

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love & Relationships

Walking Away - Cecil Day-Lewis

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WALKING AWAY

Cecil Day-Lewis

Brief Summary

A father is reflecting on how his son's childhood now that he has left home, and how this has been affecting their father-son dynamic. It is suggested that they have spent a lot of it physically separated due to his son attending school.

Synopsis

- A father is remembering a day eighteen years ago when his son was playing his first football game at school.
- He remembers how on the first day of term, his son would walk away from him, and compares him to a lot of natural imagery, to show how it is natural that he is growing up.
- He can't stop thinking about this moment and how it has affected their relationship since - perhaps considering how he regrets letting him go to boarding school at such a young age.

Summary

Context – Day-Lewis was brought up by his father as his mother died when he was young // poet laureate // addressed the poem to his first son Sean, who went to boarding school.

Structure - ABACA rhyming scheme // repetition // direct address

Language – similes // lyrical // seasonal change // direct address // passive vs active verbs

Key Points – from the perspective of a father watching his son grow up // Walking Away has a tone of reflection and regret // the poem was initially addressed to 'for Sean'

Context

Cecil Day-Lewis (1904 - 1972)

Day-Lewis was brought up by his father as his mother died when he was young. This may explain the emphasis he places on the father-son relationship with his own son. He had a very successful career as a poet during his lifetime, he was Poet Laureate until he died in 1972.

Sean Day-Lewis

It is thought the poem is about his first son Sean, who was born as a result of his first marriage. Sean went to boarding school, in Somerset, from the age of seven. The original poem is subtitled "**for Sean**", and the poem considers the effect that separation can have on a still developing parental relationship.

Walking Away

It is a **semi-autobiographical** poem, suggested by the initial subtitle "**for Sean**", Day-Lewis' oldest son, which reflects the intimate narrative of direct address. The relationship between father and son appears very distant, stimulated by the fact that Sean went to boarding school from the age of seven - it also sets

