Seamus Heaney, recipient of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature, was born in 1939 into a large Catholic farming family in County Derry, Northern Ireland. From the outset, Heaney’s poetry has negotiated the concerns of a divided land and its religious conflicts, the poet’s approach being to delve into history and myth, all with a keen ear for the rhythms of Irish speech and for the rich possibilities of poetic language. First appeared in Heaney’s first poetry collection, Death of a Naturalist (1966), “Digging” can be described as a vocation poem, in which a poet declares a firm decision to pursue a life in writing. Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” is another well-known example, as is Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, in which the poet, standing on the roadside—in what is generally understood to be Victorian London—announces his intent to leave its “pavements gray”, at once, for the idyllic, pastoral beauty of his native land, in response to a calling heard “in the deep heart’s core” (Yeats 16).

In a sense, such a poem functions as a defiant public defense of personal values and as a time capsule, which exposes the young poet’s concerns and aspirations—and the signs of creative talent yet-to-be-refined—to the criticism of latter times. This criticism may even be the poet’s own, as the years go by; Heaney himself has demonstrated a certain embarrassed ambivalence towards “Digging” as something of a rough apprentice-piece, which he once dubbed “a big coarse-grained navvy of a poem”, while, on other occasions, he has acknowledged its “seminal” status in his development as a poet (Parker 62).

Ultimately, however, Heaney acknowledges the place of “Digging” in his oeuvre through his actions, by making it the first poem of “all his various collections and selections” (Frazier 16).

As we shall see, the poem gives voice to Heaney’s desire to explore, or delve into, the past, while serving also to as an apologia for the literary life on which he was about to embark. “Digging” shifts seamlessly to childhood, and, through memory and allusion, to the more distant past, evoking the continuity of life in a small farming community, and, within that community, the importance of the family and its sense of history and time, defined by a certain permanence over the long years. In the opening lines, the poet-speaker situates himself at a particular moment—presumably, early adulthood, which is also the conventional climactic moment in the bildungsroman, marking a decisive turning point in the narrative trajectory of the narrator-hero’s life. Here, it is the young man, upstairs at his writing desk—pen-in-hand, “snug as a gun”—while his father works below in the family’s ancestral farm work:

Under my window a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging.2

The speaker’s familiarity with the processes of farming life is illustrated in the initial description of his father digging, the implicit dignity or propenness of the activity implicit even in the adjective “clean” used to describe the “rasping sound” of “the spade.” Of course, this poem, like any literary work—including those which are rooted in, or lay claim to, historical or biographical reality—remain works of creative writing, which often depart from factuality. In these terms, the poet-narrator cannot be uncritically equated with the biographical Heaney, whose father was no quintessential, Irish potato farmer, but, in fact, traded in cattle (Parker 1). Having said this, however, the experience evoked in “Digging” is no less true of rural Ireland, culturally or historically speaking, given the role of the potato crop in Irish history and culture.

The speaker’s description of the “clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground” tells us that he
has grown up with the sounds of farm-work. As a poet, too, Heaney works—and works upon his readers—with sound. Heaney's use of onomatopoeia is one of his defining traits as a poet (Murphy 9); in this poem, we can hear how it works when he reproduces "the rasping sound" of the spade is brought to life in the words "gravelly" and "ground" (emphases mine). We are, thus, placed there, in his slippers, as it were, as he works upstairs by the window.

But, the poet-narrator's familiarity with the sounds of digging is also consistent with the continuity of farm life. In fact, continuity is manifested linguistically, space and time being conflated when the father's "straining rump / Bends low, comes up twenty years away". In other words, memory allows a slippage into the past through the sameness of repeated actions, across the space of the field, which unites the present under observation and the remembered past of the narrator's childhood.

Another nostalgic, eulogistic aspect of the poem is evident in the description of the father's digging, in his younger years, remembered by the speaker—"The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft / Against the inside knee was levered firmly"—which underlines the "precise technique" involved (Mathias 18). Apart from showing an appreciation of the effort and skill involved, there is also a respectful, knowing preciseness in the use of vocabulary associated even with what may seem so basic a tool as a spade: the "lug", the "shaft". This attention to the details of work shows the poet's recognition of the complexity—and, hence, the dignity—of the working world of his forefathers. Such importance, of course, is not always recognized, nor honored, in the elitist intellectual milieu, so that, although the poet decides to follow a new path, he does so without denigrating his heritage, or his forebears, whom he acknowledges and honors.

