



FOLLOWER KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



Context – *Follower* was published in Seamus Heaney's 1966 anthology *Death of a Naturalist*.

Seamus Heaney – Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) was a Northern Irish poet and playwright, who received the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. He is recognised as one of the major poets of the 20th Century. His poems were usually written in a traditional style about passing ways of life. His poetry is accessible, using a simple diction and a range of poetic devices to build imagery. Heaney often used his poetry to reflect upon 'The Troubles', which plagued the country throughout his early adulthood.



Horse Ploughing – Ploughing is the practice of cultivating land for the growing of crops. Early ploughs were often forked sticks or antlers horns, but by Roman times animals were being used to plough using sharpened pieces of wood to turn the soil. Before the invention of modern machinery, ploughing with the aid of animals required a high level of skill, involving a great deal of technical understanding, the training and control of large animals, and a high degree of accuracy.



Ireland – Ireland is an island in the North Atlantic, separated from Great Britain by the North Channel, the Irish Sea, and St. George's Channel. The island is made up of the Republic of Ireland (often shortened to 'Ireland'), which makes up about five-sixths of the island, and Northern Ireland, which is a part of the UK. The rural population of Ireland is 36% of the country's population. Agriculture accounts for 8% of employment.



Death of a Naturalist – *Death of a Naturalist* is a collection of poems published by Seamus Heaney in 1966. The poems include ideas that he shared at The Belfast Group, a well-known poet's workshop in the city. The anthology consists of 34 short poems which are largely concerned with rural life, childhood experiences and family relationships. They were written before Heaney's poems took a more political turn.



Language/Structural Devices

Varied and Interesting Verbs – Heaney's wide use of verbs both aid the creation of imagery and offer a contrast between the father and son. The speaker describes his father at work using verbs such as 'strained', 'sweated', 'narrowed', and 'angled'. These verbs show his physical exertion and also his skill and strength. These are contrasted with the verbs that the speaker uses to describe his own attempts: 'tripping', 'falling', 'yapping', and 'stumbling.' By juxtaposing these two categories of verbs, Heaney enhances their extremity.

Quote: "I was a nuisance, tripping, falling, Yapping always. But today"

Similes/ Metaphors – Heaney uses figurative language to enable the reader to visualise the physical and emotional ideas within the poem. A figurative comparison that runs through several lines of the poems compares his father ploughing to a boat sailing - 'his shoulders globed like a full sail strung' presents the father going about his work with enormous power, speed and grace. Later, his father is seen to cast a large metaphorical 'shadow', meaning that his son feels inadequate and ill-prepared to take on his father's role.

Quote: "My father worked with a horse plough, His shoulders globed like a full sail strung"

Ploughing/ Agricultural Jargon – The speaker uses a wide range of technical terminology in the semantic field of ploughing, for example: 'shafts', 'furrow', 'hobnailed' and 'sod.' Even though the speaker himself feels incompetent, simply having being around his 'expert' father has furnished him with an advanced understanding of ploughing.

Quote: "Between the shafts and the furrow. The horses strained at his clicking tongue."

Repetition – Repetition is used sparingly throughout the poem to enhance and reinforce meanings. For example, the word 'plough' is used in the opening lines of stanzas 1 and 5, demonstrating how preoccupied the father/son are with their work. 'Stumbling' is also repeated in stanzas 4 and 6, in order to highlight how his father now mirrors the speaker as a child.

Quote: "I stumbled in his hobnailed wake" "It is my father who keeps stumbling."

Form – The poem is written in 6 stanzas of 4 lines. This relatively rigid structure may reflect the conscientious process and level of organization that his father demonstrates. Each stanza is made up of four alternately rhyming lines – creating an ABAB rhyme scheme. This can be seen as an attempt to reflect the image of the plough moving back and forth across the field both on the page and in the sound of the poem.

Quote: "My father worked with a horse plough/ His shoulders globed like a full sail strung/ Between the shafts and the furrow./ The horses strained at his clicking tongue."

Narrative Structure – The first half of the poem is concerned with the skill and expertise of the father, describing his power (mostly stanza 1), his technical understanding (stanza 2) and his accuracy (stanza 3). At the halfway point, the focus of the poem shifts towards the child's lack of competency. The final two lines signal a shift in time, explaining how the ageing process has reversed their roles.

Quote: "It is my father who keeps stumbling Behind me, and will not go away."

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 father – through the eyes of the child. The child is filled with admiration for his strong and highly-skilled father. As suggested in the title, the child wants to 'follow' (be just like) his father. The effects of ageing means these roles are reversed in the last few lines.



