‘Follower’ by Seamus Heaney
Shafts = handles of the plough

Wing and steel-pointed sock = blade that tears through the soil making the lines

Headrig = lines in the soil

Sod = the earth
The narrator describes his father’s expert ploughing. As a boy, he greatly admired his father’s skill.

The boy followed his father around the farm. Sometimes he’d stumble and fall, and occasionally his father would carry him on his back.

He wanted to grow up to be like his father, but all he ever did was follow him around being a nuisance.

Now they’re both older, the relationship has been reversed, and it’s the father who ‘follows’ his son.
The assonant long “o” sounds emphasise the broadness of his shoulders.

This simile shows that, just as sails harness the power of the wind, he harnesses the power of the horses and uses them to plough.

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.

The verb suggests tough, physical work.

Onomatopoeia draws attention to his skill – he can control the powerful horses just by clicking his tongue.
Describing his father as an expert shows that he’s technically skilled as well as strong. This short, blunt sentence and its position at the start of the line makes it a confident, inarguable statement.

Repetition of the hard-sounding letters “k” and “t” in this stanza reflect the precision of his hard work.

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

“rolled” and “breaking” continue the nautical imagery of stanza 1. The sacks are like rolling waves rather than waves that crash against the shore – the father is so skilled that he can roll the sod smoothly without breaking it.

The use of enjambment imitates how his father turns the horses round to start a new furrow.
The use of 
enjambment imitates 
how his father turns 
the horses round to 
start a new furrow.

Of reins, the sweating team turned 
round
And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,
Mapping the furrow **exactly.**
This stanza change emphasises the contrast between the father’s skill and the clumsiness of his son—it’s unlikely he’ll grow up to be like his father.

The reference to a ship’s wake creates an image of choppy water—this emphasises how the son found it difficult to follow his father.

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.

He describes his father like a ship riding the “Dipping” and “rising” ‘waves’ of the furrows. The rhythm of the poem itself seems to dip and rise—this imitates the boy’s movement on his father’s back.

This paternal image shows how the narrator and his father have a good relationship—he’s patient and loving with his son.
“plough” and “follow” are only half rhymes – this lack of full rhyme emphasises how the son has not fulfilled his desire to follow in his father’s footsteps.

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.

He felt like a failure for not learning how to plough.

He felt like he was living in his father’s shadow. He wanted to be as skilful and impressive as he was.
This emphasises how the ‘Follower’ in the title is now the father, not the narrator—the title refers to both of them at different times of their lives.

The list of verbs and enjambment emphasises the narrator’s clumsy persistence.

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

This is ambiguous—the speaker may be frustrated that his father won’t go away, or he may be glad that they still have a strong bond.

Caesura makes this change to the present tense sudden and unexpected—this heightens the impact of the final few sentences.

In line 13 the boy was stumbling behind his father. Now the roles are reversed.
Feelings and Attitudes

The narrator admires his father’s skill at ploughing. As a child, he hero-worshipped him and hoped to take his place one day, despite struggling to follow him.

The narrator worries that he’s a failure because he didn’t follow in his father’s footsteps.

Despite not following in his father’s footsteps, the narrator still has a close relationship with him—he “will not go away”.

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Questions

1. What impression do you get of the narrator’s father from the poem?

2. Do you think the narrator is troubled by the fact that he did not grow up to be like his father?

3. Do you think the narrator is annoyed that his father “will not go away”?

Key Themes

Admiration and relationships change over time also feature in ‘Before you were mine’, strong family bonds in ‘Climbing My Grandfather’ and ‘Mother, Any Distance’, and nature in ‘Letters From Yorkshire’.