

**Poetry**  
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**Lecture - 64**  
**Seamus Heaney**

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**Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)**



- Historical and Literary Context
- Seamus Heaney
- Two Poems
- "Digging"
- "Death of a Naturalist"
- Analysis



Hello friends. Welcome to this presentation on Seamus Heaney, born in 1939 and died in 2013. We will explore the historical and literary context first, then move on to the life of Seamus Heaney, examine two of his poems, "Digging" and "Death of a Naturalist." Give an analysis of these two poems poetically, rhetorically, linguistically, and then, conclude our discussion.

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## Historical and Literary Context



- Historically oppressed and troubled Ireland
- Endless conflicts between Catholics and Protestants
- Irish independence in 1922
- Still Northern Ireland is a part of Britain.
- Irish poets have contributed to British literature greatly
- W B Yeats and S Heaney are two Nobel Laureates
- Themes: Identity, Heritage, Language, and Religion
- Irish poetry became richer and stronger in the 1960s and 1970s.
- Distinguished contemporary poets include Eavan Boland, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, and Paul Muldoon



Let us look into the historical and literary context first. Historically, Ireland was always oppressed and suppressed. And that led to finally this 1922 independence from England. Ireland got independence in 1922 but left one part of Ireland to Britain. That part of Ireland was full of Protestants and our poet Seamus Heaney happened to live in Northern Ireland.

This land has always had lots of conflicts between Catholics and Protestants and we have lot of Irish poets who have contributed to British literature or English literature greatly. Two poets, we have here, W B Yeats and Seamus Heaney who won Nobel Prizes. These poets deal with the themes of identity, heritage, language, and religion apart from others.

During the 1960s and 70s, Irish poetry became rich and strong. We have a number of distinguished poets in this category, Eavan Boland, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, and Paul Muldoon.

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## Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)



- A major 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish poet, dramatist, translator.
- A Catholic in a protestant Northern Ireland
- A scholarship boy from the farm to a professor at Harvard and Oxford Universities and Nobel Laureate
- Influenced by Ted Hughes and Robert Frost
- **Common Subjects:** personal life, father, rural life, farming, nature, Irish politics, etc.
- “. . . poets themselves are **finders and keepers**, that their vocation is to look after art and life by being discoverers and custodians of the unlooked for.”
- “If poetry and the arts can do anything, they can fortify your life, your inwardness.”



Seamus Heaney became a major 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish poet, dramatist, and translator with a large number of publications. He was a Catholic in a protestant Northern Ireland. He was born in a farm. He got a scholarship that is why he always calls himself a scholarship boy. He was a scholarship boy from the farm to a Professor at Harvard University, Oxford University. Later on, he also won this nobel prize for poetry.

He was influenced by Ted Hughes and Robert Frost. Some of the common subjects that he deals with in his poems are his own personal life, father, rural life, farming, nature, Irish culture, and politics. He had said so many things about poetry. We have two quotations here. The first one is, “poets themselves are finders and keepers, that their vocation is to look after art and life by being discoverers and custodians of the unlooked-for.” The next quotation is, “if poetry and the arts can do anything, they can fortify your life, your inwardness.”

Now, you can understand the sensibility, the spirit of Seamus Heaney’s poetry which won him this Nobel Prize. Look in, turn in, fortify yourself, strengthen yourself, and become the finder and keeper of the society, the culture, the world, the earth.

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## Two Poems



- The selected poems appear in the volume *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966. These are two of the most famous poems from this volume.
- **Digging:**
  - A poem of 31 lines in eight short stanzas dealing with three generations of diggers: the father, grandfather, and the speaker-poet. It shows the generational diggings.
- **Death of a Naturalist:**
  - A poem of 33 lines in two stanzas portraying the speaker's childhood experience of a flax dam and the frogs which threaten him with their foul smell and menacing croak, killing the curiosity of the child in him



We have selected two poems from Seamus Heaney. These poems appear in the volume called “Death of a Naturalist.” It was published in 1966. These two poems are very famous from this volume, first is “Digging.” It is a poem of 31 lines in 8 short stanzas dealing with 3 generations of diggers; the father, the grandfather, and the speaker-poet. It shows the generational diggings.

Then we have “Death of a Naturalist.” This is a poem of 33 lines in 2 stanzas, portraying the speaker’s childhood experience of a flax dam and the frogs which threaten him with their foul smell and menacing croak, killing the curiosity of the child in the poet.

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## “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

5

...  
[The poet looks upon his father in awe for the beauty and  
rhythm of digging]



First, let us see ‘Digging.’ Unfortunately, we will not be able to read the whole poem here. So we have to go to Poetry Foundation or to our textbook for the full poem. We have summarized some extracts which we cannot put them here. So we have some selections and some summary of the left out, omitted passages and then, we will have our discussions.

