

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love & Relationships

Follower - *Seamus Heaney*

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FOLLOWER

Seamus Heaney

Brief Summary

The poem recalls Heaney's childhood memories on the farm he grew up on, working in the fields trying to help his father and admiring his strength. Here, Heaney is reflecting on his **heritage and identity**, as he has decided to take a different path than that of his father and therefore hasn't actually taken the role of **'follower'** in the title.

Towards the end of the poem, there is a reversal of roles and now Heaney's father is following him around, which demonstrates the flexibility of father-son relationships, as they develop over time. It explores the influence of important people in Heaney's life, and the impact they've had on his **transition** from childhood to adulthood.

Summary

Context – from tight-knit farming community // eldest of nine children // focused on rural issues and upbringing in his work

Form – stable rhythmic pattern // constant pattern of quatrains

Structure – cyclical narrative // transposed sentence // contrast of passive and active verbs

Language – consonance // similes // rural imagery and technical farming language // nautical references // onomatopoeia

Key Points – Heaney is reflecting on his upbringing in a rural environment // as the poem progresses, his and his father's role as following and followed reverse // expresses his immense admiration for his father // semi-autobiographical

Synopsis

- The speaker introduces his father who works on their family farm
- He compliments his father's aptitude for the work he does
- Focuses specifically on how good he is at working with machinery and the fields
- Compares his own clumsy behaviour and nature to his father's abilities
- Mentions how his father would give him a ride on his back
- Expresses how he wanted to grow up and do what his father did
- Concludes mentioning that now the roles have reversed and his father is now following him

Context

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

Heaney hails from a rigid farming community, and was born in Northern Ireland into a tradition which values physical labour. He was the eldest of nine children, which meant he had a lot of pressure to conform to the expectations of his environment and upbringing and be adept at farming.

From "Death of a Naturalist" (1966)

Included a lot of poems with a focus on rural life. **'Follower'** is often compared to **'Digging'** which similarly expresses autobiographical points, his father, and his connection to nature.

- For example: **"When the spade sinks into gravelly ground // My father, digging. I look down."** continues the theme of respect for his father and the physical labour he undertakes



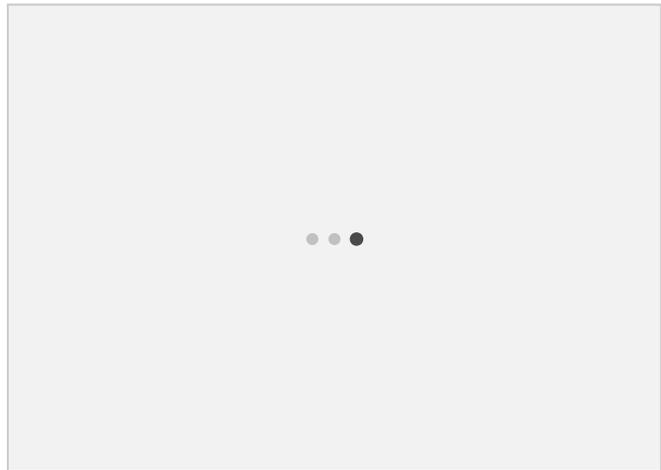
to provide for his family. It also references the prominence farming has had on his upbringing and outlook on the world.

KEY THEMES	ADMIRATION, IDENTITY, PHYSICAL LABOUR, LIVELIHOOD, SKILL
RELATIONSHIP	FATHER / CHILD
LOVE	PARENTAL, PATERNAL, ADMIRING, ENDURING, ADORING

Follower

The poem was written in the sixties, which was just before the troubles [a thirty-year period of political violence] which occurred in Northern Ireland. Life, especially rural life, would be very traditional and this is reflected in Heaney's poem. His collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, from which 'Follower' comes from focuses a lot on his childhood memories and experiences growing up, perhaps as a way to consolidate what he learnt from his time growing up.

Alongside Irish tradition, Heaney cited John Keats and William Yeats as influences, as well as the Irish Patrick Kavanagh, who wrote largely about rural life. It explores the speaker's relationship with his father throughout his childhood in general, and includes an interesting role reversal at the conclusion of the poem, as it is stated that **"today // It is my father who keeps stumbling // Behind me, and will not go away."** which somewhat replicates the **cycle of life**, and shows how relationships change over time - a theme running through most of the poems in the anthology.





