration for his father's skill and determination also plays out through the precision of the language in this stanza: the "lug" (where you place your foot on a spade), the "shaft" (the long part of the spade), the "tall tops" (the top parts of the potatoes). The effort to find the exact right words mirrors the physical effort that the father made in order to cultivate the potatoes, and this is further emphasized in this stanza by the alliteration, consonance, and assonance that run throughout. For example, the /l/ sounds that chime between "nestled, "lug," "levered," "tall," and "Loving"; or the /t/ sounds, already introduced in the previous stanza as a way of giving the poem an earthy, coarse kind of tone.

LINES 15-18

By God, the ...
... on Toner's bog.

Just like a spade digging deeper and deeper into the earth, the poem goes deeper into the speaker's memory. "By God" is an intensifying phrase that signals the level of the speaker's admiration for his father. This line—line 15—is end-stopped, signaling a brief pause which allows the poem's efforts to continue afresh in the following line. It's like the speaker taking a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow! The assonance and consonance in the line are important too:

> By God, the old man could handle a spade.

The sound of the words here is selected with precision and care, mirroring the skill the "old man" (a colloquial term for father, suggesting the speaker's affection for his pops!) possessed with a spade. (As a side note, the use of past tense here could suggest that the entire poem is constructed out of memory—that the speaker's father isn't *actually* present in the second stanza, but remembered instead).

After the end-stop, the poem digs deeper into the speaker's past, now looking at the *next* layer of the speaker's family—the generation before his father's. The father's father—the speaker's grandfather—was a master at using a spade too. Digging, then, is a kind of tradition in the speaker's family. While the speaker, as he acknowledges in line 28, isn't the same *kind* of digger, the exploration of both family figures allows the speaker to find out what his type of digging—poetry—and their type of digging—agriculture—have in common. By the end of the poem, the speaker resolves to take on the *values* he perceives in the way that both men approached their work: diligence, dedication, and sheer effort.

Line 17 moves the poem into the memory of the grandfather. While the speaker's father worked the land to cultivate potatoes, the speaker remembers his grandfather cutting turf. Turf is a type of grass and soil combined, found widely in Ireland and used for fire. Like potatoes, turf is an important part of Irish history and culture (which, in turn, emphasizes the importance of the father's and grandfather's labors). As he did with his father, the speaker expresses admiration and respect for his grandfather's digging skill and work ethic. His grandfather "cut more turf" than any other man working the same bog (a bog is an area of damp earth that accumulates peat). The use of "Toner's" gives the memory a specific location, drawing the reader into the poem's world *and* gently reinforcing the idea of tradition passed down from one family member to another.

LINES 19-24

Once I carried ...
... good turf. Digging.

The rest of the sixth stanza develops the speaker's memory of his grandfather from a more general recollection to a specific occasion. At the time, the speaker was a child, and was tasked with taking refreshment to his grandfather. This was a bottle of milk, with the milk held in place only by a make-shift cork of crumpled paper. The assonance and consonance in lines 19 and 20 is prominent, and almost deliberately over-the-top. Note the many /k/, /l/, /p/, /aw/, and short /i/ sounds:

> Once I carried him milk in a bottle
> Corked sloppily with paper.

In other words, the sounds in these lines seem to spill out from the words, almost suggesting the image of milk splashing all over the place as it's carried in the young speaker's hands.

The rest of the stanza recalls how the speaker's grandfather reacted when he received the milk. Instead of taking a proper break, he just gulped the milk down and got straight back to his work. In other words, he demonstrated commitment to his craft—just as the speaker is beginning to sense is required for his own craft of writing. The enjambment between lines 20 to 24 suggests continuous effort, the grandfather working in the land one continuous sequence of "nicks[] and slices[]." These two words have an almost onomatopoeic sound (which anticipates the more obvious onomatopoeia in the following stanza).

It's worth making an observation about the form here. The grandfather works the land by digging in deep, "heaving sods"—the bits of earth that he has to get through in order to find the "good turf"— "over his shoulder." These sods are different shapes and sizes, clumps of earth that must be dug

away. The varied shape and size of the stanzas in the poem seems to reflect this. The alliteration of "down and down"—which is also an example of diacope through repetition—shows the repetitive nature of the task. The stanza ends with the same alliterative sound, this time placing "Digging" in a sentence all of its own. This demonstrates how digging really is the key image of the poem, and means more than just the literal act of digging into the ground.

LINES 25-28

The cold smell ...
... men like them.

The penultimate stanza mirrors the third stanza, in the sense that it, too, marks the transition between the poem's present and the speaker's memory (which acts as a source of inspiration). As if to pay tribute to his forebears—and particularly the way that the examples they set in terms of work ethic can now inform the speaker's own approach to poetry—this stanza is perhaps the most vivid of all in terms of its sound. It isn't only using alliteration, assonance, and consonance to nudge the reader in a particular direction as the poem does elsewhere. This stanza goes beyond that through the prominent use of onomatopoeia, bringing the potato fields to the page.

