WALKING AWAY
Cecil Day-Lewis is best remembered as Poet Laureate of Great Britain. ‘Walking Away’ is one of his best known poems, and is about his son Sean’s first days of school in the late 1930’s. In the poem, he is thinking back to when Sean started at Boarding school at the age of seven.

Why might a father be reflecting on his son’s first day of school eighteen years later?
A father remembers watching his son play his first game of football, possibly on his first day at school. The father feels worried about his son as he watches him walk uncertainly away from him.

The memory of that day still deeply affects the father eighteen years later. However, he comes to an understanding that this is a natural process that all children and parents must go through—every child has to experience the difficult process of gaining independence, and every parent has to let go.
New boundaries are also being drawn between father and son, with the son's newfound independence.

It is eighteen years ago, almost to the day — a sunny day with leaves just turning. The touch-lines new-ruled — since I watched you play.

Your first game of football, then, like a satellite Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away.

He remembers the exact day — it’s an important memory.

Transition from summer to autumn reflects the transition in the son’s life.

Enjambment puts the unexpected word “Wrenched” at the start of the line, which emphasises it. This reflects how the father found the separation sudden and painful.

Negative simile — a satellite isn’t meant to fall out of orbit, and to drift away makes the son sound helpless and in danger. The simile also emphasises how the father has stopped being at the centre of his son’s life.
Behind a scatter of boys, I can see you walking away from me towards the school. With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free into the wilderness, the gait of one who finds no path where the path should be. Suggests a hostile place-father worries his son won't survive without his protection. Repetition of "path" emphasises that the son to find the right way in life and that he sees him as helpless. Bird metaphor used to show the father's concern that his son isn't ready. (Away) Enjambment highlights the way the boy turns away from his father to follow the other boys.
“eddyng” is a natural image that compares the son to something moving in a current of air or water – this reflects his uncertainty and lack of control.

Natural simile contrasts with the satellite simile in stanza 1 – “loosened” is less painful and forced than “wrenched”. This shows how the father is coming to terms with what happened and understands that it’s natural.

That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something I never quite grasp to convey
About nature’s give-and-take – the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one’s irresolute clay.

Fire turns clay into a pot – difficult experiences of growing up turn children into independent people.

Experiences of growing up are painful.
“Gnaws” is animalistic and vicious— the father is still affected by seeing his son go through the tough process of growing up.

Religious imagery – in the Bible, God let go of Jesus, his only son, when Jesus came to Earth and was crucified. He did this to show humans that he loved them. That “God alone” could do it, shows how difficult it is.

I have had worse partings, but none that so Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly Saying what God alone could perfectly show – How selfhood begins with a walking away, And love is proved in the letting go.

The change to a more steady rhythm underlines how the father has come to a philosophical understanding— the son has to walk away from his father to find his own identity, and the father proves his love for his son by letting him go.
Pathos - something that creates feelings of pity
Half fledged - describes a young bird that doesn’t have all its adult feathers. A bird that isn’t fully fledged is unable to fly
Gait - the way someone walks
Eddying - air or water moving in a circular motion
Irresolute - uncertain
Feelings and Attitudes

The father sees his son as vulnerable, but understands that he can’t protect him forever - he now has to show his love for his son by letting him gain some independence.

There’s a feeling of loss and sadness throughout the poem, but also the understanding that “walking away” is a natural part of growing up. It’s not a permanent parting, their relationship is just being redefined.
1. Why do you think the speaker addresses his son directly (e.g. “I watched you play”)?

2. How is natural imagery used to show that father’s feelings about his son walking away?

3. The father says the memory still “Gnaws” at his mind? Why do you think this is?

Key Themes

‘Climbing My Grandfather’ also features a close, significant family relationship. The poems ‘Mother, Any Distance’ to consider how children growing up affects their parents.