Nature – Rural Setting – As with much of Heaney's early poetry, Heaney reflects on a rural setting that reflects the environment in which he grew up. With traditional, non-mechanised methods, there is a sense of beauty in the speaker's father grafting skilfully alongside nature in this rural setting.



Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	My father worked with a horse plough, His shoulders globed like a full sail strung Between the shafts and the furrow. The horses strained at his clicking tongue.	Lines 1-4: The poem opens with the <u>personal pronoun</u> 'my' – showing the speaker's pride of his father. The opening line sets the scene – into a <u>pre-mechanised agricultural setting</u> that existed in Ireland way into the twentieth century. Shoulders ' <u>globed</u> ' suggests that his father was a muscular man, and needed to be in this physical line of work – the simile confirms this. Line 3 – with its <u>specific terminology</u> – shows the speaker's deep understanding of this line of work.
	2		
	3		
	4		
2	5	An expert. He would set the wing And fit the bright-pointed sock. The sod rolled over without breaking. At the headrig, with a single pluck.	Lines 5-8: A <u>short, simple sentence</u> is used at the beginning of stanza 2 to show that the statement is an unquestionable fact – the <u>caesura gives emphasis</u> . The use of the modal verb 'would' implies that this is something that his father completes often. The <u>speed and efficiency</u> with which he works is made clear in line 7 – the speaker as a child is wonderstruck by his father's work. The <u>technical terms</u> in the <u>semantic field of ploughing</u> compel the reader to respect the complexity and effectiveness of his work.
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3	9	Of reins, the sweating team turned round And back into the land. His eye Narrowed and angled at the ground, Mapping the furrow exactly.	Lines 9-12: The sentence following on from the last stanza shows that his father's work is relentless and he never ceases. The use of the verb ' <u>sweating</u> ' is clearly intended to apply to the father, as well as the horses, to imply how strenuous the work is. Terms such as 'turned round' and 'back into the land' are used to mirror the idea of the <u>plough turning again and again</u> . The second half of the stanza detail the father's accuracy – <u>verbs</u> such as 'narrowed', 'angled', and 'mapping' shows the high level of precision in his craft.
	10		
	11		
	12		
4	13	I stumbled in his hobnailed wake, Fell sometimes on the polished sod; Sometimes he rode me on his back Dipping and rising to his plod.	Lines 13-16: The father's graceful work is <u>contrasted</u> by the child's clumsy attempts to help – as echoed in verbs such as ' <u>stumbled</u> .' 'Hobnailed' shows there is no romanticising the tough work that his father does. 'Wake' continues the sailing <u>metaphor</u> from stanza 1. Despite the irritation of trying to work with a son in tow, the <u>father is tolerant</u> ; in the last two lines of the stanza, the speaker compares the experience on his father's back to <u>riding horseback</u> – a comparison which further emphasises his father's strength.
	14		
	15		
	16		
5	17	I wanted to grow up and plough, To close one eye, stiffen my arm. All I ever did was follow In his broad shadow around the farm.	Lines 17-20: Stanza 5 captures perfectly the desire of a small boy to be like his father – who he clearly idolises. It also captures <u>childlike impatience</u> – the desperation to 'grow up.' The second line acts to once more summarise the precision (close one eye) and power (stiffen my arm) required to work the plough effectively. <u>Hyperbole</u> is used to exaggerate his own perceived lack of effectiveness through the sentence opener 'All I ever did...' – the boy only chooses to remember his lack of competency in this area – which in turn further glorifies his father's skill. The 'broad shadow' his father casts is both <u>literal and metaphorical</u> – meaning it is difficult for the son to live up to his standards.
	18		
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6	21	I was a nuisance, tripping, falling, Yapping always. But today It is my father who keeps stumbling Behind me, and will not go away.	Lines 21-24: The varied use of verbs that the speaker uses to describe his boyhood self (tripping, falling, stumbling) provide a <u>sharp contrast</u> to the verbs earlier used to describe the gracefulness of his father. The caesura in the middle of line 22 represents a shift in time. This brings about an <u>ageing-influenced role reversal</u> that is <u>tinged with sadness</u> – the reader is provided with an image of his father now annoyingly tagging along, <u>childlike and helpless</u> .
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	23		
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Poems for Comparison

Poem	Comparison	Influences on the Poet
Walking Away	<i>Follower</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Father & Son Relationships</u>	"When I think back, it's sensation, really, rather than intellection that returns to me. A feel for places. I mean, the body stores so much. I can remember holding the handles of a horse plough, for example, with my father's hands over my hands to help me guide it. When the ploughshare would hit a small stone in the furrow, that travelled back up the handles through the grip into your own hand like a little bleep." www.brickmag.com
Letters From Yorkshire	<i>Follower</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Nature and Rural Life</u>	