Follower

Instantly sets up the focus of the poem onto his father, and the possessive 'my' centres the poem around their relationship. '

By mentioning the 'horse-plough', readers are being introduced to the farming environment the poem is set in.

Establishing his father's aptitude for and experience with farming, to emphasise his own feelings of displacement in the farm environment when trying to establish his own identity.

Shows how much Heaney is struggling to mold an identity when he cannot follow the same path as his father. "Fell" contrasts with the "polished" adjective used to describe his father's work, which indirectly compares the father and son.

Unusual phrasing of "rode me" suggests that Heaney is remaining a passive character by contrast to his father who plays a very active role in both his childhood and the poem.

An alternative interpretation is this may be a reflection of the Northern Irish dialect. It is also an activity taking place away from work, which suggests his father

My father worked with a **horse-plough**,

His **shoulders** globed like a **full sail strung**

Between the shafts and the furrow.

The horse strained at his clicking tongue.

An expert. He would set the wing

And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.

The sod rolled over **without breaking**.

At the headrig, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round

And back into the land. His eye

Narrowed and angled at the ground,

Mapping the furrow exactly.

I **stumbled** in his **hob-nailed wake**,

Fell sometimes on the **polished** sod;

Sometimes **he rode me** on his back

Dipping and rising to his plod.

Heaney compares his father's shoulders to a sail on a boat / ship, which emphasises how much he admires his power.

The sibilance of "shoulders" and "sail" suggests the father works very smoothly and deliberately. Father appears larger than life, to the son.

Symbolic of the 'family footsteps' Heaney is being expected to follow, especially as the oldest of nine children.

"Stumbled" implies the uncertainties Heaney has about his ability to take the same path as his father, and may also imply the innocence and inexperience he has due to his young age, further planting the poem in the realm of childhood memories.

The plosive sounds of "stumbled" and "hob" replicates the jittering, untrained movements of Heaney's younger self and contrast with the smooth sibilance used to



strengthened the father-son bond not exclusively through working on the farm.

Repeats the word "stumbling", this time afixed to his father, which highlights the cyclical form of the poem and the role reversal that has taken place, representative of the 'circle of life'.

I wanted to **grow up** and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.

All I ever did was follow

In his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,

Yapping always. But today

It is my father who keeps **stumbling**

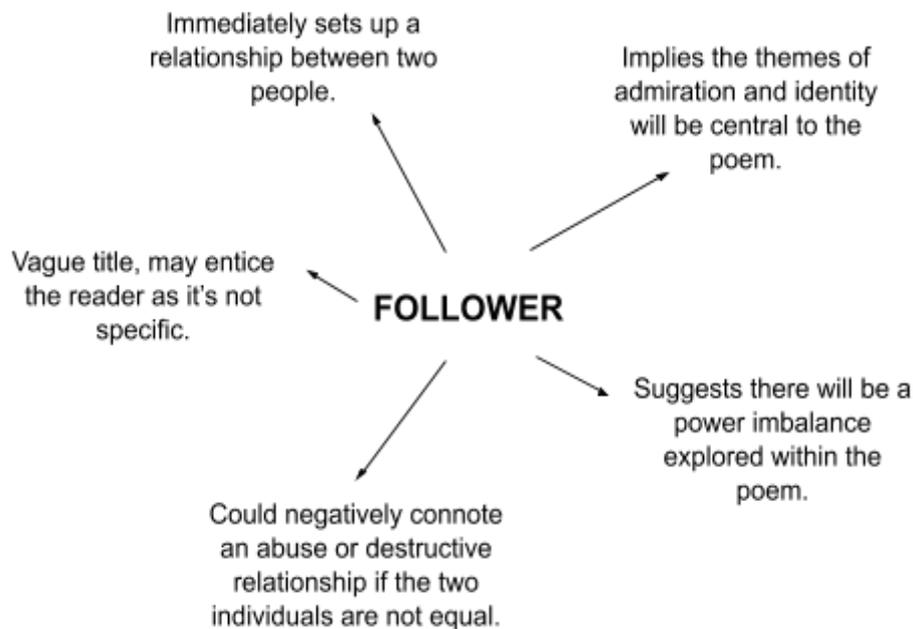
Behind me, and will not go away.

describe Heaney's father and his work.

Expresses his wish to follow in his father's footsteps when he is older.

Transposed sentence: this would make more sense as "always yapping", but this 'incorrect' grammar could either display traditional dialect or show how all consuming the boy's admiration for his father is.

