

# AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love & Relationships  
Mother Any Distance - *Simon Armitage*



## MOTHER ANY DISTANCE

Simon Armitage

### Brief Summary

In this poem, Armitage presents a speaker who is reflecting on the connection he has with his mother, from the perspective of childhood and growing up. This is portrayed against the backdrop of the older version of the speaker asking his mother to help her measure his new house. He contrasts the reliance he feels on his mother in the first stanza, to the pressure to explore independence in the second, and then considering whether he can succeed or will fail in the final stanza.

#### Summary

**Context** – grew up in Yorkshire // was a probation officer for many years before being a poet // professor of poetry at Oxford // poet laureate

**Form** – free verse // modern and open style with no strict rhyme scheme or meter

**Structure** - three stanzas // each stanza explores a different aspect of their evolving relationship

**Language** – first person narration // extended metaphor of measuring and unrolling distance // symbolism of measuring tape // imagery of doors, windows and rooms physical aspects of leaving home

**Key Points** – Armitage delves into complexities of mother-son relationships // the son needs space but the mother struggles to let go // emotional connection is the central theme

### Synopsis

- The speaker introduces the situation: he has moved into a new house and his mother has come round to help him measure the house for furniture, etc.
- He reflects on the distance between them and how he feels about his connection to his mother.
- He considers whether he will succeed on this next step in his life, or whether he will fail.

### Context

#### Simon Armitage (1963 - )

In 2019, Armitage became the new Poet Laureate, following Carol Ann Duffy in the post. He is a playwright and novelist as well as a poet, and attended the University of Manchester as well as studying in Portsmouth. He has worked in a number of occupations, and his poetry often relates back to his Yorkshire heritage (Armitage was born in Huddersfield) and often focuses on relatable situations in order to resonate with and engage the reader.

#### From “Book of Matches” (1993)

This is a collection of poems which are all designed to be read in the brief time it took for a match to burn out, and most of the poems are around the length of a sonnet.

KEY THEMES	INDEPENDENCE, AGEING, SENSE OF PLACE, FREEDOM, CHILDHOOD
RELATIONSHIP	MOTHER / CHILD   FAMILIAL
LOVE	MATERNAL, PARENTAL



