

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

Follower, by Seamus Heaney

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.

An expert. He would set the wing
And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.
The sod rolled over without breaking.
At the head rig, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round
And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,
Mapping the furrow exactly.

I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod.

I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, and stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away.

SUMMARY:

"Follower" is a reflective poem by Seamus Heaney, where the speaker reminisces about his childhood and the bond he had with his father. The poem primarily captures the speaker's memories of his father, a skilled farmer, ploughing the fields with great precision. The father is portrayed as a dominant, strong figure, physically adept, and an expert at his craft. The young speaker admires his father's prowess but feels clumsy and inadequate in comparison.

As the poem progresses, the speaker recalls how he used to follow his father around, fascinated by his strength and skill. The speaker's attempts to follow in his father's footsteps, both literally and metaphorically, are marked by failure, as he stumbles and is more of a nuisance than a help.

However, the poem ends with a poignant reversal: now, as the father has grown older, he is the one who "stumbles" behind the speaker, dependent and perhaps struggling with age and frailty. This shift highlights the passage of time and the changing dynamics of their relationship.

Analysis of "Follower":

Themes:

1. **Admiration and Heroism:**

One of the central themes of "Follower" is the speaker's admiration for his father, who is portrayed as a larger-than-life figure. Heaney emphasizes the father's strength, skill, and mastery of the land. For the young speaker, his father is an idol, and his farming abilities are a kind of heroic feat, creating a sense of awe.

2. **Generational Gap and Role Reversal:**

As the poem progresses, there is a subtle exploration of the generational gap between the speaker and his father. The speaker feels inadequate compared to his father's physical competence, a contrast between youth and expertise. However, this dynamic shifts by the end of the poem, reflecting how age changes roles, as the once-powerful father becomes weaker and now "follows" the son.

3. **Identity and Inheritance:**

"Follower" also touches on the theme of identity, particularly in how children inherit the expectations or legacies of their parents. The speaker tries, unsuccessfully, to emulate his father's strength and skill, reflecting a deeper struggle with his own identity. Heaney may be commenting on the difficulty of living up to the example set by a parent, especially in a traditional rural setting where skills are passed down from generation to generation.

4. **Memory and Time:**

The poem serves as a reflection on the passage of time and the inevitability of change. The father, once so robust and capable, eventually becomes the one in need of guidance and support. The reversal of roles illustrates the transient nature of life and the effects of ageing.

Language and Structure:

1. **Structure:**

The poem is structured in six quatrains with an alternating rhyme scheme, creating a rhythmic, steady flow that mirrors the repetitive, methodical movements of ploughing. The regularity of the form emphasizes the precision and rhythm of the father's work, as well as the steady passage of time.

2. **Imagery and Metaphor:**

Heaney uses vivid imagery to depict the father's strength and skill in farming. Phrases such as "His shoulders globed like a full sail strung" compare the father to a ship's sail, full of energy and momentum, showing his dominance over the land. The use of

physical, tactile imagery conveys a sense of the physical labour involved in farming, grounding the poem in the rural life that Heaney often wrote about.

The metaphor of ploughing becomes a broader symbol for life itself—its challenges, its rhythms, and the connection between generations.

3. **Tone:**

The tone of the poem is nostalgic and contemplative. There is a deep sense of admiration, but also of melancholy as the speaker reflects on his own inadequacies and the inevitability of his father's decline. The shift in tone at the end, from the confident father to the stumbling old man, imbues the poem with a sense of inevitability and sadness, evoking the universal experience of watching one's parents grow old.

Role Reversal and the Reflection on Aging:

The final stanza is where the poem's central reversal occurs: the father, once strong and dominant, is now "stumbling behind" the speaker. This moment powerfully conveys the inescapable reality of aging. Heaney subtly illustrates the emotional impact of this reversal, not just on the father but also on the speaker, who once felt inadequate in his father's shadow but now finds himself in a position of responsibility. The reversal symbolizes the natural cycle of life—where once we follow our parents, and eventually, they follow us.

The poem thus becomes a meditation on the shifting dynamics between parent and child, a reflection on the burden of expectations, and a poignant commentary on the inevitable decline that comes with time.

