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Following a Father’s Legacy in Seamus Heaney’s “Digging”

In Seamus Heaney’s “Digging” (1939) the speaker works through the expectations he has put on himself to follow in his forefathers footsteps. He sees the work of his father and grandfather and admires them for it. As the poem closes, he discovers that he cannot follow them, or at least not in the conventional sense.

As the poem begins, we see that the speaker has a tangible appreciation for his forefathers and their work. This admiration manifests in two distinct ways. The first is in his extolling of their skill. When speaking about his father he says “By God, the old man could handle a spade. / Just like his old man.” (15-16). To say the phrase “By God” means very little, but to write it in a poem is much more purposeful. It intentionally gives a sense of awe. The speaker sees his father using a spade, which he would have seen often, and he’s struck at the man’s skill. He doesn’t write that his father is skilled out of factual obligation, but rather out of very intense esteem. The second source of his admiration is their work ethic. This is a much more emotional aspect of his admiration and is really what the speaker is trying to exemplify to the reader. In the poem, when the speaker is still only a child he bring his grandfather a bottle of milk while he’s working. The man stands up, drinks the entire bottle, then goes immediately back to work again. The labor is hard, and the grandfather does it silently and without begrudge. Both of these aspects of their work are tied together in the two lines "My grandfather cut more turf in a day / Than any other man on Toner's bog.” (17-18). His hard work and skill come together to form the man that the speaker wishes to become.

There is definitely a sense of family obligation in the poem. Although the speaker never mentions any pressure from either his father or his grandfather, he obviously feels a responsibility to carry on in his father’s footsteps. After he so vividly describes the toil of his fathers, he writes “But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.” (30. This is interesting because of what it implies to the reader. The only motivation for writing a line such as this is that someone is expecting the speaker to “follow men like them.” This person may only be the speaker himself, in fact I suspect that he’s the only one concerned with him not being a laborer. My reason for this is first that he never mentions any pressure from his father, and secondly in the way that he interacts with his grandfather. It's unclear how old the speaker is when he brings his grandfather a bottle of milk, but based on the fact that he remembers the event and that he's old enough to go out to the fields and give it to him, we can assume that he's fairly old. It's interesting then that he's sent out for the sole reason of giving his grandfather a drink. He doesn’t do any work on his own, and his grandfather doesn't encourage him in the slightest to help. It's definitely not hard proof, but it does give the impression that he received little pressure from his family. The compulsion he feels to carry on his fathers' legacy is personal, something he puts on himself.

Though he has a great deal of respect for the work of his fathers, and he feels a personal conviction to follow their example, the speaker finds himself unable to live and work as they did. The speaker simply cannot follow after them. He feels the tugging of family pride and familial obligation, but he is simply incapable. He accepts this fact somewhat mournfully at first. The lines preceding the aforementioned line read "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." (25-27). This sort of colorful language builds up the emotion of the poem, until it reaches sort of a climax. Then that line of "But I've no spade to follow men like them." (27) brings the energy straight down again. It's as if he gets so excited about the glory of his fathers that when he realizes that glory cannot be his, it brings the energy and complexity of the poem to a halt. Even the word choice becomes simple and deliberate.

The speaker has no skill with a spade, but he does not stay in the melancholy state of the seventh stanza. The last three lines read "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it." (29-31). He's accepted that he can't be exactly who his fathers' were, but he's also realized that he can carry of their legacy in his own craft. He sees that their legacy wasn’t farming potatoes or cutting turf, it was skill and hard work. It doesn't matter what his trade is, as long as he carries those two qualities with him. The last line of "I'll dig with it." (31) shows a determination that is really lacking in the rest of the poem. It's the only line in the poem that is about the speaker's actions. The entire poem is him watching his father, and watching his grandfather, and in this last four words he takes control and steps into the legacy that only a few lines before he thought was out of reach.

Going through the poem from beginning to end, we see an evolution of the speaker. He starts with an extolling of his forefathers. This admiration then flows into his own insecurity when he sees that he can’t do what they did. Then, as the poem comes to a close, the speaker determines that though his writing he can and does continue on their legacy.

Work Cited

Heaney, Seamus. “Digging” *An Introduction to Poetry, Ed*. H. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. 13th ed. New York: Longman, 2010. 424. Print