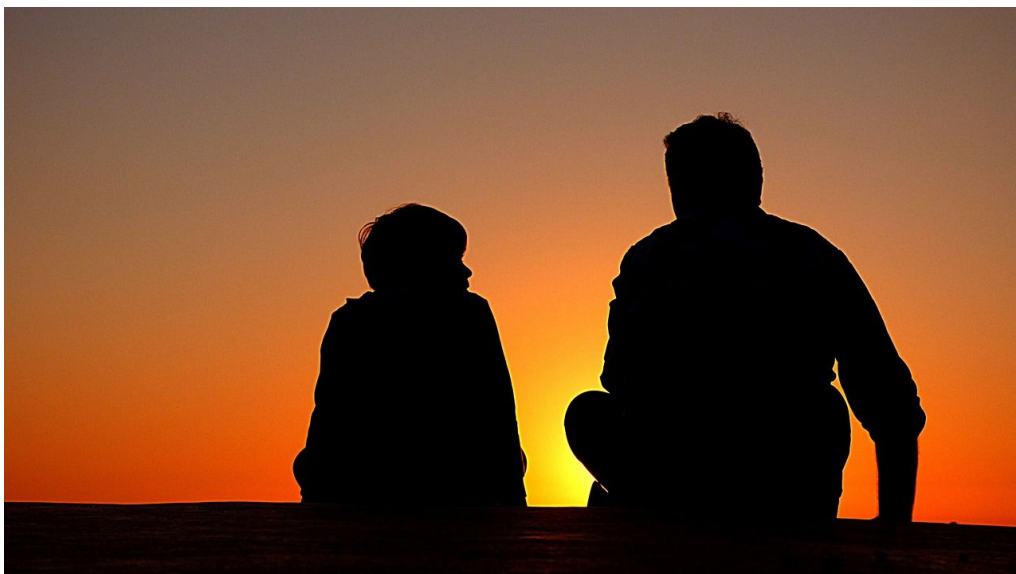
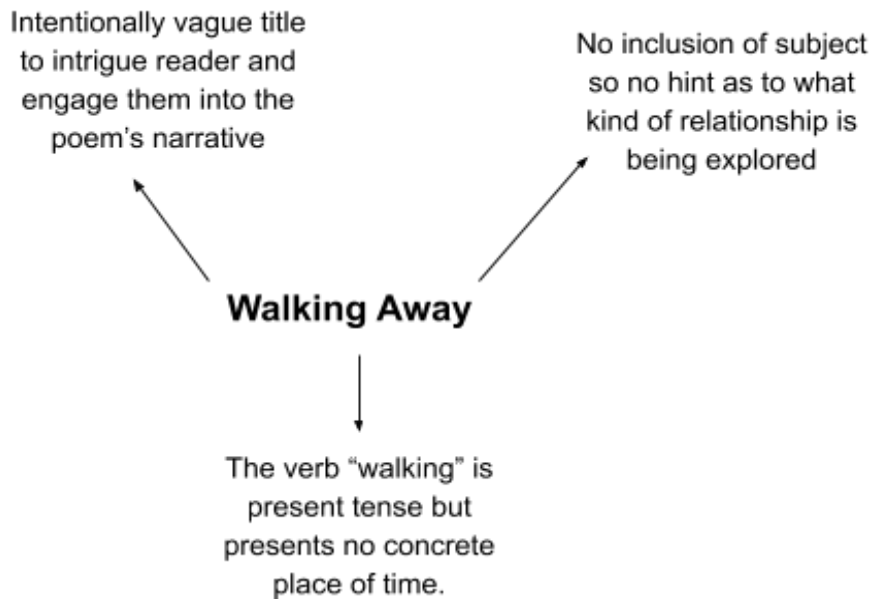
The poem explores the relationship between son and father from the perspective of a father. This perspective is different to most poems in the anthology as the majority of familial poems are from the perspective of the child, for example Follower, Before You Were Mine, and Mother Any Distance.



up the institution of school as a sort of surrogate parent - perhaps Day-Lewis is issuing a hint of regret that he's not closer to his son?

KEY THEMES	INDEPENDENCE, AGING, REFLECTION, CHILDHOOD, MEMORY
RELATIONSHIP	FATHER / CHILD
LOVE	PARENTAL, PATERNAL, DISTANT

The title “Walking Away”



Walking Away

This use of specific temporal deixis emphasises the importance that Day-Lewis feels it has on his life.

Beginning of the school year, continuing the theme of change and the development of time.

The contrast of “wrenched” and “drifting” may suggest that the father is reluctant to let his son go, but the son is ready to embrace independence.

Emphasises the powerlessness that is being experienced by Day-Lewis at this point.

Demunatises the son by suggesting he is a “thing set free”, to emphasise Day-Lewis’ reluctance to let him go. “Half-fledged” suggests he doesn’t think he’s ready to let him go.

“Pathos” means evoking pity: portraying the son as a vulnerable character

Somebody’s gait is their way of walking.

This changes the portrayal of the son as ready to gain independence, as he’s now “hesitant” and “eddyng” away, which highlights his realised vulnerability.

The clay may be symbolic of the son’s socialisation at home and by institutions such as schools and the justice system. It images humans as malleable beings, changed by the environments they are subjected to throughout their childhood. Painful events can be permanent and leave fixed marks on a person.

It is **eighteen years ago**, almost to the day –

A sunny day with **leaves just turning**,

The touch-lines **new-ruled** – since I **watched** you play

Your first game of football, then, like a **satellite**

Wrenched from its **orbit**, go **drifting away**

Behind a **scatter** of boys. I can see

You walking away from **me** towards the **school**

With the **pathos** of a **half-fledged thing set free**

Into a wilderness, the **gait** of one

Who **finds no path** where the path should be.

