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Digging Into Society: The Hierarchy of the Poet and the Working Man

Written in 1966, Seamus Heaney's "Digging" is, at first glance, a simple analysis by the author of his own cherished memories. Over the course of the poem, the author describes the hardworking nature of his father and his grandfather and compares himself to them. Ultimately, he decides to follow in their footsteps, though not in the traditional sense. Rather than following them as laborers, the speaker decides to follow their work ethic. However, Heaney's poem is more than a rudimentary description of the speaker's family background. In writing "Digging," Heaney seems to be a self-interested poet, intent on delegating importance to his own experiences and individualism. But in actuality, Heaney places himself within the confines of society, stressing his relationship with those around him. This personal relativity can then be translated to the larger issues of a post-modern poet's role in, and responsibility to, his culture. Heaney places the poet, not above the working man, abandoning a traditional social hierarchy, but instead, on the same plane, and charges him with a responsibility to give a respected voice within society to those who otherwise would not have one.

"Digging" follows a first-person point of view that places the speaker and the author as the same entity, stressing himself as the center of the experiences radiating out from him. Throughout, we see the poet placing himself at the center of the action, referring to personal experiences as a source of inspiration and importance. However, the speaker is not the sole, or even, the most important subject of the poem. At lines 13 and 14 the speaker says "To scatter new potatoes that we picked / Loving their cool hardness in our hands." In line 13, the speaker identifies himself as a member of a group with the word "we." He never fully identifies the extent of the group, leaving a vague impression of a large number of people, though at least, surely, including his father, which the second, third, and fourth stanzas directly refer to. The next line extends the speaker's identification with a group, but emphasizes it with the inclusion of the possessive "our." While the speaker is at the center of the action, he is not only accompanied by at least one other, but those accompanying him are granted a shared appreciation for the "cool hardness" of the "potatoes" from line 13. It need also be noted that the speaker is using a third person possessive, not only granting significance to those around him, but allowing them to have a sense of ownership. This shared sense of ownership, especially when applied to the agricultural context of the poem, calls to mind a communal ideal. The fact that this is the only section where the speaker

breaks from a singular first-person stresses its importance. The speaker first establishes an individualistic narration, but he does bend to include the collective.

The method of the poem's telling, that is, as a memory reflected upon by a sole speaker, continues the overall theme of individual experience that the first-person point of view establishes; though, in this case, the focus is on the content, rather than the structure. Poetry, as popularized by Wordsworth, was "emotion recollected in tranquility," essentially as the written record of an earlier memory. Clearly, Heaney is employing this tactic, as the speaker reflects upon memories of time spent with his father and grandfather while he prepares to write, with the pen "[resting] between [his] finger and [his] thumb" (ll. 1-2). The speaker emphasizes his own experiences, exerting an individualism that seems to stress his own self-importance. However, these memories cannot be taken simply as a self-interested exploration based on a surface judgment, but must be examined further.

The speaker's memories, while revolving around him, do not place him as the character central to the action. In his second memory, the speaker describes his grandfather cutting peat, saying that he "fell to right away / Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder" (ll. 21-23), while the speaker's action is delegated to simply saying "I carried him milk in a bottle" (l. 19). The difference in action can be seen immediately, as the speaker is applying present participles to his grandfather's action, but simple past to his own. The actions of the speaker's father, "straining," "bending," "digging," in the third stanza are also placed in present participle form. The present participle indicates continuous action, while the simple past of "carried" implies that it is less significant, being only a momentary action and therefore having a smaller impact. Clearly, then, the speaker himself is a secondary character in his memories, seemingly existing solely as an audience to the real action. By making his father and grandfather the subject of these memories, and then, the subject of the majority of the poem, the speaker places a disproportionate amount of importance on everyone besides himself. In fact, besides the shared action of lines 13 and 14 and the carrying of the milk from line 19, the only action that speaker performs is complete inaction.