First though, there is the consonance and assonance in "the cold smell of potato mould." This is an example of synesthesia too, when one sense is mixed with another (the *coldness* of a smell). The sound here seems to bring the smell to the reader, the precision of the language matching the strength of the speaker's memory.

Then comes the onomatopoeia: "squelch," "slap," "soggy," "curt cuts." All of these words are testament to language's ability—when used with skill—to not just *denote* what they describe but also to represent some of the attributes of what they describe. That is, "squelch"—the way the consonants squash together in the mouth—actually *sounds* like the noise when people walk over damp, muddy earth. "Slap," with its hard /p/ sound, has a physicality that suggests the actual noise and contact of a slapping sound. "Curt cuts" has short, tight sounds that cut off airflow in the mouth.

The power of these sounds to capture, represent, and bring to life the speaker's memory help connect him to his past, and to see a continuity between the traditions of his father and grandfather and his own role as a writer. The power of language establishes roots in his head, and "awaken[s]" his desire and ability to recreate the world through poetry. That's why these roots are *alive*.

As the speaker admits in line 28, he is in a sense breaking with tradition:

> But I've no spade to follow men like them.

While he can't follow his forebears into exactly the same kind of work, he can embody the values that they represented through their approach to work. As has been proved by the earlier stanzas, these values are skill, hard work, determination, and persistence. *These* are all applicable—necessary, even—to writing good poetry. The two end-stops in lines 27 ("... head.") and 28 ("... them.") show that the speaker is going through processes of thought, realizing in stages how much he actually *does* have in common with his father and grandfather. Indeed, it is through the power of creativity and imagination that he has come to see these links.

LINES 29-31

Between my finger ...
... dig with it.

The eighth stanza returns the poem to its present, and actually brings it back round full circle. As with the beginning, the reader is presented with an image of the speaker hovering of the page, pen in hand, thinking about what he will write. This repetition is key, partly because arriving at the start again shows the need for the speaker to stay focused in order to write well. In addition, the repetition mimics the repetitive nature of the work undertaken by the speaker's father and grandfather—which provide the inspiration behind the affirmative conclusion in line 31.

Notice how the pen is still at rest. One way of looking at this is that the stanzas in between the first and last are those that the speaker has just written. That is, he has done his digging—and just as the digging of his forebears brought rewards (potatoes and turf), the speaker's *poetic* digging has brought him authentic, living, breathing poetry. Alternatively, perhaps the speaker *hasn't* started writing yet—but the memory of his father and grandfather provide the inspiration behind him finally putting pen to paper.

Either way, it's important that the poem ends with its single use of the future tense, the speaker making a solemn commitment to his work: "I'll dig with it." That is, he will work hard at it, over and over, without complaint, inspired by what he's learned from his ancestors. The extended metaphor reaches its completion here, with poetry clearly presented as a form of digging. And though the speaker's work may be very different from that of his father and grandfather, it is through performing that work—through writing the poem—that he has come to see what they all have in common, in turn bringing him closer to his memories of them too.

SYMBOLS

HANDHELD TOOLS

Handheld tools in the poem represent power and

potential. Both spades (a.k.a. shovels) and pens are presented as important tools for labor—be it the manual labor of the speaker's father and grandfather, or the speaker's own labor of writing. The pen is the speaker's *version* of a spade, which is the poem's metaphorical way of saying that the speaker will use the pen just as his ancestors used their spades: to dig. But whereas the speaker's father and grandfather dug the earth to plant potatoes and find "good turf," the speaker will figuratively dig through his memories to inspire his writing. *His* digging involves remembering and honoring the values of his ancestors, and *embodying* those values even as his life's work ultimately follows a very different path.

It's also worth noting that there is, arguably one other tool in the poem: the gun of line 2, which is part of a simile the speaker uses to describe the feel of the pen in his hand. A gun is a weapon, of course, and its presence in the poem creates some tension. It suggests that the speaker has within him a great potential power, that writing itself is a weapon of sorts. Against what? Perhaps against time itself—against the loss of heritage and familial tradition. And indeed the speaker does have the ability to preserve his family's heritage in *words* (i.e., via poetry) if not in actions. To "fire" the gun, metaphorically, is to write—which, again, has already been compared to "digging." Both the speaker's writing and his forebear's manual labor, then, are equated with a powerful preservation of Irish heritage and identity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "pen," "gun"
- **Line 15:** "spade"
- **Line 30:** "pen"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used frequently in "Digging." The first example is in the first stanza:

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

Here, the alliteration is working alongside consonance and assonance to create a "snug" sounding stanza. That is, all the sounds themselves seem to fit perfectly together, just as the pen fits right in the speaker's hand (and the spade in his father's).

