



## Digging of Generations

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### Abstract

The poem “digging” of Seamus Heaney is one of the most widely known poems. This paper will study and analyze the comparison of “digging of generations” in the following aspects: tools of digging, fruits of digging, power of digging and depth of digging. Comparing the different tools of digging, the poet regards spade and pen as the symbols of occupation in different era. Heaney explores the culture and history changes of society from the fruits of digging, and delve into the social progress via the source of strength of digging. The developing digging ways and digging depth discloses great progress and amazing improvement of digging.

**Key words:** “Digging”; Generations; Tools; Fruits; Power; Depth

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Seamus Heaney is universally recognized as one of the major Irish poets of the 20th century. Attracting a great number of readers from several continents, Heaney has also won prestigious literary reputation and honors, including the Nobel Prize. He has gained positive comments from critics all around the world for his work that has always been most concerned with the past of Ireland, even his earliest poems of the 1960s. The *New York Review of Books* essayist Richard Murphy described Heaney as “the poet who has shown the finest art in presenting a coherent vision of Ireland, past and present.”

As a native of Northern Ireland, Heaney aims at reflecting upon the political problems covering intense struggles and violent colonization that always plagued the country during Heaney’s youth. His works are not simply involved in political situations and Irish history, but some are related to his childhood, farm life and culture in Ireland. “Digging” is one of such poems that open Seamus Heaney’s first collection, *Death of a Naturalist (1966)*. “Digging” can be described as a vocation poem, in which a poet declares a firm decision to pursue a life in writing. It expresses themes of time and history and the industrious nature of Heaney’s forefathers through his narration of digging in the bog on their family farm. Domestic scholars haven’t studied much on this poem which mainly focuses on Irishness and national identity. Foreign scholars have got more comprehensive and deeper achievements on the poem that include but not limited to literary/poetic devices, love and hard reality of nature and other subjects. From a new perspective, this paper will study and analyze the comparison of “digging of generations” in the following aspects: tools of digging, fruits of digging, power of digging and depth of digging. By comparison, it can be revealed that the differences of digging changes with the flying of time and the evolutions of society and Heaney’s desire to become a poet.

### TOOLS OF DIGGING: SPADE & PEN

While his ancestors do hardworking manual labor, planting, and digging, Heaney’s work is to dig into the meaning of work and life through poetry.

“ Between my finger and my thumb  
 The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.” (L1-2)

“ 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.” (L28-31)

The pen is the poet's tool, which is used to "dig" for poetic inspiration and ideas. The poem opens with a metaphor, comparing the pen resting between the poet's fingers to a gun. This metaphor gives power and builds tension at the beginning of the poem by the diction. In the first stanza, the poet compares his pen to a resting gun, which endows "pen" with the sense of tension. In the final section, the pen is again depicted as resting in the poet's hand. However, it is no longer a weapon, but rather a tool. Heaney decides that even though he does not work with a spade, that is, to choose a conventional path to follow, he will use his pen as his tool and dig to find his path and poetic inspiration as his ancestor's digging to uncover good soil and search for potatoes.

"Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging, I look down" (L3-5)

"My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog." (L17-18)

Breaking back into the past, the following stanzas portray the scene that the poet's father and grandfather work hard in the field. The tools of Heaney's grandfather and father communicate the continuity of his ancestors' digging. The spade, or shovel, an instrument typically used for digging, is one of the central symbols of Heaney's "Digging." The word "spade" appears three times in the poem, and its placement is precise. Heaney's father worked skillfully in the fields, just as he had learned from his father. "My father" uses spade to dig into the ground for potatoes, which is an old way to make a living. A spade is a tool primarily for digging consisting of a long handle and blade, typically with the blade narrower and flatter than the common shovel. Spade here interacts with the rhythm of drilling that uses sound-related literary devices to emphasize the effort and repetitive sound of digging. Sibilance is the repetition of the "S" sound in nearby or phrases, creating a hissing or whispering effect. Heaney uses sibilance to mimic the "rasping" sound of the spade sinking into the dirt. The poet uses alliteration in the phrases "spade sink" and "gravelly ground" to evoke the impact of the spade being pushed deeper into the soil in a repetitive effect.

Essentially, the "spade" slices the poem into three sections. The spade is a tool that gives power and importance to its users, and the speakers will be attracted by the strength with which his father and grandfather wield it as they read this poem. The spade functions as the perpetrator of the poem's main action, digging through time and memory to make a dramatic comparison between past and present, spades and pens. The spade is a tool that gives weight and importance to its bearers, and the speaker is fascinated by the strength with which his father and grandfather wield it.

