

# Mother, Any Distance

Simon Armitage

## OVERALL SUMMARY

"Mother, Any Distance" is a poem about a speaker who **retrospectively** (looking back on the past) reflects on the relationship he has with his mother **through the lens of his adulthood**. The speaker's mother helps fit blinds and carpets in the new house he has purchased and through this activity he is able to reflect on his childhood and the pressure he is under now to **assert his independence** while still feeling somewhat reliant on his mother.

## STANZA SUMMARY

- The speaker recounts how his mother has come to his newly purchased house to help him measure for things like curtains and blinds.
- They **respectively** (separately) hold their own ends of the tape measure and the speaker uses the **widening distance** between them as the tape measure unreels as a **metaphor** for the widening gap between himself and his mother as he ages into adulthood.
- They are in separate parts of the house now, the speaker has climbed up to the loft looking out the skylight and his mother is two floors below. Again, the speaker creates a **metaphor** with this separation for his newfound freedom as an adult. The skylight represents a **glimpse** of a life with far more **liberty** (freedom) and yet the speaker still **pines** (longs) for the security his mother and his childhood offered.

## CONTEXT

- Simon Armitage published this poem in 1993 in his collection 'Book of Matches'. He wrote this collection of **sonnets** for his 30th birthday where each of the **thirty poems** are all able to be **recounted in the time it takes to burn a match**.
- The poem is about the relationship Armitage has with his own mother. It is based on a true story and reflects **the desire for independence** he had at that age and yet the strong relationship he was able to maintain with his mother despite the **ever-expanding** distance between them as he grew older.

# Key Themes & Analysis

## UNCONDITIONAL MATERNAL LOVE

- The poem is essentially about **the unconditional love of mothers** and the constant support they provide no matter the age of their child.
- The speaker addresses his mother in the first stanza, saying **"you come to help me"**. The **personal pronouns "you" and "my"** are present and yet there is a **physical gap** between them **syntactically**, which represents the separation the speaker has from his mother as he grows and matures.
- He speaks about the **"acres of walls"**, using **hyperbole** to add to the **semantic field of distance** to represent how far he feels he is from his mother now that he is older.
- The **"spool of tape [...] line still feeding out, unreeling"** **reinforces** this idea of distance, but the tape acts as a **metaphor** showing that their relationship is still strong, with them being bound together, despite the gap between them.
- No matter how far the speaker is physically from his mother, they still have a strong connection – they are **inextricably bound** to one another regardless of the physical space.
- He compares the tape measure to an **"Anchor"** and **"Kite"**. The two **nouns evoke ideas** of being **rooted** or having a constant connection to something. But the two also **juxtapose**, one underwater and the other in the sky, showing the **conflict** he feels between wanting the security of his mother, but also wanting to **forge** his own path in life.
- He describes how his mother's **"fingertips still pinch"**, the verb **"pinch"** portraying that her **grasp is flimsy** but **"still"** showing that she will not let go. The speaker demonstrates his mother's **unconditional love** in that no matter how far he gets, she still clings to the bond she has with him.
- However the verb **"pinch"** could **evoke pain**, which could reflect the worry or guilt he feels in the ever-expanding gap between him and his mother.
- He speaks of **"the endless sky, to fall or to fly"**. The **rhyming couplets** here represent the speaker and his mother and the **complementing, loving** relationship they have. Furthermore, the **juxtaposition** between **"fall"** and **"fly"** reminds us that the speaker's mother provides him with **unconditional** support and will support him when he flies and catch him if he falls.
- Armitage shows **maternal love** to be **everlasting and permeant**.