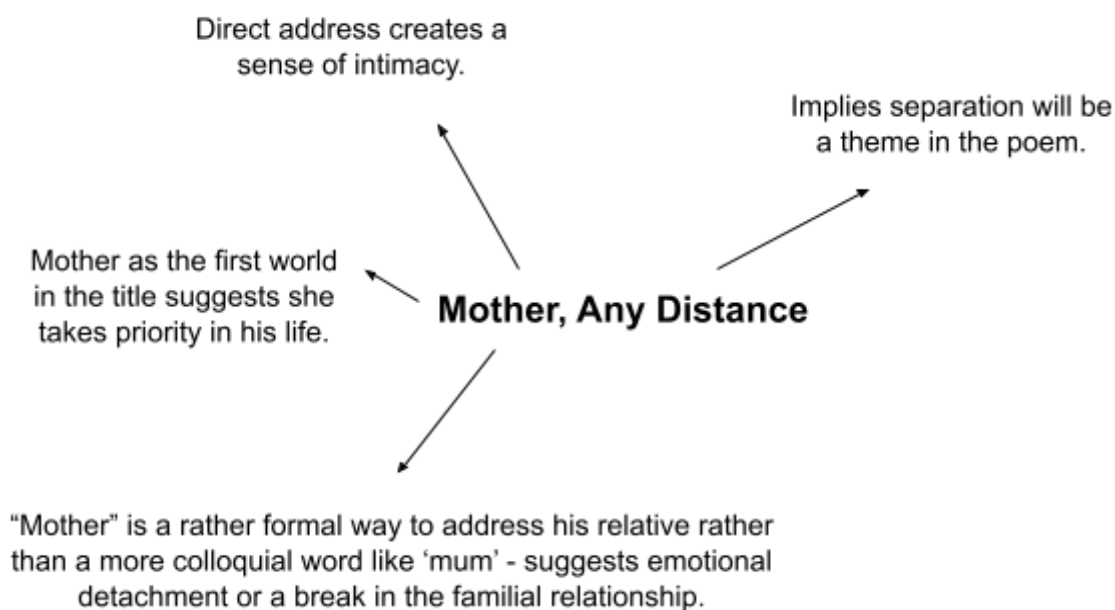
### **Mother Any Distance**

Like a few of the other poems in the anthology, Armitage isn't very specific in his time or setting with the poem 'Mother Any Distance' - and this is emphasised in the **present tense narrative** of his poem. It is from the **perspective of a child** reflecting on how his mother is helping him move into his own home, and having a child commenting on their relationship with a parent or relative is common for the familial poems in the collection.

It uses a **juxtaposition** between **colloquial phrases**, with formal address, such as the word **"mother"**. Again, like many of the other poems in the anthology, the structure of 'Mother Any Distance' is quite fluid and Armitage employs a very loose rhyming scheme, which is mainly in the form of **half-rhyme**.

**JUXTAPOSITION** | Comparing two concepts, characters, or clauses, in close proximity in a passage for the effect of contrast.

### **The title "Mother Any Distance"**



## Mother Any Distance

*The slight internal rhyme to this pair of lines creates an intimate, homely sense to start the poem. It emphasises how close he is to his mother, both literally and figuratively, and sets up the titular figure of the mother as very protective.*

*References the limit of the tape measure.*

*His mother is at the base, symbolic of home, of the tape measure, and this may imply them have now more of an emotional connection between them rather than sharing the same house. The tape measure may also be symbolic of the umbilical cord, a physical connection between the mother and son which has now been lost.*

*We are left on the word 'fly' which suggests a positive ending to the poem. A rhyming structure is implemented in these final two lines, between 'sky' and 'fly', which may suggest harmony and a return to certainty after Armitage's period of reflection.*

**Mother**, any **distance** greater than a single **span**  
requires a second pair of **hands**.

**You** come to help **me** measure windows, pelmets,  
doors,

the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

You at the **zero-end**, me with the spool of tape,  
**recording**

**length, reporting metres, centimetres back to base**,  
then leaving

up the stairs, the line still feeding out, unreeling

years between us. **Anchor. Kite.**

I space-walk through the empty bedrooms, climb

the ladder to the loft, to breaking point, where  
something

has to give;

two floors below your fingertips still pinch

the last one-hundredth of an inch ... I reach

towards a **hatch** that opens on an endless **sky**

to fall or **fly**.

*By addressing his mother as 'mother' rather than a more informal name may suggest the speaker is trying to mature and place distance between him and his mother.*

*Whilst the addresses "you" and "me" are physically separated in this line, the sentiment of it suggests the reliance the son has on his mother.*

*The semantic field of measurement may be symbolic of measuring the time and memories the pair have shared together.*

*Contrasting images of anchor and kite, to highlight the confusion he is experiencing as to his feelings towards his mother and his increasing independence - the conflict between these parts of his life. Enjambment displays both the mother and son attempting to move on, and the singular worded sentences slow the poem's pace, hinting that Armitage may be feeling thoughtful and reflective.*

*The hatch may symbolise the freedom offered to Armitage through the process of growing up.*



## Perspective

The poem is from the perspective of a son who is moving into a new home and has asked his mother for help measuring the house.

## Structure

### Sonnet

Loosely based on the format of a **sonnet**, and the loose format may suggest uncertainty as to how he feels towards his mother. If it is read like a sonnet with emphasis placed on the final line, this perhaps highlights how nervous he feels about moving onto a new stage in his life.

### Uneven rhyming structure

**Uneven rhyming structure**, which may suggest the uneven relationship between mother and son - the son clearly relies a lot more on his mother than vice versa.



### Enjambement

Armitage uses **enjambment** between many of his lines, and this serves to replicate the rhythm and form of someone talking naturally. This may suggest they have a healthy, unforced relationship, and this mirrors the subject content - obviously the son has relied a lot on his mother.

