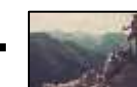




# CLIMBING MY GRANDFATHER KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



**Context** – *Climbing My Grandfather* was written by Andrew Waterhouse and was published in 2000.

**Andrew Waterhouse** – Andrew Waterhouse (1958-2001) was an English poet and musician. Waterhouse was a concerned environmentalist, and had studied a degree in environmental science – this interest in the natural world followed through into his poetry. He also wrote a series of walking guidebooks. He also wrote a series of poems about relationships between family members. In his later life, Waterhouse suffered from depression, and took his own life in 2001 at the age of 42.



**Mountain Climbing** – Mountain climbing is a popular pastime in almost all cultures across the world – starting out as an attempt to reach the highest point (or summit) of a peak, often as part of a personal or community goal. Mountain climbing can often be exceptionally dangerous, as climbers traverse ridges, overhangs, seracs, and other obstacles – many climbers die every year, especially climbing high peaks such as Mount Everest, where the lack of oxygen becomes a factor.



**Grandparents** – Scientists believe that around 30,000 years ago more people began living to become grandparents, causing the preservation of information that would otherwise be lost. Grandparents often take the role of primary caregivers, where parents cannot. Even when not the case, grandparents often have a clear role in raising young, sharing 25% genetic overlap. Many adults often have deep feelings of nostalgia and vivid memories of experiences with their grandparents.



**The Environment** – Waterhouse was a keen environmental enthusiast and campaigner, and he explores ideas of nature across a number of his poems. The modern world contains a number of threats to the natural environment, many of which are at least partially caused by humans – they include climate change, species extinction, air and water pollution, physical shortage of natural resources, and deforestation. Many feel that these problems are now beyond repair.



## Language/Structural Devices

**Extended Metaphor** – A metaphor runs through the entirety of the poem which compares the child climbing the grandfather to a mountaineer tackling a large mountain – such a metaphor may be seen as reflective of a childlike, vivid imagination. The grandfather's clothes and body are compared to physical mountain features, whilst the grandfather's feelings and experiences are reflected in the 'danger' posed by the mountain. The metaphor describes the grandfather as large but kind, in a nostalgic tone.

**Mountaineering Vocabulary** – A wide range of specific vocabulary in the semantic field of mountaineering is used throughout the poem:  
Overhang – A section that is angled beyond vertical.  
Summit – The top/ peak of a mountain. The highest point.  
Ridge – A thin section (often a line) of mountain that falls away on either side, leaving the climber exposed.  
Traverse – To climb in a horizontal direction.  
Altitude – The height above sea-level.

**Quote:** "First, the old brogues, dusty and cracked; an easy scramble onto his trousers,"

**Quote:** "and easy, to his thick hair (soft and white at this altitude), reaching for the summit,"

**Oxymoron** – An oxymoron is used in line 10, comparing the grandfather's fingers to 'warm ice.' Such a contradiction is reflective of the fact that the grandfather's skin may be cold, but that he is a warm, kind person. Despite his large, formidable exterior, the grandfather holds an inner warmth that makes him accessible to/ loved by the child.

**Assonance** – Assonance is used sparingly throughout the poem, but a strong example is used in line 18 through 'screed cheek.' The reading of these words creates a long vowel sound, which echoes the arduous, continuous effort that the child/ mountaineer is having to exert in order to scale the mountain – the sound of the poem echoes the subject matter.

**Quote:** "the skin of his finger is smooth and thick like warm ice. On his arm I discover"

**Quote:** "to a smiling mouth to drink among teeth. Refreshed, I cross the screed cheek"

**Form** – The poem is a single verse of 27 lines – one solid block of poetry, perhaps representing the enormity of the challenge – one continuous piece may represent a mountain waiting to be climbed. There are no rhymes or repetitions, and little in the way of rhythm, creating a gentle and relaxed tone, almost as if the poet's mind is wandering between memories. Enjambment shows movement between stages.

**Structure** – The poem moves through the process of the climb, as the child climbs from his grandfather's feet (base) to his head (summit). Different obstacles are presented throughout, e.g. the 'overhanging shirt' (line 5) and the 'glassy ridge of a scar' (line 11). Mid-climb, it appears that the grandfather may be agitated, but the poem resolves in the final two lines that he is a kind and tolerant man.

**Quote:** "the forehead, the wrinkles well-spaced and easy, to his thick hair (soft and white)"

**Quote:** "feeling his heat, knowing the slow pulse of his good heart."

**Themes** – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Family Love** – The poem explores the relationship between a child and his grandfather – considering ideas such as the grandfather's tolerance, the child's ignorance of the grandfather's life, and the child's honest observations of the physical effects of ageing. It also explores the nostalgia the adult speaker feels about time with his grandfather.



**Nature** – Waterhouse was an environmentalist, and thus the theme of nature is prevalent in *Climbing My Grandfather*. An extended metaphor runs throughout the poem, comparing the speaker's grandfather to the features of a mountain – for example images of 'ice', 'ridge', 'birds' and 'clouds' are given through the poem.



## Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
	1	I decide to do it free, without a rope or net.	<b>Lines 1-4:</b> The poet explores his relationship with his grandfather through the <u>extended metaphor</u> of mountain climbing. The subject is not introduced, providing a 'hook' for the reader. Without 'rope' or 'net' suggests <u>danger</u> . Simple language perhaps reflects the mindset of the child. The <u>lexical field of clothes</u> begins, related to items that an old man may wear (brogues) as the child commences the climb.
	2	First, the old brogues, dusty and cracked;	
	3	an easy scramble onto his trousers,	
	4	pushing into the weave, trying to get a grip.	
	5	By the overhanging shirt I change	<b>Lines 5-8:</b> <u>Mountaineering terminology</u> is applied to the grandfather's body and clothes. The 'overhanging shirt' suggests that the grandfather is a <u>large man</u> , as though his stomach protrudes like an overhanging mountain-ridge. The 'earth-stained hand' and 'splintered' nails make reference to both the mountain climb, but also the grandfather's <u>long and tough life</u> – perhaps working in a practical field.
	6	direction, traverse along his belt	
	7	to an earth-stained hand. The nails	<b>Lines 9-13:</b> The <u>oxymoron</u> 'warm ice' suggests that even though the grandfather's fingers are cold, the speaker can sense his <u>inner warmth</u> . In the grandfather, the portrait of a man is created that is far from simple – the ' <u>glassy ridge of a scar</u> ' suggesting that his life has been eventful/ he has experienced trauma (ridge is another example of a dangerous mountaineering obstacle). 'Move on' implies that the grandchild <u>does not question</u> the reasons for the scarring. The grandfather's 'firm shoulder' also suggests that he is <u>steadfast</u> – a large, strong man. <b>Lines 14-18:</b> The grandfather gives shade, suggesting that he provides <u>safety and security</u> . However, the speaker cannot be 'looking down', for 'climbing has its dangers', giving the impression that his grandfather's <u>patience</u> is being tried by the marauding young boy. Alternatively, this may reflect the <u>sense of loss</u> – as this is an adult looking back on his time with his grandfather. There is the <u>brutally honest</u> physical assessment of the grandfather in the term 'loose skin.' <b>Lines 19-23:</b> The 'mountaineer' is <u>refreshed</u> after his break, and continues the climb. As a child would, the speaker takes in the tiniest details of the grandfather's eyes. There is <u>assonance</u> of 'screed' and 'cheek', with the long vowels suggesting drawn-out effort. Once again, metaphors are used between mountaineering and physical effects of ageing. For example, there is the 'soft and white' hair, which resembles the soft, white snow and clouds at high altitudes on mountains. Another example is the 'wrinkles well-spaced/ and easy (enjambment shows the space) which may resemble the natural steps towards the summit.' <b>Lines 24-27:</b> There is a sense of <u>achievement</u> in these lines. His tiredness at climbing up his grandfather mirrors the far-more extreme <u>oxygen deprivation</u> that climbers of large mountains suffer at summits. The clouds are <u>personified</u> as 'watching', perhaps emphasising how out of place man seems at this height. The birds circling may represent the <u>limitless possibilities</u> of the boy's future. The final two lines resolve that the grandfather is a kind, tolerant man.
	8	are splintered and give good purchase,	
	9	the skin of his finger is smooth and thick	
	10	like warm ice. On his arm I discover	
	11	the glassy ridge of a scar, place my feet	
	12	gently in the old stitches and move on.	
	13	At his still firm shoulder, I rest for a while	
1	14	in the shade, not looking down,	
	15	for climbing has its dangers, then pull	
	16	myself up the loose skin of his neck	
	17	to a smiling mouth to drink among teeth.	
	18	Refreshed, I cross the screed cheek,	
	19	to stare into his brown eyes, watch a pupil	
	20	slowly open and close. Then up over	
	21	the forehead, the wrinkles well-spaced	
	22	and easy, to his thick hair (soft and white	
	23	at this altitude), reaching for the summit,	
	24	where gasping for breath I can only lie	
	25	watching clouds and birds circle,	
	26	feeling his heat, knowing	
	27	the slow pulse of his good heart.	

## Poems for Comparison

Poems for Comparison	Influences on the Poet
<b>Walking Away</b>	<i>Climbing My Grandfather</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Family Love</u>
<b>Sonnet 29: 'I think of thee'</b>	<i>Climbing My Grandfather</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Mental Illness</u>
	"Five miles beyond the village of Longframlington, an hour's drive north from Newcastle, the poet Andrew Waterhouse planted trees. He bought 10 acres of Northumbrian upland in 1998 and later that year planted 40 saplings of oak, sycamore and ash with friends to celebrate his 40th birthday. A passionate environmentalist, he planned to populate the area with species that predated the last ice age." The Guardian – 3 <sup>rd</sup> January, 2002