## CONFLICT

- The speaker very much portrays a conflict between **desiring the security** of his mother and his childhood but also wanting the **independence** that comes with being an adult.
- He introduces, in the first stanza, that he ***"requires a second pair of hands"***. The **verb "require"** demonstrates the **reliance** he has on his mother and the **noun "hands"** evokes ideas of **help** and **generosity**. It creates **a sense of community** which he shows is a necessity in his life. The speaker cannot live without his mother.
- Hands also typically **evoke strength and power** which shows that his mother is a stable, helpful force in his life.
- The speaker is ***"reporting [...] back to base"*** but then ***"leaving up the stairs"***. The **juxtaposition** of these two phrases represents the **dichotomy** he feels between being with his mother and also wanting to be independent.
- As the speaker climbs to the top of the house he asserts ***"something has to give"***. Armitage creates the sense that the speaker is **insecure** in his relationship with his mother, that he is **uncertain** whether it will **withstand** him growing up and becoming more independent.
- The speaker ***"reach[es] a hatch"*** where he is offered the opportunity, metaphorically "to fall or to fly". The hatch **represents an opportunity** for the speaker in terms of his freedom.
- He can see the ***"endless sky"***, showing the **potential liberty of adulthood** to be **immense**. And yet the harsh **fricative** sounds in the words ***"fall"*** and ***"fly"*** represent a conflict the speaker is feeling; they show him to be stressed under the **immense pressure** to decide between the **familiarity** of his mother or the new opportunities of adulthood.
- Armitage portrays a sense of **conflict** that comes hand in hand with aging and growing up. He shows the guilt that is often felt by adults who feel they are creating distance between them and their parents by ageing and the **conflict between wanting independence, but also craving security**.

# Form

## SONNET

- The poem is loosely a **sonnet**, as are all the other poems in the collection.
- The sonnet form makes the poem seem **devotional**, as if it is an **ode** (a love poem) to his mother. It **connotes tenderness and love** and shows him to be incredibly **fond** of his mother and his childhood.
- Writing in sonnet form forces the reader to feel the love the speaker feels as well and by extension the reader also feels the conflict that the speaker feels around leaving his mother. Our emotions, while reading the poem **mirrors the speakers**.

## RHYME (UNEVEN & COUPLETS)

- Armitage's rhyme scheme is **disjointed and loose**.
- It consists **primarily of half rhymes** which are scattered in **couplets** throughout the poem. This has the effect of making the speaker seem confused, it reflects the conflict they feel between relying on their mother but also being independent.
- The fully rhyming couplets at the end of the poem give it a sense of **finality**. As though the speaker has concluded that the relationship with his mother can **endure** (survive) any distance.

## METRE

- The poem mostly lacks the iambic pentameter which is conventionally associated with sonnet form and instead the metre is uneven.
- Through the uneven metre, Armitage reminds us that the poem is not simply an **ode** (love poem) to his mother but also a **musings** (considering) on ageing and asserting ones independence.

# Structure

## VARYING PUNCTUATION

- The poem makes use of **varied punctuation**, with uses of **ellipses and a semicolon**.
- There is also a huge amount of **enjambement** and complex sentences.
- This emphasises the reader maturity as the **retrospectively reflect** on their mother and their childhood.
- The enjambment, creating an overflow into the next sentence, could mirror the immense overflowing of emotions of **love and adoration** for his mother. The enjambment after "span" on the first line reinforces the **sempiternal love**.

## FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE

- Armitage writes his poem in the **first person**.
- This highlights that the poem is **personal** to him, as it is based on his life.
- It also **ensures we view his mother through his eyes**, making our view of **her coloured by the warmth and fondness** he feels for her. It makes his mother seem perfect and **conventionally maternal**.

# Comparisons

Letters From Yorkshire	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
<b>Similar</b>	<p><b>Fondness</b></p> <p>Both speakers possess a <b>warmth</b> and <b>fondness</b> for the people that they address in their poems which makes their poems seem like <b>Odes</b>.</p> <p><b>Conflict and disparity</b></p> <p>Armitage addresses the <b>disparity</b> (gap) between loving his mother and asserting his independence and Dooley too writes about <b>disparity</b>. She addresses the disparity she feels there is between her <b>rural and urban lives</b>. Her career and her home.</p>	<p><b>Metre</b></p> <p>Both poems seem to lack a <b>discernible, regular metre</b>, which makes them sound <b>disjointed</b> and uneven, as though they are a <b>stream of consciousness</b>, a direct insight into the speakers brain.</p>	<p><b>Enjambement</b></p> <p>Both poets make use of <b>enjambement</b>, and this makes them sound thoughtful and <b>musings</b></p>	<p><b>Personal</b></p> <p>Both poets poems are based on their personal lives, Armitage's about his mother and Dooley's about a person <b>evidently</b> close to her. This demonstrates the immense impacts our childhoods and family lives have on us as adults.</p> <p><b>Change</b></p> <p>Both poets show the desire to leave their childhood behind them to mature and grow but seem <b>conflicted</b> about this.</p>
<b>Different</b>	<p><b>Identity</b></p> <p>In Armitage's poem it is obviously about his mother, while in Dooley we are unsure of the relationship the speaker has with the man that she describes. Dooley's poem thus seems to have a <b>melancholier</b> tone because it lacks the personal element we can see in Armitage's.</p>	<p><b>Stanzas</b></p> <p>Armitage's poem is in the form of a <b>sonnet</b> and each stanza has a varying number of lines. Dooley's stanzas, however, are broken into three <b>unrhymed tercets</b> making her sound more <b>objective</b> in her tone. Unlike Armitage whose <b>objectivity is distorted by his immense fondness</b> and personal relationship with the subject of his poem.</p>	<p><b>Enjambement</b></p> <p>Towards the end of Dooley's poem, the <b>enjambement</b> seems to fade and the sentences become simpler. This possibly reflects her career, which is in news, making her sound conclusive at the end of her poem as she would at the end of a report. Whereas enjambement <b>permeates</b> (is in the whole poem) Armitage's poem, making him sound rambling as one might ramble about someone they love.</p>	<p><b>Complexities</b></p> <p>Dooley gives the sense that her childhood was more <b>nuanced</b> (complex) than Armitage's; that it was <b>coloured by miscommunication</b>. Armitage's account of his childhood is warm and fond whereas Dooley's seems less so.</p>

