**"Digging" Part B** written 1964 from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) Presenter: Mrs. Brown/Ms. Bowen

Key **literary elements** & comment:

* Opening **slant rhyme** (1 & 2) Exact rhyme (3 & 4) Slant rhyme (4 & 5)
  + the "mis-rhyme here perhaps suggest the gap between the hand, the symbol of family inheritance, and the newly acquired weapon" (Mathias 17).
* **Imagery**
  + Visual – throughout
  + Tactile – "snug as a gun" (2); "coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft / Against the inside knee was nestled firmly" (10 – 11); "loving their cool harness in our hands" (14)
  + Olfactory – "cold smell of potato mold" (25)
  + Auditory – "clean rasping sound" (3); "squelch and slap / Of soggy peat" (25-26)
* Precise **iambic** rhythm ( – / ) 1, 5, 10, 13, 18, 25, 27-31: especially note first line and last five lines.
* **Metaphor** compares digging with writing (1-2 & 29-31).
* **Symbol** – digging representing basic needs (heat, food, beauty/creativity)
* **Alliteration**: "gravelly ground" (4), "tall tops," "buried the bright edge" (12), "squelch and slap / of soggy" (25-26)
* **Consonance**: "scatter new **p**otatoes that we **p**icked" (13), "sloppily with paper" (20)
* **Allusion** to the idiom – *The pen is mightier than the sword* (first and last verses)
* **Structure**: A pivotal short stanza (15-16) divides the poem into two sections, the first focusing on the father and the second on the grandfather. Moving in reverse chronological order suggests a kind of genealogical "digging."
* **Form**: Elegy - although the poem is written before his father’s death, it elegizes him in advance. It can therefore be called an anticipatory elegy (Pellegrino). Because of the rural subject matter, it might also be considered a "pastoral" elegy.

Key **literary criticism**:

* "Digging" "takes the form of a promise, a commitment from the poet to his father and grandfather. . . Heaney acknowledges that he is not a farmer, and will not follow their vocation. But at the start of his career, he vows to translate their virtues into another kind of work" (Kirsch 53).
* By taking the reader into the speaker’s experiences with rich imagery, through the senses we feel the "nostalgic pull" that is exerted on the speaker (Arp 156).
* In declaring his intentions to "reshape the remembered world" (Mathias 18) Heaney calls our attentions to the rhythms of the work of his grandfather and father as he offers us a new rhythm in his writing.

**Compare/contrast to other Heaney poems studied:**

* This poem shares the subject of childhood memories with "Death of a Naturalist" and "Blackberry Picking," but while those poems reflect in depth on a change in perspective, "Digging" announces a choice of vocation.
* As the first poem in Heaney’s first book of poetry, "Digging" is noted for the "themes that would dominate his poetry: his sensual love of his native ground; his fascination with work and all kinds of tools; his vision of poetry as a traditional, laborious, and sustaining craft, like farming" (Kirsch 53).
* Themes of continuity of the Irish experience and examples of Heaney’s fascination with the past run through much of his poetry.
* Stylistically, this poem is similar to most of Heaney’s poems in its rich use of imagery and sounds.

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| **Presenter's arguable thesis:** Through sustained tactile and kinesthetic imagery, the poet honors the physical work of his father and grandfather. Finding his own skills unequal to their tasks, the speaker asserts that his work will be to write, metaphorically to "dig"; by paralleling the three generations, he suggests an intention to follow honorably in their footsteps. |

**Works Consulted or Cited:**

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