Needless to say, some critics find some of Heaney's lines a little forced, finding, for instance, that the poet "protests too much ... as though the bold, untroubled confidence—I'll dig with it—beliees an underlying fear that in writing poetry he'll be departing, rather than continuing, the family (and cultural) tradition" (Shapiro 14). Arguably, it is also possible to suspect some false modesty on the poet-narrator's part, so that in his homage—perhaps "hom(m)age" would be more appropriate—to the Heaney patriarchs of the past, his ostensible self-deprecation in stating that he "has no spade to follow men like this" is not entirely sincere. The image of the father's "straining rump", for instance, is hardly graceful, and may render the man into something of a carnivalesque figure of fun with his backside in the air; it may contain some irony, which, though good-humored, would be no less patronizing.

Of course, this is just to say that the poem is not as straightforward, or simplistic, as it might at first appear; but no interpretation can be entirely conclusive, or final, and, perhaps, it is enough that the young poet praises his forefathers in a declaration of personal origin and future direction. In this regard, Heaney has explained that he felt the pressure of "the generations of rural ancestors—not illiterate, but not literary", which produced in him a certain doubt about himself and his planned career as an artist (Parker 64).

Similarly, the speaker's awe for his father's digging skills—evident in his homespun exclamation, "By God, the old man could handle a spade"—becomes the basis for further celebration of the family—seen, it should be stressed, in exclusively patriarchal terms: "Just like his old man"; for, as one critic has rightly observed, "Digging" is rather "macho, melodramatically so" (Morrison 26). However, these lines also emphasize a working heritage. Beyond the family-unit stands a community, which the poet implicitly enrolls into this celebration of his forefathers, and, very significantly, of their work ethic: "My grandfather could cut more turf in a day / Than any other man on Toner's bog."

Though a reader could well consider the possibility of competition, rivalry—even envy or resentment—on the part of those other men, bested by Grandfather, even then, there would implicitly have been a shared value-system—an ethos founded on the need to work to survive in a poor rural community, together with respect for hard work, and admiration, however grudging, for those willing and able to work hard. It is success in such terms of masculinized hard work that our narrator accords his father, and his grandfather before him, in a line that, by extension, points to the more distant past. As we shall see, Heaney's portrayal of an Irish tradition of hard work is of immense political importance.

The self-reliant nature of the traditional rural community is also revealed when the narrator recalls taking his grandfather some milk "in a bottle / Corked sloppily with paper". The milk, of course, was not purchased in a shop. It was not bottled—properly capped in a commercial dairy, which, in the context of Ireland's colonial history of exploitation by the English, the reader would expect to belong to the English, or to the Anglo-Irish elite, epitomized by the figure of the absentee landlord—perhaps reaping the benefits from in London, in what some historians have described as "a kind of bastardized feudalism" (Cleary 102). Rather, the milk most likely came from one of the family's own cows.