Walking Away	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p><b>Leaving</b></p> <p>Both poems address the theme of growing up and leaving home through a <b>retrospective lens</b> with an element of <b>fondness</b> in their tones.</p> <p><b>Conflict</b></p> <p>Both speakers feel <b>conflicted</b> with the idea of letting go. Armitage's speaker with letting go of his mother. And Day-Lewis' with letting go of his son.</p> <p><b>Emotional intimacy</b></p> <p>Both speakers have a sense of <b>insecurity</b> in their relationships with their respective mothers and sons. They are worried that their relationship has been or will be affected by physical distance.</p>	<p>The poems are quite dissimilar in terms of form</p>	<p><b>Perspective</b></p> <p>Both poets make use of the <b>first person</b> in their poems, which allows us a certain amount of intimacy with the speakers. It makes the poems seem more <b>personal</b>.</p>	<p><b>Relationships between parents and children</b></p> <p>Both poets have close relationships with their father's with Day-Lewis being raised by a single father after his mother passed and Armitage being close to his mother.</p>

Walking Away	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Different	<p><b>Emotional intimacy</b></p> <p>While Armitage's speaker concludes that his relationship with his mother is strong and can <b>withstand</b> the physical distance between them, Day-Lewis' speaker seem <b>insecure</b> in his relationship with his son and regrets not spending enough time with him.</p>	<p><b>Rhyme</b></p> <p>Armitage's poem lacks a discernible rhyme scheme while Day-Lewis' employs an <b>ABACA rhyme scheme</b>. This could highlight the age of Day-Lewis' speaker, showing them to be <b>more mature</b> and thus more organised with their thoughts in comparison to Armitage's speaker who is younger and therefore more unstable and disorganised.</p> <p>Furthermore Day-Lewis poem's rhyming couplets are <b>monosyllabic</b> which places <b>emphasis</b> on certain words making them more noticeable the Armitage's half rhymes. Again, making Day-Lewis' speaker seem more <b>cohesive</b> (organised) in his thoughts.</p> <p><b>Stanzas</b></p> <p>Day Lewis' poem is broken into four stanzas of five lines each whereas Armitage's stanzas are uneven and <b>disjointed</b>. This has the effect that Armitage's uneven rhyme scheme <b>mirrors his uncertain attitude towards his mother and their parting</b>. Whereas Day Lewis' speaker seems more accepting of the relationship he has with his son and isn't making any changes to that relationship</p>	<p><b>Enjambement</b></p> <p>Armitage's poem makes use of enjambement far more compared to Day's Lewis' who uses a range of <b>complex sentences</b> but who includes shorter, simpler ones as well. As a result, Day Lewis' speaker seems less rambling than Armitage's, which could, as <b>mentioned, be attributed to their respective ages</b>.</p>	<p><b>Tone</b></p> <p>Day-Lewis' poem seem more <b>retrospectively melancholic</b>. The poem is thought to be about his son who went to boarding school and the speaker and the poet by extension regrets not spending more time with his son. Armitage's poem is, on the contrary about his mother with whom he is very close and thus is poem has a happier tone with more fondness.</p>