In the narrative moment, all that the speaker says of himself is "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests" (ll. 1-2, 29-30). Even then, the speaker does not perform an action on the pen, such as holding it or writing with it, but the pen itself is exerting the action. The pen "rests." Obviously, the word, "rests," is alluding to the pen's dormant nature. However, the pen, as an inanimate object, cannot actually have a dormant nature. The speaker, instead, is attributing his own dormancy to the pen. While the speaker is passive in his memories, his passivity in the present is taken to a higher level still. The speaker is so passive that he cannot even attribute the action of resting to himself, needing a surrogate to perform that action for him. It is clear that the speaker is preparing to write, or perhaps, is unable to write and is merely sitting dumbstruck as he attempts to. It is in this moment that the speaker falls back on his memories, unable to concentrate or create on his

own, needing the comfort of his father's and grandfather's action. Then, within those memories, the only concrete action that he performs is the "[picking]" and "loving" of the potatoes, which he does as part of a group.

The speaker's actual method of remembering is key to an understanding of how his individual passivity and admiration of the working class contribute to Heaney's definition of a poet's role. The speaker begins remembering with "under my window, a clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father, digging. I look down" (ll. 3-5). It is not peculiar that the poet would be "[looking] down" at a working class man, or that he would be "under" the speaker. Both of these phrases indicate a traditional social hierarchy, where the academic would exist well above a common farmer. Heaney, is, however, calling this hierarchy into question in two ways. The first is that the speaker's father is working "under [his] window." The operative word here is "window" as it represents a man-made structure. The house that the speaker is writing within, just like the society he lives in, in which farmers work "under" the more noble professions, such as poet, are both human constructs. The world does not naturally divide society in this way, and in truth, the farmer is far more valuable than the poet. The speaker's awe and admiration of his father and grandfather, then, are justified, and Heaney is calling attention to the importance of the working classes in a functioning society. This is why the speaker could not actually function except when he was working as part of a group to "[pick]" potatoes or in aiding his grandfather by bringing him a bottle of milk.

The second way that Heaney questions this hierarchy stems from a discussion of the speaker's grandfather "going down and down / For the good turf" (ll. 23-24). Just as the speaker "[loves] [the] cool hardness" (l. 14) of the potatoes, which exist below the rest of the world, sustaining it both as a literal base and as a source of food, the "good turf" is far below the surface. It is no accident that the speaker's grandfather finds quality in the lower reaches or that the speaker's own joy comes from something rooted beneath the rest of the world. Not only is the constructed hierarchy antagonistic to the natural world, it is actually opposite. In the natural world, the most enjoyable things and highest quality material are often beneath the rest, requiring a hardworking man to fish them out. The speaker, then, as a poet, exists only on the backs of the most valuable members of society.

Heaney does not throw out the position of the poet altogether, however, but merely revises the duty that he has in society. Throughout the poem, the speaker admires the work that his father and grandfather do in their own role with statements like "by God, the old man could handle a spade" (l. 15). This admiration, mixed with his own inability to create and therefore fulfill what he understands as a poet's role, causes an existential crisis late in the poem as the speaker laments that he "[has] no spade to follow men like them" (l. 28), in reference to his father and grandfather. It does not take long for the speaker to resolve this crisis, however, as he finishes the poem with an echo from the beginning, saying "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it" (ll. 29-31). The resolve of

the final line concludes the speaker's apprehension about his profession, as he is finally aware of what his role needs to be.

The word "dig" in the final line has two significances. Obviously, it is a reference to the speaker's father and grandfather who dug for a living, and who inspired him with their hard work and dedication, and can itself mean to work hard and earnestly. However, the word's more literal meaning of making holes or turning over the soil are more significant. When the speaker says of his pen that he will "dig with it" he is actually talking about a more dramatic turning over of society, or making holes in the way society perceives itself. As established, the speaker holds a great admiration for the working class, and Heaney questions the social hierarchy which places a poet above the working class. Thus, the speaker's final acceptance of his profession is an evening out of the hierarchy, placing everyone on equal, if separate footing. Though he "[has] no spade to follow men like them," the speaker can fulfill his place in society by taking up his pen in earnest and providing a voice for those who work silently, yet who society rests and relies upon.

Works Cited

Heaney, Seamus. "Digging." *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M.H. Abrams and Stephen Grenblatt. 8th ed. Vol. F. New York: Norton, 2006. 2824. Print.