By extension, his grandfather's character as a hardworking man is also underlined, as he stops only briefly to drink his milk before resuming work "right away", efficient and industrious in his manner: "Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder." Moreover, this milk-drinking Irishman is a negation of a particularly persistent stereotype about the Irish, namely, the narrative of the self-created misery of a nation of gregarious and lively men, regretfully too fond of the bottle, a weakness which leads to heartache for them, their whining, long-suffering...
Theorists as their illustration of "methodically" gained with the help of his man, Friday—had "been very appropriately used by many economic castaways who becomes a little king in his own island, and keeps excellent records of his possessions, literary history of Daniel Defoe's author's familiarity with the economic theory of Max Weber—underscored the cultural significance in English In similar terms, Ian Watt's publications as contributed to the ideal of the believed, and, indeed, as virtues which they claimed to possess. This belief was to be reborn in America, where it work, and the resulting material success—signs of God's favor—as particularly Protestant values in which they their religious identity, as manifested in the concept of the Protestant work ethic, which viewed a dedication to hard In addition, where the English were concerned, the nation's —and through comparison with other examples of similar cultural-identity redefinition in a range of postcolonial and minority literatures, thereby demonstrating the rightness of approaching Irish literature-and-culture as an area of postcolonial studies. Of course, questions are raised by some scholars about whether it is legitimate to consider Ireland's experience of colonialism in the same terms as the treatment that Native Americans, Africans, and people of other races, suffered at the hands of various European nations. Here, language becomes one of the main focal points. Along with Ireland's geographical location and the fact that the Irish are of European stock, there is the use of the English language, the mastery of which is most symbolically manifested by the roll-call of great writers over the centuries, which may leave many with a sense of Irish inclusion in English cultural life, and, hence, of the exceptionality of the Irish in the context of colonial history. Faced with the history of atrocities across the world, imperialist offences which included the slave trade, persecution and genocide—some scholars would argue that the Irish experience does not belong in the main field of colonial and postcolonial studies.

But, it is worth noting that that colonial oppression can take many forms. Furthermore, European colonial practice, where the British were concerned, was partly developed, and, in a sense, perfected, in Ireland, for later exportation to other lands—so that, to quote the title of a recent article on the subject, Ireland functioned as "A Laboratory for Empire" (Ohlmeyer). For that matter, it was commonplace in Victorian times—the highpoint of British colonialism in Africa and the East—for the Irish to be included in the Orientalist discourse that went hand-in-hand with imperialist practice, and which "asserted and highlighted the lack of civilization" and the alleged "racial 'primitive' similarities of the colonized peoples" (Lennon 136).

To expand on the subject of imperialism and culture, in White Writing (1988), J.M. Coetzee discusses the attitudes expressed by South Africa's Dutch settlers, commencing in the mid-seventeenth century, toward the black people whom they found living in the Cape. The Hottentots were described in various terms as lacking civilization—dirty and immoral, and exhibiting uncivilized habits (Coetzee 16). But, beyond this issue, a central accusation against the Africans—which was to be instrumental to self-serving, European perspectives of the natives as undeserving of self-rule—was "that they did, or seemed to do, so little with their time" (Coetzee 11). As Coetzee explains, this accusation of idleness had moral—even criminal—connotations in the context of early modern European culture (Coetzee 21); the accusation of being "idle", therefore, became the basis of the justification for imposing white authority over the African natives.

The process of cultural justification of colonial practice described by Coetzee was part of an ideological rhetoric which would later be summed up under the notion of the white man's burden—the paternalistic idea, however hypocritical it may have been to varying degrees—that white people, as fathers, had a duty to help people in other countries—the childish, allegedly uncivilized ones—by taking Western progress, civilization and order to them.

In addition, where the English were concerned, the nation's self-image as culturally superior was closely linked to their religious identity, as manifested in the concept of the Protestant work ethic, which viewed a dedication to hard work, and the resulting material success—signs of God's favor—as particularly Protestant values in which they believed, and, indeed, as virtues which they claimed to possess. This belief was to be reborn in America, where it contributed to the ideal of the self-made man as most famously embodied by Benjamin Franklin—albeit, in less-religious, and more utilitarian terms—both through the example of his success, and as articulated in such publications as Poor Richard's Almanack (1738-52), and his posthumously published autobiography (completed ca. 1771-1790).

In similar terms, Ian Watt's The Rise of the Novel (1957)—a classic work of literary criticism, informed by the author's familiarity with the economic theory of Max Weber—underscored the cultural significance in English literary history of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719); in Watt's formulation, the novel's eponymous hero—a castaway who becomes a little king in his own island, and keeps excellent records of his possessions, "methodically" gained with the help of his man, Friday—had "been very appropriately used by many economic theorists as their illustration of homo economicus" (Watt 69).
However, the negative construction of supposedly uncivilized, colonial subjects, particularly their inherent lack of seriousness and maturity—and the implied contrast with a civilized and competent imperialist's self—can be traced as far back as the 1580s, in the reign of Elizabeth I, when England was consolidating its control over Ireland. Thus, Andrew Trollope, in a letter to Francis Walshingham, described the Irish as "not thrifty and civil or human creatures, but heathen or rather savage and brute beasts", who had "degenerated from all manhood [and] humanity." 7 We may be tempted to focus on Trollope's shocking denial of the Irish people's humanity—their allegedly bestial nature. However, we should not be distracted from the implications of the two initial terms: "thrifty" and "civil"—the qualities of basic economic sense and civility, which the Irish are claimed to lack.

