What happens?

A child admires a skilled farming father; the ending reverses who follows whom.

The main idea

Admiration for a parent’s mastery develops into an uneasy recognition that dependence can reverse.

1. “full sail”

Method: Simile

The father’s shoulders suggest strength and controlled movement.

2. “expert”

Method: Minor sentence

The isolated judgement concentrates the child’s admiration.

3. “stumbled”

Method: Verb

The son’s uncertain movement contrasts with paternal precision.

4. “stumbling”

Method: Role reversal

The changed subject complicates whether following means care, burden or persistent memory.

Form and structure

Six quatrains with alternating full and slant rhymes; the final stanza turns from childhood to the present.

Development, voice and tone

Father at work — Admiring. Detailed observation presents a skilled body controlling the plough and horses.

Child following — Self-deprecating. The son wants to imitate that competence but remembers clumsiness and dependence.

Present reversal — Uneasy. The father becomes the follower, changing the title's original relationship.

Context

Heaney's rural childhood informs the precision of farming language. The poem also explores inheritance and a son's different adult path.

Comparison links

Walking Away: changing family roles. Climbing My Grandfather: admiration through movement.

Recall question

How does the ending change the meaning of the title?