Conclusion:

"Follower" by Seamus Heaney is a beautifully crafted exploration of memory, admiration, and the passage of time. Through simple yet evocative language, Heaney captures the bond between father and son, the complexities of inheritance, and the inevitability of ageing. The poem resonates deeply with anyone who has experienced the tension between admiration and inadequacy, and the bittersweet process of witnessing a parent's decline. It is a profound reflection on the cyclical nature of life and the unbreakable bonds of family.

COMPARISON WITH BEFORE U MINE

Both "**Follower**" by Seamus Heaney and "**Before You Were Mine**" by Carol Ann Duffy are reflective poems that explore parent-child relationships, but they approach these themes from different perspectives. While Heaney focuses on the father-son dynamic and the impact of time on that relationship, Duffy looks at the mother-daughter bond, using time as a lens to reflect on the mother's lost youth and identity. Despite their thematic similarities, the tone, structure, and emotional undercurrents in these poems vary significantly.

Themes of Admiration and Time

1. **Admiration of Parents:** Both poems express deep admiration for a parent, though in different ways. In "**Follower**", Heaney's admiration for his father stems from the physical strength, skill, and mastery of his craft. The father is depicted as a figure of competence and control, ploughing the land with precision. The speaker, as a child, feels inadequate in comparison, aware of his own clumsiness beside his father's expertise.

In contrast, "**Before You Were Mine**" portrays the mother as a lively, carefree, and glamorous figure before the responsibilities of motherhood changed her life. The speaker imagines her mother in her youth, dancing and enjoying life with her friends. Here, the admiration is for the mother's lost vitality and independence, and there's a sense of nostalgia for a version of the mother the daughter never knew but wishes she had.

2. **The Impact of Time:** Time plays a crucial role in both poems, but it manifests in different ways. In "**Follower**", time is depicted as a force that brings about a reversal of roles. The speaker reflects on how his father, once so strong, is now aging and dependent, "stumbling behind" his son. This shift illustrates the inevitability of aging and the changing dynamics between parent and child over time.

"**Before You Were Mine**" also deals with the passage of time but in a more retrospective manner. The speaker imagines her mother's life before she was born, feeling a sense of guilt or responsibility for the way motherhood has seemingly changed her. Time here is something that distances the mother from her former self, creating a poignant sense of loss—not of life but of identity.

Parent-Child Relationships:

1. **Role Reversal in "Follower":** The relationship between father and son in "**Follower**" evolves from one of hero worship to one of caretaking. Initially, the son looks up to his father as a figure of immense strength and skill. As the son grows older and the father ages, the power dynamic shifts, and it is now the son who must take on the role of responsibility, mirroring the generational cycle of life.
2. **Mother-Daughter Dynamics in "Before You Were Mine":** In "**Before You Were Mine**", the mother-daughter relationship is more introspective, with the speaker reflecting on her mother's life before she was born. The speaker is acutely aware of the changes her birth brought to her mother's life, suggesting a sense of guilt or a longing for her mother's lost freedom. The speaker imagines that her arrival into her mother's life marked the end of her mother's carefree existence. Unlike the role reversal in "**Follower**", there is no direct change in responsibility, but rather a reflection on the transformation motherhood brings.

Tone and Mood:

1. **Nostalgic yet Respectful in "Follower":** The tone of "**Follower**" is nostalgic, with Heaney reflecting on his father's once-dominant presence. However, it's also respectful, as the speaker's admiration for his father remains strong throughout the poem. The final reversal, where the father now stumbles behind the son, is

bittersweet, conveying both the inevitability of aging and the deep bond that remains even as roles change.

2. **Nostalgia and Guilt in "Before You Were Mine":** The tone of **"Before You Were Mine"** is also nostalgic, but it carries a more pronounced sense of guilt and loss. The speaker mourns the version of her mother that existed before her birth, suggesting that the responsibilities of motherhood extinguished some of her mother's youthful vitality. The mood is more introspective and tinged with regret, as the speaker imagines what her mother's life might have been like had she not been burdened by the demands of being a parent.

Structure and Imagery:

1. **Structure in "Follower":** **"Follower"** is structured in six regular quatrains, with an alternating rhyme scheme that reflects the steady, rhythmic motion of ploughing. The consistent structure mirrors the methodical nature of farm work, and the imagery of physical labour—ploughing, handling the reins—gives the poem a grounded, tactile quality. Heaney uses vivid, physical imagery to illustrate his father's strength and skill, contrasting it with the speaker's own awkwardness as a child.
2. **Structure in "Before You Were Mine":** **"Before You Were Mine"** is composed of four stanzas, each with five lines, creating a sense of progression as the speaker moves through different periods of her mother's life. Duffy's imagery is more focused on the emotional and personal, evoking the mother's youth with references to dancing, high-heeled shoes, and carefree laughter. The language is rich in visual and auditory imagery, bringing to life a version of the mother who is far removed from the domestic figure the daughter knows.