## The opening

**Mother**, any **distance** greater than a single span  
requires a second pair of hands.  
**You** come to help **me** measure windows, pelmets, doors,  
the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

By addressing his mother as **“mother”** rather than a more informal name may suggest the speaker is trying to mature and place distance between him and his mum. The slight **internal rhyme** to this pair of lines creates an intimate, homely sense to start the poem. It emphasises how close he is to his mother, both literally and figuratively, and sets up the **titular figure** of the mother as very protective.

Whilst the addresses **“you”** and **“me”** are physically separated in this line, the sentiment of it suggests the reliance the son has on his mother. By including this in the opening of the poem, along with the title and first line including the word **“distance”**, Armitage is introducing the **theme of separation**, or the prospect of distance, early on in the poem.



The **hyperbolic imagery** employed in the final line “**the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors**” embarks the **theme of exploration**, but the largeness of the images reflects the intimidation he feels when faced with the prospect of growing up and gaining independence. The sentence is structured using **parallelism**, to perhaps reflect the stable and comforting structure of home. Armitage's choice of the word “**Acres**” may suggest that Armitage is feeling lonely and isolated. Both ‘**acres**’ and ‘**prairies**’ are historically unused spaces. By opening the poem to this stanza, Armitage is demonstrating how intimidated the speaker is with the prospect of moving onto a new stage in his life.

**HYPERBOLE** | Use of exaggerated statements.

## Language

### Semantic field of measurement

**SEMANTIC FIELD** | A writer uses words which are linked by a theme or topic throughout a text or passage.

Semantic field of **measurement and distance** links the poem back to the title and explores how far Armitage feels he can go without the assistance of his mother. It may also be **symbolic** of measuring the time and memories the pair have shared together. These references include “**metres, centimeters**” and “**one-hundredth of an inch**”.



### Metaphors

The poem is rife with **metaphors** such as “**endless sky**” to symbolise the possibilities in life and the “**tape**” measure as either the umbilical cord, or more generally the connection between mother and son. The use of these metaphors elevates the poem into a more vivid dream-state, to engage the reader and contrast with the basic, central theme of a child's reliance on their mother.

The line:

*the **acres** of the walls, the **prairies** of the floors*

Has a very exaggerated and **hyperbolic** metaphorical quality to its description, which can suggest that he feels very intimidated with both the prospect of moving onto a new stage in his life, but also having less reliance on his mother.



Colloquial language

**Colloquial language** is used to display the intimate and comfortable bond the pair have, such as “**back to base**”. The colloquial language contrasts with the formal address of “**mother**”, which suggests it is the speaker who is keen and is trying to distance himself from his parent.

**COLLOQUIALISM** | An informal phrase common at its time of utterance.



## Comparisons

Mother Any Distance	Letters To Yorkshire
<i>“breaking point”</i>	<i>“Wouldn’t” abbreviated version of ‘would not’</i>
<i>“back to base”</i>	<i>“planting potatoes ”</i>
Both are written in free verse without a rhyming scheme, to mimic the colloquial tone of the poems, however Letters From Yorkshire are written with a stable stanza structure of three lines per stanza.	

### Mother Any Distance & Walking Away

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explores the concept of letting your children go off into adulthood</li> <li>• Both poets use caesura to demonstrate the separated between past and present</li> <li>• Both poems utilise a final couple of lines to conclude the poet’s reflection with a hopeful message.</li> <li>• Both speakers use <b>direct address</b> to imply the intimate connection between the speaker and other characters the speaker is addressing.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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 <b>semi-autobiographical</b> instance.</li> <li>• Biblical imagery is utilized in WA but not MAD.</li> </ul>

### Mother Any Distance & Follower

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both from the perspective of a child, who is expressing their admiration for their respective parents.</li> <li>• They both extensively employ <b>metaphors</b> to symbolise different aspects of the parental / child bond.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The son in MAD is attempting to distance himself, however the father / son relationship in Follower remains bonded.</li> <li>• MAD manipulates sonnet form, which is typical of love poetry, suggesting love for his father</li> <li>• Enjambment is utilised 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>