The second stanza also uses alliteration:

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

The alliteration here is used to convey the physical effort of digging a spade into the earth. The prominence of the alliterating syllables draws the reader's attention to speaking as a kind of physical effort, involving the muscles of the mouth (indeed, even reading silently involves some muscle movement too).

The fourth stanza uses alliteration to a similar effect:

> He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
> To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
> Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

Again, these syllables have a sort of firmness or toughness that mirrors the effort of digging. The plosive, air-stopping consonants—the /t/, /b/, and /p/—are followed by the breathy exhale of the /h/, evoking, via sound, the physical intensity of this work. It's also as though the speaker is himself digging into the language, bringing up crops of consonance.

Next up is the /d/ sound in lines 23 and 24. Here "down and down" alliterates with "Digging," linking these words together conceptually. That is, by digging, the person doing the digging goes further and further into the earth. This also carries the same meaning as in the previous two examples.

The greatest concentration of alliteration of saved for lines 25 and 26):

> The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
> Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

The onomatopoeic quality of these lines is covered in the corresponding section of this guide. But it's worth noting how the numerous /s/ sounds seem to convey the dampness of the earth in which the speaker's father (and grandfather) would dig.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "my," "my"
- **Line 2:** "squat," "snug"
- **Line 3:** "sound"
- **Line 4:** "spade sinks"
- **Line 5:** "digging," "down"
- **Line 8:** "drills"
- **Line 9:** "digging"
- **Line 12:** "tall tops," "buried the bright"
- **Line 13:** "potatoes," "picked"
- **Line 14:** "hardness," "hands"
- **Line 22:** "slicing," "sods"
- **Line 23:** "down and down"
- **Line 24:** "Digging"
- **Line 25:** "smell"

- **Lines 25-26:** “squelch and slap / Of soggy”
- **Line 26:** “curt cuts”
- **Line 28:** “spade”
- **Line 29:** “my,” “my”

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "Digging." It first appears in the opening stanza:

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

The assonance here is used to make the lines sound "snug." That is, all the vowels fit neatly together, as though they were made for each other. Similarly, the pen fits just right in the speaker's hand—symbolizing that poetry is his calling. Indeed, such is the closeness of the sounds that "snug" is almost the reverse of "gun" (just lacking an s on the end!).

Als note the /oo/ sound that appears in line 8, in "Stooping in rhythm through ..." The same sound then echoes throughout the fourth stanza, in "boot," "rooted," "to," "new," and "cool." This assonance helps the language feel at once tightly controlled, methodical, and repetitive, mimicking the nature of the speaker's father's labor.

The next key example is line 15:

> By God, the old man could handle a spade.

The use of /a/ sounds here conveys the father figure's skill with a spade. That is, the assonance here mirrors just how in sync the speaker's father is with "handling" a shovel.

More evocative assonance pops up in line 22:

> Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods

This line describes the grandfather's digging of turf. Notice how the cutting actions—"nicking and slicing"—have quick /i/ assonance, while the more physically tiring job of "heaving sods" over the shoulder has a longer vowel sound (chiming with "neatly").

The penultimate stanza also features assonance prominently (along with thick alliteration and consonance):

> The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch ...
> Of soggy peat ... an edge
> Through living roots awaken in my head.

This stanza is extremely vivid, also using onomatopoeia to give the reader a sensual picture of rural Irish life (before the poem returns to its present). The prominent assonance draws the readers' attention to the sounds of the words, which strengthens the metaphorical link between digging in the earth and writing on a page.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “my,” “my thumb”
- **Line 2:** “pen rests,” “snug as a gun”
- **Line 3:** “sound”
- **Line 4:** “sinks into,” “ground”
- **Line 5:** “digging,” “down”
- **Lines 6-7:** “flowerbeds / Bends”
- **Line 7:** “twenty”
- **Line 8:** “Stooping in rhythm through ”
- **Line 10:** “boot”
- **Line 11:** “knee,” “levered firmly”
- **Line 12:** “rooted,” “tall tops”
- **Line 13:** “To,” “new,” “potatoes”
- **Line 14:** “cool”
- **Line 15:** “man,” “handle”
- **Line 19:** “him milk in”
- **Line 22:** “Nicking,” “slicing,” “neatly,” “heaving”
- **Line 23:** “Over his shoulder,” “down,” “down”
- **Line 25:** “cold smell of potato mould,” “squelch”
- **Line 26:** “Of soggy peat,” “edge”
- **Line 27:** “Through,” “roots,” “ awaken,” “head”
- **Line 28:** “no,” “follow,” “men,” “them”
- **Line 29:** “my,” “my”
- **Line 30:** “pen rests”
- **Line 31:** “dig with it.”