Spade is an instrument of labor as pen is stationery for writing. This poem is published in 1966 when Heaney

made great efforts to launch his writing career. Spade here symbolizes grandfather and father's hard work, their career, and their way to explore the world. Slipping into the era of his grandfather and father, Heaney admires his elders' skills and abilities with the spade, but declares that he will "dig" in the different field with his pen instead. This is obviously essential that spade and pen are the symbols of occupation, expressing the spiritual inheritance of lineage and Heaney's determination to become a poet with a totally different tool—pen, as the proverb has it, the pen is mightier than the sword (or the gun or the spade).

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## FRUITS OF DIGGING: TURF, POTATOES, AND POETRY

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Clearly rooted into the past, Heaney frequently repeats the words "dig" and "digging" to emphasize the idea of searching and uncovering with skill and effort. The speaker describes that his grandfather cut "more turf in a day/Than any other man on Toner's bog." Peat, known locally as turf, which was dried and used for fuel in wintertime, was dug as the connection of generations to echo the fruits of working in the past. Turf here refers to the natural grass and the surface layer of earth held together by its roots, which could be the fuel dug to be sold for a living for thousands of years. His grandfather worked hard to go down for the sod. In the past, Irish people warmed their homes and cooked their food by burning turf dug from the bog as fuel. Because of the rising costs of chemical fuels and the cutting gas supplies, Irish regarded turf that could replace those expensive and finite fuels as a precious domestic source of heat and energy for centuries. Lacking coal and woods, not to mention electricity, Irish people survived for centuries by draining turf and using peat as fuel. Turf cut from the bog by spade or shovel, played a crucial part in Irish people's daily life and also in Irish's culture and history.

Besides the dug turf but potatoes buried in the ground is the digging goal of Heaney's father. Potato visually unfolds a painting that revealed the phenomenon that as the daily food of Irish people it carries the historical meaning and cultural tradition. The emotions and memories evoked in "Digging" is no less true of rural Ireland, actually speaking, given the role of the potato in Irish history and culture. Alluding the crop potato to the Irish history, Heaney intends to evoke the readers' awareness of "Great Famine" that is a period of starvation and disease in Ireland from 1845 to 1849. The potato plant is appealing for its characteristics---hardy, nutritious, calorie-dense, and easy to grow in Irish soil. Therefore, during the famine, nearly half of Ireland's population depended exclusively on potatoes as their staple food, and the other half had potatoes frequently in their daily life. And also, Ireland is well-known for loving potatoes around the world. Potato in this poem responds to the

history of Great Hunger and bears the will of life and the appetite for success of Irish's parents. The repetition of the word "digging" also reinforces the hardworking nature of Heaney's ancestors. They do their work well and almost mechanically, seeming never to complain or tire of this physically demanding and strenuous work.

As his father and grandfather carefully digs to harvest and plant crops, Heaney methodically digs to search for the words to represent life experiences through poetry. *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) is the first major published collection of poems written by Seamus Heaney, who receives the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. Digging is one of the most celebrated poems in this collection that addressed his resolution to become a poet who establish his own business. When studying English at Queen's University, Heaney is heavily influence by artists who created poetry out of their local and native backgrounds—poets such as Ted Hughes, Patrick Kavanagh, and Robert Frost. Corresponding to what were dug in the period of Heaney's grandfather and father, works created by Heaney's pen are as useful and significant as turf and potatoes.

From turf to potatoes to poetry, poem focuses strongly on what Heaney has inherited from his father and his grandfather. He distinguishes between the different types of digging—for flowers, potatoes, or peat—and much of his language expresses the strenuous nature of the farming work. Although he didn't carry forward the hard work into gravelly ground with spade for turf or potatoes, he inherited the spirit of struggling for success and fighting for a bright future from them with his pen as his potent tools. Poetry is what he would like to delve into his whole life with.

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### **SOURCE OF STRENGTH OF DIGGING: SHOULDER, BOOT AND LEG, FINGERS.**

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"Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf"

The speaker makes clear that his grandfather shouldered the spade to hurl his shoulder at it to push deeper for the good turf. After cutting down he heaved manicured turf over his shoulder. With heavy weight he continues his laborious and hard digging work. Moreover, when the poet recalls bringing his grandfather some milk "in a bottle / Corked sloppily with paper", the self-reliant nature of the Irish traditional rural community is revealed. The phenomenon of self-sufficiency in Irish family is reflected through a bottle of milk that must come from dairy cattle rather than commercial bottle-milk bought in the store. Agriculture-oriented economy obviously is the main economic pattern in Ireland at that time when peasants could only make a living and realize the value of

life by manual labor.