As Canny further explains, English justifications of colonial rule over the Irish sometimes made reference to a persistent idea that Ireland was well endowed with natural wealth, so that the "failure of the inhabitants ... to exploit these resources was further proof of their barbarism" (173). Clearly, this is the fledgling idea of the white man's burden centuries before Queen Victoria of Great Britain, or King Leopold II of Belgium. The latter, of course, played a leading role in launching the "scramble for Africa"; apart from his self-serving arguments about the Europe's moral obligation to save Africans from Muslim slave-traders, in a more candid if cynical moment—in the Berlin Conference of 1884-85—he gloated in the opportunity to get what he called "a slice of this magnificent African cake" (qtd. Pakenham 22). But, the propagandist discourse of benevolent, paternalistic rule over races of colonial subjects in need of guidance and protection—even from themselves—was such that any resistance by the natives was deemed the action of an ungrateful, unnatural child deserving punishment.

Of course, Heaney's nostalgic evocation of the continuity of farming life is framed by the refrain about the pen's legitimacy as a tool, in place of the farmer's spade: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests." The additional clause ("snug as a gun"), given added emphasis by the crude-but-effective use of the semi-colon rather than a comma, also introduces another possibility open to a young Irish-Catholic man in the 1960s: that of violence, making the pen, therefore, both a tool and a weapon—not only an alternative to the spade, but also, implicitly, the gun of a member of the IRA (Frazier 29).

As a political defense of the rural Irish-Catholic community from which he came, Heaney's "Digging" provides a clue to the poet's motivation in taking up the pen, and hints at the service as a cultural ambassador for the cause of the Irish, that the poet has accomplished as a result of his international reputation as a poet—epitomized, of course, by the Nobel Prize in Literature—and all the more significant considering that Heaney writes poetry rather than prose; this is certainly something that he could never have done with a gun.

The portrait in "Digging" of a sober, industrious, and self-reliant Irish peasantry, therefore, not only reverses some longstanding and very damaging stereotypes about the Irish—of a people's poverty and misery, blamed on the English, but also tearfully portrayed by many-a-writer as the self-inflicted legacy of irresponsibility, and, in particular, of a scourge of endemic alcoholism. In addition, apart from reversing a stereotype, this is also the appropriation of a positive stereotype. For Heaney's Irish-Catholic turf-cutters are exemplars of an ideal of hard work, or work ethic, which, therefore, can no longer be labeled Protestant.

Heaney's technique—indeed, it would not be misguided to see it as a political tactic—has analogues in the work of a range of postcolonial and minority writers. For instance, in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958), the pre-colonial hero, Okonkwo's background as a brave warrior, who had killed five men in tribal warfare, is mentioned very briefly, while several chapters are devoted to the novel's account of Okonkwo's struggles to build a big farm in order to become a great man in his community, a project which required him to fight against the odds—borrowing at interest; struggling against bad weather, which destroyed his first crop; saddled with a lazy father—with only his will to drive him on to greatness. Okonkwo, thus, becomes a self-made man, the epitome of the values and virtues that colonial subjects were alleged to lack, and which the imperial nations claimed to embody.

