

# Follower

Seamus Heaney

## OVERALL SUMMARY

"Follower" is a **retrospective** poem where Heaney **reminisces** on his childhood spent on a farm following his father around and being a nuisance to him. However, by the end of the poem the role of **the follower is reversed** and as Heaney ages it is his father who follows him and is a nuisance.

## STANZA SUMMARY

- He describes watching his father, as a child, working a horse plough, noting his father's strong shoulders and ability to make the horse submit to him.
- He describes his father expertly operating the farming machinery. And controlling the horses.
- He labels himself as clumsy in comparison to his father's expert skill and talks of how he would trail behind his father, following him everywhere he went.
- He speaks of wanting to grow up and follow in his father's footsteps.
- He describes himself as a nuisance as a child but now he is older the roles have reversed, and it is his father who follows him.

## CONTEXT

- Heaney writes an account of how **traditional rural life** was in the sixties, when the poem was written.
- Heaney often writes about nature and rural life as he grew up in **County Derry** which is a town surrounded by vast rural lands.
- The poem is **semi-autobiographical** because Heaney's father was a cattle farmer.

# Key Themes & Analysis

## FAMILY DYNAMICS

- Seamus Heaney presents how his dynamic with his father reverses as they both grow older.
- Heaney describes himself as a child, watching his father who's "shoulders globed like a full strung sail" do farm work. The simile he uses makes his father seem **immense** and **powerful**, portraying a sense of **admiration** from his childhood self.
- He describes his father as "an expert", **idolising** him as children tend to with their parents, establishing their dynamic.
- He describes himself as a child as "tripping and falling" and "yapping". The **verbs** give the sense that he is trying not to be as clumsy as he is as they are **active** rather than **passive**.
- Furthermore, the **onomatopoeic** sound "yap" makes the **imagery** of him being a clumsy child more **vivid**. It's striking and it demonstrates that these are **formative** (early / influential) memories for the speaker are obviously significant to him.
- The reason for that significance becomes clear in the final stanza where the speaker **jumps forward in time** and describes how, opposite to his childhood, his father is the one now following him around and thus their dynamic is shifted and their roles reversed.
- He recounts that "today", marking the time jump, "it is my father who keeps stumbling behind me and will not go away". The flipping of roles appears **as a tragic reminder** of the loss of agency that comes with old age. His once strong and skilled father is now **juxtaposed** against the old man who now follows his son around. His older father seems **alien** in comparison to the one who has just been described.
- Through the **shift in the father son dynamic** in his poem, Heaney reminds us of the tragic nature of ageing and the almost parental role children must take on with their parents when they are too old to function independently.

## THE VALUE OF RURAL WORK

- Heaney immensely values rural labour and rural land in his poem.
- He describes how his father would ***"fit the bright steel-pointed sock"*** on his horses and does so through the **lens of a child watching a parent**, a lens that is inherently coloured with awe. Thus, he looks at the manual labour his father does, with awe.
- Furthermore, the **adjective** bright mirrors the speaker's **awe filled** disposition and shows how life as a child is inherently more colourful and exciting.
- The speaker recounts how his father would include him in his labour, saying: ***"he rode me on his back"***. His **fond tone** and the **syntactical closeness** of ***"me"*** and ***"his"*** shows that he places **immense value** on the work that made up a lot of his formative years.
- Seamus Heaney's own father was a cattle farmer and so the speaker's **admiring tone** can be attributed to the author as well.
- When the speaker says, ***"I stumbled hob nailed in his wake"***, he paints the work his father does as involving **immense skill** by adding the verb ***"stumbled"***, further adding to his tone of admiration.
- Furthermore, the phrase ***"hob nailed"***, is symbolic of him being expected to follow his father's career path, a task he feels he cannot live up to, presenting his father's work as hard and gruelling - compounding that admiration.
- Seamus Heaney **immensely values** the work of **rural labourers** in Ireland and his poem almost feels like an ode (love poem) to them. He portrays his father in an **idolised light**, reminding us of the immense skill that is involved in the work that he commits himself to.
- In doing this **he idolises his own father** as the poem is semi- autobiographical in its nature.

# Form

## METRE

- Heaney mainly uses **iambic tetrameter** with occasional lines **that deviate from this established metre**.
- The uneven metre creates an eerie sense of **foreboding** and what initially seems like a fondly retrospective poem, has an unexpectedly **melancholic ending**.

## RHYME

- The stanzas have occasional rhyming couplets and a few of which are **half rhymes**, making the rhyme scheme sound disjointed and unorganised.
- The rhyme scheme seems to perhaps mirror the speakers clumsy movements and also his desire to be like his father, but the **half rhymes** reflect how he never quite achieves that dream.

## QUATRAINS

- Each of the five stanzas has four lines called quatrains meaning each stanza is of equal length.
- This gives the poem an organised feel, again reminding us that this is an adult speaking **retrospectively**.
- The organised stanzas could reflect his organisation and poised nature as an adult, contrasting his fathers more **feeble and disorganised state**. It shows the **disparity** between the older and younger generations, and how as people get older, they regress into a more **infantile helpless state**.

# Structure

## CAESURA/ENJAMBEMENT

- The continuation of sentences over stanzas, creates a break in in the sentence and acts as a caesura but also contributes to the poems enjambement.
- This makes it so the poems structure, in the way the lines follow into the next stanza, mirror the way speaker **physically and metaphorically followed his father**.

