

Compare how poets present growing up in 'Mother, any distance' and in **one** other poem from 'Love and relationships'.

Mother, any distance

Mother, any distance greater than a single span
requires a second pair of hands.
You come to help me measure windows, pelmets, doors,
the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

5 You at the zero-end, me with the spool of tape, recording
length, reporting metres, centimetres back to base, then leaving
up the stairs, the line still feeding out, unreeling
years between us. Anchor. Kite.

10 I space-walk through the empty bedrooms, climb
the ladder to the loft, to breaking point, where something
has to give;
two floors below your fingertips still pinch
the last one-hundredth of an inch ... I reach
towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky
15 to fall or fly.

Simon Armitage

[30 marks]

Grade 6 response

In the poem 'Mother, any distance', Simon Armitage presents his point of view on how he regards his mother in relation to growing up. He sets the metaphor as a relatable scene of moving house and having parental assistance. He uses reference to childhood memories and adventure through this extended metaphor, as a reference to his still existing acknowledgement to how his mother won't let go of her young son.

An example of Armitage presenting himself as a young boy is his reference to measurements. For example, the phrase 'single span' conveys a small representation of distance between them and how he and his mother are still close despite the fact that he later wants to space himself from her. Reference to a 'span' portrays a child's hand as they are small and represents his childish address to her at the start of the poem as 'mother'. His later need of 'a second pair of hands' portrays that as he was a young boy, he still needed his mother's help and portrays to the reader that he will not forget all she has done for him.

The 'acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors' portrays a wide space for him yet he is complaining about his lack of space from his mother. The reference to nouns such as 'acres' and 'prairies' show that with such a wide space he could have adventure as a young child. This is connected to Seamus Heaney's idolisation of his father, as a metaphor is the ship 'dipping and rising' as he rode on his back. However, Seamus Heaney uses reference to adventure to portray that he wants to get closer

to his father while Armitage wants to create as much space as possible as he realises as he grows up he needs to weaken the bond between them.

Heaney's use of direction has a direct contrast to Armitage's use of measurements to represent his want of distance. Heaney uses farming terminology to help the reader recognise how he followed in his father's footsteps. For example, he uses reference to 'of rein' which shows typical Irish farming on how the plough would change direction. This, however, shows a change in role. Heaney uses the ambiguous phrase 'all I ever did was follow' to show the audience the past tense that he uses to describe the volta in the poem and how he now has his father following him, showing how he has grown up to follow his father's footsteps. Armitage, however, uses the metaphor of an 'endless sky' to portray the endless possibilities he could have instead of Heaney's aspiration to be like his 'expert' of a father. Armitage uses the phrase 'to fall or fly' to show determination in his leaving home (his mother) and uses the house's stairs to represent the stages he goes through in his life to grow away from his mother.

Heaney's reference to ships and his adventurous attitude as a child suggests his need to overcome his father as a ship can be rocky and hard to overcome. He uses adjectives to describe his father's energy as a farmer, such as 'broad shadow' and similes to show how his father once overpowered him in the first two stanzas. Within the third stanza, the volta of the poem shows how his 'dipping and rising' slows the pace of the poem to represent him getting older while his father is getting weak and elderly. However, in the poem 'Mother, any distance', Armitage still shows a close bond to his mother through the 'spool of tape' and shows that although he will physically move away, he will always be with her. This contrasts with Heaney's ambiguous phrase 'and will not go away' which could mean that he is proud and happy his father is still around yet he finds his father's presence to be a burden on him.

Overall, both poets use distance or direction to show how growing up can have a physical change on the parents as well as their own different struggles to overcome parental attachment. While Simon Armitage uses metaphoric reference to his need of further opportunity, Heaney uses his father's need to be followed and his idealisation of him as a barrier to growing any further than being the small boy on an Irish farm.

Grade 8/9 response

'Mother, any distance' and 'Walking Away' both explore the universal human concern of growing up and becoming independent. However, the way they explore these ideas is different, and they are written from opposing viewpoints.

'Mother, any distance' explores these ideas from the perspective of the child. It was written by Simon Armitage when he was feeling homesick during his time at Portsmouth university – where he soon left and went to live nearer his mother. This poem presents positive feelings towards growing up and a mutual understanding between the mother and son that it is necessary. These feelings are presented by Armitage through the structural technique of a focus shift: the poem is made up of three stanzas, which start with 'Mother', 'You' and 'I' in chronological order. The progression from the focus being on his mother to the focus on himself may be reflective of his journey through life, as he becomes less dependent on her. This progression is not negative; it is simply shown to be

natural. The final line of the poem – ‘to fall or fly’ – summarises the narrator’s feelings: they are scared of how they will cope on their own. However, ending with the positive verb ‘fly’ gives the poem an uplifting end and suggests that he did not ‘fall’.

On the other hand, ‘Walking Away’ by Day-Lewis has a decidedly negative tone. It is written about Day-Lewis’ first son, and presents the writer’s feelings towards him growing up. The poet evokes imagery of animals and space to describe the parting: for example, he describes his son as being ‘like a satellite wrenched from its orbit’. This simile shows the process of growing up and becoming independent to be painful and forced: a satellite should not naturally be taken from its orbit. The harsh ‘ch’ sound in the verb ‘wrenched’ adds to this. In the final stanza, the poet speaks of the events ‘gnawing’ at him. This verb has connotations of an animal causing a consistent pain.

Both poems share the idea of parental love being constant: in ‘Walking Away’ the poet uses an ABACA rhyme scheme to highlight how it is not affected by surrounding changes; in ‘Mother, any distance’, the poet ends the middle stanza with the two fragments, ‘Anchor. Kite’ to evoke imagery of his mother as someone strong and stable to keep him safe while he becomes successful (‘flies’). This is also seen in ‘Mother, any distance’ in the final stanza, where Armitage describes how his mother’s ‘fingertips still pinch / the last one-hundredth of an inch’. The full-rhyme gives these lines a somewhat childish yet not immature feeling, which may be further emphasised by the exaggerated figure ‘last one-hundredth of an inch’.

‘Mother, any distance’ and ‘Walking Away’ both use elements of fantasy to create an atmosphere that is surreal and dream-like at times. For example, in ‘Mother, any distance’ Armitage uses the abstract verb ‘space-walk’ to describe his movement through the house. This emphasises the distance, and evokes positive imagery of the unknown events that life holds for the poet. This also creates a sense of child-like adventure, which may link to the general theme of growing up by suggesting that we all keep some elements of our childish nature as we become older.

In ‘Walking Away’, Day-Lewis uses a number of similes and metaphors to describe both the events and his feelings. Between the first and second stanzas, the poet uses enjambment to separate fantasy from reality. This is jarring, as it forces the reader to quickly change how they visualise the poem. This may reflect the poet’s feelings.