Presenting interesting similarities, there is the figure of Frederick Douglass (ca. 1818-1895), who was born into slavery in antebellum Maryland but proceeded to become a gifted speaker for abolition following his escape to the North, and, indeed, a celebrated orator, who advocated not only civil rights for African-Americans—both before and after the Civil War—but also causes as varied as women's suffrage and Irish free rule. A major tool in his self- construction—aside from his almost single-handed publication of the abolitionist paper, The North Star (1847-1851), subsequently named the Frederick Douglass' Paper, which ran in the years 1851-60 (Shortell 83)—were his autobiographies, the first of which was published seven years after his escape: the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself (1845); My Bondage and My Freedom (1855); Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1892). Douglass's Narrative deliberately evoked another seminal work of American letters discussed above, namely Benjamin Franklin's autobiography.8 Thus, Douglass, the self-educated former slave, and tireless campaigner, stressed his self-conscious pride when he took his first menial job as an independent economic agent—"dirty and hard work" though it was to load a small cargo ship "with a load of oil"—conscious that, having gained his freedom, he was his finally "own master", entitled to "the reward" for his own efforts (Douglass 99).

Indeed, in a point of convergence with Heaney's equation of the pen—and, hence, authorship—as an alternative form both of work and of violent manifestations of militancy, a fascinating case has been made with regard to such
works as Douglass's autobiographies that "For the American slave, storytelling becomes a kind of work, gaining status in conjunction with the slave narrator's redefinition of labor", a redefinition essentially founded on the fact that the slave works "for himself", his personal account constituting an act of "labor against objectification" (Cassuto 249). Work, therefore, whether Douglass's first menial employment, or the work of authorship, in which his personal journey was itself described, were the steps he took on his self-portrayed path towards success as a hardworking and disciplined individual. Tellingly, one of Douglass's most popular speeches, written "in the late 1850s", but which he repeatedly delivered as a professional speaker in the years after the Civil War, and which was particularly well-received by white audiences, was titled "Self-Made Men" (Andrews 13).

Despite differences discussed here in the work of writers as diverse as a nineteenth-century African-American, a Nigerian in the 1950s, and an Irishman responding, in the 1960s, to conditions in British-occupied Northern Ireland, they all clearly exemplify common, crucially important continuities, namely, the cultural appropriations by writers from oppressed groups of the precise discourses of racial or cultural superiority used against their peoples as the justification for colonial practice. These are writers who, by these means, subvert such imperialist myths, producing counter-narratives in which the virtues of the colonial subject are demonstrated. The ease with which Heaney's "crude but effective manifesto", to borrow the words of John Wilson Foster (7), can be discussed in the same vein as such a range of works of anti-colonial and progressive writing, ultimately shows the appropriateness of exploring Irish cultural history within the wider field of colonial and post-colonial studies.

Works Cited


Notes:

* An earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper at ‘Bloomsday 2006: Irish Literature & Culture’, First Symposium of the Hallym University Institute for Commonwealth Literature Studies (Damheon Hall, Hallym University, Chuncheon, Korea: June 16, 2006). I gratefully acknowledge the sponsorship of the Hallym University Research Office.


3 In this regard, Frank McCourt's Pulitzer-Prize-winning Angela's Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood (London: Flamingo / HarperCollins, 1996) could be seen as a quintessential example—and a highly accomplished example of modern literature besides—but the literary stereotype of Irish alcoholism and family neglect and dysfunction is commonplace to the point of being redundant.

4 Joe Cleary—who would respond to such questions in the affirmative—enumerates some of these implicit objections, which include: "Can Ireland legitimately be considered a colony like Britain's other overseas possessions? Did colonialism play a significant role in Irish historical development? ... Does the situation in Northern Ireland represent a continued colonial dimension in Irish politics?“ (94).

5 In this regard, Lennon further discusses John Penland Mahaffy's severely racist Twelve lectures on Primitive Civilization and Their Physical Conditions (1869), which “repeatedly compares the Celts with Orientals, Africans, and native Americans, as well as with Neolithic hunter-gatherers” (136).

6 As Waldo E. Martin, Jr. observes, "No eighteenth-century American better personified the self-made man than Benjamin Franklin", whose "gospel of self-improvement and economic success represented a secularized version ... of the Protestant work ethic" (254).


8 As James Olney has noted, "Douglass's book fits ... within that general American autobiographical tradition begun by Franklin—the story of the self-made man who, in telling that story, produces a kind of how-to book“ (3).