"The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly."

Detailed description of actions of Heaney's father is given to present a labor picture through the eyes of Heaney in his childhood. He has grown up with the work of his father and grandfather who devote themselves to the earth as his forefathers did. "boot", "lug", "shaft" and "knee" help to turn over the soil and search for potatoes that are the ultimate goal of his digging. Compared to heaving sods over shoulders, generation of fathers offer less strength by knee and leg instead but dug for more direct and specific things. These lines, describing how his father's shovel fit against his boot and leg, and his grandfather heaves turf over his shoulder, echo the first lines of the poem, which describe the speaker's fingers around his pen.

"Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests"

While Heaney's forefather and father dig with part of body which was thought to provide greater power, he turns to his finger and thumb for help to dig. These two lines are repeated to emphasize what the speaker digs by, that is "finger" and "thumb". As the minimum joint of the whole body, finger and thumb offer astonishing power to dug for profound words. From another perspective, this is a way of metonymy that refers to brain by the name of figure. In fact, brain was the real final source of strength that excavate the mental bog of his mind and convey the energy of words by writing. And finger and thumb here only executed what instructions his brain handed out and what ideas his mind would like to express.

In general, it seems that there are less and less physical strength of digging generation after generation. However, while his father and grandfather make strenuous effort to dig into the earth to plant crops and harvest, Heaney unconventionally digs into the fertile ground of thought to search for the poetry and works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.

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### **DEPTH OF DIGGING: THE SURFACE OF EARTH, POTATOES IN THE SOIL, IDEAS AND WORDS IN THE MIND.**

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Besides the development of tools, the goals of digging have developed. Grandfather cuts the turf and father sinks into for potatoes, while Heaney digs into my heart and mind to produce poetry. Similar to the process of digging of his grandfather, the digging of Heaney's father still goes into the ground but deeper than it. "When the spade sinks into gravelly ground (Line 4)" Sod is grubbed from the land surface of bog, while potatoes are usually planted

in the loam or sandy loam with deep soil layer, loose and breathable slope and sufficient moisture. Totally different from his forefathers' digging, Heaney throws himself into digging his mind by experiencing the world and thinking independently. Poetry as the achievements reflects the transition of goal and the process of digging.

In addition, in "Through living roots awaken in my head.", the phrase "living roots" also works metaphorically as a link to connect the new and different digging with the roots that the speaker tries to access into his family history and as the way he relates his own work as a writer to the work of his ancestors. From ancient time to recent period, the depth of digging penetrates into the soil deeper and deeper with the changes of times, and even from the earth surface to the fertile ground of mind. The process of digging becomes deeper and deeper, from the surface of the ground into the achievements (the fruits of the earth), from production of something physical to the results of thoughts and mind. The depth of digging also reveals the persistence and inheritance of hard work and spirit of perseverance with which the generations of Irish like Heaney and his forefathers can keep the consistence of their craft. The developing digging ways and digging depth discloses the fact that the digging made great progress and amazing improvement.

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## CONCLUSION

The poem "Digging" represents a portrait of the plain, industrious, and self-reliant Irish peasantry, that helps not only reverse some typically existing and very negative stereotypes about the Irish who are considered as men living in poverty and misery, tending to blame on the English, but also denied the character portrayed by a great number of writers with the inherited bad manners of irresponsibility, and, in particular, of a scourge of endemic alcoholism. Moreover, on the basis of reversing the false stereotype, the poet reshaped the appearance of a new positive stereotype of laborious farmers and workers with precise and concise description. For Heaney's Irish turf-cutters are examples of an ideal of hard work, or work ethic, which, therefore, can no longer be labeled Protestant.

Heaney's poem is built on the idea of the value of work and labor. The poet admires his father and grandfather's hard work in the fields. He emphasizes their skill and mastery in digging and planting with mechanical precision. Heaney stresses that there is as much skill in manual labor as there is in intellectual labor. The farmer's

spade is equated to the poet's pen, as one digs for good soil and the other digs for good ideas. Heaney also writes the poem to explore how his ancestry inspires his work as a poet that brings him great courage and ambitious motivation to write. From his grandfather, his father to him, the ways of digging change a lot with times going. Moreover, the significance of "digging" has been deeper and deeper, ranging from turf to thinking, from "material" to "spiritual".

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