CAESURA

Caesurae appear throughout "Digging." The first example is in line 2:

> The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

The caesura here emphasizes the inanimateness of the pen, how it is currently at "rest." This shows that the speaker is pausing for thought, which ultimately sets up the poem's journey into the speaker's memory.

In line 5, a full-stop caesura comes after the word "digging." This is one of three examples in the poem in which "digging" is followed by a full stop, highlighting how important the word is to the poem's overall discussion. Indeed, the poem's main purpose is to draw the link between two different types of digging: digging in the ground, and metaphorical digging in the mind (to create poetry). The full stops that often appear after "digging" push the reader to pause and reflect on the word itself.

The next caesura is line 7:

> Bends low, comes up twenty years away

This is an important caesura, separating two moments in time: the poem's present, and 20 years earlier. It helps the speaker enter into the memory of his father digging potatoes.

The two caesurae in the fourth stanza help separate out the different stages in the father's digging process: resting his boot on the "lug," keeping the spade's "shaft" firmly levered, rooting out the "tall tops" of potatoes, and cultivating the land to plant new ones. This helps build a picture of digging as a kind of skilled craft, more complex than people without experience might imagine it to be.

The caesurae in the sixth stanza work in the same way, just with the grandfather instead. And, in line 24, the caesura makes "Digging" into its own sentence—again emphasizing the word's important place in the poem.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "rests; snug"
- **Line 3:** "window, a"
- **Line 5:** " father, digging. I"
- **Line 7:** "low, comes"
- **Line 12:** "tops, buried"
- **Line 15:** "God, the"
- **Line 20:** "paper. He"
- **Line 21:** "it, then"
- **Line 22:** "neatly, heaving"
- **Line 23:** "shoulder, going"
- **Line 24:** "turf. Digging"
- **Line 25:** "mould, the"
- **Line 26:** "peat, the"

CONSONANCE

"Digging" is packed full of consonance right from the beginning. Here's the first stanza:

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

The multiple consonant sounds in this stanza suggest precision and skill, but also the comfortable way with which the pen fits in the speaker's hand (as though he was born to write). In other words, the consonant sounds are "snug" together—indeed, "snug" and "gun" are almost the reverse of one another (e.g. snug/guns).

The second stanza develops the poem's consonance, continuing the /n/ sound from above and also using three instances of alliteration (covered in that section of the guide). Arguably, the /n/ sounds make the /s/ sounds stand out more, which is particularly noticeable with the word "rasping," the first /s/ in the stanza. If you say this word out loud, the shift from the /s/ into the /p/ *creates* a rasping sound in the mouth (anticipating the poem's use of onomatopoeia in later stanzas).

In stanzas two and three, the consonance becomes a little bit harsher, relying heavily on a hard /t/ sound, plus the sharp /k/, and gruff /g/. The hardness of the sound here helps build a picture of the physical effort required to dig the ground, described in such vivid detail by the speaker as he recalls a memory of his father. This seems particularly linked to the word "potato" itself, which, of course, is the reason why the father is digging in the first place.

Notice then how thick the fourth stanza is with plosive consonants, mixed together with breathier, softer /h/, /s/, and /l/ sounds. The entire poem is like this, really, the lines richly woven sounds reflecting the speaker's skill with words *and* his father's skill with a spade. Here are lines 12 and 13, for instance:

> He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
> To scatter new potatoes that we picked,

And the consonance just keeps on going; it is also an important part of the short fifth stanza:

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

Note how sound here links the speaker's father to the shovel, and to *his* (the speaker's father's) father. The poem is in part about measuring up and comparing very different kinds of work: the physical labor of the speaker's forebears, and his own imaginative work as a poet. Handling consonance like the above takes skill, which in turn reinforces the speaker's belief that his father, too, was highly skilled.

There's no let-up of consonance in the following stanza either. Look at the prominent /p/ and /k/ sounds in lines 19 and 20:

> Once I carried him milk in a bottle
> Corked sloppily with paper

These are sharp sounds. The /k/ conveys a sense of harshness, while the /p/ sounds have a kind of haphazard, almost humorous quality which fits with the image—the young speaker trying, with great difficulty, to carry milk to his grandfather and spilling it all along the way.

The consonance is dialed up to its peak in the penultimate stanza. Again, that /t/ sound, still echoing "potato," is a main feature:

> The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
> Of soggy peat, the curt cuts ...