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.

...

In the omitted part, the poet looks upon his father in awe for the beauty and the rhythm of digging.

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## “Digging”



[The poet admires the professional gear of his father as he was digging]

....

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.

15



Again, in the omitted part the poet admires the professional gear of his father as he was digging.

....

“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.

That is his father, that is, in this case, the poet’s grandfather.

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Again, we have an omitted passage. Heaney remembers a day in Toner's bog. That is a place where they had the land when he went to his grandfather with milk in a bottle which he had not closed properly. Then he refers to the grandfather.

“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.”

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## “Digging”



[The smell and sound of the potatoes remain with the poet to make him feel his generational and professional difference from his father and grandfather. He chose to study in a university on scholarship and become a poet to work with his pen and words.]

....

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.



Again, we have an omitted passage. The smell and sound of the potatoes remain with the poet to make him feel his generational and professional difference from his father and grandfather.

The poet chose to study in a university on scholarship and become a poet to work with his pen and words. So at last, he says,

“But I have no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I will dig with it.”

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## Thematic Contrast



- Grandfather, Father and Son
  - Farming and Writing
  - Spade and Pen
  - **Earth and Paper/Mind**
  - Past and Present
  - Work and Rest
  - Belonging and Alienation
- 
- The great theme of digging the land and the mind, the language and culture.
  - Words are burial grounds. Poets bury their experiences in poems and we as readers dig them for meaning.



Let us see the thematic contrast in this poem between old age, that is, grandfather and father, and then youth, son. Between farming and writing, spade and pen, earth on the one hand, and paper or mind on the other hand, past and present, work and rest, belonging and alienation.

Seamus Heaney left his land to a university and he left his culture but then, he always remembers his past, his parents, his grandparents, his people, his land, his culture, his language, everything he remembers. And he remembers everything in contrast to what he is now. He is a poet. He uses a pen, not a spade. So we have this great theme of digging the land and the mind, the language and culture. Now, you can understand finders and keepers. For me, it appears that the words are burial grounds. Poets bury their experiences in poems and we as readers, dig them for our own understanding.

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## Poetic Devices



**Metaphor:** digging of the land and the mind (history, time)

**Simile:** Snug as a gun (2)

**Metaphor:** The coarse boot nestled on the lug (10)

**Simile:** Just like his old man (16)

**Alli & Asso:** Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods (21)

**Metaphor:** Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it. (29-31)

**Allegory:** Poetry reading and writing as digging



Some of the poetic devices we can find in this poem are, Metaphor, in ‘digging of the land and the mind,’ that is history, time, space even. Simile, we have in ‘Snug as a gun.’ Metaphor, we have in ‘The coarse boot nestled on the lug.’ Another simile is, ‘Just like his old man;’ that is, human simile one person is compared with another person.

We have alliteration and assonance in ‘Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods.’ It is a beautiful line in this poem, full of rhythm, full of music. Nicking, we have alliteration, na, neat; we have alliteration again in sa, slicing, and sods. Then we have the assonance in nic king, sli cing, hea ving. And then, we also have another case of assonance in neat and heave. Such a line is rare to find, it is beautiful.

Then we have metaphor in, Between my finger and my thumb, The squat pen rests. I’ll dig with it. The whole poem can be considered something like an allegory of poetry reading and writing as digging.

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## Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Form:** Free verse
- **Rhyme:** no specific end rhyme except a pair of words, sound and ground.
- **Rhythm:** alternating between iamb, spondee, trochee
- **Meter:** Line length varies from 4 syllables to 12 syllables, indicating dimeter and alexandrine (6 feet)
- **Caesura, Enjambment and End-Stopped Line:**

He root| ted out| tall tops | buried| the bright| edge deep →  
To scatter new| potato| toes that| we picked,  
Loving| their cool| hardness| in our| hands. (12-14)



Now, let us come to Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter in this poem. The whole form of the poem is free verse. So we may not be able to expect much rhyme but then, we have a pair of words, sound, and ground rhyming in this poem.

Then when we come to the rhythm, we find an alteration between iamb, spondee, and trochee. The meter of this poem varies from 4 syllables to 12 syllables, indicating dimeter and alexandrine, that is, 6 feet.

We also have caesura, enjambment, and end-stopped line in this passage that we have quoted here.

“He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep,

To scatter new potatoes that we picked,

Loving their cool hardness in our hands”

We have underlined all those iamb, spondee, trochee examples. He root, that is, a case of iamb; spondee in tall tops; and trochee in loving. We have this enjambment in ‘edge deep to scatter’ and then full stop at the end, that is, end-stopped line.

