

Follower



SUMMARY

The speaker's father used a traditional walking plow, drawn by two horses, to cultivate their family farm. He rounded his shoulders as he guided the plow, in such a way that his body looked like a sail fastened at one end to the beams that brace the plow's handles and at the other end to the trench that he was cutting into the earth. The horses worked hard to keep up with his voice commands.

The speaker's father had mastered this practice. He would adjust the "winged" portion of the main share, or cutting edge, so that it ran parallel to the ground, ensuring that the soil would be level as the blade turned it, and position the plow's shiny steel point so that it cut precise furrows into the ground. The soil was upended in a smooth, circular motion, leaving behind an unbroken segment of turned over land, rather than uneven, broken up clumps of earth.

At the strip of unplowed land at either end of the field, the speaker's father was able to turn the horses, who were sweating from the strenuous work, around to begin a new furrow by simply giving their reins one brief tug. He closed one eye and used the other to trace the land in front of him, charting its precise measurements so that he might adjust his plow accordingly.

The speaker moved clumsily in his father's trail, which was studded with imprints from the heavy-duty nails that reinforced his father's work boots. From time to time the speaker would fall, disturbing the perfectly cultivated soil that his father had just plowed. Sometimes the speaker's father would pick him up and place him on his back so that he could feel the rising and falling cadence of his father's movements.

When the speaker was a boy, he, too, wanted to be a farmer when he grew up and envisioned himself closing one eye and holding his arm out firmly to guide the plow, as his father had done. However, the speaker only trailed behind his father as he farmed, never taking up the practice himself.

The speaker was bothersome as a boy. He would talk incessantly and was always losing his footing and falling onto the soil. But now that both men have aged, it is the speaker's father who is constantly and clumsily trailing *him*, and will not leave his shadow.



THEMES



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

"Follower" tracks the way that the relationship between parents and their children changes over time. The speaker begins the poem with deep admiration and respect for his father, contrasting his father's exceptional farming skills with his own stumbling ineptitude as he follows behind. But by the poem's end, there's been a major role reversal: the final lines reveal that the speaker's father, having grown weak with age, eventually trails behind the speaker. In this way, "Follower" establishes a father-son dynamic of custodian and dependent (respectively) only to flip those roles on their heads. In doing so, the poem suggests that there is an inevitable transfer of leadership and responsibility from one generation to the next.

When describing his childhood, the speaker juxtaposes his father's agricultural mastery with his own incompetence. This sets up a family dynamic in which the speaker's father is a dominant, guiding force for his son. The speaker foregrounds his father's physical strength throughout much of the poem, using words like "strain" and "sweating" to convey that ploughing is strenuous, back-breaking work. The speaker's father is also technically skilled— "an expert" who "exactly" surveys land and adjusts his rig to create precise furrows. The speaker, on the other hand, is a clumsy and disruptive child. He falls, disturbing the pristine soil that his father has freshly ploughed, and describes himself as "a nuisance, tripping, falling, / Yapping always."

By highlighting his inability to replicate his father's methods and suggesting that his father works effortlessly, the speaker creates an atmosphere of childlike awe. This, in turn, reinforces their father-son, leader-follower dynamic. Furthermore, the speaker closely follows his father's motions, first through observation and then by walking in his "wake" or trail. The speaker's father periodically lifts him up to place him "on his back" so that the speaker can feel the cadence of his father's steps, "dipping and rising to his plod." In these ways, the speaker's father literally determines his son's movements, reaffirming his authority over the speaker.

At the poem's conclusion, however, the reader learns that the speaker's father has lost his dominance and now follows his son, who assumes the leadership role. In the poem's final stanza, the speaker reveals that eventually "it is [his] father who keeps stumbling / behind [him]." As the speaker's father weakens with age, he becomes reliant on his son, in a reversal of caretaker roles. The speaker even says that he cannot "get

rid" of his father, who "keeps stumbling"—indicating a permanent shift in leadership, especially—as this is the image that lingers at the poem's conclusion. The awe and respect that the speaker earlier possessed seem to have been replaced by vague annoyance, or perhaps simply sadness at the fact that the speaker's father is no longer the man he once was.

Furthermore, the recycles the word "stumble"—first used earlier in the poem by the speaker to describe himself as an inept child—to describe his father's movements. The speaker's path, down which his father follows him, diverges from the farming tradition, and his father clearly struggles to keep up. In this way, as his father's role diminishes, the speaker's own disposition naturally begins to define their familial identity. As a whole, then, their story exemplifies the inevitable transfer of familial stewardship from one generation to the next.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



THE VIRTUE AND NOBILITY OF FARMING

Like many young men born in mid-20th-century Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney grew up on a farm and was expected to carry on the farming traditions of his father but failed to do so. He shares these traits with the poem's speaker, who celebrates such traditions and immortalizes them in verse. Thus, although the speaker does not *practice* traditional farming methods, he showcases their beauty and deems them worthy of preservation.

As the speaker details his father's plowing method, he dignifies and idealizes agricultural work. The speaker uses nautical imagery to describe his father, beginning in line 2, where the speaker describes his father's shoulders as "globed like a full sail." The combination of "globed" and "shoulders" recalls Atlas, the iconic, muscular Greek god tasked with carrying the world on his back. This image puts the speaker's father on the same plane as a deity, ennobling him and *his* task. Other maritime language such as "breaking" and "dipping and rising" call to mind the waves of the ocean, likening the speaker's father to a formidable ship who effortlessly glides through the water, leaving perfectly tilled soil in his "wake."

The speaker's perspective as a captivated young boy creates an atmosphere of blind admiration, further uplifting his father. The speaker is clumsy and watches mesmerized as his father works with precision—his soil "polished" and his movements "exact"—becoming a superhuman ideal that the speaker can aspire to. Indeed, the speaker dreams of being like his father, expressing a desire to "grow up and plough." The speaker does not illustrate his veneration through one specific anecdote or moment in time from his childhood. Instead, he assembles a patchwork of fragmented memories, cherry-picking his father's

finest shows of strength to establish that his mastery is enduring—practiced at many different points in time. The use of words like "would" and "sometimes" also suggest that the actions described are repeated frequently. In this way, the speaker signals that their familial farming traditions are deep-rooted and long-held, further legitimizing and dignifying this type of labor.

By recounting the story of a son who *fails* to sustain patrilineal farming traditions, "Follower" suggests that such traditions are at risk of being lost. At the same time, the poem immortalizes them in verse, implicitly arguing that they *shouldn't* be forgotten. Over time, the speaker's father grows weak and is no longer able to plough—and therefore no longer able to sustain the tradition on his own. It becomes clear that the tradition's preservation hinges on the speaker taking it up. And when he fails to do so, proclaiming that "all [he] ever did was follow," the endangerment of this agricultural way of life becomes even more pronounced.

The sense of endangerment, though, is part of what spurs the speaker to reflect on and capture these agricultural traditions in verse. The speaker uses a barrage of specialized terms throughout the poem—"shafts," "furrow," "steel-pointed sock," and "headrig," to name a few. These terms are obscure to anyone who isn't well-educated in the plowing process. Therefore, the poem requires readers to familiarize themselves with the tradition, ensuring that a certain level of understanding will survive over time in readers' minds.

Finally, the act of plowing dominates the poem's events and images. It serves as the sole lens through which the reader can understand the characters or make inferences about their mindsets and wider life experiences. Thus, the poem manifests a reality for many Irish families throughout history—farming isn't simply a practical procedure but also an *identity* and a way of life. "Follower" immortalizes this perspective in poetry, insisting that farming is a valid, useful framework for understanding and exploring the world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*My father worked ...
... and the furrow.*

The speaker opens "Follower" with a plain and direct statement that communicates his father's profession, which he will go on to detail in the coming lines. He specifies that his father uses a "horse-plough," an old-school horse-drawn farming tool that cuts long, narrow furrows, or trenches, into the earth, turning

the soil over in preparation for planting and growing crops.

This poem, like the others that comprise Heaney's first major collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, is understood to be predominantly autobiographical. Heaney grew up in mid-20th-Century Northern Ireland, when motorized tractors were beginning to overtake traditional farming equipment, posing a threat to the farming traditions that so many families had passed on from generation to generation over hundreds of years. By naming the outmoded "horse-plough," the speaker draws attention to the traditional nature of his father's farming practice.

