

## How to Annotate a Poem

We annotate texts and poems in order to understand them. An annotation requires many readings of the poem. You must make time to seriously consider each word and its place within the poem as a whole.

What is the author saying through this particular speaker/persona?

What is the natural progression of the poem? What is its purpose?

What is the tone and style of the poem? These are things to consider:

- Structure of the poem which explains its progression along with the major turning points
- Language that denotes regionality, education of speaker, rhetorical purpose, etc. Is it conversational, colloquial or does the speaker fall back on formal language? *Harder to address with translated poetry.*
- Tone: Is the poem celebratory, depressed, confused? Does it shift or change?
- Speaker/Persona: What does the poem reveal about the speaker?
- Imagery: What images does the poem use to create meaning or set the mood?
- Symbolism: What images become symbolic?
- Any other characteristics that are specific to your poem--Every poem is different.

As you research, you will discover that particular poets are known for certain techniques or styles. If this poem follows that trend or veers from it is important to your understanding of the poem.

Example of an annotated poem:

Tone: Celebratory  
Admiration

Form: Freeform  
manual labor broken down resembles sonnet  
digging with the mind?

Digging = extended metaphor of digging and roots.  
Heaney digs into his roots, his heritage

Language: technical  
colloquial  
conversational monosyllables

### Digging

Pen fat with what?

opening - coming to terms with self? home  
Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; as snug as a gun.

Power? violence? protection  
A natural extension?

Speaker - male  
patriarchal traditions  
reverent attitude

Memory #1  
his window - ownership threshold to his heritage

Under my window a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down - remembering / to look down on has negative con. but the poem is positive + celebratory

In rhythm =  
In touch with  
In agreement with

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

rasping connotes a living thing  
connections with the past, former generations, traditions

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.

homely  
- in control, precise  
skill, pride, dignity  
- bragging rights

Symbol: peat  
living roots  
digging  
squat pen  
Why squat?  
crouching ownership  
survival  
nourishment  
potatoes  
warmth

Admiration  
colloquial language

### Transition

By God, the old man could handle a spade,  
Just like his old man.

### Memory #2

My grandfather could 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, digging down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

worked hard - work ethics  
Strength - technique

### Turning Point heritage

The cold smell of potato mold, 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.

- negative images  
traditions / livelihoods destroyed  
No longer available

an awakening of what?

Follow in what way?

### Closure - Acceptance

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

weapon - tool

Follows tradition of fathers using the tools available to him.

Seamus Heaney

Reminders of home + hearth  
rests, snug, nestled

2 separate memories:

Father digging potatoes  
Grandfather digging turf - peat bogs

Onomatopoeia  
rasping gravelly  
squelch  
slap

The pen is mightier than the sword.