



Mycroft Lectures.

Adapted Transcript for:

Seamus Heaney's ***Digging.***

(Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture also presents extra information to enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. As the Mycroft lectures are not read from a script, a transcript of a lecture contains the imperfections of a spoken presentation. To avoid the embarrassment of having the spoken performance thought to be an essay and being quoted as such, I have made occasional changes to the spoken lectures for the purposes of clarification. What follows is the transcript of a lecture, not an essay.)

Chronology of the lecture:

1. The poem is read through.
2. The relevance of this poem to Seamus Heaney's poetic output is explained.
3. The poem is parsed, paraphrased, and explained line by line in simpler English. Various complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:
 - ⤴ Different interpretations of the simile 'snug as a gun'.
 - ⤴ Seamus Heaney's use and control of onomatopoeia.
 - ⤴ The different time periods in which the poem takes place.
 - ⤴ How Heaney thwarts our possible expectations for what a poetic image is.
 - ⤴ 'Seeing things'. Heaney's ability to notice the specific, relevant detail others would miss.
 - ⤴ The golden childhood memories evoked of his father, of his grandfather.
 - ⤴ Heaney's reaction to his family's prowess at manual labour.
 - ⤴ How do we dig with a pen? The lecture looks at the way Heaney views his family's

professionalism at digging and uses it as an analogy for creating the type of poems that Heaney wishes to write.

- ⤴ The digging analogy is extended to other instances where digging is mentioned in the poem.
 - ⤴ The lecture acknowledges the social situation concerning education at the time the poem was written.
 - ⤴ The metafictional element of the poem is examined.
4. The poem is read through again.

Like all of the Mycroft lectures, I'm going to read the poem through, then give you a line-by-line analysis of what the poet is telling us in the poem, and then put that in the simplest English I can. I'll then come back and look at the more beautiful way the poet has chosen to give us the poem, rather than in the simplistic, prosaic way that I explained the poem to you. The virtue of me explaining the poem to you in this way is that you will know what the poem's content is. You will know what the poem is about. And after that, you can look at the poem's form to look at the wonderful ways that, in this case, Heaney has chosen to give us what he wants to say in the poem. Here we go.

This is the first reading of Seamus Heaney's *Digging*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.*

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

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

Now the first relevance of this poem is that it is the first poem of Seamus Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, and it operates as a kind of mission statement. Heaney is telling us right from the very start [of his career] what kind of poet he is going to be. And it's all there, everything that he does in his whole career; everything he achieves is there, nascent in this first poem. It's a wonderful piece. It is in many ways deceptively simplistic, but there's Freudianism in there, there's Marxism in there if you want to see it, but let's look at this line-by-line analysis of the poem.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Simple enough. He's holding a pen in his hand. 'The pen is in my hand, and it's very comfortable.' The type of pen that he's holding is presumably a fountain pen. You know the ones, they're short and fat. A short, fat, squat pen that he's going to write with.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

The pen he's holding in his hand is not doing anything. It's waiting there, but it feels comfortable. It feels as 'snug as a gun'. Here's a simile. Something is compared to something else in terms of 'like', or 'as'. The pen feels as 'snug as a gun'. Over the years, I've heard many different interpretations for this 'snug as a gun' simile. Surely the simplest one is that a gun does feel comfortable in your hand. The gun is built to fit your hand. The pen is built to fit his hand. One could also say that if you imagine a pen, a big, fat pen, held in your hand to write with, and you take the pen out of the way, you've kind of got a gun-like shape in your hand, with the pen removed. Seamus Heaney, coming from Northern Ireland at the tail-end of the 1960s, was almost obligated to be affiliated with the troubles in Northern Ireland; the near civil war in the north of Ireland. As soon as somebody from that area of the world mentions a gun, it has an extra import. Now whether Heaney intended that this early in his career, I don't know. Whether he intended to see this 'snug as a gun' simile with any political import, I'm not so sure. What I do think is that the 'snug as a gun' simile is certainly calling us to deal with the 'pen is mightier than the sword' idea. We've all heard this one - we say the pen is mightier than the sword. You can do more by writing than you do by fighting. And nowadays, we don't use swords, we use guns. So I think by saying, 'the pen feels as snug as a gun', he is bringing that to our attention. But, suffice to say, at this point in the poem, Heaney is sat in a room, he's got a pen in his hand, the pen feels comfortable, but he is not writing.

The next stanza begins:

Under my window, a clean rasping sound

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground

Heaney is really good, as good as anybody I've ever read, with onomatopoeia. 'Onomatopoeia' is of course when a word means the same as it sounds. 'Bang', 'crash': these

are onomatopoeic. Heaney is able to write of things with a sort of onomatopoeic emphasis that conjures up the sound of the thing he is describing. He is describing a spade here, going into gravel. So the spade digs into the gravel. Listen to how Heaney describes it.

*Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground*

In this 'clean rasping sound' we can hear the spade going through the small stones in the gravel. Gravel is of course, made up of small stones. So,

*Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.*

So Heaney is up at his window, and he looks down from his window, and he sees his dad there, and he sees his dad digging outside in the gravelly ground. He sees his dad there, and he remembers something. This noise outside, the spade cutting into the gravel, conjures up this memory, and the memory is

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

How can something go down and then come up twenty years away?

Well, plainly it's a memory. He sees his dad as an old man digging outside, and he remembers him digging twenty years ago. And notice here how Heaney pays attention to the aging process. When he sees his dad as an old man in the present, he has this straining rump, 'rump' being his backside. And straining? It is painful for an old man to do some digging.

But when he imagines his father bending low and coming up twenty years away, when his father was twenty years younger, he *bends low, comes up twenty years away stooping in rhythm through potato drills where he was digging*. The straining rump twenty years ago is stooping in rhythm. It was much easier, twenty years ago, for his dad to do the job that he was doing.

So what have we got here?

We've got the boy trying to write a poem, and he looks out of his window, and he sees his dad digging, and the sight of his dad digging makes him remember his father digging twenty years before.

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

'The coarse boot nestled on the lug.' Now, if you think about what Heaney is actually writing about here, if I was to say to you that this is all very poetic, what people tend to think about with 'poetic' is usually romantic poetry. If something is poetic, it's usually to do with love, and clouds and beautiful things.

That's not necessarily true.

Those images are some of the things that poets write about.

What Heaney is writing about here is his dad digging a hole in the ground. He's paying specific attention to the way his father's foot would rest on a spade as he dug out potatoes. It's difficult at first to imagine a less poetic image. But look how Heaney's specific attention to detail turns this totally un-poetic image into something that is poetic.

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

The rough boot nestled gently against the lug of the spade. Whether he achieves in making the digging of a hole beautiful here, I don't know. But I can't say I don't think he manages to get poetry out of it because he does manage to get poetry out of it.

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

What Heaney seems to me to be able to do is make the digging of a hole professional. An activity worthy of a professional. There's nothing accidental about the way his father digs a hole. And this will become more important later.

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

'Tall tops' are a type of potatoes, so he rooted out tall tops. 'Buried the bright edge deep.'

Heaney is a master at what we would call, well, what Heaney himself calls 'seeing things'. When he won the Nobel Prize, he won it for a book of poetry called *Seeing Things*. And 'seeing things' can mean two different things: it can refer to a situation where we have a madman who hallucinates, and we say, 'that man is "seeing things".' That means noticing things that aren't there. But the other thing we mean by 'seeing things' is noticing things that other people don't notice. Recognizing things. One could argue that the Irish poet William Butler Yeats was the 'seeing things that weren't there' type of poet, whereas Heaney is the Irish poet who can see things that are there. He's the guy who sees the 'bright edge' of the spade. And the bright edge of the spade is the bottom edge of the spade, the bit that actually goes into the ground first, and the reason that that edge is bright is because it has been shined up by continual friction with earth, and gravel, and the act of digging itself. The bright edge shows that his father is very professional. It shows that he works hard - the edge of his spade gleams, that bottom edge gleams from work, and Heaney notices this.

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

I love this line, because it suggests to me that only somebody who had actually done it would know to mention it. Only someone who had actually done it would know that when you dig potatoes directly out of the ground, they are cool and hard. So what you can imagine

here is his father working up a potato drill, and his dad has got his spade in his hand and he's digging up the potatoes and throwing them back, and Heaney and his brothers, his family, are going behind him to pick up the potatoes. And he remembers this kind of golden childhood memory. And he remembers this specific part about it of how as kids they loved picking up the potatoes and loving the cool, hardness in their hands. He's very good on these golden childhood memories, Heaney is.

I'll read this stanza again.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft

Against the inside knee was levered firmly.

He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep (that's the bright edge of the spade)

buried the bright edge deep

To scatter new potatoes that we picked,

Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

Lovely bit of writing.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.

Just like his old man.

Now, 'by God'. If we were to translate that into modern parlance, I'd hear it as 'wow'. The 'by God' is an indication of how impressed he is at his father's prowess at manual labour. *By God, the old man could handle a spade.* When we say 'to handle something', it means we can control it, we can do it. We may say, 'that man knows how to handle a car'. Or we often hear, 'he knows how to handle a gun' in a Western (film). *By God, the old man could handle a spade.* Even though it is manual labour that he is doing, and that his tool is just a spade, the man knows how to do it. Now, you could be good at handling a spade, and you could be bad at handling a spade, and if it is your job to handle a spade, it's far preferable that you are good at it than bad at it. And that's what Heaney notices about his dad, that's what he seems to be quite proud of here. Actually 'seems to be', is wrong. This is what he blatantly obviously is very proud of here.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.