It's at this point that the speaker is about to exit his memory and return to the present, so it makes sense that this stanza offers a kind of final flourish to prove the poet's skill—and to

prove *poetry's* skill in bringing a world to life on the page.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Lines 22-23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Line 27
- Line 28
- Lines 29-30

END-STOPPED LINE

"Digging" mixes end-stopping with enjambment to great effect. Generally speaking, the end-stopping is used to provide clear pauses, spaces for thought. The first end-stop is at the end of line 2, just after the speaker's pen has been described as "snug as a gun." This indicates that, in a way, the poem is loaded—about to unfold. It's a useful moment of tension before the speaker starts the journey into his memory.

In line 9, the end-stop comes after the word "digging." Here, this suggests the kind of pause that someone who is digging might need to take. That is, digging is a repeated process that involves strenuous effort with frequent brief pauses. But it's also a pause to aid the speaker to conjure up the next level of detail, which follows in stanza four. In *that* stanza, line 11 is end-stopped after the word "firmly." Having a full-stop here secures the line, stopping it in its tracks, mirroring the father's strength and sturdiness.

Lines 14, 15, and 16 are *all* end-stopped:

> Loving their cool hardness in our hands.
> By God, the old man could handle a spade.
> Just like his old man.

This allows the speaker to round off the memory of his father with a general expression of admiration and respect. After that comes the next stage of the poem—the memory of the grandfather (who exhibited a similar work ethic).

Line 24's end-stop ensures "Digging" forms its own fragmented sentence. This hammers home the importance of the word to the poem, foregrounding the way that the speaker is seeking common ground between the digging of his forebears and his own more imaginative type of digging—writing poetry.

Line 30's end-stop mimics the caesura in line 2, creating a pause after "rests." Only this time, the speaker has resolved to "dig with [the pen]." This is the moment at which the poem brings together the two different types of digging in the clearest way possible, and is a statement of intent, the force of which is strengthened by the preceding end-stop.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "gun."
- **Line 4:** "ground:"
- **Line 9:** "digging."
- **Line 11:** "firmly."
- **Line 13:** "picked,"
- **Line 14:** "hands."
- **Line 15:** "spade."
- **Line 18:** "bog."
- **Line 24:** "Digging."
- **Line 27:** "head."
- **Line 28:** "them."
- **Line 30:** "rests."
- **Line 31:** "it."

ENJAMBMENT

About half the lines in the poem are enjambed. The enjambment works closely with the poem's use of end-stop to build momentum and then insert pauses throughout. The enjambment in the poem's very first line creates a sense of anticipation, for example, as the speaker implies that *something* rests between his fingers, but withholds the *what* (that is, the pen) until the following line. A particularly striking enjambment also comes at the end of the second stanza, which in fact is enjambed right across the stanza break itself. This occurs after the word "down"—here, the speaker goes *down* into his memory, just as the enjambment urges the reader's eye *down* the page for the continuation of the sentence. And downwards, of course, is the direction of digging!

In the third, fourth, and sixth stanzas, frequent enjambment conveys the physical effort required to dig. The lines flow into the next, reflecting the skill of the speaker's father—who can work smoothly and efficiently—but also the exhausting nature

of the work at hand, which seems to go on and on down the page. The end-stops here, in turn, represent the brief pauses needed in between these bouts of physical exertion.

Enjambment can also be used to draw attention to certain words. For example, in line 25, it places extra emphasis on the word "slap." This is an onomatopoeic word that rings out all the louder because of where, and how, it is placed in the line:

> The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
> Of soggy peat ...

The final stanza repeats the enjambment of the first between "thumb" and "the squat pen rests." This shows that the poem has come full circle, back to the image of the speaker hovering over the page with his pen. This time, however, he is about to dig—that is, to write.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "thumb / The"
- **Lines 3-4:** "sound / When"
- **Lines 5-6:** "down / Till"
- **Lines 6-7:** "flowerbeds / Bends"
- **Lines 7-8:** "away / Stooping"
- **Lines 8-9:** "drills / Where"
- **Lines 10-11:** "shaft / Against"
- **Lines 12-13:** "deep / To"
- **Lines 17-18:** "day / Than"
- **Lines 19-20:** "bottle / Corked"
- **Lines 20-21:** "up / To"
- **Lines 21-22:** "away / Nicking"
- **Lines 22-23:** "sods / Over"
- **Lines 23-24:** "down / For"
- **Lines 25-26:** "slap / Of"
- **Lines 26-27:** "edge / Through"
- **Lines 29-30:** "thumb / The"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

In a way, the whole poem is an extended metaphor. The poem sees the speaker reflecting on his craft—writing—as he tries to place it within the context of where he is from. He comes from a line of manual laborers—people who dug up the land in order to cultivate potatoes and cut turf, two essential crops in Irish life. The poem has to prove the link between literal digging and *digging* in the mind: creativity, imagination, and memory. In order to prove this link, the speaker himself has to do his own form of digging—that is, he has to write poetry.