Next, the speaker provides an image of his father working. He stands, holding onto the plow and rounding his shoulders so that he resembles a sail, fastened to the plow's handles on one end and the ground he is tilling on the other. This is the poem's only [simile](#); the speaker largely avoids [figurative language](#), opting for straightforward statements and descriptions. However, this image gives the reader a clearer picture of his father's stature by comparing it to a familiar image, while also dignifying his father by suggesting that he is strong and capable, like a formidable ship.

The simile also recalls the Greek god Atlas, who carries the heavens—often represented by a sphere—on his hunched shoulders, implicitly likening the speaker's father to a god. The [assonant](#) repetition of the long /oh/ sound in "shoulders globed" playfully draws out this reference by reproducing the image that this phrase describes on the page. Similarly, due to the [enjambment](#) at the end of line 2, the word "strung" actually strings one line to the next:

His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
Between ...

While the poem will eventually settle into a loose [iambic tetrameter](#) (eight syllables per line in an unstressed stressed pattern), the first lines are [metrically](#) irregular. Each line begins with two iambs and ends with two [feet](#) of varying stress patterns. In line 3, for example, the iambs are followed by a [pyrrhic](#) (unstressed unstressed) and a [trochee](#) (stressed unstressed):

Between | the shafts | and the | furrow.

Although the tetrameter has not yet coalesced into a regular pattern, several other factors are at work to establish regularity and rhythm. Perhaps most importantly, these lines lay out a sentence structure that will repeat throughout the poem, providing structure and consistency. The [parallelism](#) is created by strings of sentences and clauses that each begin with a noun—usually the speaker or his father—followed by an active past-tense verb. This simple, no-frills sentence structure makes the speaker's statements easy to follow, and in turn, he

comes across as direct and authoritative.

The [asyndeton](#) in the first two lines ("... worked with a horse-plough, / His shoulders globed ...") also links two such clauses with a comma to form one sentence, allowing momentum to build without interruption from a conjunction or period. The [end-stops](#) that appear in two of the first three lines will be reproduced throughout much of the poem as well, helping to build a sense of rhythmic regularity.

Finally, the [sibilance](#) created by /s/ and /sh/ sounds and [consonance](#) created by /l/ sounds create a soft, calm tone at the poem's outset that facilitates a smooth flow from one line into the next, while harder /t/ sounds add some pops of rhythm and structure. Here is a closer look at this mix of soft and hard sounds:

His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.

Therefore, although the first lines are metrically irregular, they still feel carefully constructed and poetic—crafted with tenderness and respect.

LINES 4-7

*The horses strained ...
... over without breaking.*

Throughout the next four lines, the speaker details his father's plowing process, both providing evidence of his expertise and stating the expertise outright as fact.

First, he describes his father using simple voice commands to drive the horses, who have to work hard to comply. The commands are represented by the "clicking" sound he makes with his tongue, and they are brought to life in the text thanks to [onomatopoeia](#). The repetition of hard /k/ followed by short /i/ sounds mimics the "clicks" themselves, recreating their effect. [Assonance](#) with "his" places additional emphasis on those short /i/ sounds ("his clicking"), subtly enhancing the onomatopoeia and helping to bring the poem's setting to vivid life for the reader.

The "strain" the horses feel as they comply with his instructions demonstrates that plowing is difficult, backbreaking work without stating it explicitly. The speaker is direct and unwavering in the next line, though, when he refers to his father as "an expert."

This is a fragment, the poem's only incomplete sentence. The unique brevity and simplicity of this phrase gives the proclamation an air of sincerity, further bolstered by the poem's first [caesura](#): there's a period in the middle of the line, adding a sense of assuredness to the speaker's summation of his father's character. The speaker comes across as direct and forthcoming, legitimizing his claim about his father.

While this caesura creates a rhythmic irregularity to focus

attention on the fragment, the poem's overall flow remains intact for several reasons. First, the [meter](#) in this line and the two that follow is perfect [iambic tetrameter](#) (while the meter in line 4 is almost perfect, save an additional unstressed syllable). Here is a look at line 5:

An ex- | pert. He | would set | the wing

The metrical regularity results in a bouncy feel that allows the poem's overarching iambic rhythm to gain steam for the first time (due to the somewhat erratic meter of the first three lines). Additionally, the /s/ and /t/ sounds that are prominent in the previous section carry over, creating continuity between the two stanzas ("horses," "strained," "expert," "set," "bright steel-pointed sock," and "sod"). These factors ensure that the full stop caesura does not interrupt the poem's flow, maintaining the rhythm and allowing it to build.

After declaring his father's expertise, the speaker provides images of his father putting his skill into action. He makes precise adjustments to the plow, placing the steel blade that cuts into the earth ("sock") precisely where the next furrow should be, and steadying that blade on its flat edge ("wing") to keep the plow balanced so that the sections of cut soil are turned over in a level manner. He is successful in doing so, as the earth holds together in one piece—evidence of evenly turned soil. The speaker uses the phrase "without breaking" to describe "the sod," calling to mind the waves of the ocean (which break against shorelines, vessels, etc.) and extending the implied comparison between the speaker's father and a ship.

Here, the father appears to move smoothly and effortlessly throughout the "waters" of the field, careful not to disturb them. The repetition of long vowel sounds (i.e., [assonance](#)) in "sock," "sod" and "rolled over" cause one word to softly "roll" into the next—aided by the [consonance](#) of /s/ in the first pair and that of /r/ in the second—sonically mirroring the process that these lines describe and the smooth, methodical manner in which it is performed.

LINES 8-12

*At the headrig, ...
... the furrow exactly.*

The next two sentences, which comprise lines 8-12, describe how the plow is turned around to create a new furrow. This takes place at headrigs, or the patches of unplowed land at the top and bottom of a plot (that is, above and below parallel columns formed by furrows). Having cut a complete furrow, the speaker's father stops at the headrig and tugs on the horses' reins to turn the "team"—the horses and the plow—around to start another.

The speaker specifies that his father is able to maneuver the team with one swift motion, "a single pluck / Of reins." To pluck something is to grab hold of it and quickly pull it out of its

starting position, creating a short but impactful noise, similar to actually sounding out the word "pluck." This is thus another moment of [onomatopoeia](#), which feels all the more striking due to the [assonance](#) of short /i/ sounds in "headrig with a single" that creates a short, choppy rhythm right before "pluck." Furthermore, because line 8 is [enjambéd](#) across an entire stanza break ("single pluck // Of reins"), "pluck" appears to linger out in space, playing on the idea of it being a "single," isolated tug.

Next, the speaker's father squints at the ground, scanning the completed furrow and making precise calculations so that he can adjust the plow into the ideal position for cutting a new furrow. The speaker uses terms associated with geometry ("narrowed," "angled") and mapmaking ("mapping") to describe this process, suggesting that his father is as precise as a mathematician or cartographer and putting his agricultural profession on the same plane as those more academic ones. These references evoke navigation and exploration, again sustaining the comparison between the speaker's father and a ship that appears in the previous two stanzas.

These lines contain the highest concentration of enjambment and [caesura](#) of any section of the poem. These devices work together to create a sort of stopping and turning effect, wherein the reader's gaze turns from the end of one line into the beginning of the next, due to enjambment, and then stops in the middle of lines due to caesura. This pattern occurs three times in lines 8-11, imitating the plow that they describe stopping and turning around to create a new furrow:

At the headrig, with a single pluck
Of reins, the sweating team turned round
And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed ...

Lines 8-10 ("At the headrig ... His eye") are [metrically](#) perfect, save for the addition of one unstressed syllable at the beginning of line 8. The strong, bouncy rhythm helps to carry the reader through these many stops and starts. While lines 11-12 ("Narrowed ... exactly.") are not written in perfect [iambic tetrameter](#), the [end-stops](#) and conspicuously absent caesura signal a return to more regular punctuation, steadying the reader.

LINES 13-16

*I stumbled in ...
... to his plod.*

Throughout the first half of "Follower," the speaker zooms in on his father's movements, growing progressively closer as his descriptions become more detailed. In the poem's second half, the speaker is finally pictured *interacting* with his father and the fields his father plows. In this way, stanza 4 represents a significant shift in the poem's focus, in which the speaker's

experiences are foregrounded and purely observational accounts of his father plowing subside. At the same time, the speaker's earlier descriptions of his father serve as a natural point of comparison for the speaker's own actions.

