Digging

Topics: growing up, finding one’s own path, individuality, conformity, identity, tradition, family legacy

Literal meaning: writer is looking out his window looking down at his father digging “potato drills” and then reminisces about his grandfather digging sod and peat. He eventually declares that he will not follow in their “digging” but wants to be a poet.

BY SEAMUS HEANEY

Between my finger and my thumb

His comparison of the pen to the gun indicates the power of poetry or the poet

First two stanzas rhyme. This represents his place as the poet. He looks down from his window, which represents the lofty position of the poet. When he talks of his father and grandfather, there is no rhyme, as they are labourers. This switch moves the point of view from poet to farmer.

The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:

From a lofty position: the poet’s position.

My father, digging. I look down

“straining”: the work is hard

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Something that extends back into the past. This connects to tradition.

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,

Connects the writer to the tradition of manual labour from childhood.

Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.

Writer’s grandfather was also someone who used to dig. Further implies tradition of manual labour

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

Further connects the writer to tradition

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

The living roots are the roots to his father and grandfather’s legacy of manual labour and the writer is cutting them by not following in their path

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

He has “no spade to follow men like them” but uses the pen to dig into his thoughts and emotions “for the good turf”.

The squat pen rests.

I’ll d

ig with it.