This isn't a one-way metaphor. Digging is presented as a kind of skilled craft (like poetry), and poetry is presented as a kind of arduous labor (like farming). The speaker is fully aware of the differences between the two acts—"I've no spade to follow men like them"—but through the poem is able to show what they have in *common*. Moreover, the speaker is able to find the attributes he admires in the work of his forebears and apply to his way of writing poetry. In other words, the father and grandfather offer concrete experience that the speaker can turn, through metaphor, into the values of his own craft: hard work, persistence, determination, attention to detail, and skill.

It's not until the last line that the speaker makes this metaphor explicitly clear (at no point earlier does the speaker say "poetry *is* digging"). Having mined the earth of his own memory to find inspiration, he now resolves to "dig with [his pen]."

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-9
- Lines 10-14
- Lines 17-21
- Lines 22-28
- Lines 29-31

ONOMATOPOEIA

Onomatopoeia is primarily used in the penultimate stanza. That said, there's a case to be made that the phrase "rasping sound" in line 3 is onomatopoeic too. The sharpness of the word—the way that the different consonants travel in the mouth when said out loud—means that anyone saying "rasping sound" also *creates* a rasping sound.

But the clearest onomatopoeia comes in lines 25 and 26:

> The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
> Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Again, it's all about how the consonants sound when said out loud. Say "squelch," and notice how the mouth produces a sound that is similar to boots walking in mud. Likewise, the way that "slap" ends on the hard /p/ sound is strong and forceful—just like a slapping sound! "Curt cuts" involves blocking off the airflow in the mouth, which means that the syllables are literally and physically cut off from one another—just like the parts of turf carved up by the speaker's grandfather.

It's notable that this onomatopoeia happens just before the speaker re-enters the present (having delved deep into his memory). It's almost like a final poetic tribute to his father and grandfather, leaving the reader with a vivid and living picture—in image and sound—of the daily lives of his forebears.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "clean rasping sound"
- **Lines 25-26:** "the squelch and slap / Of soggy peat, the curt cuts"

REPETITION

There are a few key instances of repetition in "Digging." The most obvious one is the way that the final stanza pretty much repeats the first. This is the first:

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

And this is the last stanza:

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

On first glance, it might seem like the poem has come full circle back to the start. But what's important is what has taken place in between, and the key shift that has happened because of the middle stanzas. Essentially, the first and last stanzas are the poem's present, the speaker hovering over the page with his pen. In between, the speaker conjures up vivid memories of his father and grandfather working the land. in these memories, he finds inspiration and encouragement—and a way of approaching his own labor, poetry. Accordingly, the last stanza has one difference with the first that can hardly be overstated. Now, the speaker is not a picture of inaction; now, he is resolved to write poetry, to "dig with [his pen]." This, then, is like a mission statement, a commitment to his craft which has been inspired and strengthened by the work ethic of his forebears.

There is another form of repetition in the first line (also repeated in the last stanza). This is diacope: my finger and my thumb. Essentially, this just shows the "snug[ness]" of the pen in the speaker's hand (suggesting that writing is his true calling). Diacope again appears in lines 15 and 16 with the repetition of "old man," emphasizing how these farming traditions have been passed down from father to son for generations. The "down and down" of line 23 is also diacope, underscoring just how deeply the speaker's grandfather dug for "the good turf."

One other type of repetition worth noticing is of individual words. "Digging" occurs three times in the poem—four if you count the title—which underscores its importance. Indeed, the whole point of the poem is to find common ground between two types of digging: digging in the earth and metaphorical digging in the mind. "Potato" is also repeated throughout, appearing like a crop in the surrounding soil of the poem's 31 lines.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun."
- **Line 5:** "digging"
- **Line 8:** "potato"
- **Line 9:** "digging"
- **Line 13:** "potatoes"
- **Line 15:** "old man"
- **Line 16:** "old man"
- **Line 23:** "down and down"
- **Line 24:** "Digging"
- **Line 25:** "potato"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests."
- **Line 31:** "dig"

SIMILE

Simile is used just once in "Digging," and it appears in the first stanza:

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

It's an unusual simile that compares the speaker's pen to a gun (perhaps playing on the old adage that "the pen is mightier than the sword"). There's no other mention of guns elsewhere in the poem.

First of all, it's just a straight-up comparison of the way that a gun fits well in the hand. The pen has its proper place in the speaker's hand, suggesting that it is his tool of choice, perhaps even that writing is his true calling. But the mention of a gun also adds a hint of danger and threat to the poem. At this point, the speaker seems a little uncertain, hovering over the page, not yet putting his skill into practice. By the poem's last stanza, the "gun" is no longer there (but the rest of first stanza is). This suggests that the speaker has arrived at a point of resolution, the pen no longer a threatening object, but equivalent to the spades held by his father and grandfather.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "snug as a gun."

