



# MOTHER, ANY DISTANCE KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



**Context** – *Mother, Any Distance* was written by Simon Armitage and was published in 1993.

**Simon Armitage** – Simon Armitage (born 1963) is an English poet, playwright, and novelist. He is the current Professor of Poetry at the University of Leeds, and also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. His poems are characterised by their ease of accessibility, their realist style, and their cutting critique. Many of Armitage's poems contain a darkly comic element, or touch on every day feelings, emotions, and relationships. He is described as having 'an acute eye for modern life.'



**Realism** – Realism in literature is a part of the realist art movement that began in the mid-twentieth century. Realism attempts to represent familiar things as they are. Authors of realist texts choose to describe everyday or banal activities, as opposed to romanticising or colourfully elaborating ideas. Realistic poems often describe subjects from contemporary, conventional life, often focusing more on the character than on sensational events.



**Armitage's Home/ Family Life** – Armitage was born in the village of Marsden, West Yorkshire. Many of his extended family lived in close proximity to him, meaning that he has vivid memories of his experiences with them. He still lives around the corner from his parents, whom he cites as some of the biggest influences in his poems. He has claimed that his experiences as a young man in West Yorkshire have been a huge influence on the content and the style of his poems.



**Parental Bond** – A parental bond is the bond between a parent and child, often referred to as either the maternal bond (mother/child) or the paternal bond (father/child). Research suggests that both bonds have a biological basis, with changes taking place in the brains and hormones of mothers and fathers before and after the birth of their child. Further studies have shown that children who grow up to be happy and stable often develop strong bonds as infants with their parents.



## Language/Structural Devices

**Metaphors** – The entire poem can be seen as an extended metaphor. On the surface level, the poem is about a young man leaving home and moving into a new apartment, aided by his mother. She helps him to measure the dimensions of the apartment, whilst he explores its extremities. On a deeper, figurative level, however, the poem is about how their relationship is changing and adapting as he nears independence. The tape measure that they are using represents the bond between them, being stretched and 'unreeling' until the point 'where something has to give.' He returns to her, 'reporting metres, centimetres back to base' which reflects him seeking her advice and input on matters before 'leaving' again.

**Enjambment and Juxtaposition** – Armitage uses enjambment throughout the poem to emphasise certain points, and to draw the reader's attention to individual words or ideas. For example in the section that reads: 'to breaking point, where something/ has to give' the reader is left dangling on 'something' before the line eventually breaks. Armitage also uses juxtaposition for effect, for example 'pinch' and 'reach' are placed close together on the page, to give a clear image of his mother tightly clinging onto the bond between them. These words also evoke images of childhood – memories of pinching and reaching for his mother.

**Quote:** "to the loft, to breaking point, where something has to give."

At the end of stanza 2, more specific metaphors are utilised to compare the speaker to a kite (representing freedom) and his mother to an anchor (keeping him grounded, safe, and ensuring that he can't drift to danger). At the end of the poem, the endless sky represents opportunity and independence, which the speaker approaches with trepidation.

**Personal Pronouns** – The poem uses a range of personal pronouns to show the interactions and shifting relationship between mother and child. The poem starts by predominantly using 'you' and 'us', but towards the end of the poem use these are largely replaced by the pronouns 'me' and 'I', showing the shift in their relationship.

**Quote:** "You at the zero-end, me with the spool of tape, recording length, reporting metres, centimetres back to base"

**Quote:** "up the stairs, the line still feeding out, unreeling years between us. Anchor. Kite."

**Form** – The poem is 15 lines long, and follows the rough style and length of a sonnet. The extra line may be because this is about family (not romantic) love. Sonnets are ordinarily love poems. Armitage may have chosen this style of poem to give a representation of his love for his mother. The rhyme scheme is AABBCCCD ECFGHH, with a mix of full and half rhymes.

