

“Digging” by Seamus Heaney

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking				
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Create
Close Reading	Grammar	Composition		
Reading Strategies Determining Main Idea Generalization Inference Paraphrase Summary Literary Elements Character motivation Detail Diction connotation denotation vocabulary Imagery Mood Point of View person perspective Setting Style Theme Tone tone determined through diction, imagery, detail, point of view, and syntax multiple tones vocabulary associated with tone Figures of Speech Metaphor Simile Sound Devices Alliteration Consonance Onomatopoeia Rhyme Literary Techniques Characterization direct indirect Motif Symbolism Literary Forms Verse	Parts of Speech Phrases Absolute Clauses Independent Sentences Structure compound Sentence Variety Sentence Beginnings Syntax Techniques Omission Repetition Rhetorical Fragment Analysis of a Text Meaning and Effect related to parts of speech, phrases, clauses, sentences, and syntax	Types (modes) Expository analytical The Process of Composition Prewriting generation of ideas organization of ideas Structural Elements Body incorporation of quotes topic sentence use of commentary use of evidence		

Materials and Resources

- “Digging” by Seamus Heaney, included

Lesson Introduction

This lesson guides students through an analysis of a contemporary poem that explores the relationship between the speaker and his father and grandfather. Close reading activities focus on connotative diction, imagery, figurative language, syntax, and sound devices that help students discern the character of the speaker and his own recognition of the role he plays in perpetuating his family and cultural heritage. Students also analyze the writer’s use of a controlling motif to unlock meaning in the poem. The lesson culminates with a writing activity in which students discuss the speaker’s attitudes toward his father and grandfather.

“Digging” By Seamus Heaney

Read carefully the poem “Digging” and answer the questions that follow.

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 (5)

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stopping in rhythm through potato drills¹
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug², the shaft (10)
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. (15)
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf³ in a day
Than any other man on Toner’s bog⁴.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up (20)
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 (25)
Of soggy peat⁵, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

¹ **Potato drills:** furrowed rows of potato plants.

² **Lug:** the top projection of the blade on a spade.

³ **Turf:** a block of peat to be burned as fuel.

⁴ **Bog:** a marsh; an area of wet, spongy ground.

⁵ **Peat:** partially decayed, highly combustible, dry plant material usually formed in swamps.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests. (30)
I’ll dig with it.

Activity One: Summary

In the space below, write a brief summary (three to five sentences) of what this poem is about.

Activity Two: Close Reading

1. Using a slash mark (/), indicate the end of each sentence in the poem. How many sentences are there? _____
2. Describe the point of view in this poem and justify your answer, giving evidence from the poem. _____

3. Write one or two good sentences to describe the speaker in the poem, referring to age, gender, occupation, etc. _____

4. What other specific people does the speaker mention? _____
5. What is the **simile** the speaker uses in lines 1–2? _____
What two things are being compared? _____
In what way(s) are these two things similar? _____

6. Define the word “squat.” _____

Why do you think the speaker uses this word to describe the pen? _____

A *rhetorical fragment* is a sentence fragment used deliberately for a persuasive purpose or to create a desired effect.

7. In lines 3–4 the speaker uses a **rhetorical fragment**: “*Under my window, a clean rasping sound/When the spade sinks into gravelly ground.*” What effect is created by the speaker’s use of this fragment? _____

Write this fragment as a complete sentence: _____

Does the complete sentence achieve the same effect as the fragment? Explain your answer.

8. In line 5 the speaker uses another **rhetorical fragment**: “*My father, digging.*” Write this fragment as a complete sentence: _____

Which is more effective—the fragment or the complete sentence? Explain your answer.

