

# AQA English GCSE

## Poetry: Love & Relationships

Climbing My Grandfather - *Andrew Waterhouse*

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# CLIMBING MY GRANDFATHER

Andrew Waterhouse

## Brief Summary

The poem is semi-autobiographical, and from the perspective of someone recounting childhood memories of playing with their grandfather, and learning more about him. It employs an extended metaphor of mountaineering, which reflects Waterhouse's keen interest in environmentalism.

## Synopsis

- The speaker starts at his grandfather's shoes, and begins to 'climb' his body.
- He comments on his shoes, hands, skin and nails.
- He gets up to his shoulders and reflects on his 'journey' so far.
- Climbs on further to the top of his head and then reflects on his grandfather's "good heart".

## Context

### Andrew Waterhouse (1958 - 2001)

Waterhouse struggled with mental illness, and eventually took his own life at the age of 42. He spent his childhood in the north-east of England, and much of his work focuses on the environment - he even gained a masters in Environmental Science, and wrote a series of natural walk guidebooks.

<b>KEY THEMES</b>	CHILDHOOD
<b>RELATIONSHIP</b>	GRANDPARENT / CHILD
<b>LOVE</b>	FAMILIAL

## Climbing My Grandfather

Waterhouse's poem centres around a young boy, or we can assume it's a boy, 'climbing' his grandfather. The act of climbing could be a metaphor for getting to know his relatives, through the strong semantic field of mountaineering. Much of Waterhouse's work focuses on the environment, and this typicality is continued very much so in Climbing My Grandfather.

Climbing My Grandfather is a good poem to compare to both the romantic relationship poems as it employs a lot of poetic technique, including natural imagery. Or you can compare it to the familial relationship poems as it centres on quite a typical family relationship. Waterhouse also explores the theme of distance which is found in much of the anthology.



## Climbing My Grandfather

*Element of peril or risk involved with getting to know his grandfather, which may reflect the generational divide between them. Alternatively, it may suggest a level of familiarity, as he is comfortable around his grandfather and can trust him to catch him if he falls. The present tense of "decide" involves the reader, and presents the speaker as an active character.*

*Metaphorical of the process of learning more about his grandfather*

*Reflects the change of direction in the formatting of the text, through the enjambment of the line, perhaps representing the complex process of getting to know someone.*

*The enjambment at this line reflects physically reflects "splintered" in the text.*

*The grandson is considerate and aware of the pain his grandfather has gone through.*

*Continues the theme of trust in the relationship between grandson - grandfather, as he is relying on his grandfather to keep him safe. Continues the themes of independence and liberation, contrasting with the trust he places in the grandfather.*

*Highlights the positive relationship between the pair.*

*"Well-spaced" implies intentionalism.*

I **decide** to do it free, **without a rope or net**.

**First, the old brogues**, dusty and **cracked**;

an **easy scramble** onto his trousers,

pushing into the weave, trying to **get a grip**.

By the overhanging shirt I **change**

**direction**, traverse along his belt

to an **earth-stained** hand. The **nails**

**are splintered** and **give good purchase**,

the skin of his finger is **smooth** and thick

**like warm ice**. On his arm I discover

the glassy ridge of a scar, place my feet

**gently** in the old stitches and move on.

At his still **firm shoulder**, I **rest for a while**

in the shade, **not looking down**,

for **climbing has its dangers**, then pull

**myself** up the loose skin of his neck

to a **smiling** mouth to drink among teeth.

Refreshed, I cross the scree cheek,

to stare into his brown eyes, watch a pupil

**slowly** open and close. Then up over

the forehead, the wrinkles **well-spaced**

and easy, to his thick hair (soft and white

at this altitude), reaching for the summit,

*"Without" invokes the themes of independence and liberation*

*The child is starting his climb and observation at his grandfather's feet. The adjective "cracked" connotes a level of disconnect, but also suggests the grandfather has a lot of advice and experience.*

*Juxtaposing connotations of "easy" and "scramble" may further set up a divide between the child and his grandfather, as this is somewhat paradoxical.*

*Connection to nature is typical of Waterhouse's work.*

*Has a wealth of experience.*

*Contrasting image to the rough and old images from earlier.*

*Simple simile for child-like effect.*

*Shoulders are typically used in literature as symbols of bearing weight, so by describing them as "firm" it places respect on the grandfather, and suggests he's very resilient, especially for his age.*

*"Rest" connotes trust for his grandfather, which suggests they have a close and trusting relationship.*

*Introduces a theme of avoidance.*

*The grandson is gaining independence as he is now circumnavigating his grandfather without his help: "myself".*

*"Slowly" connotes consideration and care, which can thematically relate back to the depiction of the relationship.*



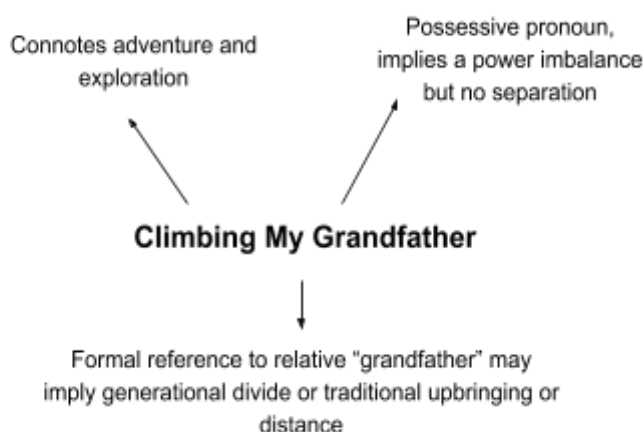
*“Heat” connotes comfort and a sense of familiarity.*

*Clearly shows his grandson has a lot of admiration for his grandfather.*

where gasping for breath I can only lie  
 watching **clouds and birds** circle,  
 feeling his **heat**, knowing  
 the slow pulse of his **good heart**.