## END STOPPING

- While some of the stanzas make use of enjambement and caesuras, some have end stopped lines.
- This has the effect of making him sound more decisive on the stanzas that are end stopped are the stanzas where he is making assertions.
- This reminds us that though he is speaking about when he was a child, he is speaking about it **retrospectively as an adult**.

# Comparisons

Love's Philosophy	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<b>Childlike awe of paternal figures</b>  Both speakers write about the <b>idolised</b> way in which they saw their paternal figures (Heaney's is his actual father and Waterhouse's is his Grandfather) when they were children. They highlight the way in which children see adult figures in their lives as <b>role models</b> and <b>aspire to be like them</b> . They show the influence <b>paternal figures</b> can have in a person's formative years.	<b>Rhyme</b>  Both poems lack a <b>regular rhyme scheme</b> , with Heaney's having occasional <b>rhymed and half rhymed couplets</b> scattered throughout and Waterhouse's having none at all. This gives both poems a sense <b>decohesion</b> (disjointedness). The rhyme scheme is <b>flawed</b> like their reductionist childhood view of their paternal figures.  <b>First person</b>  Both speakers speak in the first person which means we see their paternal figures exclusively through their eyes. We thus get a distorted view of them and reminds of the distorted, biased view most children have of their paternal figures.	<b>First line</b>  Both poems begin with <b>personal pronouns</b> which makes them sound <b>confessional</b> in nature. Heaney's begins with "my" and Waterhouse's, "I". It also makes the reader feel as though they are on more <b>intimate terms</b> with the speaker which makes them more <b>involved in the world of the poem</b> .	<b>Autobiography</b>  Both poets write <b>semi-autobiographically</b> , showing that poetry, by nature, is often best written when it stems from personal experience. It makes both poems seem more <b>authentic</b> .
Different	<b>Reality</b>  Heaney ends his poem speaking in the present tense with him as an adult and shows him and his father to have <b>switched roles</b> and the childlike awe he had for him has <b>dissipated</b> (gone) and has been replaced with frustration as his father is now a <b>burden</b> to him. Waterhouse's speaker remains a child and thus <b>retains</b> (keeps) the awe he has and. His poem is far more optimistic.	<b>Stanzas</b>  Heaney's poem is broken into five <b>quatrains</b> which gives it an organised feel, reminding us of the speakers age despite him thinking back to his childhood in the first person. Waterhouse's poem, on the other hand is one continuous stanza which makes the speaker age less discernible. It makes us more absorbed in the events of the poem and less focused on the speaker.	<b>Cyclical structure</b>  Heaney's poem has a <b>cyclical structure</b> in that it returns to the present at the end of the poem after looking back at his childhood. Waterhouse's, however, remains in childhood. The poems thus have very differing tones. Waterhouse's has an <b>optimism that is reminiscent of childhood</b> and Heaney's has the <b>cynicism of an adult</b> .  <b>Enjambement</b>  Waterhouse's poem has far more enjambement which makes the poem more representative of a stream of consciousness, which it very much sounds like. Heaney's poem sounds more structures and organised in comparison.	<b>Patriarchs</b>  The men that appear as <b>patriarchs</b> (father figure) in both poems differ in relation to the speaker and by extension (because of the point above) the poet. In Heaney's poem he writes about his father but in Waterhouse's <b>patriarch</b> is the grandfather.

Love's Philosophy	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p><b>Admiration</b></p> <p>Both speakers in the two poems, show an immense sense of admiration for the male figures they talk of.</p> <p><b>Value of rural work and land</b></p> <p>Both speakers speak with immense admiration of rural labourers. They seem to value nature and working on the land</p>	<p><b>Stanzas</b></p> <p>Both poems are organised into evenly weighted, regular stanzas. Heaney uses quatrains while Dooley uses tercets. This gives the poems a sense of calmness and indeed the tone of both speakers appear quite calm.</p>	<p><b>Caesura</b></p> <p>Both poems use caesuras in the form of the continuation of sentences over stanzas. It makes it so both poets sound thoughtful because they have breaks in their sentences which could be interpreted as pauses for thought.</p>	<p><b>Relationships with men</b></p> <p>Both speakers write semi-autobiographically about relationships with men who are close to them.</p>
Different	<p><b>Admiration continued</b></p> <p>With Heaney's speaker, that admiration fades with age and soon morphs into resentment. However, Dooley's speaker retains her admiration throughout the entire poem.</p>	<p><b>Rhyme</b></p> <p>Heaney, while his rhyme scheme is disjointed, employs occasional rhyme and half rhymed couplets whereas Dooley doesn't use rhyme at all. Heaney's half, uneven rhymes foreshadow the changing relationship between him and his father whereas Dooley's absence of rhyme makes her sound almost prose like which is similar to how the speaker might write in her news career.</p>	<p><b>Rhetoric</b></p> <p>Dooley employs rhetoric which makes the lines that use this technique stand out from the rest. As a result, Dooley's speaker seems more conflicted than Heaney's who seems secure in his assertions.</p>	<p><b>Ambiguity vs clarity</b></p> <p>Heaney's poem is obviously fairly autobiographical, but Dooley's is less obviously so and she is more ambiguous about the man she speaks of. She almost demonstrates a reluctance to be totally vulnerable in the way Heaney is.</p>