

Seamus Heaney
&
his poem “*Digging*”

For M. A (English), Sem. 2.

MGCU, Bihar

Life, Work and Awards:

- **Seamus Justin Heaney** (April 13,1939 – August 30,2013) was born on Northern Ireland.
- Heaney's work is notable for representing Irish rural life, political strife and mythology.
- He was an immensely popular poet of his time and won awards like Geoffrey Faber Memorial award, E.M.Foster award, PEN translation award.
- Heaney got the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.
- He has written around 20 books of Poetry, has edited anthologies and has written works of criticism. He has also translated some works.

Notable Works: A

- Death of a Naturalist
- Door into the Dark
- The Burial at Thebes
- Human Chain
- Selected Poems: 1919
- Beowulf: New Verse translation: 1999

Notable Works: B

- The Spirit Level: 1996
- Electric Light: 2001
- District and Circle: 2006
- Finders Keepers (Prose): 2002

Profession

- He served as Prof. at Harvard (1981-87)
- Poet in residence (1998-87)
- Prof. of Poetry at Oxford (1989-1994)

Autobiographical Elements

- Ireland of his time saw the political turmoil and conflict between northern and southern regions which is reflected in his important works *Wintering Out* (1975) and *North* (1975).
- Heaney was born in the family of farmers and farm imagery and domestic life finds brilliant portrayal in his works. The poem in our syllabus “Digging” is an example of this.

Ideas on Poetry

- Heaney has written works on criticism where he expressed his optimistic attitude towards poetry which, for him, would stay relevant even in the times dominated by technology. He believed poets to be the “discoverers and custodians of unlooked for”.
- Heaney writes that “if poetry and the arts do anything... they can fortify your inner life, your inwardness.”
- Heaney was not an active participant in political life and defended poet’s right to be private and apolitical.

“Digging”

- The poem "Digging" reflects the conflict in poet's mind who has decided to choose an occupation different from the one his forefathers adopted i.e. farming.
- The poem is written in a free style with some use of alliteration.
- Writer has used the sensory imagery, which was his typical style, to present the lively pictures of farming.
- There is a sense of pride for the traditional occupation that writer's forefathers had gained lot of expertise in.

Comparing Spade, Pen, and Gun

- The poem opens with the lines: Between my finger and my thumb /'The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
- The poet takes his pen to be his weapon. He probably thinks that he can bring some social changes through his pen.
- As the poet is working on his desk, he looks outside his window to find his father working on the flowerbed with his spade and reminiscences the time he had worked along with him in his childhood; spade being his tool then.

Sensory Imagery

- The poet then starts thinking of his happy and proud childhood when he had appreciated his forefather's skill of farming. This childhood comes lively in front of readers eyes through brilliant usage of imagery.
- "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." Note down the imagery used here. The words 'squelch' and 'slap' are onomatopoeic.

Bringing the past to present

- Bringing up the scenes from rural life and poet's past, the writer suddenly comes back to the present and takes the turn while writing: "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests. I'll dig with it". The word 'dig' becomes a link between past and present.
- The skills or the wisdom the poet learned from his forefathers will be utilized by the writer in his new occupation in the present times.
- Poet's reflection of his past suggests his mental conflict embedded in the decision of giving up the occupation of his forefathers.

Continuity with the past

- The poet delves deeper into his past to find his roots and, at last, confidently brings them in the present when writes that he will keep "digging" like his forefathers, though his tool will be his pen.
- Poets reflections, thus, end up with a sense of continuity with his past. He finds his past embedded in the present even when he has opted for a different profession.
- Seamus Heaney is a writer who shared his optimism and happiness through his writings and "Digging" is a good example.

Some Questions to Reflect Upon

- Why is the poet's past important for him? Do you think your past is also important in a similar fashion?
- How is person's sense of identity linked with occupation?
- Does the poem end in a triumphant spirit? Has the writer come up with some creative solution to his personal problem? How much important is the role of speculative thinking in the narrator's life?
- Highlight the words in the poem that bring up sensory images.

Thank You

- “History says, don’t hope on this side of the grave. But then, once in a lifetime, the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up and hope and history rhyme!” – *Seamus Heaney*.