*More natural imagery references back to Waterhouse’s environmentalist background, and could suggest the connection between grandson and grandfather is very natural and caring.*

## The title “Climbing My Grandfather”



## The opening

The poem opens with a line introducing the speaker’s intention to **“climb”** his grandfather, starting with his shoes. This immediately makes the reader assume the speaker is young, seeing as it is in **present tense** rather than framed as a childhood memory.

I **decide** to do it free, **without** a rope or net.

This suggests to the reader that there is an element of peril or risk involved with getting to know his grandfather, which may reflect the generational divide between them. Alternatively, this may suggest a level of **familiarity**, as he is comfortable around his grandfather and can trust him to catch him if he falls.



The **present tense** of **“decide”** involves the reader, and presents the speaker as an **active character**. The **preposition “without”** invokes the **themes of independence and liberation**, which are continued in the rest of the poem.



## Perspective

The poem is from the perspective of a grandson 'climbing' his grandfather, as a metaphor for getting to know him. It's told in a first person, present tense narrative.

Though the poem is quite ambiguous, it can be assumed that the speaker is **recalling memories** from when he was a child when playing and getting to know his grandfather. This is juxtaposed by the fact that the poem is in the **present tense**, which shows that it is from the **perspective of a child**. It's also in **first person**, and he refers to his grandfather's features as **"his"** rather than 'your', which may imply narratively there is a divide - perhaps a generational one - between them.

## Structure

### Unbroken single stanza

The format of the poem is in **one single, unbroken, stanza** which continues the theme of mountaineering and climbing into the structure of the text as well as the language used. The simple structure of the poem as in one complete stanza also reflects the **child-like nature of the speaker** and his memories. It could also reflect the daunting, relentless journey of climbing a mountain. Moreover, the poem is **void of specific syllable lengths per line or a rhyming scheme** which helps it mirror a natural conversation.

### Enjambment

**Enjambment** is used by Waterhouse, perhaps to reflect a natural pace of a conversation or exploration, or to portray the change of direction taken whilst climbing. The most prominent example of this is the set of lines:

By the overhanging shirt I **change**  
**direction**, traverse along his belt

Because the **"change direction"** is literally displayed through the enjambment.

## Language

### Extended metaphor of mountaineering

Waterhouse employs a **semantic field** of mountaineering, associated with the apparent care he has for his grandfather, suggesting he enjoys the activity. For example, the lines:

without a rope or net  
easy scramble  
overhanging



This **metaphor** suggests that the speaker sees his grandfather as a **monumental piece of nature**, or perhaps quite complex to get to know well. It could also be a metaphor for the process of getting to know his grandfather during his adult years, or even a compilation of childhood memories.

As he is moving from his feet to his grandfather's head, this may be representative of growing up and developing as a person - perhaps he is finding more out about himself and he finds more out about his grandfather.

This **extended metaphor of climbing** could be metaphorical for the grandfather's status and experience he's gained through living his life, or the admiration and feeling of awe the boy has towards his grandfather. An alternative interpretation of this choice of metaphor is to make the grandfather appear distant and too complex to get to know.

### Oxymorons

**OXYMORON** | Two opposing terms placed next to each other.

Waterhouse uses **oxymoronic language** such as **"warm ice"** and **"easy scramble"** in order to demonstrate the **complex nature of memory and nature**, and perhaps the grandson-grandfather bond here.

### Comparisons

Climbing My Grandfather	Follower
<b><i>"rope or net"</i></b>	<b><i>"full sail strung"</i></b>
<b><i>"easy scramble"</i></b>	<b><i>"rolled over without breaking"</i></b>
Both use the extended metaphor of extreme sports to reflect the experience of getting to know the relative (CMG) and the difficulties experienced staying close to a relative (Follower)	
Extended metaphors is used to juxtapose a gain and lose of a trait in both cases: for CMG, the grandfather has experience and the grandson does not. For Follower, the father is adept at farming and the son is not.	

### Climbing My Grandfather & Follower

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theme of <b>idolising</b> a family member.</li> <li>• Extended metaphor of extreme sports employed in both poems - sailing for Follower and climbing for Climbing My Grandfather.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very different structures - Climbing My Grandfather has a very loose structure in free verse, whilst Follower has a constant ABAB rhyme scheme and is formatted into rigid quatrains with iambic pentameter.</li> <li>• Heaney is reflecting on his childhood, whereas Waterhouse is speaking in the present tense from the perspective of a child.</li> </ul>



### Climbing My Grandfather & Mother Any Distance

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Both use extended metaphor - in MAD, it is of the measuring tape and measuring in general to suggest distance, in CMG climbing is used as a metaphor for the grandson getting to know his grandfather and learning from his experiences.</li><li>• Both in first person narrative, in the present tense.</li><li>• Both follow only a loose structure.</li></ul>
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