VOCABULARY

Squat (Line 2, Line 30) - Short and thick.

Snug (Line 2) - Comfortably/tightly.

Gravelly (Line 4) - Characterized nu lots of small rocks/stones.

Rump (Line 6) - This refers to the speaker's father's backside.

Stooping (Line 8) - Bent over.

Drills (Line 8) - Small sections of cultivated earth.

Coarse (Line 10) - With a rough texture.

Lug (Line 10) - The top of the main part of the spade (shovel) on

which the user places their foot.

Shaft (Line 10) - The long part of the spade.

Tall tops (Line 12) - The leafy parts of potato plants that grow above the ground.

Spade (Line 15, Line 28) - A shovel.

Turf (Line 17) - Grass and soil in combination. Used widely in Ireland as a fuel source.

Toner's Bog (Line 18) - A local area of damp earth where the grandfather would dig.

Corked (Line 20) - Holding the milk in the bottle, like a wine cork (though this one is not very effective!).

Sods (Line 22) - Big chunks of earth.

Peat (Line 26) - Pretty much the same as turf. It is formed partly by the decomposition of organic material (like grass), making it like an early stage in coal formation (and therefore useful as a fuel).

Curt (Line 26) - Quick and brief.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Digging" doesn't follow a conventional poetic form. Instead its eight stanzas vary in length, some as short as two lines, while the longest, the sixth, has eight lines. The first effect of this is visual—notice how the text actually looks on the page. Considering the poem's main metaphorical idea—that writing is a kind of labor, like digging—it's tempting to view the different chunks of text on the page as representing the clumps of earth upturned by a spade. Like clumps of earth, the stanzas are made out of the same material—language—but they come in all shapes and sizes.

The poem has a nearly circular form, starting and ending with almost identical stanzas. In between, the speaker goes deeper and deeper into his memory, conjuring an image of his father and then his grandfather—and finding inspiration in both figures. There is one difference between the first and last stanzas, however, and it's crucial. Having mentally revisited his forebears, the speaker resolves in the last stanza to "dig" with his pen (whereas the first stanza is an image of inaction). This shows the importance of the memories in giving the speaker a kind of model for how to proceed.

METER

"Digging" doesn't have a strict meter; it's written in free verse, reflecting the freely flowing memory of the speaker and the way one image will inspire another in his mind. That said, some lines do fall into an iambic pattern (da DUM). The first line, for example, scans perfectly as iambic tetrameter (meaning there are four poetic feet of unstressed-stressed syllables):

> Between | my fin- | ger and | my thumb

The neatness of the sound here suggests the "snug" way in which the pen fits the speaker's hand—and how he has found his chosen craft.

The first two lines of the third stanza also use meter to great effect:

> Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
> Bends low, comes up twenty years away

Notice how the stresses help convey a sense of physical effort, with great weight landing on "strain" and "Bends low." This reminds the reader of the physicality of manual labor, and helps build a picture of the father as a determined worker.

Interestingly, the final stanza is again fully iambic (though "pen" *could* be viewed as stressed too):

> Between | my fin- | ger and | my thumb
> The squat | pen rests.
> I'll dig | with it.

The tight meter here could be read as a metaphor for poetry itself—that is, the speaker shows his commitment to his craft by intensifying the poetic sound of his words.

RHYME SCHEME

"Digging" doesn't have a rhyme scheme, but it does use rhyme here and there. Both examples come at the beginning:

> ... my thumb
> ... a gun.
> ... clean rasping sound
> ... gravelly ground:
> ... I look down

"Thumb" and "gun" are slant rhymes based on vowel sound, while "sound" and "ground" rhyme fully. The first rhyming pair contribute to a highly patterned opening stanza, in terms of sound. This helps suggest the *idea* of "snugness"—the way in which the pen fits perfectly in the speaker's hand.

The next three rhymes have a more hypnotic effect, perhaps suggesting that the speaker is falling under a kind of spell of memory. These rhymes pull the speaker—and the reader—into the speaker's childhood, and it's here that the speaker finds inspiration in the figures of his father and grandfather.

SPEAKER

The first-person speaker doesn't define who he is, but this is generally taken to be Heaney himself (indeed, that's how it

comes across in Heaney's interviews about the poem). The poem opens with a picture of the speaker in a state of inaction, his pen hovering over the page. Already, the reader gets the impression that the speaker is a writer—or at least an aspiring writer.

