Seamus Heaney's Digging Versus Robert Hayden’s Those Winter Sundays: Comparative Analysis

In ‘Digging’ by Seamus Heaney, we are taken through the past, present, and future in a free verse poem, observing the lives of three generations in a family; the young speaker, his father, and his grandfather. The speaker identifies himself as a writer, who speaks with the highest amount of respect for his elders; previously farmers on a potato field and peat bog. Robert Hayden’s ‘Those Winter Sundays’ gives readers an insight on what Sunday’s were like for the speaker, as a child. He reminisces on how he spoke to his father, a labour worker, ‘indifferently’ (line 10, p.141), and how the relationship between them wasn’t of much importance to him; a relationship he didn’t really care about all that much. Only now, that he is older and reflecting on his childhood, does he realise how he treated his father, talking to him cold-heartedly, when all his father did was work hard to provide for his family; working with ‘cracked hands that ached from labor’ (line 3, p.140), simply for nobody to ‘ever thank him’ (line 5, p.141). This essay will analyse and compare the use of literary devices, diction, structure, and form of the differering poems, to discuss what the two speakers have to say about family and familial love as a theme.

Usually, people get Sundays off from work, it’s universally understood as a day of rest. Not in the case of the father in Hayden’s ‘Those Winter Sundays.’ After a week of suffering through hard labor, the father had the day off work and could utilise it to sleep and rest, he chose not to. This could also relate to a religious connotation. In Christianity, it is understood that when God was creating the earth, the 7th day, Sunday, would be his day of rest. Also, in the Bible, Christ died on the cross on a Sunday. Christ’s duty was to die to save mankind, as his duty. His ‘children’, or followers, didn’t understand him and crucified him. The father is similar to Christ in this sense; he had his own cross to care in working his own job and caring and providing for his uncaring child. Much alike to Christ dying on the cross for these children, the father in Hayden’s poem labored and suffered to care for his child, and in neither of these instances did the children realise and understand the sacrifices until it was too late. So instead of the father resting, he confronted the cold, to chase it away to provide his family with comfort. While his family were in the comfort of their beds, the father worked through the ‘blueblack cold’ to light the fireplaces in the house, so it was a warm environment for his loved ones to awake to. This task required effort and may have involved pain, which the father was no stranger to; his weekday job labouring left him with ‘cracked hands that ached’ (line 3, p.140). The end of the stanza finishes with the line; ‘no one ever thanked him’ (line 5, p.141). No one understood the father’s suffering and acknowledged him for his efforts. This line at the end, stands out alone, as if it were almost an afterthought of the speaker. Moving into the second stanza, the speaker describes his experiences as a child, waking up to a warm room, the fires giving an audible noise in the house, ‘splintering, breaking’ (line 6, p.141). He explains how as he arose and got dressed, he awaited ‘the chronic angers of that house, speaking indifferently to him’ (lines 9-10, p.141). Despite the fathers caring efforts to make the house warm for them, he would be insulted and spoke to ‘indifferently’ (line 10, p.141). The son is the only person in the house who understands his father well and recognises his efforts. However, despite this, the son still refers to him as ‘father’ (line 1, p.140) instead of the more friendly papa, dad, daddy, and so forth. Father is a lot more formal and could indicate that their father-son relationship lacks the closeness and affection that a father-son relationship should have.

It appears that the speaker's narrative and personal life lacks the comforts a childhood should. Throughout the poem there is no mention of a mother figure, which leads us to wonder if he even has a mother. Is she there? Or is she absent? Alongside the formality of using father instead of dad, the speaker also refers to the place he lives as 'that house' (line 9, p.141) rather than home. In 'that house' (line 9, p.141) all we seem to witness are cold rooms, and 'chronic angers' (line 9, p.141) of the father - who is evidently a negative influence and not a very comforting figure in the speaker's life. Although it is unknown what the 'chronic angers' (line 9, p.141) could be referring to - arguments between parents? Aggression from the father? Conflict between siblings? Whatever it may be, the negativity within the house could have influenced the speaker and confused their ideals of love and reality of family relationships. It seems that the only warmth in this house is coming from the firepits the father lit in the morning.