Stanza 3 contains a vast, unique mixture of many different consonant sounds; stanza 4 is noticeably softer, marking the re-emergence of [sibilance](#), accompanied by [consonant](#) /l/, /b/, and /h/ sounds, as well as [assonant](#) /ah/ sounds:

I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;

The gentle combination of these sounds works with the return of frequent [end-stops](#) to distinguish these lines from the sonic and rhythmic chaos of the previous stanza.

In lines 10-12, the speaker describes his father making precise calculations based on sight alone so that he can adjust his plow and better cultivate the land. Immediately afterward, he describes himself stumbling and falling onto perfect, freshly-tilled land. By placing these two contrasting images one right after the other, the speaker [juxtaposes](#) them, underscoring the differences between himself and his father.

The repetition of individual words also helps to distinguish the two men. For example, the speaker "sometimes" falls, disturbing the well-cultivated land, and his father "sometimes" carries the speaker as he works. The speaker comes across as uncoordinated and even counterproductive for messing up the perfect "polish" of the soil, while his father plows so effortlessly that he volunteers to carry the extra weight of his son (conveniently getting him out of the way). The juxtaposition of what each character "sometimes" does exaggerates the speaker's agricultural ineptitude and his father's agricultural prowess. Line 14 also recycles the term "sod," which first appears in line 7, where it is described "[rolling] over without breaking." This draws additional contrast between his father's skillful cultivation of the earth and the speaker's disruption of it.

Lines 13-14 are written in perfect [iambic tetrameter](#), whereas lines 15-16, which describe the speaker riding on his father's back, begin with a [trochee](#) in place of the usual iamb:

Sometimes | he rode | me on | his back
Dipping | and ris- | ing to | his plod.

The irregular [meter](#) is further exaggerated by the repetition of "sometimes." Furthermore, "on" in line 14 and "plod" in line 15 receive additional emphasis due to the assonant /aw/ sound that pervades the stanza ("hobnailed," "polished," etc.). The [enjambment](#) from line 15 into line 16 ("... back / Dipping ...") also contributes to the irregular rhythm of these lines, as it gives the effect of two stressed syllables ("back" and "dip") followed by two unstressed syllables ("and" and "ris-"). Repeating long and

short /i/ sounds, which add emphasis to both stressed and unstressed syllables, confuse the rhythm to an even greater extent:

Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod.

All of the above rhythmic irregularities give these lines a subtle turbulence, mimicking the dips and rises the speaker feels as he rides on his father's back.

LINES 17-22

*I wanted to ...
... Yapping always.*

The speaker begins stanza 4 by declaring that he had a childhood dream of becoming a farmer. He describes an idealized version of his adult self, squinting at the ground and holding out his arm, as he had seen his father do so many times. Earlier in the poem, the speaker uses the terms "plough" and "eye" when detailing his father's masterful plowing process. He reuses those terms when describing his own aspirations, indicating that what he *really* wants is to be like his father.

Immediately thereafter, the speaker describes his reality—endlessly stumbling behind his father around the farm, eclipsed by his father's shadow and never plowing on his own. By placing these two images side by side, the speaker [juxtaposes](#) his dream and reality, stressing the differences between the two. [Parallelism](#) aids this differentiation by drawing a natural comparison between what the speaker "wanted" and "all [he] ever did."

With the exception of line 19, this section of the poem maintains a very strong [iambic](#) rhythm. Although lines 21-22 are not written in perfect iambic [tetrameter](#), the additional unstressed syllable at the end of line 21 is followed by a [trochee](#), so it reads as if an iamb stretches over the line break, leaving the bouncy rhythm undisrupted:

I was | a nui- | sance, trip- | ping, falling,
Yapping | always ...

Furthermore, the [parallel](#) -ing verb endings and [consonant](#) /p/ and /l/ sounds appear at both the end of line 21 and the beginning of line 22, supporting continuity between them. In line 19, however, each foot is inverted, so that trochees replace each iamb, creating the effect of a metrically "backwards" line:

All I | ever | did was | follow

While the speaker plays up his youthful clumsiness in the previous stanza, hinting that he doesn't have an inborn knack for farming, this statement is his most direct indication that he never became a farmer. It is a particularly striking revelation,

given that it directly follows and shatters his childhood dream. Because this line is metrically opposite from those that surround it, its deviation can be interpreted as a reflection of the speaker's inability to replicate his father's movements.

The word "follow" appears in line 19, and each of its sounds—/f/, /aw/, /l/, and /oh/—occur elsewhere nearby. For example, he occupies his father's "broad shadow," he was "always" "falling," and following is "all [he] ever did." The long /i/ also comes up many times throughout this section of the poem. The word "I" itself appears at the beginning of three sentences in a row, and its presence is strengthened by nearby "my" and "eye." Thus, the sounds of "following" and of the speaker, represented by "I," dominate these lines, linking the speaker to the act of following and suggesting that he is the "Follower" of the poem's title.

Line 22 contains the poem's final example of [onomatopoeia](#), "yapping." This term usually describes the sharp, piercing barks of a dog. When applied to someone's speech, it indicates that they are talking in a shrill tone of voice and implies that they are bothersome, rambling on and on. The word "yap" is made sharper by the [metrical](#) stress that it receives and its appearance at the beginning of a line. Furthermore, the string of "-ing" words, or present participles, that stretches from line 21 into line 22 evokes rambling speech.

LINES 22-24

*But today ...
... not go away.*

The poem's final sentence marks a leap forward in time and, with it, a substantial change in the speaker's relationship with his father. Now that both men have grown older, the speaker's father constantly trails behind *him*. Whereas the first 21.5 lines lay out a leader-follower dynamic between father and son in great detail, that dynamic is suddenly upended in the poem's final lines. The contrast between the reader's earlier perception of their relationship and the true state of their relationship is a form of [situational irony](#). Plus, the speaker describes himself clumsily following his father directly before bringing this role reversal to light, creating a [juxtaposition](#) between past and present.

The structure of this final sentence also marks a divergence from what comes before it. The simple noun-verb structure used in the previous 5 sentences, a device known as [parallelism](#), is abandoned. Furthermore, the [caesura](#) in line 22 ("Yapping always. But today") draws attention to the phrase "but today," which abruptly brings the reader into the present. With only 7 syllables, this is also the poem's shortest line, placing additional emphasis on the phrase.

The repetition of keywords helps to draw out changes in the father-son dynamic. The speaker first uses "father" in line 1, describing him working in the fields with childlike awe. He initially appears stately and resilient, "like a full sail." "Father"

doesn't appear again until line 23. Here, he is shown hobbling behind the speaker, who says he "will not go away," indicating that he is slightly uneasy about his father's presence, if not annoyed by it. Therefore, whereas the word "father" was once associated with strength and virtue, it now refers to an unsteady old man.

The use of "stumbling," also in line 23, has a similar effect. Stanza 4 opens with "I stumbled in his hobnailed wake"—the speaker's inaugural first-person sentence, which presents him as an uncoordinated young boy who teeters behind his strong, graceful father. That same verb is later applied to his father, who now "keeps stumbling / Behind" the speaker. Their positions are swapped, representing a reversal of their roles in each other's lives, as the speaker's father has grown weaker with age and becomes subordinate to his son, who naturally assumes the leadership position.

The poem's final sentence is a continuous, self-contained unit, reflecting its separation from the rest of the poem in both time and the family dynamic it describes. It is bound on one side by the caesura in line 22, and on the other by line 24's [end-stop](#). [Enjambment](#) in both lines 23 and 24 cause the final lines to spill into one another, creating a relatively uninterrupted flow. The [consonance](#) of /t/ sounds further blends line 22 into line 23 ("But today / it is ... stumbling"), while the /m/ and /b/ sounds in "stumbling / Behind me" and the [assonant](#) long /e/ in "keeps ... Behind me" do the same for lines 23-24. This sense of continuity helps to keep this sentence, and the period of time and conditions it describes, as a singular unit, set apart from the rest of the poem.

Finally, the [meter](#) in the last two lines is almost perfect [iambic tetrameter](#), but an additional unstressed syllable appears in both lines:

It is | my fa- | ther who | keeps stumbling
Behind | me, and will | not go | away.

The additional syllables cause the last two lines to trail on slightly longer than expected, like the speaker's father, who follows his son indefinitely.



