

BBC Bitesize - Poetry

Episode 8 – Comparing ‘Walking Away’ and ‘Climbing my Grandfather’

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TESTAMENT: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize Poetry Podcast, I'm Testament, I'm a writer, rapper and poet, and your host for this series. I'm all about helping you get to grips with the poems you're studying for your GCSE English Literature.

In these episodes I'll be comparing two poems, and you can listen to the first three episodes in this series where we cover the basics.

Make sure you've got a pen to make notes, because I'm gonna be giving you loads of really good quotes for you to use, let's go.

TESTAMENT: In this episode we're comparing ‘Walking Away’ by Cecil Day-Lewis and ‘Climbing my Grandfather’ by Andrew Waterhouse, and my guest is the brilliant poet Caroline Bird. Yo Caroline walking, climbing, are you ready to get moving?

CAROLINE: Yes, let's do it.

TESTAMENT: Alright, we're gonna talk through three key points that will help you compare these poems. One, perspective. In ‘Walking Away’ we have an adult thinking about a child, and in ‘Climbing my Grandfather’ we have someone who is really small perhaps someone remembering being a child looking at their grandfather. Secondly, tense. ‘Walking Away’ is written in the past tense, while ‘Climbing my Grandfather’ is present tense.

And third and finally, imagery. Both these poems contain nature imagery. We're also going to give you the quotes to back up your answers.

TESTAMENT: Both these poems are about family relationships and memories, Caroline can you briefly tell us about the poem, what happens in ‘Climbing my Grandfather’?

CAROLINE: Okay, the speaker of the poem, he climbs up his grandfather and his grandfather is like a mountain, and he is doing it without a rope or a net and he's climbing from the shirt to the shoulder to the forehead, all the way up to the top of his head.

And then in ‘Walking Away’, it sounds a lot less dramatic it's a parent watching a child play football, and then watching their child walk back to school.

And you think well that doesn't sound like very much happens in that, but actually it does because it zooms in to the feeling.

TESTAMENT: Kid is playing football, he's walking around with his friends. He's not rushing over to his dad, he's choosing to walk with his friends instead –

CAROLINE: Yes, yes.

TESTAMENT: – devastated, devo.

TESTAMENT: Our first key point of comparison is perspective. They are both written in the first person. That means they're from the point of view of the narrator. In 'Walking Away', it's an adult.

CAROLINE: No and it's a perspective we don't often read about, a parent's fear, not of losing their child in a tragic way, but of just losing their child to growing up.

TESTAMENT: A great quote about what this poem says about relationships is the last line, Love is proved in the letting go. So this means that part of loving a child is accepting that they will grow up and they'll make their own choices, and they won't need you so much.

CAROLINE: The hardest part of this quote is the middle bit, And love is proved in the letting go. I would focus on remembering that middle, love is proved in the letting go, we're not just loving them and letting them go, we are proving our love to them by letting them go.

TESTAMENT: There's that viral meme, [sings] if you love me let me go, but you don't –

CAROLINE: Yeah you see, but you don't want to remember that.

TESTAMENT: But you don't – no but you want to remember it cos you've got love letting go but you've got to remember oh it's a remix so the word prove is in there –

CAROLINE: Remix, perfect.

TESTAMENT: – love is proved in the letting go. and let's compare that to 'Climbing my Grandfather', let's look at the last line here too, "the slow pulse of his good heart". Climbed the mountain that is his grandfather, and he's found love?

CAROLINE: So you're climbing up the vast mountain of the grandfather's memory, but you've got these lines, you've got to think about them in context right, Reaching for the summit where gasping for breath I can only lie watching clouds and birds circle – we want to be able to reach a conclusion right about the people we love but, love is much more vast and mysterious than that. It's as vast and mysterious as nature, and actually he gets to the top of his granddad, has he concluded anything? No. All he can do is suddenly appreciate the world.

TESTAMENT: Our next comparison is looking at tense. 'Walking Away' is written in the past tense, while 'Climbing my Grandfather' is written in the present tense. Caroline, what do those tenses do in those poems?