This is important, because what follows could be interpreted as an invocation. An invocation is an address to deity or muse that asks for help in the following poetic composition (John Milton's "Sing heavenly muse" in *Paradise Lost* is a good example). This poem comes at the start of Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, and it's fair to say that the poem does work as a kind of mission statement, with the speaker committing to honor his forebears through dedication, hard work, and craftsmanship. Indeed, much of this collection draws on Heaney's own childhood memories, suggesting that, perhaps, it is the past that functions as Heaney's muse/deity. Either way, the speaker is inspired by his father and grandfather to "dig" with his pen—to write.

SETTING

The poem opens with the speaker at a desk, suggesting he's inside a room of some sort. He's sitting by a window, outside of which he can hear his elderly father working in the flowerbeds. This sound might be real or imaginary; either way, it prompts the speaker to delve into his memories—introducing a new setting to the poem. Here, he admires the way that his father and grandfather work the land—which is distinctly Irish because of the reference to "potatoes" and "turf."

In a sense, then, the poem takes place in the speaker's mind—but his memories are firmly rooted in the rural Irish landscape. Indeed, part of the poem's aim is to bring that world to life—through, for example, the onomatopoeic sounds in the penultimate stanza. Ultimately, the poem returns to the present, the final stanza almost identical to the first. Except this time, however, the speaker turns to the future—inspired by his father and grandfather, he resolves to write.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Seamus Heaney was an Irish poet who lived from 1939 to 2013. Aside from W.B. Yeats, there is probably no other Irish writer whose work is read—and treasured—so widely. Heaney himself felt an affinity for poetry that used the poet's local environment as a kind of raw material; his early influences include Robert Frost, Patrick Kavanagh, and Ted Hughes.

This poem is the opening poem in Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, which is firmly rooted in Heaney's youthful—and local—experiences (e.g., scouring the countryside for fruit in "Blackberry-Picking," or learning about frogs at school in "Death of a Naturalist," the collection's title poem). Like those other poems, both language and memory are there to be mind—to be dug at—in order to cultivate poetry. On a separate note, Heaney's poem "Follower," like "Digging," explores the poet's relationship with his father, an Irish farmer.

Death of a Naturalist, published in 1966, was well received and helped Heaney gain international recognition. Some of the poems in this collection were workshopped in a group known as The Belfast Group, which at one time or another included other important Irish poets such as Paul Muldoon, Ciarán Carson, and Michael Longley. Heaney published numerous books of poetry throughout his life, as well as plays and translations. He was the recipient of literature's highest honor, the Nobel Prize, in 1995.

It's also worth noting that "Digging" could be interpreted as part of a literary tradition of opening poetic statements. That is, it can be read as an invocation, which is poetry that calls on gods or muses for help in poetic composition (at the start of a given work). Heaney's gods in this collection, as it were, are childhood, memory, family, and Ireland itself. John Milton's introduction to *Paradise Lost* is a classic example of an invocation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Heaney was born and raised in Northern Ireland, growing up in a Catholic household in a society that was largely Protestant. Education was important to Heaney; his teachers encouraged his taste for literature at an early age before he went on to study the subject at Queen's University in Belfast. Indeed, Heaney said of his own early years that he lived "a buried life and [then] entered the realm of education."

"Digging" appears to be set in Heaney's early days of writing poetry, and his childhood memory. The most notable thing here is the way that the speaker breaks with a long-standing agricultural tradition by wanting to be a writer, rather than someone who works the land—he wants to dig for poetic material, not potatoes or turf.

The father and grandfather are typical of working class Irish folk of the era, sustaining themselves and their family through the cultivation of the land. Indeed, the importance of potatoes and turf in the Irish story can hardly be overstated. Potatoes grew well in Ireland and were a good source of nourishment for centuries if Irish people. Starting in 1845, Ireland was ravaged by the Great Famine—this was a period of starvation and disease brought about by the repeated failure of the potato crop (the potatoes were made inedible by an infection). Around a million people died during the years of the famine, and approximately another million emigrated (many of whom went to America).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Heaney Looking Back — Heaney reflects on his life and career shortly after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WT-dub5v4YA)
- Heaney's Life and Poetry — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/seamus-heaney)
- Heaney in the Archive — Heaney reads and discusses some of his poems, including "Digging." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvneazagsRI&t=340s)
- Ireland and the Potato — An interesting article about the relationship between Ireland and its key crop. (https://www.historyireland.com/early-modern-history-1500-1700/the-introduction-of-the-potato-into-ireland/)
- Heaney and Muldoon — Heaney interviewed by fellow Irish poet, Paul Muldoon. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HWurkQ1ao4)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SEAMUS HEANEY POEMS

- Blackberry-Picking
- Death of a Naturalist
- Follower
- Mid-Term Break
- Storm on the Island

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Digging*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Oct 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Digging*." LitCharts LLC, October 29, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/seamus-heaney/digging.