SYMBOLS



SHIPS AND NAVIGATION

While "Follower" is not a highly [symbolic](#) poem, the speaker does repeatedly compare his father to a ship. This, in turn, is meant to glorify his father's agricultural labor. This symbol first appears in line 2, where the speaker says that when his father works, his shoulders round so that he resembles "a full sail," his hands tethered to the handles of his plow and his feet tethered to the earth he tills. Fittingly, the

speaker goes on to use language that likens the field to the ocean, emphasizing its vastness and drawing out the comparison between his father and a ship over many lines.

First, the speaker says that the earth "rolled over without breaking," recalling an image of soft waves that ripple through the ocean, rather than thrashing against coastline. Then the speaker refers to his trail of plowed land as "his hobnailed wake" and describes his father's gait as "dipping and rising." This language aggrandizes the speaker's father by presenting him as a stoic, magnificent ship that weathers the ocean's waves with ease. He is even able to be ridden, as described in line 15.

Furthermore, the speaker's father takes the place of a mapmaker in lines 10-12, when he appears "mapping the furrow exactly." The terms "narrow" and "angle" evoke the triangulation method, or measuring angles from known, fixed points to determine the location of a third, unknown point. Images of devices such as protractors and sextants might also come to the reader's mind, all of which suggest that his father intuitively makes precise calculations as he plows, and therefore has not only the strength and stoicism of a ship, but also the intellect and skill to navigate one.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "His shoulders globed like a full sail strung / Between the shafts and the furrow."
- **Line 7:** "The sod rolled over without breaking."
- **Lines 10-12:** "His eye / Narrowed and angled at the ground, / Mapping the furrow exactly."
- **Line 13:** "his hobnailed wake"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Sometimes he rode me on his back / Dipping and rising to his plod."



POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

"Follower" contains a great deal of [assonance](#). In general, the vowel sounds that echo throughout the poem add texture and feeling to the atmosphere, while also drawing attention to important words and the ideas they represent.

For example, in line 2, the long /oh/ sound in "shoulders globed" visually mimics a circle, via the "o" that appears on the page and the shape the reader's mouth takes when sounding it out. This literal roundness plays off of the image it describes—the hunched shoulders of the speaker's father that resemble a globe—making the image stick in the reader's memory. Throughout the poem, the speaker continues to use maritime and navigational language to dignify his father. Thus, the assonance in line 2 helps the speaker establish a positive perception right off the bat and lay the groundwork for the imagery to come.

In lines 15-16, which contain a concentrated group of short /i/ sounds, the speaker feels the ripples of his father's movements, riding on his back while he works:

Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod.

The short, snappy /i/ sounds come and go in quick succession and occur in both stressed and unstressed syllables. The meter here is already slightly irregular, as both lines begin with a [trochee](#) (DUM-da) rather than an [iamb](#) (da-DUM). The addition of assonance creates an increasingly turbulent and unpredictable rhythm and mood, resembling the dips and rises that the speaker feels as the cadence of his father's tread ripples up to him.

Lastly, the poem's final lines contain three long /e/ sounds:

It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me ...

Here, the assonance of long sounds slows the reader down, increasing their awareness of the poem's final events, which represent an abrupt break from the established setting and dynamic—the speaker's father, who is otherwise described as strong and skillful, has aged and now staggers behind his son. The additional emphasis on "keeps stumbling / Behind me" drives that reality home suddenly and adamantly, before leaving the reader with one final note—this is the indefinite state of their relationship—making for a memorable ending.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "ou," "o"
- **Line 4:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "o"
- **Line 7:** "o," "o"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 14:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 15:** "i"
- **Line 16:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 18:** "eye," "y"
- **Line 19:** "A," "i," "o"
- **Line 20:** "oa"
- **Line 23:** "ee"
- **Line 24:** "e," "e"

ASYNDETON

The poem's use of [asyndeton](#) allows it to flow smoothly and naturally, uninterrupted by conjunctions. The poem's first line, for example, could have ended with a period rather than a comma, but that would have cut the line off from the rest of the sentence, indicating a longer pause and interrupting the rhythm's momentum rather than letting it build. Furthermore, if

line 2 began with a conjunction, it would not build the [parallel](#) sentence structure that characterizes the rest of the poem.

Later in the poem, asyndeton also allows the speaker to omit words that would have to be repeated if the clauses were separate sentences. Take lines 13-14, which would have read, "I stumbled in his hobnailed wake. / I fell sometimes on the polished sod." This interrupts the poem's rhythm, as would a conjunction: "I stumbled in his hobnailed wake / And fell sometimes on the polished sod." So the speaker opts, instead, to connect the two phrases using asyndeton, which maintains the poem's flow. The device has essentially the same function in lines 17-18 ("I wanted ... my arm.") and 21-22 ("I was a nuisance, tripping, falling, / Yapping ..."). In each case, two commas replace conjunctions, allowing momentum to accumulate and drive the poem forward.

Furthermore, the lack of conjunctions imitates natural speech. While it might seem unconventional for sentences to be *written* this way, people commonly string related phrases together—without words like "but" and "and"—in everyday conversation.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "My father worked with a horse-plough, / His shoulders globed"
- **Lines 13-14:** "I stumbled in his hobnailed wake, / Fell sometimes"
- **Lines 17-18:** "I wanted to grow up and plough, / To close one eye, stiffen my arm."
- **Lines 21-22:** "tripping, falling, / Yapping"

CAESURA

[Caesura](#) is essential to steering the rhythm throughout "Follower." The first caesura appears in line 5—which contains the only poem's fragment, or incomplete sentence, as it includes a noun phrase ("an expert") but no verb:

An expert. He would set the wing

This stands in contrast to the surrounding sentences, which all begin with a noun immediately followed by an active, past tense verb form ("My father would His shoulders globed ... The horses strained ..."). Therefore, the caesura draws considerable attention to the fragment, whose brevity and self-containment comes across as very authoritative; the speaker's father is an expert, full stop—a plainly stated fact that requires no qualifying phrases that might provide evidence or discuss the magnitude of his expertise, etc., making it hard to argue with.

Caesura also plays a crucial role in lines 8-12, which describe the speaker's father manipulating his plow so that it turns around and creates a precise new furrow. The parallelism that the first several lines establish is broken in line 8, where a

sentence begins with a prepositional phrase ("At the headrig"). The new rhythm doesn't have much opportunity to gain momentum, though, because it is met with a caesura halfway through the line:

At the headrig,

Then, it begins to pick up speed as [enjambment](#) causes the next phrase to leap over the line and stanza breaks, only to crash into line 9, where it is met with another caesura:

At the headrig, with a single pluck
Of reins,

The pattern of caesura followed by enjambment repeats as such until the end of line 11. The punctuation creates a turning and stopping rhythmic effect that is unique to this section of the poem, which in turn mimics the actions of the plow that it describes.

In lines 18 ("To close one eye, stiffen my arm.") and 21 ("I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,"), caesura reappears to enable [asyndeton](#), with commas replacing conjunctions to maintain the steady, natural flow that the poem again assumes. The final example of caesura, however, creates an important barrier between the past and the present:

Yapping always. But today

Furthermore, the period draws attention to the phrase "but today" and allows the poem's final image and the idea it represents to stand alone from the rest of the poem. Most importantly, in doing all of the above, the caesura marks a turning point from a time when the speaker followed his father, to a time in which the speaker's father follows him.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "expert. He"
- **Line 8:** "headrig, with"
- **Line 9:** "reins, the"
- **Line 10:** "land. His"
- **Line 18:** "eye, stiffen"
- **Line 21:** "nuisance, tripping, falling"
- **Line 22:** "always. But"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) permeates the poem and therefore serves a multitude of functions. Taken as a whole, it creates a pleasant lyricism and allows one image to flow into the next by linking them with similar sounds. It also produces sonic interest that draws attention to important events and ideas, while sometimes deepening their meaning by reproducing some of

their qualities with recurring sounds.

The poem opens with a long string of /s/ sounds, or [sibilance](#), beginning in line 1 and continuing through line 9. Similar sounds are formed by various letter combinations, like in "expert," coalescing to create a soft effect that almost sounds like whispering. Other gentle sounds, such as /w/, /f/, /l/, and /sh/, help establish a calm lyricism that almost lulls the speaker into their rhythm. Here is a closer look at stanza 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.

There are also many /t/ sounds at the poem's outset, which provide balance and form to help establish a strong rhythm.