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### Overall Impression



- Heaney recalls an image of his father digging and another image of his grandfather digging a turf.
- Both men used their spade with commitment and contentment to grow potatoes from the land.
- Instead of a spade, a pen squats between the speaker's finger and his thumb, with which the speaker-poet promises to dig in his mind and Irish life to write his poems.
- Heaney's digging is also beautiful and beneficial to him and to his community as he has written plenty of sonorous poems to win millions of hearts and many awards, e.g., the Nobel Prize.
- This is an authentic, memorable, reflective, and lyrical poem of his agricultural family and his poetic life.



To give an overall impression of this poem, let us look at these points. Heaney recalls an image of his father digging and another image of his grandfather digging a turf. Both men used their spade with commitment and contentment to grow potatoes from the land.

Instead of a spade, a pen squats between the speaker's finger and his thumb with which the speaker-poet promises to dig in his mind and Irish life to write his poems. Heaney's digging is also beautiful and beneficial to him and to his community and to the whole world as he has written plenty of sonorous poems to win millions of hearts and many awards including the Nobel Prize.

This is an authentic, memorable, reflective, and lyrical poem of his agricultural family and his poetic life.

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## Death of a Naturalist



All year the flax-dam festered in the heart  
Of the townland; green and heavy headed  
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.  
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun. 4

....  
[The speaker describes bluebottles, dragonflies,  
butterflies, and the frogspawn, emphasizing his special  
interest in the frogspawn.]



We move on to the next poem “Death of a Naturalist.” Again, we will not be able to read the whole poem for copyright reasons. Please go to Poetry Foundation webpage or to the textbook.

“All year the flax-dam festered in the heart

Of the townland; green and heavy headed

Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.

Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.” 4

Flax dam is a place where water is there and some plants are put inside the pond or dam and this flax rots. Some lines are omitted. So we have a summary of this. The speaker describes bluebottles, dragonflies, butterflies, and the frogspawn, emphasizing his special interest in the frogspawn.

It is actually a poem of nostalgia, remembrance. In his childhood, he used to see this and he used to take some frogspawn from the pond to his house and also to his school. We will see that in the next two few slides.

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## Death of a Naturalist

[The boy would collect the frogspawn into jars and keep at home and also take them to the school and see the change into tadpoles.]

Miss Walls would tell us how      15

The **daddy frog** was called a bullfrog  
And how he croaked and how the **mammy frog**  
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was  
**Frogspawn.**

[One can predict the weather based on frog skin color;  
yellow - sunny; brown – rainy]



First, we have a summary of the omitted part. The boy would collect the frogspawn into jars and keep at home and also take them to the school and see that change into tadpoles. Miss Walls that is his teacher,

“Miss Walls would tell us how      15

The **daddy frog** was called a bullfrog

And how he croaked and how the **mammy frog**

Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was

**Frogspawn.”**

And there are some more points we have summarized here. One can predict the weather based on the frogs’ skin color. If the frogs’ skin color is yellow, it is sunny, it may not rain. And if the skin color is brown, it may rain. That is the kind of knowledge Irish people had in rural areas. They did not have the entire system we have created for meteorology today.

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## Death of a Naturalist



[The curious child became afraid of the frogs invading the flax-dam croaking with a menace which made the boy escape from that place.]

The slap and plop were obscene threats. **Some sat**  
**Poised like mud grenades**, their blunt heads farting. 30  
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew  
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.



We continue and summarize first and then go to the poem. The curious child became afraid of the frogs invading the flax-dam croaking with a menace which made the boy escape from that place.

“The slap and plop were obscene threats. **Some sat**  
**Poised like mud grenades**, their blunt heads farting. 30  
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew  
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.”

His experience is described here and that is described in terms of like mud grenades. The frogs would attack him and so, he would because of that fear, he would run away.

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## Thematic Contrast



- Life and Death
- Nature and Human Beings
- City and Village
- **Childhood and Adulthood**
- Decay and Growth
- Hot and Cold
- Invasion and Protection
- Vengeance and Forgiveness



We have the thematic contrast between life and death, nature and human beings, city and village. Most importantly, childhood and adulthood. This poem actually describes the growth of a young boy into an adult person with an understanding, with an experience. And we have the contrast between decay and growth, hot and cold, invasion and protection, vengeance and forgiveness.

