



# INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

( Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal )

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 7.560 (SJIF 2024)

## Seamus Heaney's "Digging": The Metaphor of Poetic Potentiality

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DOI No. [03.2021-11278686](https://doi.org/10.2021-11278686) DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doilink/09.2024-62645419/IRJHIS2409014>

### Abstract:

*In his famous poem "Digging", Seamus Heaney, a prominent Irish poet writes about his poetic potentiality to "dig" his name in the golden pages of literary canon. The poet wants to follow his ancestral tradition unconventionally. Sitting at his writing desk, the poet observes his father's "digging". Basically the poet also wants to "dig"—but with the "pen" instead of fore-fathers' "spade". The poet resolves to "dig" the emotions, passions experiences and the spontaneity of life through the intellectual break through to gain "something of real value". The poet acknowledges that he has "no spade to follow men like them" but he has his "squat pen"—the symbol of poetic spontaneity. There is an inherent tone of independence and determination while the poet connects the ancestral tradition to the present. The poet reconciles his inner conflict within himself—following his own path. Being strong in his root, he attempts to break the tradition. Instead of being ashamed for the fore-fathers, he feels proud—immortalizes their profession through his poetic potentiality. Heaney weaves his poetic tone through his brilliant use of simple diction and striking imageries.*

**Keywords:** Inner-conflict, digging, traditions, passion, dream.

### Introduction:

The Irish Nobel Laureate Seamus Justin Heaney, "the most important Irish poet since Yeats" (Robert Lowell) is famous for his 1966, first full-length collection "Death of a Naturalist". Many influences and experiences shape his poetic tone and theme. The Irish split culture, Irish rituals, and Irish conflict as well as the subsequent loss of "innocence of childhood" is a major theme in "Death of a Naturalist". Heaney has close relation with Nature as well as his sheer instinct sets his poetic-self. In "Death of a Naturalist", the poet expresses his love for motherland through the simplest use of poetic diction. A stance of remoteness and profound serenity is there in the poem through his clever use of pen. He plays with a varied range of onomatopoeic sounds. In "Death of a Naturalist",

Heaney upholds his childhood world, Mossbawn. He observes people and work minutely— from different perspective with a child’s naïve wonder, natural charm and instinctive fear. Bogland is very nearer to him; the bog is represented for him a repository of memories of his childhood. Heaney uses images, symbols and metaphors with the zeal of an archaeologist. Heaney expresses his experiences, nature, childhood days, farming background, socio-political events, cultural and societal problems around him through his poetic verses.

### Poetic Potentiality:

Seamus Heaney, “probably the best- known poet in the world” in his famous poem “Digging” writes about his poetic potentiality. He upholds the relationship of three generation: the poet-speaker, his father and the poet-speaker’s grandfather. The poet resolves to take up poetic writing as career. The poet-speaker wants to follow the ancestral tradition in a different way.

The starting of the poem sets the thematic tone. The poet-speaker starts the poem in a very unconventional way. The poet is at his writing desk. The pen is held in between his thumb and index finger. The poet compares the “squat pen” with the gun, the symbol of conquering power. The poet-speaker, sitting at his writing desk looks out of the window where his father is digging the flower-bed on stony-ground. The transparent single pane of glass which separates father and son is deeply symbolic to weave the poetic intention of traditional deviation. The poet’s father stretching the hind lower part of body stoops to dig the ridges of soil. The poet has described the rhythmic rasping sound of digging with minute poetic diction. The crude, rough boot of the poet’s father balances tightly while the top of the blade of the spade uproots the buried bright edges of ‘cool’ potatoes. The poet-speakers’ ancestors are farmers— they have been farming dedicatedly generations after generations.

The poet asserts that by God’s grace, his father handles the spade efficiently just like his grandfather. The poet-speaker’s grandfather was so skilled in ‘digging’ turf that no other man could challenge him in Toner’s bog. The Grand-father drank a bottle of milk carried by the poet-speaker and once finished he immediately started to slice up “heaving sods” neatly. His continuous act of digging is written—

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

The “cold smell of potato” reminds the poet-speaker a possessive sense of farming wherein the root of his life lies. The poet also wants to follow the tradition unconventionally. After much inner-conflict the poet arrives at the conclusive decision that he also wants to dig, but he is reluctant to dig with ‘spade’ but with the ‘pen’. Through his poetic pen he resolves to ‘dig’ the human emotions, passions, experiences and the spontaneity of life to achieve “Something of real value”—

“Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I’ll dig with it”.

The poet expresses the deeper significance of life; he philosophizes human life penning down the poem; he captures the passion, possession and predicament of human life in his poems. He digs with his finest touch of poetic pen whereas his ancestors procured food and fuel with the masterly control of spade. The poem is cramped with verse of brilliant images and subtle symbols. The opening imagery strikes the main theme of the poem as the poet compares his ‘pen’ with the snug ‘gun’. The imagery suggests the power of poetic craftsmanship. This reminds us of the proverbial saying—“The pen is mightier than the sword”. The poet hears a “clean rasping sound” as his father digs. There is an apparent comparison between his intellectual labor, giving him silent solace and his father’s physical labor, bearing traditional heritage. The onomatopoeic jugglery of words—“a clean rasping sound”; “spade sinks into gravelly ground”; “the squelch and slap of soggy peat”—reverberate the actual sound through such brilliant imagery. The physicality of digging is expressed through various postures depicted in simple diction. Through the various fragmented images, the poet appeals our visual and auditory senses.

The title ‘Digging’ itself implies two-fold signification— ancestors’ ‘digging’, farming for daily livelihood and the poet’s literal ‘digging’ of human passions, emotions, experiences and the spontaneity—a poetic inscription in the world history of literature—an assured journey from poetic rapture to the achievement of poetic excellence— Nobel prize in literature. From breaking the tradition in a literal sense to the apex of poetic excellence, Seamus Heaney, the optimistic visionary poet concludes that whilst we should not forget our anchored roots, we must pursue our determined passion and dreams in life. The poet’s indomitable determination— “I’ll dig with it” gets its ultimate fruition in receiving Nobel Prize (1995) in literature.

#### **Conclusion:**

Heaney intends to glorify the very act of “Digging” in deeper, symbolic way. The poet through his simple poetic diction, fervor, zeal and verbosity wants to “dig” his name in golden letters in the pages of the world History of English Literature.

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