Just like his old man.

And Heaney's thought process then skips back a generation. He thinks of his grandfather. His grandfather also had prowess at manual labour. And Heaney tells us another one of these golden childhood memories, the first one being him and his family going behind his dad as his dad dug potatoes. And the second one is this, the stanza goes:

*My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.*

Now, Toner's bog is obviously a place where his grandfather worked. His grandfather was one of the guys who would dig peat. Peat is found in Ireland, it's a brown, soil-like material - you can use it for burning, you can use it for building with, and someone has to go out and dig the peat from the peat bogs. It doesn't sound like the most glamorous of jobs, but like most employment, you can be good at it, and you can be bad at it, and if it's your job to dig peat, it's better to be good at it than bad at it. And plainly, his grandfather was very good at it, as Heaney tells us: *my grandfather cut more turf in a day than any other man on Toner's bog*. This is the memory he has of his grandfather.

*Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf.*

Now the memory is of Heaney as a young boy, taking some milk out for his granddad, and in the memory his granddad gets the milk, and he drinks the milk, and he doesn't stop his

work. He takes the milk, drinks it, presumably gives (the bottle) back to Heaney, and continues on with his work.

Just a small touch in this that I quite like is the fact that Heaney brings his grandfather milk in a bottle 'corked sloppily with paper'. Why would it be corked with paper? As I remember milk bottles, they were corked with tin. Or at least had a tin lid on them. But of course, Heaney was raised on a farm, he grew up on a farm, and the milk would come directly from a cow, not from a shop, and you need something to cork the bottle with. So, there's pieces of newspaper, presumably, that they'd cork the bottle with, and the young boy takes the newspaper cork out to give the milk to his grandfather. It's a sort of small detail that we lose over time, and I like the inclusion of that. It situates the poem in a social context perhaps of days gone by. Just a small detail that I like.

*Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away*

'Fell to' means continued. His granddad gets the milk, drinks it, straightens up to drink it, and 'fell to', continues back with his digging.

Heaving sods over his shoulder

'Sods' are turfs.

Heaving sods over his shoulder

This 'heaving' suggests how heavy the turfs are that his grandfather is digging and throwing over his shoulder.

Nicking and slicing neatly

is good as well; this is that Heaney attention to the way words sound: he wants to make the words in which he describes the digging of turf sound like the act of turf-digging itself. And in that *nicking and slicing neatly* we can imagine his granddad cutting the turf, 'nicking' it and 'slicing' it neatly, and then heaving the sod over his shoulder.

Great writing.

Going down and down

For the good turf. Digging.

And we'll come back to that line, because it yields a lot more than is apparent on first reading. But we need to get to the end of the poem to really be aware of its relevance.

I'll read the stanza again.

*My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.
The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

We have this attention to sound working beautifully here once more, *the cold smell of potato mould*: this is the memory, the memory of his dad digging potatoes. ...*the cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap of soggy peat...* This is the sound of his granddad digging the peat. ...*the curt cuts of an edge Through living roots awaken in my head. But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

Now I'm going to come back to this line about *the curt cuts through living roots awaken in my head* in a minute. But Heaney reaches an acknowledgment here.

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

He knows that his ancestors, his family, have all been manual labourers, but he is not. He is upstairs in a room in a house, trying to write a poem.

*I've no spade to follow men like them
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.*

Now, what does he mean by 'I'll dig with' the pen?

I think this is a great metaphor. What he's saying is, he's going to use his pen in the same way as his family, his granddad, his father, have used their spades. He's going to dig with his pen. First off, how has he shown his dad and his grandfather using spades? He has shown them being used with with an extraordinary degree of professionalism, capability, attention to detail: this is what Heaney wants to be able to do with his pen. The pen is the tool of his trade in the same way that the spade in the tool of the trade of his family.

I've no spade to follow men like them

'My tool is a pen, and I will dig with that pen.'

What does he mean by 'dig'? As soon as we know that Heaney is creating an analogy between the digging that his parents have done and the digging which he wants to do with his pen and poems, it invites us to extend that analogy through other times that digging is mentioned in the poem. He is going to dig with his pen, he's going to go down deep, he's going to work hard with it, he's going to be very professional in his attention to detail, he's going to be a good writer - all of which he achieved, and more.