**Structure** – A first person narrator is used, who addresses the mother in the second person with the personal pronoun 'you.' The opening stanza describes the mother helping the speaker measure the house. The second stanza describes them moving apart from one another. The rhyming couplets at the end of the poem show that they will always be close.

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

**Quote:** "'towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky to fall or fly."

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

**Parental Love** – The poem explores the persisting strength and durability of the paternal love. Literally, the poem depicts the moment in life at which the offspring leaves the family home. On a literal level, the poem explores how the bond between parents and children changes as the child grows into adulthood.




**Motherhood** – In a sensitive and sentimental fashion, the poem also explores the idea of what motherhood entails. Despite the speaker reaching adulthood, the poem makes clear that his mother is still there to 'help him' and to be his 'anchor' for anything beyond a small matter ('any distance bigger than a single span').



## Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	Mother, any distance greater than a single span	The speaker addresses their mother in a <u>second person</u> style. The <u>rhyme and rhythm</u> of the opening stanza gives it an almost nursery rhyme feel, reflecting the speaker's childhood. A ' <u>single span</u> ' is a very small amount of space – reinforcing the idea that their relationship is <u>extremely close</u> ; anything bigger than a small task requires her support. The <u>hyperbole</u> used to describe the 'acres' of the walls and 'prairies' of the floors shows the <u>childishness</u> of the adult speaker in the presence of their mother – <u>everything seems vast</u> to them.
	2	requires a second pair of hands.	
	3	You come to help me measure windows, pelmets, doors,	
	4	the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.	
2	5	You at the zero-end, me with the spool of tape, recording	<u>Literally</u> , the speaker's mother is helping him to measure distances in the house using a tape measure, however <u>figuratively</u> this represents the bond between them. Mother at the 'zero end' reflects her position at the <u>centre of his universe</u> – the place where he began. The <u>metaphor</u> is extended as the speaker ' <u>feeds out/unreels</u> ' further and further from his mother, but always returns 'back to base' to 'report.' Further <u>metaphors</u> are used to end the stanza, as the mother is compared to 'anchor' and he 'kite.' He is flying on his own now, but still has his mother guiding him with care.
	6	length, reporting metres, centimetres back to base, then leaving	
	7	up the stairs, the line still feeding out, unreeling	
	8	years between us. Anchor. Kite.	
3	9	I space-walk through the empty bedrooms, climb	The speaker's <u>increasing distance</u> from his mother (both physically and in terms of their relationship) becomes clear through the use of ' <u>space-walk</u> .' The ending of the first line on the verb 'climb' leaves the reader with the idea that they are separating further still. Eventually, the <u>speaker's explorations</u> of the new house lead him to ' <u>breaking point</u> , where something/as to give.' His mother is now only able to 'pinch/the last one-hundredth of an inch' – he is now <u>almost completely independent</u> from her. The 'endless sky' through the hatch represents the <u>freedom</u> of complete independence – leaving the nest. It is not clear whether he decides to 'fall' back to her or to 'fly' away. However, it is clear that he understands the need to become <u>self-supporting</u> , but with the acute awareness of the safety and support that his mother still offers. It appears that ' <u>any distance</u> ' that he voyages, his mother is still there for him.
	10	the ladder to the loft, to breaking point, where something	
	11	has to give;	
	12	two floors below your fingertips still pinch	
	13	the last one-hundredth of an inch...I reach	
	14	towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky	
	15	to fall or fly.	

## Poems for Comparison

	Poems for Comparison	Words from the Poet
<b>Walking Away</b>	<i>Mother, Any Distance</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Parental Love</u>	<p>"My family are from an amateur dramatics background – they're all about putting on shows and plays and entertaining within the local community. Maybe to a certain extent I was interested in living up to some of those expectations...I'm glad to be a poet." – Interview with Boyd Tonkin – <a href="http://www.theindependent.co.uk">www.theindependent.co.uk</a> – 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012</p> 
<b>Before You Were Mine</b>	<i>Mother, Any Distance</i> can be compared with these poems in relation to the theme of <u>Motherhood</u>	