There is a proliferation of new sounds around stanza 3, which has a unique rhythm that starts and stops often, mirroring the turning plow that these lines describe (we discuss this more in the device entry for [caesura](#)). In short, a lack of end punctuation guides the reader from the end of one line immediately to the beginning of the next, where the reader is met with a comma or period, causing a pause. Consonance creates chains of sounds that contribute to this effect as they spill from one line into the next.

The effect begins in line 8, with /s/ and /r/ sounds...

At the headrig, with a single pluck

...which run into line 9, where /t/, /n/, and /d/ sounds also appear...

Of reins, the sweating team turned round

...and continue into lines 10 and 11:

And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,

Furthermore, /r/ sounds appear often in three of the stanza's four lines. This creates strings of sound that trail off and give way to one another.

When the rhythm becomes more regular in the next stanza, the earlier softness created by sibilance and /l/ sounds returns, boosted by the /h/ sounds in its first line and humming /m/, /b/, and /d/ sounds throughout the stanza:

I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;

More straightforward examples of consonance appear in the poem's powerful final sentence. The /t/ sounds work with

[enjambment](#) to guide the reader from line 22 into line 23, where /m/ and /b/ sounds have a similar effect that carries into line 24:

... But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me,

This gives the three lines and the sentence that spans them a sense of continuity, allowing it to stand as one unit, apart from the rest of the poem. It also creates interesting sonic effects that draw further attention to this line, which describes a new time period (i.e. the present) and, with it, a dramatic reversal of the well-established father-son family dynamic.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "f," "w," "w," "s," "l"
- **Line 2:** "sh," "l," "s," "l," "l," "f," "ll," "s," "l," "s," "t"
- **Line 3:** "t," "sh," "f," "t," "s," "f"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 5:** "x," "t," "w," "s," "t," "w"
- **Line 6:** "t," "t," "s," "t," "t," "s," "ck"
- **Line 7:** "s," "r," "r," "t," "r," "k"
- **Line 8:** "r," "g," "s," "l," "l," "ck"
- **Line 9:** "r," "s," "t," "t," "t," "r," "n," "d," "r," "n," "d"
- **Line 10:** "nd," "n," "t," "n," "d"
- **Line 11:** "N," "rr," "d," "n," "d," "g," "d," "g," "r," "n," "d"
- **Line 12:** "rr"
- **Line 13:** "s," "mb," "l," "d," "h," "s," "h," "b," "l," "d"
- **Line 14:** "ll," "s," "m," "m," "s," "p," "l," "d," "s," "d"
- **Line 15:** "S," "m," "m," "s," "d," "m," "s"
- **Line 16:** "D," "pp," "s," "s," "p," "l," "d"
- **Line 17:** "t," "t," "p," "p"
- **Line 19:** "ll," "d," "d," "ll"
- **Line 20:** "r," "d," "d," "r," "d," "r"
- **Line 21:** "pp," "ll"
- **Line 22:** "pp," "l," "B," "t," "t"
- **Line 23:** "t," "m," "t," "m," "b"
- **Line 24:** "B," "m," "t"

END-STOPPED LINE

The prevalence of end punctuation, especially in combination with the poem's consistent tetrameter, creates a series of neat, self-contained lines that mirror the perfectly parallel, impeccable furrows that the speaker's father plows. The poem's many [end-stopped lines](#) not only visually resemble the trenches that are cut into the land over the course of the poem, but they also provide a natural pause that comes to be anticipated at the end of each line, helping to establish a regular rhythm. The abundant [parallelism](#), present from the poem's outset, also contributes to this sense of orderliness and regularity.

Therefore, that rhythm is not significantly disturbed by any single instance of [enjambment](#) that occurs about where the speaker would naturally pause when reading or reciting a sentence. Stanza 4 is a good example of this:

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.

Line 15 ("Sometimes ...") breaks where a comma would typically be inserted when writing prose, so the enjambment here doesn't feel particularly disruptive.

However, there are two main instances where the lack of end-stops does cause the rhythm to break down. This happens in lines 8-11 ("At the headrig ... ground,") and 22-24 ("Yapping ... away."), where [caesura](#) is also present and the poem's parallelism is abandoned. We discuss this more in our device entries on enjambment and caesura. It's worth noting here, though, that the pervasiveness of end-stopped lines elsewhere in the poem draws attention to these deviations, creating contrast and emphasizing these moments of irregularity.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "horse-plough,"
- **Line 3:** "furrow."
- **Line 4:** "tongue."
- **Line 6:** "sock."
- **Line 7:** "breaking."
- **Line 11:** "ground,"
- **Line 12:** "exactly."
- **Line 13:** "wake,"
- **Line 14:** "sod;"
- **Line 16:** "plod."
- **Line 17:** "plough,"
- **Line 18:** "arm."
- **Line 20:** "farm."
- **Line 21:** "falling,"
- **Line 24:** "away."

ENJAMBMENT

About one-third of the lines in "Follower" are [enjambéd](#), meaning that their meaning spills across the line breaks. Enjambment is used primarily to control the poem's rhythm and build momentum. There are several instances in "Follower" in which line breaks occur after words that indicate movement, and because enjambment encourages the reader to quickly transition from one line to the next, it causes the poem's *form* to match the images being described.

This effect first appears in lines 2-3, in which the speaker compares his father to a sail and the line breaks after "strung," which is fixed to the last word of line 2 and the first word of line

3, stringing them together and mimicking the sail they describe:

His shoulders globed like a full sail **strung**
Between the shafts and the furrow.

The break after "turned round" in line 9 is another good example of this; the reader's gaze "turns" around from the end of one line and back to the beginning to read the next, guiding them through these lines like the speaker's father guides his plow:

Of reins, the sweating team turned **round**
And back into the land.

A similar effect occurs in lines 19 and 23, which break on "follow / In" and "stumbling / Behind," respectively, the lack of punctuation ensuring that one line follows immediately after, or stumbles behind, that which comes before it.

In line 8, the line enjambment spans not only a line break, but also a stanza break, causing the word "pluck" to linger out in space:

At the headrig, with a single pluck
Of reins,

Here, the speaker is explaining how his father could steer his large, heavy horses and plow with one brief tug of reins, represented by the "single pluck" that hangs between one stanza and another, strengthening the image. Although the poem's momentum carries the reader from line 8 into line 9, it is almost immediately interrupted by a [caesura](#) (the comma after "reins"). This pattern (enjambment followed by a caesura) repeats from line 9 into line 10, and from line 10 into line 11. Caesura and enjambment thus work together throughout this section of the poem to create a rhythm that builds enough momentum to turn from one line into the next but also starts and stops often. In other words, lines 8, 9, and 10 are all enjambéd, their phrases coming to rest with caesuras in the middle of the following lines. Fittingly, these lines describe the speaker's father and his plow stopping after completing one furrow so that they can turn around and begin another.

In line 22, enjambment works with caesura to place additional emphasis on the phrase "But today." This phrase marks an important turn from the past, in which the speaker stumbles behind his father, and the present, in which the opposite is true. Enjambment helps to draw the reader's attention to this phrase, which sets up a major reversal of the family dynamic that the rest of the poem describes.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "strung / Between"

- **Lines 5-6:** "wing / And"
- **Lines 8-9:** "pluck / Of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "round / And"
- **Lines 10-11:** "eye / Narrowed"
- **Lines 15-16:** "back / Dipping"
- **Lines 19-20:** "follow / In"
- **Lines 22-23:** "today / It"
- **Lines 23-24:** "stumbling / Behind"

IRONY

The role reversal between the speaker and his father that occurs in the poem's final lines upends the family dynamic that the rest of the poem works diligently to make known. This is an example of situational [irony](#), meaning that a sudden, unpredictable turn of events creates tension between how a situation seems on its surface and the truth of the matter.

The first half of "Follower" provides image after image of the speaker's father plowing their family field with effortless strength and skill. For example, he is able to cut into the earth and turn it in such a way that it "[rolls] over without breaking" and command his large, heavy team of horses and plow "with a single pluck / Of reins."

The second half of the poem then contrasts the expertise of the speaker's father with the speaker's own ineptitude. He describes himself as "a nuisance," who stumbles over the "polished sod" that his father has freshly plowed, disturbing it. The speaker also describes himself "stumbling" in his father's trail and "following" in his shadow, setting up a clear leader-follower dynamic between father and son, respectively. This gives the impression that the speaker's father is strong and capable—a powerful, guiding force for his clumsy son.