Identity and Loss:

1. **In "Follower":** Identity in **"Follower"** is closely tied to the father's role as a farmer and the son's struggle to live up to that legacy. The speaker feels a sense of inadequacy, as though he can never truly follow in his father's footsteps. However, as the roles shift with age, there is also a recognition that identity is fluid, and the father's former strength and the son's former clumsiness are both subject to change over time.
2. **In "Before You Were Mine":** Identity is also central in **"Before You Were Mine"**, but here the focus is on the mother's lost identity. The speaker imagines a version of her mother who existed before the responsibilities of motherhood took over, suggesting that the mother's former self has been lost to time. This loss is not just physical but emotional, as the mother's freedom and sense of self seem to have been sacrificed for the role of being a parent.

Conclusion:

In both **"Follower"** and **"Before You Were Mine"**, Seamus Heaney and Carol Ann Duffy explore the profound effects of time and change on parent-child relationships. While **"Follower"** deals with the shift in power dynamics and the changing roles between father and son, **"Before You Were Mine"** reflects on the mother's lost youth and identity due to motherhood. The poems share themes of admiration, loss, and the inevitable passage of time, but they approach these themes from different emotional angles, with **"Follower"** being more focused on physical labor and legacy, and **"Before You Were Mine"** being more

concerned with identity and emotional change. Both are poignant reflections on how time reshapes relationships and roles within families.

COMPARISON WITH EDEN ROCK

"**Follower**" by Seamus Heaney and "**Eden Rock**" by Charles Causley are both reflective poems that explore the relationships between parents and children, as well as themes of memory, loss, and the passage of time. However, they approach these themes from different angles, with "**Follower**" focusing on the admiration and role reversal between father and son, and "**Eden Rock**" evoking a serene, almost spiritual reunion between the speaker and his deceased parents.

Themes of Parent-Child Relationships

1. **Admiration and Influence:** In "**Follower**", Seamus Heaney portrays a young boy who deeply admires his father's physical strength, expertise, and precision in farming. The father is depicted as a larger-than-life figure, someone the boy wants to emulate but finds himself falling short of. The son feels clumsy and inadequate in comparison to his father's effortless mastery of plowing. The father-son relationship is marked by a combination of admiration and a feeling of inadequacy from the son's perspective.

In contrast, "**Eden Rock**" presents a much more idealized and peaceful vision of the parent-child relationship. The speaker recalls a serene, almost idyllic scene where his parents are waiting for him by a riverbank, seemingly from beyond the grave. There is no sense of clumsiness or inadequacy here; rather, the relationship is one of calmness, love, and acceptance. The parents are depicted as stable, comforting figures, and there is a sense of longing for reunion and connection.

2. **Role Reversal and Aging:** "**Follower**" explores the idea of role reversal that occurs with the passage of time. As the speaker ages, his once-strong father becomes frail and dependent, "stumbling" behind him. This reversal reflects the inevitability of aging and the changing dynamic in parent-child relationships, where the child ultimately takes on the caretaker role.

In "**Eden Rock**", however, there is no explicit mention of the parents aging or becoming frail. Instead, they remain frozen in time, as youthful and vibrant as the speaker remembers them. The poem suggests that the speaker's parents have passed away, and they are waiting for him in the afterlife. Rather than a role reversal, "**Eden Rock**" suggests a peaceful reunion in the afterlife, where the speaker will cross the river to join his parents.

Themes of Memory and Time

1. **Nostalgia and Memory:** Both poems are deeply nostalgic, but they evoke memory in different ways. In "**Follower**", the speaker looks back on his childhood with a sense of both admiration and regret. He recalls his father's strength and skill, but also his own inability to live up to his father's legacy. The memory is bittersweet, as it highlights the gap between the father's past and his present frailty.

"Eden Rock, on the other hand, conjures up a more idealized and dreamlike memory. The speaker recalls a peaceful, almost heavenly scene of his parents together, waiting for him at a riverbank. There is a sense of serenity and acceptance in this memory, as if time has frozen, and the speaker is invited to join his parents in a perfect, eternal moment. The tone is more tranquil and meditative compared to the tension and complexity found in **"Follower"**.