The title "Follower"



Perspective

The poem is written in the **first person** which immediately sets up the poem as intimate and personal to the poet. The speaker is **semi-autobiographical**, so it could be suggested that the speaker is Heaney himself. However, ignoring authorial context it is obvious that the speaker is a farmer's son who is actively admiring his father's work.

The poem is mostly written in the **past tense** which demonstrates how the narrative is grounded in a childhood memory. The final couple of lines bring the poem back into the present tense, and comment on his current relationship with his father. The poem neglects to mention a time where both he and his father were '**equals**' - it skips from childhood straight to present tense, to emphasise the role reversal taking place.

The poem's perspective is from Heaney's viewpoint as it is semi-autobiographical, which could be argued to create a sense of separation between the speaker and the reader, perhaps mirroring the distance felt between the speaker and his father..

The opening

The poem begins with "**my father**" which instantly suggests that it will be a poem centered around the familial relationship between someone and their father. The **possessive 'my'** gives positive indications that they have a good relationship, but also suggests a power imbalance.

My father worked with a **horse-plough**,
His **shoulders** globed like a full **sail** strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.
The horses strained at his **clicking tongue**.

By mentioning the "**horse-plough**", readers are being introduced to the farming environment the poem is set in, which is important as the farming theme and rural setting is crucial to understanding the context of the poem.

Heaney compares his father's shoulders to a sail on a boat / ship, which emphasises how much he admires his power. The **sibilance** of "**shoulders**" and "**sail**" suggests the father works very smoothly and deliberately.

The father appears larger than life to the son. As Heaney can remember such specific details such as the "**clicking tongue**" making the horse move it demonstrates the immense level of observation he had during his childhood, furthering the idea that he was obsessed with his father and his father's work.



Structure

Heaney employs a solid structure in his poem to emphasise the role of hard work on the farm and how this contributes to his admiration towards his father.

Cyclical Narrative

There is a slightly **cyclical narrative** to the poem, which means that some part of the language or theme or narrative is mirrored or regained at the end of the poem from the start. This is because it begins with the boy following his father around the farm [***“I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake”***], and ends with the father following him around [***“It is my father who keeps stumbling // Behind me”***]. This demonstrates the **strong paternal bond** between the speaker and his father, and also how the roles between children and parents change as they grow up and age.

Stable rhythmic pattern

The poem's lines all tend to be around eight syllables long, which aids the steady rhythm of the poem and reflects the stable relationship between the speaker and his father.

Many lines also tend to be **iambic tetrameter** which is a regular rhythm of four pairs of syllables, with the stress falling on the second syllable. For example:

I **wanted to** grow up and **plough** // To **close** one eye, stiffen my **arm**.

This rhythm isn't consistent throughout the poem which suggests an incomplete aspect to the paternal relationship; this hints there were tensions between father and son.

The poem is structured into **quatrains** of four lines, ordered in an **ABAB rhyming scheme**. However, each stanza contains one **perfect** rhyme and one **slant** rhyme, where the lines almost rhyme but don't quite. For example:

I wanted to grow up and **plough**,
To close one eye, stiffen my **arm**.
All I ever did was **follow**
In his broad shadow round the **farm**.

The effect of this is to mirror the feeling that Heaney has that he will never live up to his father's aptitude for farm-work. The perfect rhymes symbolise his father and the slant rhymes represent the speaker.

Quatrains

The poem is organised into quatrains of four lines each. Arguably the **neat, stable structure** mirrors the well ploughed fields the poem references; this could be Heaney commenting on how he is able to achieve a similar level of perfection, just through the manipulation of words rather than physical



soil. The tight structure may alternatively reflect the **claustrophobic**, tight-knit environment that Heaney was brought up in which contrasts with the choice he eventually makes to take a career path different to that of the farm and his father.

Use of a transposed sentence

If you transpose something it means you've changed the order. Heaney does this within his poem. For example:

Yapping always. But today

This is an example of a **transposed sentence**. It would make more sense as "**always yapping**", but this 'incorrect' grammar could either display traditional dialect or show how all consuming the boy's admiration for his father is.

Passive vs active verbs

*Sometimes **he rode me** on his back*

Unusual phrasing of "**rode me**" suggests that Heaney is remaining a passive character by contrast to his father who plays a very active role in both his childhood and the poem. An alternative interpretation is this may be a reflection of the Northern Irish dialect. It is also an activity taking place away from work, which suggests his father strengthened the father-son bond not exclusively through working on the farm.