However, this pretense is shattered in the poem's final sentence, which reveals that, in reality, the opposite is true, as the speaker's aged father now "keeps stumbling / Behind" the speaker. The irony created by this abrupt shift helps to underscore the fact that this is a *reversal* of their roles—the speaker has taken up the position that his father was earlier described occupying in great detail, and vice versa.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 22-24:** "But today / It is my father who keeps stumbling / Behind me, and will not go away."

JUXTAPOSITION

Throughout "Follower," highly contrasting images are [juxtaposed](#), or placed side-by-side to exaggerate their differences. This first occurs from line 12 into line 13, where the poem's focus shifts to center the *speaker* rather than *his father*:

Mapping the furrow exactly.
I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,

In line 12, the speaker's father is pictured squinting at the land in front of him, tracing it with his gaze so that he can map out exactly where to maneuver the plow next. The next line presents a very different image—the speaker, a little boy, teetering across the field and disturbing his father's soil, so expertly-plowed that it appears "polished" before the speaker stumbles over it. The side-by-side arrangement of these two images—one of precisely preparing soil and the other of clumsily disturbing it—help to mark a broader shift in focus from father to son that occurs about these lines. The juxtaposition also draws great contrast between the speaker and his father, setting up the expectation that the speaker's father is a strong, dominant force that the speaker annoyingly trails behind.

However, another juxtaposition in the final stanza upsets this expectation. The speaker provides an image of himself stumbling across the farm over and over again, before stating that in reality, today it is his father who "keeps stumbling / Behind" *him* and shows no signs of stopping. By presenting a strong description of one family dynamic alongside its opposite, juxtaposition highlights just how extreme the differences are between the two, introducing [irony](#) and creating the impression of a role reversal.

Lastly, juxtaposition occurs in stanza 5, where the speaker explains that as a young boy he "wanted to grow up and plow" like his father. He goes on to imagine himself squinting at the field with one eye closed and his arm held out, assuming a position that he has watched his father take so many times. Immediately thereafter, the speaker specifies that "all [he] ever did was follow" his father around the farm. The juxtaposition of this reality with his childhood dream makes the reader immediately aware that it never came to fruition. In this way, the dream remains short-lived in the reader's mind, as it was for the speaker.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "Mapping the furrow exactly. / I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,"
- **Lines 17-19:** "I wanted to grow up and plough, / To close one eye, stiffen my arm. / All I ever did was follow"
- **Lines 21-24:** "I was a nuisance, tripping, falling, / Yapping always. But today / It is my father who keeps stumbling / Behind me, and will not go away."

ONOMATOPOEIA

The setting in "Follower" is not described in detail and instead appears within fragmented images of the speaker and his father interacting with the land. Because how the farm *looks* is not

described in detail, [onomatopoeia](#) provides important texture and depth to the setting by providing other sensory details—i.e., sounds, which allow the readers to better picture what it would be like to walk around the farm. Line 4 contains the first example of onomatopoeia—the "clicking" sounds that the speaker's father makes with his tongue to command the horses. The repetition of a hard /k/ sound followed by a short /i/ sound that this word contains (clicking / clicking) creates two short "clicks" that sound like the noises they are meant to describe.

Another arguable example comes with the word "pluck" at the end of line 8. Line 8 is [enjambéd](#), meaning "pluck" appears to hang at the end of the line and the stanza:

At the headrig, with a single pluck
Of reins,

The sentence that contains "pluck" describes how the speaker's father seems to manipulate the cumbersome horse-plow team effortlessly, as he gives the reins one brief tug. The speaker's decision to use the word "pluck" evokes the sound of a single guitar string (or another similar instrument) being held back from all of the others, then suddenly released. The enjambment that follows this word adds to the effect by isolating the word at the end of the line and stanza while also encouraging the reader to move into the next line, as if the "pluck" has swiftly released the guitar string to its starting position among the others.

The term "yapping" in line 22 is the poem's final example of onomatopoeia. The term "yap" is typically used to describe the sharp barks of small dogs, which are harsh and unpleasant to the ear. When applied to humans, as it is here, the term indicates that a person's speech is grating—characterized by a shrill tone of voice and rambling on and on. The quick, harsh, and somewhat nasal quality of the word "yap" itself, and especially the short /ah/ sound, is heightened by its position at the beginning of the line and the metrical stress it receives ("Yapping"). Furthermore, /p/ and /ing/ sounds appear directly before the term; "yapping" picks up on these sounds once again, adding additional stress so that it reads as having a sharper, harsher feel.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "clicking"
- **Line 8:** "pluck"
- **Line 22:** "Yapping"

PARALLELISM

There is one very straightforward sentence structure that repeats throughout "Follower." All but two sentences begin with a variation on this pattern, which is characterized by a

noun or noun phrase—the sentence's subject—followed by an active verb in some past tense form. This effect, known as [parallelism](#), is present from the poem's outset:

My father worked with a horse plow,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung

In lines 1 and 2, the noun phrases are "my father" and "his shoulders," while the verbs are "worked" and "globed," respectively. These first lines create a regular rhythm and set up a very direct sentence structure that is uncomplicated and easy to follow. The poem goes on to present a series of tasks and actions, described in the past tense. The repetition that results from parallelism presents all of these actions as equal, drawing natural comparisons, such as between father and son in the neighboring sentences "His eye / Narrowed and angled" and "I stumbled ... Fell." In this way, parallelism heightens the effect of the poem's [juxtapositions](#).

Furthermore, the pervasiveness of parallelism draws attention to the sections of the poem where it is absent, heightening the effects of [caesura](#) and [enjambment](#) (which are discussed in their own entries).

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My father worked"
- **Line 2:** "His shoulders globed"
- **Line 4:** "The horses strained"
- **Line 5:** "He would set"
- **Line 7:** "The sod rolled"
- **Lines 10-11:** "His eye / Narrowed"
- **Line 13:** "I stumbled"
- **Line 17:** "to grow up and plough"
- **Line 18:** "To close one eye"
- **Line 21:** "I was"

REPETITION

Many important words and phrases repeat in "Follower." Usually, they are applied first to the speaker's father and then to the speaker himself or vice versa, helping to compare and contrast the poem's two characters. For example, line 1 reads "My father worked with a horse-plough," while line 17 reads "I wanted to grow up and plough." The [repetition](#) of "plough" at the end of both lines links the two statements so that when the speaker says that he wishes to "plough," it's clear that he means that he wants to be like his father. A similar effect occurs with "eye" in lines 10 and 18; the speaker first describes his father squinting at the ground with one eye closed, and then later says that he, too, wants "to close one eye." Both examples of repetition also reveal a crucial difference between the speaker and his father—the former *wants* to plow, while the latter actually *does*.

In line 7, the speaker's father is shown cultivating land with precision, so that it turns over in one piece. Later, in line 14, the speaker stumbles onto tilled soil, disturbing it. The term "sod" is used in both lines, suggesting that the speaker trips over the same soil that his father had just perfectly cultivated. This further distinguishes the speaker from his father, as he seems to hinder or partly undo his father's hard work.

While the above examples largely cast the speaker as a clumsy young boy and his father as a strong, graceful workhorse, the repetition of "stumble" has a more complicated outcome. The word first appears in line 13: "I **stumbled** in his hobnailed wake." Here, the speaker is pictured following his father, reinforcing the dynamic just described. However, lines 23-24 read "It is my father who keeps **stumbling** / behind me," in a reversal of that dynamic. The repetition again compares the two men, but this time it points to a similarity: both men stumble—first, the speaker and later, his father, indicating that they have switched roles.

Another type of repetition that arguably approaches the level of [anaphora](#) occurs in the poem's final three stanzas, where the speaker lists the different ways he interacted with his father and their family farm as a child. The speaker's use of the first person results in four sentences in a row that begin with "I" statements. The poem's first half is told from a second-person perspective and describes the speaker's father, so he is overwhelmingly the subject of its sentences and clauses. Thus, the subsequent repetition of "I" drives home the fact that the speaker is now the subject, signaling a major movement in the poem from father to speaker and drawing a comparison between the two.

The long /i/ sounds that echo throughout the poem's second half, such as in "rising," "eye," "my," and "sometimes," ensure that the speaker's role and perspective remain at the front of readers' minds. This shift in focus also foreshadows the reversal that occurs in the poem's last lines, where the speaker overtakes his father as the leader of their family. In these ways, repetition draws attention to the generational transfer of leadership as well as the differences between father and son, ideas that strike at the core of the poem's themes.