2. **The Passage of Time:** In **"Follower"**, time is a force that brings about change and decay. The once-strong father has grown old, and the child who once followed in awe must now lead and support his parent. The passage of time is marked by the physical decline of the father, which underscores the inevitability of aging and death.

In **"Eden Rock"**, time seems to stand still. The speaker's memory of his parents is untouched by the ravages of time. They are portrayed in a state of eternal youth and grace, awaiting the speaker's arrival on the "other side." The passage of time is hinted at, but there is no sense of decline or aging—only the peaceful anticipation of a reunion in the afterlife.

Tone and Mood

1. **Bittersweet vs. Tranquil:** The tone of **"Follower"** is bittersweet, combining admiration with sadness. The speaker's childhood memories are tinged with feelings of inadequacy, as he reflects on his inability to match his father's strength and skill. The final stanza, where the father is now "stumbling" behind the speaker, adds a layer of melancholy, as the speaker acknowledges the inevitable decline of the father he once idolized. The mood is reflective, but also filled with a sense of regret and loss.

In contrast, **"Eden Rock"** is more serene and tranquil. The tone is one of peace and quiet acceptance, as the speaker imagines a reunion with his parents in a calm, idyllic setting. There is no tension or regret here—only a sense of longing for the calm, perfect world that awaits beyond the river. The mood is peaceful and meditative, suggesting that death is not something to be feared, but rather a gentle transition into a better place.

Structure and Imagery

1. **Structure:** **"Follower"** is written in six regular quatrains, with an alternating rhyme scheme that reflects the steady, rhythmic motion of ploughing. The structure is methodical, much like the work of farming, and it emphasizes the father's skill and control. The regularity of the structure mirrors the repetitive, physical nature of the father's work, as well as the relentless march of time.

"Eden Rock" is also written in quatrains, but with a more relaxed and flowing rhythm. The structure feels more fluid and open, much like the peaceful scene it describes. The enjambment between lines and stanzas gives the poem a sense of continuity and calmness, as if the memory is flowing gently from one image to the next. This flowing structure matches the calm, timeless quality of the scene at the riverbank.

2. **Imagery:** "**Follower**" relies heavily on physical and tactile imagery to convey the strength and skill of the father. Heaney describes the father's shoulders as "globed like a full sail strung," and the precision of his ploughing is depicted with detailed imagery of reins, furrows, and sods. The imagery is earthy and grounded in the physical world, reflecting the father's deep connection to the land and the hard work of farming.

"**Eden Rock**" uses more ethereal and idealized imagery to create a sense of peace and tranquillity. The parents are described in simple, almost angelic terms, sitting on a "white cloth" and waiting by a river that suggests a crossing to the afterlife. The imagery is less about physical labour and more about purity, peace, and serenity. The use of light and soft colours—such as the "white cloth" and the "light" that reflects on the water—creates a sense of calm and otherworldliness.

Themes of Life and Death

1. **Life and Decline in "Follower":** "**Follower**" reflects the natural cycle of life and death through the father's aging. The once-powerful figure now stumbles behind the son, and there is a strong sense of life's inevitable decline. The poem suggests that life is cyclical—children look up to their parents, but eventually, the roles reverse, and the parents become dependent on their children.
2. **Death and Reunion in "Eden Rock":** "**Eden Rock**" deals more explicitly with death but in a much more peaceful and spiritual manner. The poem suggests that death is not an end but a transition to another, better place where loved ones are reunited. The idea of crossing the river as a metaphor for death is central to the poem, but there is no fear or sadness associated with this transition—only the anticipation of being reunited with those who have gone before.

Conclusion:

Both "**Follower**" and "**Eden Rock**" explore the relationships between parents and children and the passage of time, but they approach these themes in distinct ways. "**Follower**" is a more grounded, earthy poem that deals with the realities of aging, the physical labor of life, and the inevitability of decline. "**Eden Rock**, on the other hand, is more idealized and spiritual, offering a peaceful vision of life after death and a serene reunion with loved ones. While Heaney's poem is marked by a bittersweet recognition of the changing roles between parent and child, Causley's poem offers comfort and peace in the face of mortality. Both poems, however, underscore the deep emotional bonds between parents and children, and the ways in which those bonds persist across time and even death.

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