9. What literal scene does the speaker describe in lines 3–6? _____

10. Identify two different types of **sound devices** used in lines 3–5 and write the words that create those sound devices. _____

How do these sound devices contribute to the description of this scene? _____

11. Is the action described in line 7 (“Bends low, comes up twenty years away”) literal or figurative? Explain. _____

12. What literal scene does the speaker describe in lines 8–14? _____

13. What role does the speaker play in the scene described in lines 8–14? _____

How does this depiction of the speaker differ from the speaker you characterized in Question 3? _____

14. In lines 10–11, there are two independent clauses joined only with a comma. What kind of word has the writer omitted? _____

Why do you think he might have chosen to join these two independent clauses in this way instead of in a more traditional manner? _____

15. Who is “the old man” the speaker refers to in line 15? _____

16. In the chart below, list all of the main verbs (not participles) in stanzas 3 and 4. In parentheses give the subject of each verb. The first one has been done for you.

	present tense verbs	past tense verbs
Stanza 3	<i>bends, comes (rump)</i>	
Stanza 4		

17. What do the tenses of the verbs in Stanzas 3–4 tell you about the action being described in these two stanzas? _____

18. In the space below, write one complete sentence that describes the speaker’s attitude toward his father, as revealed in lines 3–15. Then give at least two details from the poem to support your statement.

19. Who is “his old man” to whom the speaker refers in line 16? _____

What is the speaker’s relationship to this man? _____

20. What transition occurs in lines 15–16? _____

21. What specific scene does the speaker describe in lines 17–24? _____

22. What role does the speaker play in the scene he describes in lines 17–24? _____

How does this depiction of the speaker differ from the speaker you characterized in Question 3? _____

23. In the space below, write one complete sentence that describes the speaker’s attitude toward his grandfather, as revealed in lines 15–24. Then give at least two details from the poem to support your statement.

24. Read carefully the sentence that comprises lines 25–27:

*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.*

Underline twice the main verb in this sentence. Is it present tense or past tense? _____

Based on the verb tense, how would you describe the transition that occurs in this sentence?

25. List below each of the compound subjects in this sentence and tell whether these subjects are more closely related to the speaker’s father or to his grandfather or both:

26. What two meanings of the word “roots” seem implicit in line 27? Explain.

27. What does the speaker mean when he says that these images “awaken in my head”?

Symbolism is the use of any object, person, place, or action that has a meaning in itself while standing for something larger than itself, such as a quality, attitude, belief, or value.

28. What tool or implement does the speaker associate with his father? _____

What tool or implement does the speaker associate with his grandfather? _____

29. Look carefully again at what the father and grandfather were digging. How do these things represent some of the basic necessities of life? _____

30. Read carefully the sentence in line 28: ***But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.***

What is the rhetorical function of the word “But” at the beginning of this sentence? _____

31. Paraphrase this sentence: _____

32. What tool or implement does the speaker associate with himself? _____

33. How can the speaker “dig with” this tool? _____

34. How do these two different tools serve as symbols for the speaker and for the speaker’s father and grandfather? _____

A *motif* is a pattern or strand of imagery or symbolism in a work of literature.

35. Notice that the title consists of only one word—“Digging.” Where is this word (or another form of this word) repeated in the poem? For each instance, give the line number and tell who is connected with the digging in that line. _____

36. Find at least three other words or phrases in the poem that also relate to the act of digging. Give the line numbers where they occur. _____

37. How does this **motif** of digging unify the poem? _____

38. Why do you think the speaker repeats in lines 29–30 the words he used in lines 1–2? _____

39. Notice that the speaker’s descriptions of his father and his grandfather are “bookmarked” by lines 1–2 and 29–30. How does this repetition relate to the cycle of life established in the poem? _____

Activity Three: Determining Tone

1. In the space below, list several words that describe the speaker’s attitude toward his father and his grandfather.

Circle the two words you think best describe this attitude.

2. Keeping in mind the motif of “digging” in this poem, fill in the chart below with examples of diction, imagery, and figurative language that reveal the speaker’s attitude toward his father and his grandfather. You must include at least four pieces of evidence and identify the device used. Use quotation marks around quotes from the poem and cite line numbers. The commentary explains, analyzes, etc. how or why the concrete device reveals the tone you identified.

Device—Evidence (Lines from the Poem)	Commentary
<p>Tone words: _____ and _____</p>	