[Parallelism](#) is another specific type of repetition that has to do with sentence structure, and this is discussed in its own entry.

[Assonance](#) and [consonance](#) involve the repetition of vowel sounds and consonant sounds respectively, and they are also examined in greater detail in their own entries.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "father," "plough"
- **Line 3:** "furrow"
- **Line 7:** "sod"
- **Line 10:** "eye"
- **Line 12:** "furrow"

- **Line 13:** "I stumbled"
- **Line 14:** "sometimes," "sod"
- **Line 15:** "Sometimes"
- **Line 17:** "I wanted," "plough"
- **Line 18:** "eye"
- **Line 19:** "All I ever did"
- **Line 21:** "I was"
- **Line 23:** "father," "stumbling"

SIMILE

Although this poem contains only one [simile](#), it plays an important role. The simile occurs in lines 2-3 and compares the speaker's father to a ship's sail. At one end, his body is tethered by the hands to the plow's handles, and at the other, it is tethered by the feet to the earth he plows. The speaker's father stands upright with rounded shoulders so that his body appears to bow between the two fixed points, like a sail fastened at either end to a mast. Through this comparison, the speaker declares that his father is tough, driving the plow forward and weathering the strenuous work as if he is gliding through the ocean's thrashing waves. In doing so, the speaker sets up a grandiose tone that encourages a positive, dignified perception of his father from the poem's outset.

The simile conjures another image that also supports his glorification—that of Atlas, the Greek god who held the celestial heavens on his shoulders. Atlas is typically pictured with hunched shoulders, carrying the heavens, which are represented by a sphere. Therefore, the simile likens the speaker's father to a god, one known for his strength and endurance and who also has come to be a symbol of mapmaking. The simile's navigational and seafaring language reappears sporadically throughout the poem, continuing to celebrate the speaker's father (see lines 7, 11-13, and 16) and ultimately coming to symbolize his strength. The impact of this [symbol](#) is examined more closely in the Symbols section of this guide.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "His shoulders globed like a full sail strung / Between the shafts and the furrow"



VOCABULARY

Horse-plough (Line 1) - A traditional horse-drawn machine that farmers use to prepare their fields so that they can plant crops. Plowing (the American English form of "ploughing") cultivates the land by cutting into the soil to lift it up and turn it over. This process exposes helpful nutrients, hides any vegetation that has grown since the field has been harvested, and breaks up hardened soil to encourage draining and root

growth.

Globed (Line 2) - Rounded, creating a form that resembles a sphere's arc.

Shafts (Line 3) - The long, narrow poles that connect and brace the plow's two handles.

Furrow (Line 3, Line 12) - The narrow groove that the horse plow creates as it cuts into the earth. Furrows are the long, continuous trenches that run along the full length of a plot in neat, parallel lines.

Clicking (Line 4) - Creating concise, sharp sounds as a means to guide the horses. Short, simple voice commands are commonly used to drive plowing horses.

Wing (Line 5) - The flat part of the plow, or cutting edge closest to the soil, that "wings" out into a tip. The wing helps the plow stay balanced and level, so it must be adjusted to prevent the plow from tilting too far towards the freshly plowed furrow or the unplowed earth. The speaker's use of this slang term underscores his great knowledge of traditional plowing machinery.

Steel-pointed sock (Line 6) - The steel tip of the plow's main cutting edge. "Sock" is a slang term for "plowshare" that would only be familiar to those who have spent considerable time around traditional plowing machinery.

Sod (Line 7) - The very top layer of earth, including vegetation such as grass and weeds in addition to soil.

Breaking (Line 7) - Cracking into discrete, uneven clumps of earth that are difficult to work with. The speaker's father was able to turn the earth in smooth, level swaths.

Headrig (Line 8) - The patch of unplowed land on each end of a plot where the plowing apparatus turns around to create a new furrow. Also known as "headland" or "turnrow" in some areas.

Pluck (Line 8) - A quick tug and release. This word can also refer to playing stringed instruments, highlighting the skill and artistry of the speaker's father by subtly comparing him to a musician.

Team (Line 9) - Two or more horses tethered together to pull a piece of machinery.

Angled (Line 11) - Directed itself at its subject from an angle. The speaker's father was able to make precise geometrical calculations by sight to improve the plow's performance.

Mapping (Line 12) - Visually tracing and mentally charting.

Hobnailed (Line 13) - Studded with impressions of hobnails, or short nails with heavy heads that are driven into the soles of work boots to increase their durability.

Wake (Line 13) - Trail of turned soil. This term typically refers to a trail of water kicked up by a boat or a trail of air disrupted by an aircraft. Here, the speaker applies "wake" to his father's trail of freshly tilled earth, giving the impression that his father

is as powerful as a ship or airplane.

Polished (Line 14) - Smooth and elegant. The soil was not literally rubbed until it shone, but this image indicates that his father turned the soil over in level pieces and worked with finesse.

Plod (Line 16) - Drawn-out, deliberate, and heavy manner of walking.

Broad (Line 20) - Physically wide, but also great in magnitude, metaphorically.

Yapping (Line 22) - Talking on and on in a way that is shrill and irritating, like the high-pitched barks of small dogs.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Follower" consists of six quatrains, or stanzas of four lines apiece. What is perhaps most striking about the form of "Follower" is the regularity of its lines. On the most basic level, they all *look* like they are roughly the same length. And with only one exception, each line has four poetic [feet](#). The poem's lines thus appear tight and tidy on the page, mirroring the expertly plowed furrows that run parallel to one another up and down the field described.

The prevalence of [end-stopped lines](#) contributes to this effect. Heaney does opt for [enjambment](#) in a few notable places throughout the poem, though these moments also reflect the poem's content. Take line 2, where the word "strung" bleeds into the subsequent line, bridging them, much like the plow that the speaker describes linking his father's hands to his feet like the mast that a sail hangs from. Lines 8, 9, and 10 are also enjambed, so the reader's gaze mimics the plow, turning from the end of one line into the beginning of the next as the speaker describes "the team [turning] round" to create a new furrow.

Arguably the poem plays with the [ballad](#) form, given that it is arranged into quatrains and its [meter](#) is primarily [iambic](#) (meaning that follows an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). While the poem does not use strict iambic meter or alternate between [tetrameter](#) and [trimeter](#), as ballads customarily do, its rhythm still mimics the bounciness associated with the ballad form due to its iambic bent. Furthermore, the poem uses an ABAB [rhyme scheme](#) rather than the ABCB pattern of traditional ballads.

This adaptation of a beloved, traditional poetic form mirrors the speaker's own take on the farming traditions of his forefathers. Both Heaney's treatment of form and his speaker's innovative preservation of family practices via poetry show respect and reverence for the past, while carrying on traditions in a new way that resonates with a new generation.

METER

"Follower" is mostly written in [iambic tetrameter](#), meaning that the lines consist of four sets of iambs, or an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Take line 5:

An **ex-** | pert. **He** | would **set** | the **wing**

However, the meter is highly irregular, with many lines containing an extra syllable and/or substituting iambs for other poetic [feet](#). Still, due to the overarching prevalence of the iamb, a bouncy rhythm flows throughout the poem and mirrors the tread of the speaker's father, who is "dipping and rising" with his plow as he works.

There are countless metrical variations throughout the poem, but a few are particularly notable. For example, line 22 deviates from the established tetrameter, as its meter is [trochaic](#) (meaning the feet are **stressed-unstressed**) and it is missing a final syllable:

Yapping | always. | But today

Interestingly, each line in the three preceding [stanzas](#) (stanzas 3, 4, and 5) has eight syllables. In the final stanza, however, lines 21 ("I was a nuisance ..."), 23 ("It is my father ..."), and 24 ("Behind me ...") have *nine* syllables, while line 22 has just *seven*—making its shortness even more pronounced due to the increased length of the surrounding lines. Therefore, a great deal of emphasis is placed on this line, which contains the poem's volta, or turn—it represents a shift from past to present as well as a reversal of the established leader-follower dynamic and a corresponding change in the speaker's attitude towards his father. The formal irregularity of this line helps to draw attention to it as a point of change.