The poem ends with the speaker indicating that love sometimes expresses itself unassumingly, through actions rather than demonstrative expression. 'What did I know, what did I know of love's austere and lonely offices?' (line 13-14, p.141). The repetition of 'what did I know?' (line 13, p.141) allows the reader to understand how sad the reader feels looking back on the way his father was treated, and the regret that came with it. The word 'offices' (line 14, p.141) could signify a service done for another person; for example all of the work the father did for his family. It could also tie into the religious 'office' referring to a ceremony, tieing in nicely with the religious connotations of the father making a sacrifice for his family. By the speaker going back and reflecting on his childhood experiences and memories of home life and his father, his outlook on familial love has changed. It seems that when the speaker was a child, his idea of familial love was one that consisted of hugging and telling one another they love each other and so forth. Now, he understands that his father was showing his love towards his family through actions; through his hard work, and it was overlooked and unappreciated by the family. The speaker, now of an older age, has a greater appreciation for how difficult the duties of parental love can be and how selfless parents are, with no expectation of reciprocity.

In stark contrast comes the idea of familial love in Seamus Heaney's poem, 'Digging.' Here we see the speaker reflecting on memories of his family, much alike to the speaker in Hayden's poem. However, the speaker in Heaney's poem talks of his father and grandfather with the highest respect. He admires how hard they work; and looks up to the hard-working attitudes and physical strength they demonstrate in their daily work on the farms. He describes his grandfather at work in a peat bog 'nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / over his shoulder, going down and down / for the good turf'(line 21-23, p.144) - he describes his grandfather as a steady, effective and skilful worker, who is persistent with his heavy and intense work. Even though their work doesn't come alongside a glamorous, lavish lifestyle, it is his family history, and he finds greatness in this no matter what. When describing his memories of watching his father at work, he declares; 'by God, the old man could handle a spade' (line 15, p.144). The exclamation at the beginning of 'by God' (line 15, p.144) adds emphasis - his father was no ordinary potato farmer, his skill at his job was something to behold and marvel at. It also suggests that the speaker is proud of his father, maybe even going further, in awe of him. The speaker continues with this attitude of admiration when describing his grandfather at work, who's skill and hard-working attitude were similar to that of his fathers as well. This description of his grandfather is followed by a pause, as the speaker says, 'but I've no spade to follow men like them.' (line 27, p.144). The speaker, who seems to be a writer of some kind, is doubting himself and his identity within his family. As he thinks back and speaks so highly of the work his father and grandfather have done, he doubts his skill; why is he sitting inside with a pen in his hand when his family have such a great history of strong laborers? This hesitation and moment

of doubt doesn’t last long, as he says whilst looking at the pen in his hand, ‘I’ll dig with this’ (line 31, p.144). The speaker accepts that he has his own identity. He isn’t being forced to follow within his family footsteps. He has his tool, a pen rather than a spade, which he can dig with himself. Without dismissing his admiration for his father and grandfather, the speaker forgets his doubts and hesitation, and accepts his own path in life as a writer.

The speaker in Heaney’s poem is very different to the one in Hayden’s. Heaney’s speaker is full of pride and admiration for his father and grandfather. He recognises their hard work, and is in awe of the tasks they do and how they complete them. Whereas the speaker in Hayden’s poem is the very opposite; he notices how hard is father worked to provide for them, but didn’t acknowledge it. He wasn’t full of that same admiration the speaker in Heaney’s poem was. Only when he becomes older does he realise that his father was doing all the hard work out of love for his family, almost realising too late.

The title of Hayden’s poem is appropriate to the idea that the father-son relationship that concerned the speaker, was one that didn’t contain any warmth or closeness. Hayden writes of ‘Winter Sundays’. Why did he not write of Summer Sundays? Or Spring Sundays? In summer and spring, everything is fresh and green and beautifully thriving. When it comes to winter, everything alive and beautiful is now dead and grey, covered in frost and snow, with a cold bitter chill in the air. Winter provides a sense of coldness and gloominess, which could quite easily reflect the boys’ relationship with his father; how distant it was, lacking the familial warm love, and the coldness the son showed towards his father.

Both poets Seamus Heaney and Robert Hayden successfully use clever imagery and devices to describe familial love between a child and their father; of very different kinds. Hayden’s poem carries a tone of sadness and regret. We sympathise with the speaker and his realisation of how unfortunate it is that as children we are often unable to comprehend ‘love’s austere and lonely offices’ (line 14, p.141) - the love our parents have for us. The speaker’s father works hard labouring away to provide for his family, only for it to be dismissed and unappreciated. This poem illustrates the complex nature of a father-son relationship. On the other hand, in Seamus Heaney’s poem, Digging, we are confronted with a speaker who has to utmost respect and admiration for his father, and grandfather alike. He describes the work they do on the farm with the highest regard, and alongside the tone of the poem, we almost feel like the speaker is doubting his own skill and path in life; he perhaps feels inadequate in that he isn’t following the farming path his father and grandfather both excelled in, in their lifetime. Yet he doesn’t allow these doubts to let him dismiss the admiration he has for his forefathers.