That **hesitant** figure, **eddyng** away

Like a **winged seed loosened from its parent stem**,

Has something I never quite grasp to convey

About nature’s give-and-take – the small, the scorching

Ordeals which fire one’s irresolute **clay**.

Pathetic fallacy introduces the theme of change and development into the poem through the suggestion of seasonal change.

Use of past tense to highlight how the poem is a reflection of his son’s childhood.

Introduces the semantic field of space, which thematically links to exploration and development.

Repetition of the word “away” highlights the introduction of distance into the relationship

“Scatter” implies a sense of uncertainty. Shows the choice between friends and family for the son.

Separation of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’ and ‘me’ subtly embed the theme of separation for the reader.

School presented as an institution that acts as a substitute parent and teaches a child independence.

Suggests his son will have to forge his own path in life and shows that he feels lost at this point. Utilizes a lot of fricative consonants to create a sort of onomatopoeia for the image of flight.

Natural imagery used in this simile. Seeds are part of the plant’s reproductive system and therefore it could be relating to the son starting a new family. Also intensifies the image of an uncontrollable entity - the father no longer has control over his son and his behaviour.



Father finds his son's separation from him painful and causes him to reflect - it is ambiguous as to if he is experiences regret towards this or not.

"Gnaws" has animalistic connotations which shows the uncontrollable nature of his sadness.

Final conclusion centres around acceptable for the situation he's in and an acknowledgement that just because his son is growing older, their love only changes rather than disappearing.

I have had worse partings, but none that so

Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly

Saying what **God alone** could perfectly show –

How selfhood begins with a walking away,

And love is **proved in the letting go**.

Reflective tone as the poem concludes in the final stanza. Reaffirms the portrayal of the father as a passive character by comparison to the son who is described actively. The use of enjambment shows that this thought takes up more than one line in the speaker's memory.

The poem concludes with a religious reference which implies that the conclusion the speaker has reached was inevitable.

Perspective

'Walking Away' from the perspective of a father watching his child grow up and leave home, thinking about his involvement in his son's childhood. It is written in a **first person narrative, with a heavy tone employed of reflection**, demonstrated by lines such as **"I have had worse partings, but none that so // gnaws at my mind still"**.

However, the distance between them in the relationship is displayed when the speaker refers to his son as a **"hesitant figure"**, despite the poem being addressed to the character of the son with the object pronouns **"you"** and **"your"**. This further emphasises the **tone of reflection**, because it implies the speaker himself is unaware of the amount of distance he has in the relationship between himself and his son. As the original poem had the subtitle **"For Sean"**, the poem becomes more intimate and personal as we can assume it is semi-autobiographical, so influenced loosely by the experiences Day-Lewis himself has had.

The poem is from the perspective of a father addressing their son, whilst reflecting on their relationship during the son's childhood, after the son has left home.



The Opening

The poem opens on a focus on time - **“eighteen years ago”** - which immediately suggests to the reader that the poem will be centered around **reflection**. This use of **specific temporal deixis** - which refers to events moving away - emphasises the importance that Day-Lewis feels it has on his life.

It is **eighteen years ago**, almost to the day –
A sunny day with **leaves just turning**,
The touch-lines **new-ruled** – since I **watched** you play
Your first game of football, then, like a **satellite**
Wrenched from its **orbit**, go **drifting away**

Pathetic fallacy introduces the theme of change and development into the poem through the suggestion of **seasonal change**. Day-Lewis references the beginning of the school year - **“touch-lines new-ruled”** continuing the **theme of change and the development of time**.

The use of the **past tense “watched”** highlights how the poem is a reflection of his son’s childhood. Introduces the **semantic field of space**, which thematically links to exploration and development. Repetition of the word **“away”** highlights the introduction of distance into the relationship. The contrast of **“wrenched”** and **“drifting”** may suggest that the father is reluctant to let his son go despite the son being ready to embrace independence. These verbs emphasises the **powerlessness** that the speaker feels at his son growing up.