In line 19, each foot is again a trochee rather than an iamb:

All | ever | did was | follow

This produces a line that is literally backwards metrically, reflecting the speaker's inability to replicate his father's motions, as the line describes. The nearly perfect iambic tetrameter that comprises the rest of stanza 5 heightens this effect.

Finally, lines 11-12, which describe the speaker's father making methodical calculations, are filled with additional unstressed syllables, so they read as soft and nimble:

Narrowed | and **ang-** | led at | the **ground**,
Mapping | the **fur-** | row **ex-** | **actly**.

Some readers might argue that "at" receives slight stress. Still, this line contains two unstressed syllables in a row, so the effect holds and carries into line 12. The lines that follow,

however, abruptly snap back into iambic tetrameter:

I **stum-** | bled **in** | his **hob-** | nailed **wake**,
Fell **some-** | times **on** | the **pol-** | ished **sod**;

These lines appear rather blunt and lurching as the speaker's childlike stumbling is pictured, providing a metrical contrast as focus shifts to the speaker's movements and away from his father's.

RHYME SCHEME

Heaney uses the following rhyme scheme throughout the poem:

ABAB

In other words, the sounds that end the first and third lines of each [stanza](#) rhyme, as do the sounds that end the second and fourth lines. Sometimes these rhymes are perfect, meaning that the sounds are identical, and other times they are [slant rhymes](#), meaning they have similar, but not identical, sounds. For example, lines 2 and 4 contain perfect rhymes with "strung" and "tongue," while lines 1 and 3 are slant rhymes: "plough" and "furrow." In stanzas 1, 4, and 5, the slant rhymes occur in the first and third lines, so the rhyme scheme resembles that of a traditional [ballad](#): ABCB (that is, if readers count the slant rhyme of line 3 as a new rhyme sound, the "C" in that pattern, rather than just a riff on the "A" sound). In the other stanzas, though, lines 1 and 3 are the perfect rhymes and lines 2 and 4 are slant rhymes. Take stanza 3, where "round" rhymes perfectly with "ground," but "eye" is a slant rhyme with "exactly."

The rhyme scheme is not entirely predictable then, which might subtly suggest the father's skill in navigating the fields he plows. The poem moves nimbly between these various rhyme patterns, just as the speaker's father adeptly works his land.



SPEAKER

The speaker in "Follower" is an adult man reflecting on his shifting relationship with his father, a farmer. For most of the poem, the speaker appears as a stumbling little boy who is in awe of his father. But his true age (and resulting removal from that period of his life) serves a few functions.

First, it allows the speaker to use sophisticated language, which helps to implicitly elevate the nobility of his father's work. It also reveals the changes that both men have undergone as the years have passed. As a child, the speaker badly wanted to be like his father and dreamt of being a farmer when he grew up. At the end of the poem, however, the reader learns that he has not realized this dream. What's more, the speaker no longer sees his father as a dexterous, strong man, and instead, he "keeping stumbling behind" the speaker. He seems to find this role reversal troubling or unsettling, as it seems that he cannot

shake his father, who he says "will not go away."

The speaker in this poem and in the other works that appear in *Death of a Naturalist* is generally understood to be a persona of Heaney's. His father was a successful cattle dealer and operated their family's generations-old farm. Heaney's father expected him to take up these trades and maintain their familial traditions, but, like the speaker, Heaney failed to do so. Like Heaney, the speaker in "Follower" ultimately does not follow the path established by his forebears and instead charts a new one.

While it is possible to interpret the speaker as a non-male figure, Heaney's biographical similarities to the speaker and the fact that Irish farming traditions were patrilineal, or passed down from father to son over generations, suggest that the speaker is male, a conclusion also reached by many literary critics. This guide uses male pronouns accordingly, but it is certainly possible to interpret the poem differently.



SETTING

This poem presumably takes place in the 1940s in rural Northern Ireland, where Heaney spent his childhood. However, the poem reveals very little about the setting—only that its events take place on a farm, where fields are plowed using horses and other traditional agricultural equipment. This is a time before more modern farming technology, but that is about all the reader knows of this particular setting.

Where indications of place do appear, they appear in fragments—single words and phrases that describe the earth, such as "headrig," "land," "polished sod," and "the farm." This has the effect of directly connecting the reader's sense of place with the land and its cultivation, which, in turn, reflects the poem's thematic emphasis on farming as a meaningful part of (familial) identity. Furthermore, the one-dimensional setting allows the actions of the speaker and his father, including their impact on the land, to remain foregrounded throughout the poem, as these are the clearest images the poem provides. In other words, the poem takes place, above all, within the relationship between these two men.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Although *Death of a Naturalist* is among Heaney's earliest work, relative to his long career, it introduces ideas that Heaney continued to grapple with for decades to come. Themes such as family dynamics, childhood experiences, veneration of the past, Irish identity, and the nobility of rural laborers pervade his poetry. He also continued to use both child and adult perspectives in his writing as lenses through which his speakers

interpret their settings and experiences. Heaney maintained a deep respect for the past, and his work often nods to poetic tradition—reflected in the [ballad](#)-like form that "Follower" riffs on, for example.

It is essential to note that Heaney's work is very much engaged with Irish literary traditions, and particularly their emphasis on land and sense of place. He has said that poets such as [Ted Hughes](#) ("[Hawk Roosting](#)"), [Robert Frost](#) ("[After Apple-Picking](#)"), and especially [Patrick Kavanagh](#), all of whose work drew heavily from their native locales, helped him see the virtue of his traditional Irish upbringing, which he had written off as archaic earlier in life. Heaney also translated many works of Irish literature and found inspiration and camaraderie among contemporary Irish poets such as [John Hewitt](#), [John Montague](#), and [Paul Muldoon](#). Accordingly, he was a most consistent and persistent member of the Belfast group, a poet's workshop that he attended from its inception in 1963. Today, countless poets cite Heaney as an influence, as he is one of the most widely read poets in the world, cherished by casual poetry readers and literary critics alike.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ireland has a rich farming history, handed down over thousands of years through 200+ generations. Plowing technology has been around about as long, and steel plows, like the one used in "Follower," became prolific after their invention in the mid-19th century. However, a shift to motorized tractors began to occur around the 1920s, and it really picked up in the '40s, right around the time Heaney was born. As more and more farmers made the switch, traditional plowing methods were increasingly abandoned, and livestock handling traditions diminished along with them. Irish farming methods are traditionally passed on from father to son, making them central to familial identity. Therefore, during Heaney's childhood, the survival of familial agricultural traditions hinged more than ever on young Irish men practicing and sustaining them.

Heaney experienced a great deal of ambivalence about his role as a farmer's son. Farming did not suit his nature and he resisted its traditions for much of his life before coming to appreciate their beauty and virtue, which he detailed in his poetry, uplifting and preserving such methods in his widely-read verse. That ambivalence, sense of endangerment, and reverence are all encompassed within "Follower," whose speaker exalts his father's techniques while also suggesting that they are in jeopardy, and ultimately argues for their preservation. Like Heaney, the speaker forges his own path—one that diverges from familial traditions and expectations—and eventually both men become leaders, albeit leaders slightly unsettled by this reversal of familial roles.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Biography of Seamus Heaney](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/biographical/) — An overview of Heaney's life and work that pays special attention to his early years. (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/biographical/>)
- [Seamus Heaney Reads "Follower"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSnrxHqEB3I) — Listen to the author read the poem aloud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSnrxHqEB3I>)
- [A Documentary on Irish Farming Traditions](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GeIL6LOeTM) — The first several minutes of this video (2:10-6:00) show a farmer working with an antique horse plow. The documentary goes on to describe the tools that replaced traditional plows. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GeIL6LOeTM>)
- [Heaney's Annotations in Death of a Naturalist](https://www.theguardian.com/books/interactive/2013/may/18/seamus-heaney-death-naturalist-annotations) — Images of a copy of Heaney's first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, which he annotated. This includes a short annotation of "Follower." (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/interactive/2013/may/18/seamus-heaney-death-naturalist-annotations>)

- [The Belfast Group](https://belfastgroup.ecds.emory.edu/overview/) — An overview of the Belfast Group from Emory University, which houses the largest collection of Heaney's literary archive, per his donation. (<https://belfastgroup.ecds.emory.edu/overview/>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SEAMUS HEANEY POEMS

- [Blackberry-Picking](#)
- [Death of a Naturalist](#)
- [Digging](#)
- [Mid-Term Break](#)
- [Storm on the Island](#)



HOW TO CITE

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