### Skill Focus

#### Levels of Thinking

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<th>Remember</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Apply</th>
<th>Analyze</th>
<th>Create</th>
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### 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.
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
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stopping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
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.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner’s bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. 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.

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.
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>present tense verbs</th>
<th>past tense verbs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stanza 3</strong></td>
<td>bends, comes (rump)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stanza 4</strong></td>
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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:


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? _______________________________________________________

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Device—Evidence (Lines from the Poem)</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tone words: _________________________</td>
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<td>and _________________________</td>
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3. Examine the evidence you provided in the chart above. Now complete the following sentence by filling in the blank with appropriate noun forms of the tone words you selected for Question 1 and two types of concrete devices you used in your chart:

The speaker in “Digging” reveals his _____ and _____ toward his father and his grandfather through his use of _____ and _____.

4. **Writing about the Poem**: Write one complete paragraph in which you analyze how the poet reveals his attitude toward his father and his grandfather. Use the sentence you wrote above as your **topic sentence**, and use the evidence and commentary from your journal to complete your paragraph. You may paraphrase or use direct quotations from the poem. Write at least two sentences of commentary explaining how the evidence reveals the speaker’s attitude.

After you have finished your paragraph, use this checklist to evaluate it.

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<tr>
<td>I included two or three pieces of evidence.</td>
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<td>I incorporated the evidence into sentences with my own words.</td>
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<td>I explained how the evidence reveals the speaker’s attitudes toward his father and his grandfather.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I highlighted evidence and analysis in two different colors to be sure that there is more analysis than evidence.</td>
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