Structure

ABACA

Employs a **consistent ABACA rhyming scheme**, and this stable structure contrasts the theme of change and individual development within the poem, and could also reflect the **stable nature of paternal love**.

Use of dashes [-]

Throughout the poem, the poet uses punctuation of dashes, to add in extra information to make the description and narrative more vivid for the reader. It also has the effect of mirroring the shift in time and setting described in the poem: **seasonal change**.

Repetition

Day-Lewis continues to **repeat** the word **“away”** in each stanza, which continues the **theme of separation and development** in the father-son relationship



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:School_sign.jpg



as the son is growing up and leaving home and school.

Direct address

By using the **object pronouns** “*you*” and “*your*”, Day-Lewis is employing direct address to place the reader into the position of the speaker’s son, to engage the reader and try and help them relate the poem to their own familial relationships

Language

Similes

Day-Lewis uses a lot of **similes** to create **vivid imagery** in order to create a sense of relatability for his reader. The **naturalistic language** may also be Day-Lewis reflecting on how a change in the dynamic of a relationship over time is natural and to be expected - perhaps to comfort and reassure himself. Day-Lewis compares his son to a range of common concepts using the similes “*like a satellite*” and “*like a winged seed*” which helps his readers understand how he is feeling towards his son, to include them in their relationship. By using the **preposition** “*like*”, it could be assumed that their relationship is flimsy and always borders on being concrete, but is never fully stable.

Lyrical

Lyrical style of the structure is mirrored in the language, with Day-Lewis using a range of **adverbs** and **adjectives** to create a **vivid image of his pain and reflection** on his relationship with his son. For example, “*worse partings*” and “*gnaws at my mind still*”.

Seasonal change

The poet references **seasonal change** in order to create a natural backdrop to compare the changes experienced in his relationship with his son. As Sean, who the poem is addressed to, went to boarding school for many of his formative years, the poem could be Day-Lewis’ attempt at exploring the impact of separation in a still-developing father-son relationship.



Direct address

He uses a lot of **direct language** towards his son, such as “*I watched you*” and “*You walking away*”, but this ceases in the last two stanzas as he becomes more reflective and contemplative. This **shift from direct language to contemplative language** mirrors their separation as his son grows up.

Passive vs active verbs

Uses **passive language to describe himself** - such as “*see*” and “*watched*”, by comparison to the **active language used to describe his son** - such as “*eddyng*”. This may suggest Day-Lewis is jealous of his son’s lifestyle, which is not a healthy trait to be introduced to a relationship.



Comparisons

Walking Away	Before You Were Mine
<i>"I watched you"</i>	<i>"Till I see you"</i>
<i>"You walking away"</i>	<i>"Your polka-dot dress brows round your legs"</i>
<i>"That hesitant figure"</i>	<i>"Bold girl winking in Portobello"</i>
Both poems use a mix of direct address and referring to their son / parent indirectly / in the third person, to highlight their respective turbulent and changing relationships.	

Walking Away & Mother Any Distance

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores the concept of letting your children go off into adulthood. • Both poets use caesura to demonstrate the separated between past and present. • Both poems use a final couple of lines to conclude the poet's reflection with a hopeful message. • Both speakers use direct address to imply the intimate connection between the speaker and other character the speaker is addressing.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst WA is addressed to Sean, who is Lewis' son, whereas the speaker and addressee in Mother Any Distance is ambiguous and may not be a reference to a semi-autobiographical instance. • Biblical imagery is used in WA but not MAD.

Walking Away & Winter Swans

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems don't use a stable form, such as a rhyme scheme and consistent syllable count per line, also both poems use enjambment to show the fluidity of both familial and romantic relationships, and how they can change over time.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WA centres on a father / son familial relationship, whereas WS focuses on a romantic relationship. • Sheers uses more classical poetic techniques, such as metaphors of the lake and the swans.