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## Poetic Devices



- Dead metaphor:** the heart/ of the townland (1-2)
- Personification:** the punishing sun (4)
- Onomatopoeia:** Bubbles gargled delicately (5)
- Simile:** Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water  
In the shade of the banks.(9-10)
- Personification:** the angry frogs (23)
- Alliteration:** coarse croaking (24)
- Metaphor:** The air was thick with a bass chorus. (25)
- Simile:** their loose necks pulsed like sails (27)
- Simile:** Some sat/ Poised like mud grenades (28-29)
- Hyperbole/ Personification:** The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for vengeance (30-31)



A large number of poetic devices can be found in this poem. We have a dead metaphor in the heart of the townland. Personification in the punishing sun, under the hot sun the flax-dam would become rotten and rotten. Onomatopoeia, we have in

‘bubbles gargled delicately.’ Bubbles gargled delicately, this kind of sound effect only some poets can achieve. Simile, we have in ‘Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water in the shade of the banks.’ We have personification in ‘the angry frogs.’ Alliteration in ‘coarse croaking.’ Metaphor in ‘The air was thick with a bass chorus.’ Simile in ‘their loose necks pulsed like sails.’ Then another simile in, ‘some sat poised like mud grenades.’ And lastly, we have this hyperbole and personification together, ‘The great slime kings Were gathered there for vengeance.’ Slime kings and the poor boy was afraid and he ran away.

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## Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



**Rhyme:** No end rhyme

**Rhythm:** Common speech rhythm; iamb & trochee

**Meter:** Pentameter; mostly 10 syllables and five feet

**Poetic form:** blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter

**Caesura, Enjambment and End-Stopped Lines:**

All year | the flax | -dam fe | stered in | the heart    >

Of the | townland; | green and | heavy | headed    >

Flax had | rotted | there, weigh | ted down | by huge | sods.



We have rhyme, rhythm, and meter in this poem. Specifically, we do not have any end rhyme in this poem. We have this common speech rhythm, which arises from this iamb and trochee. We have pentameter in this poem because mostly, we have 10 syllables and 5 feet almost in every line.

The poetic form is blank verse. That means, we have unrhymed iambic pentameter in all these lines. We also have caesura, enjambment, and end-stopped lines here in this extract.

“All year the flax-dam festered in the heart

Of the townland; green and heavy headed

Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.”

All year is an example for this iamb. The flax is an example for trochee, and then we have this enjambment from the first line, the heart of the townland, heavy-headed flax had rotted there. And then last, the full stop that is end-stopped line.

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### Overall Impression

- The speaker recalls a childhood experience of the flax-dam decaying throughout the year under the hot sun.
- Bluebottles, dragonflies, butterflies, and frogspawn would swarm around the flax-dam.
- As a school boy, he would collect the frogspawn in bottles and keep them at home and also in school where the teacher would explain the evolution of the tadpoles into frogs.
- Later an awakening came to him about the croaking frogs which threatened the boy who ran away from the dam.
- Certainly, the poem displays the evolution of the innocent and curious boy into an experienced adult with an awareness of fear and disgust in him, suggesting the death in the title.
- The poet has used many poetic devices like alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, caesura and enjambment to create a rhythmic effect of joy and fear in the poem.



We have an overall impression of this poem here. The speaker recalls a childhood experience of the flax-dam decaying throughout the year under the hot sun. Bluebottles, dragonflies, butterflies, and frogspawn would swarm around the flax-dam.

As a schoolboy, he would collect the frogspawn in bottles and keep them at home and also in school, where the teacher would explain the evolution of the tadpoles into frogs. Later, an awakening came to him about the croaking frogs, which threatened the boy who ran away from the dam.

Certainly, the poem displays the evolution of the innocent and curious boy into an experienced adult with an awareness of fear and disgust in him, suggesting the death of a naturalist in the title. Naturalist, a person with interest in scientific understanding of nature. That particular aspect of him died. The poet has used many poetic devices like alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, caesura, and enjambment to create a rhythmic effect of joy and also fear in the poem.

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## Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Seamus Heaney
- Two Poems
- "Digging"
- "Death of a Naturalist"
- Analysis
- *"Even if the hopes you started out with are dashed, hope has to be maintained."*  
- Seamus Heaney



Let us have the summary of our discussion so far. We looked into the historical and literary context in which Seamus Heaney wrote his poems about Irish conflicts, Irish subjects. We looked into two specific poems, 'Digging,' and 'Death of a Naturalist.'

While Digging refers to the digging of land by his father and grandfather and his own metaphorical digging into his mind for writing poems, the Death of a Naturalist recalls an experience of the young boy watching frogs growing in a jar in a bottle, which threatened him when it came to the flax-dam with their croaking sounds.

And that is how we have looked into the poems of Seamus Heaney. Now, we end this lecture with a quotation from Seamus Heaney again. "Even if the hopes you started out with are dashed, hope has to be maintained."

That is exactly why poets are needed. That is why Nobel prizes are given to writers who somehow are able to find some hope in this chaotic hopeless world. We have some references for you.

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## References



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Some I hope, you will find in some places and read them for further understanding of the digger, Seamus Heaney. Thank you.