CAROLINE: 'Walking Away' it makes sense is written in the past tense about something that happened 18 years ago that they're trying to grasp and recount. 'Climbing my Grandfather' is present tense, I decide to do it free without a rope or net, it starts at the beginning, which –

TESTAMENT: It's happening now isn't it?

CAROLINE: – hap- it's happening right now, and that creates a danger, we don't know whether or not they're gonna climb their grandfather and fall to their death right, whether they're gonna reach the top, what's gonna happen and, but it also makes an innocence and a childlikeness – look, look, look what I'm doing right now, look at me.

TESTAMENT: In 'Walking Away', the speaker is talking to his son directly using 'you', whereas in 'Climbing my Grandfather' the grandfather is referred to as 'his', his fingers, his neck and so on. What does that tell us about the relationships in each of the poems?

CAROLINE: There is a, a directness and a – an intimacy of, I can see you walking away from me towards the school, even though we know now he's speaking to an adult but he's saying, I can still see you as that little boy.

TESTAMENT: That's lovely, and then let's contrast that with 'Climbing my Grandfather' so, here we've got his fingers, his neck, what's that doing to us in the poem?

CAROLINE: Well, it makes him more unknowable. The poem's full of love but it's also full of distance, like it's a massive distance from the grandfather's feet, his brogues, to his head, you think about our relationships with relatives, you will have relatives that you love but feel far away from you.

TESTAMENT: Finally, we're gonna talk about imagery. When you read a poem always look out for what kind of language you can see there. So here in both poems we've got nature imagery. Let's talk about the line in 'Climbing my Grandfather', "Watching clouds and birds circle", what does this line say to you, Caroline?

CAROLINE: I mean it's a moment of peace and beauty, but it's also a moment about vastness and the nobleness of nature right. It could mean, oh I've reached the top of my granddad and I know him and I can relax now, could mean that. It could mean I've reached the top of my granddad and I know nothing, and I'm just exhausted, and it could mean my granddad has taught me to appreciate the world.

How does it make you feel when you read it what – what about you?

TESTAMENT: Yeah I think it's okay to say that a line can have multiple meanings, you know. Okay let's pair that quote with one from 'Walking Away', Like a winged seed loosened from its parent's stem. What's a winged seed?

CAROLINE: Have you seen those? They're these seeds that look like they've got little wings right, and they're built like that on purpose so that the wind will pick up the seed and toss it somewhere else so it can grow somewhere else, and nature has deliberately designed it that way to make it easier for the wind to disperse it. Think about children, they have to be dispersed by the wind, you know, you don't want them living in your house forever, they have to grow up, they are designed like winged seeds one day they are going to plant elsewhere.

TESTAMENT: I mean nature here is definitely a metaphor again for the relationship between these two relatives [**CAROLINE:** Yeah.], like a winged seed, lovely simile –

TESTAMENT: Before we wrap up let's recap that once more, if you haven't already grab a pen and write down these quotes. So, we've got two poems about family relationships, love, memory, trying to know someone and letting someone go. In 'Walking Away' we've got the line –

CAROLINE: And love is proved in the letting go.

TESTAMENT: And the last line of 'Climbing my Grandfather' is –

CAROLINE: A slow pulse of his good heart.

TESTAMENT: And remember to pay attention to perspective, in 'Walking Away' we have –

CAROLINE: Past tense.

TESTAMENT: And in 'Climbing my Grandfather' –

CAROLINE: It's present tense.

TESTAMENT: In 'Climbing my Grandfather' the speaker talks about the subject in a more distant and novel way as 'his', whereas in 'Walking Away' the poem speaks directly and more intimately to –

CAROLINE: You.

TESTAMENT: And finally both poems have nature imagery, and what does it say in 'Climbing my Grandfather'?

CAROLINE: Watching clouds and birds circle.

TESTAMENT: And in 'Walking Away' –

CAROLINE: Like a winged seed loosened from its parent's stem.

TESTAMENT: Thank you Caroline, and thank you so much for listening to this Bitesize Poetry Podcast. Remember to check out the first three episodes where Caroline and I give you loads of tips to help you talk about poetry, and there's more on the Bitesize website. To check out other episodes in this series, or the rest of the Bitesize Podcast, search Bitesize on BBC Sounds. You got this.