But note this other time that digging is mentioned. In the stanza beginning, *my grandfather cut more turf in a day* we hear at the end

*He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.*

His grandfather goes down and down for the good turf. So 'the good turf', the good stuff you want to get from digging is deep down. It seems to me Heaney is saying that what he wants to do with his pen is think deeper thoughts to get deeper poems. Go down through the layers to get the stuff that's deeper down, that's what he wants to do. It's not just that he's going to work hard, but he's going to go deeper, get the deeper stuff, go 'down and down for the good turf, digging'. Heaney somewhere describes poetry-writing as being like archaeology. You go down through layers to find the stuff that you are after. And by 'stuff', I

mean the things which you're going to use in the creation of your poem. I think this digging analogy, you could argue, is there in the poem itself. I mean, Heaney's up in the room, and he looks down and he sees his dad, he looks out the window and he sees his dad there digging, and this conjures up an image for him of his dad twenty years ago, and this conjures up an image of his granddad years before that; and this down here, he finds the realization that his family's prowess at manual labour is something that he can use. I said earlier that there's – not to overstate the case - a Marxist element in this, and by a Marxist element I only mean that it pays attention to an economic situation.

Heaney was one of the first generation of children to be educated away from the intellectual capabilities of their family. Would that be fair to say? To be educated away from the intellectual *expectations* of their family may be better. He describes his family somewhere as 'literate, but not literary'. Meaning they could read, but they didn't do so as a preoccupation - they weren't that interested in the educational process. But he was, he was always obviously an extraordinarily bright kid, and he was a beneficiary of the idea that very clever kids from working-class backgrounds should be able to attain university education. And he took good advantage of this, and succeeded at university brilliantly. This happened at the beginning of the 1960s. Heaney, being one of the cleverest kids in his area, gets a university education.

You can imagine what happens when this happens for the first time in any country: the kids who have got the university education come back home, and they meet their manual labouring parents, and they have nothing in common with them. The kids are all very educated, and they're interested in the stuff that educated people are interested in, and they come home and they see their parents out digging, and there's a disconnect. This doesn't seem to be - 'this doesn't seem to be', this flat out isn't the situation that occurs to Heaney. Rather than looking at his parents and thinking, 'they're out digging holes, I'm so glad I don't have to do that, what a horrible job', Heaney looks at his family's abilities at manual labour very positively. He looks at it and says, 'there's a *capability* there that I want. There's an *inheritance* there for me. This ability to work hard, this ability to do the job well, that's what I'm going to take from them. I've got a different tool to do the job with, but I'm going to inherit that from my family.'

The curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awaken in my head.

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

When he says *But I've no spade to follow men like them*, he almost says it out of regret. And the 'men like them' doesn't mean, 'idiots like them', it's more 'gods like them'. These people who have a capability that I know I don't have.

*The curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awoken in my head.*

'Roots', of course, has two meanings. In one instance, a root is a part of a plant; the potato is of course a root plant, so we can have the curt cuts of the spade through the potatoes. But roots are also your family, where you come from. And Heaney is acknowledging here that he is being cut off from his roots.

I've no spade to follow men like them.

But this doesn't bother him. He's going to take what he can from their prowess at manual labour, and use it for his work, for his writing, for his poetry, and become the poet that he indeed became.

Before I read the poem through for you once more, one other aspect that I quite like in this is the idea of a poem being 'metafictive'. 'Metafictive' describes fiction that draws attention to its status as a text. And a lot of poems do this. Poems about the act of writing poems. With *Digging* being Seamus Heaney's mission statement, he's saying, 'These are the type of poems that I want to write, the ones that go down and down for the good turf, where I've worked hard to get them, got the deep thoughts by that hard work.' But I would suggest that there's a circularity in this poem. One that I like. If we imagine at the start, the boy is upstairs, the boy, the young Heaney, the young poet-to-be, this Nobel Prize winner getting ready to write his first poem, he's upstairs and he wants to write a poem. He looks down, sees his dad, this reminds him of his granddad, this clarifies to him the type of poet that he wants to be, and he says finally,

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.*

And where previously he has said snug as a gun', now he says, *I'll dig with it.*

And you get the idea that he's now going to write a poem.

I'll dig with it.

And the poem starts. And the poem that he's going to write is, of course, the poem that you've just read. I always imagine the sort of circularity in the poem, as we finish it, it goes back to the beginning again. We read the poem ending with the declaration that 'I now can write the poem that you've just read.'

So. Seamus Heaney's *Digging*.

I'll give you a final read-through of it, and now you should be able to understand what's happening in the poem.

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

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

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

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

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

My grandfather cut more turf in a day

*Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.*

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

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

Thank you very much.
Hope you enjoyed the lecture.

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Some Other Notes.

1 Snug as a gun is [almost] a palindrome. It reads the same forward as it does backwards. Make of that what you will.

2 “Once I carried him milk in a bottle / Corked sloppily with paper.” We can, if we wish, imagine the bottle as a wine bottle. A wine bottle would be easier to cork with paper than a milk bottle. Also there may be some appeal for the idea of the serious working man drinking milk from a wine bottle. Milk being a drink to strengthen, wine being a drink, many may say, to weaken.