FOLLOWER

My father worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.
The horse 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 headrig, 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, 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.

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

BACKGROUND

Seamus Heaney was one of Ireland’s greatest poets and was winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. He was born and brought up in Northern Ireland. Speaking of his early life
and education, he commented, "I learned that my local County Derry experience, which I had considered archaic and irrelevant to 'the modern world' was to be trusted.

Seamus Heaney

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE POEM?

The title of the poem tells of how the young Heaney followed his father literally and metaphorically while he was ploughing.

The poem begins in the past when the author was young and followed his father around while he worked on the farm ploughing. He admires the strength and skill of his father and how the horse obeys him.

The "shafts" are the long, wooden things that the farmer holds on to and that are attached to the horse (what he steers with). And the "furrow" is the deep line in the earth that the plough is cutting as it moves along (where you'd plant seeds). The fact that the horse is straining under the task also shows that it is hard work. The father's shoulders, because they are hunched and straining with the effort of steering the plough, look rounded from the back like sails do when the wind is blowing full force. Heaney is painting a picture of how physically strenuous horse-drawn ploughing is but also reveals how strong is father is to achieve such a task. He calls him an "expert" which also tells us how he admires and looks up to his father.
The sod is the surface of the ground. The ploughman’s job is to cut the earth on the surface in order to rotate the soil and to make planting easier.

The young boy follows his father as he works, but he's nowhere near as comfortable with the task. He's clumsy, and often stumbles and falls trying to keep up with the father-horse duo. His father sometimes carried him on his back while he ploughed. His ‘hob-nailed’ wake is the sight of the soles of his father's boots studded with nails which makes them last longer.

The writer talks about how he looked up to his dad, and wanted to grow up to plough too, but how he was never skilled enough compared to his father.

The writer lived in his father's shadow and yearned to be just like his father.

In the final stanza he sees himself as being a bothersome child, maybe even troublesome, ‘I was a nuisance’. We are brought to present day, where, in a complete turn of events, the elderly father is now following (but not literally) the grown-up son, just as the son used to follow in his father in the fields. Their roles are reversed.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN IDEAS AND THEMES?

- Relationship between father and son, age and youth

- Role models - father/son and reversal of roles as time progresses

- Appreciation of hard work of the artisan and skilled ploughman seen through the eyes of a younger generation

- An old rural world of manual labour

WHAT ARE THE ASPECTS OF STYLE WHICH ARE EFFECTIVE?

- The metaphor of following in a father’s footsteps, the father is sturdy while the son falters.

- There are many nautical images ‘his shoulders globed like a full sail strung’ suggesting grace and ‘mapping the furrow’ suggests ploughing is like navigating a ship: skilful and disciplined.

- There are many active verbs: ‘rolled’, ‘stumbled’, ‘tripping’, falling’ suggesting the physicality of the task.

- There are colloquialisms ‘yapping’ and specialised ploughing words like ‘sock’ and ‘headrig’ giving a feeling of the rural world of the farmer.

- There is a regular rhyme in the poem giving a sense of authority and skill of the father as well as a contrast between father and son.