However, whilst the majority of the **active verbs** in the first stanzas refer to his father - such as "**worked**", "**pluck**", "**mapping**" - as the poem progresses and the roles of follower and followed become reversed, the active verbs start to be applied to the son a lot more - such as "**stumbled**", "**tripping**" and "**falling**". They also become **present tense** rather than past.

Language

Consonance

Heaney employs a lot of **consonance**, such as the 'k' sound in "**sock**", "**pluck**" and "**clicking**". This could be trying to replicate the hard nature of the work his father is completing. It also provides a sturdy, stable rhythm to the poem, to contrast and emphasise the changes the father-son relationship undergoes as the poem concludes.

Similes

SIMILES | Comparing one thing to another, usually using the words 'as' or 'like' in the comparison.

The poet uses **similes** to compare his father to a sail in the line: "**his shoulders globed like a full sail strung**". However, as the poem progresses his comparisons become much more concrete but



also grounded in reality, such as the line: **“narrowed and angled at the ground”** which is a literal description of the work his father is completing.

Rural imagery & technical language

There is an intense focus on **rural and natural language**, which reflects Heaney’s upbringing and the setting of the poem in Country Derry. For example, he mentions **“horses”** and **“land”** which are common symbols of the countryside. This grounds the piece in a rural atmosphere. However, he also uses more technical language specific to farming, such as **“sod”**, **“headrig”** and **“furrow”**.



The effect of this is to isolate readers unfamiliar with these pieces of terminology, perhaps to put them in a similar disconnect which Heaney is experiencing in his relationship with his father.

Onomatopoeia

ONOMATOPOEIA | When the words sound resembles the sounds of the object it is being described along.

Heaney uses onomatopoeia such as **“pluck”**, **“yapping”** and **“clicking”** in order to create a texture of sounds for the reader to create a more vivid reading experience. It also serves to highlight how much of an impact his father had on his upbringing, as he was clearly very attentive to his work.

Nautical references

Subtle **nautical references** such as the **“sail”**, and **“rolled over,”** continues the theme of precise and highly skilled work, as sailing requires a lot of skill and practice like farming does. It could be suggested that by linking sailing as farming the speaker is highlighting how both professions must deal with the impact of weather on how they work, and the unpredictable nature of both sailing and farming.

Admiration

The intense relationship between son and father is highlighted most through a **semantic field** of admiration and this theme is highlighted through his depiction of his dad as an **“expert”** who was **“mapping the furrow exactly”**.



Comparisons

Follower	Before You Were Mine
“expert”	“Marilyn”
“exactly”	“the thousand eyes”
written in first person	written addressing her mother
Heaney focuses on childhood with his father whereas Duffy focuses on both before she was born and during her childhood.	
Both focus chronologically over a long period of time and the changes which occur during that period of time.	

Follower & Climbing My Grandfather

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme of idolising a family member. • Extended metaphor of extreme sports employed in both poems - sailing for Follower and climbing for Climbing My Grandfather.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • Heaney is reflecting on his childhood, whereas Waterhouse is speaking in the present tense from the perspective of a child.

Follower & Mother Any Distance

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both from the perspective of a child, who is expressing their admiration for their respective parents. • They both extensively employ metaphors to symbolise different aspects of the parental / child bond.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The son in MAD is attempting to distance himself, however the father / son relationship in Follower remains bonded. • MAD manipulates sonnet form, which is typical of love poetry, suggesting love for his father • Enjambment is utilized in both poems, however in MAD it is to show the breaking of the parental bond, whereas in Follower, it contrasts with the stable, unbroken familial bond. • Completely different settings - contemporary, implied urban setting of MAD vs rural setting of Follower, though MAD is a lot more ambiguous than Follower in both setting and relevance to context.

Follower & Eden Rock

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In both poems, an undeniable admiration for the speaker’s parents is a key theme, and both poems are written from the perspective of a male child reflecting on childhood memories. • Both parents provide support and encouragement to their child.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both poems employ an orderly structure of four line stanzas, arguably reflective of the stable parental relationships explored in each poem.• Both poems appear to end vaguely - <i>“I had not thought it would be like this” and “not go away”</i>.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Whilst Eden Rock focuses on a speaker mulling over a specific childhood memory, Follower explores the speaker’s relationship during his childhood in general.

