Climbing My Grandfather

SUMMARY

I decide to free climb, without any safety equipment. I start at my grandfather's worn-out old shoes, which are covered in dust and cracks in their leather, and then pull myself up to his trousers, pushing into their woven texture to find a hold. When I get to his tucked-in shirt, which hangs loosely over his waste, I change direction along the belt and arrive at my grandfather's dirt-caked hand. His nails are cracked but are easy to grip, while his finger's skin is smooth and dense like ice warmed up. When I get to his arm, I chance upon a pale scar, like the ridge of a mountain; placing my feet carefully in the stitches, I keep moving. On his shoulder, which is still strong, I take a breather, resting in the shade. I don't look down, because it's dangerous to look down from this high up. I then gather myself and head up to the loose skin of my grandfather's neck. Once I get to his smiling mouth, I drink water next to his teeth. Feeling rejuvenated, I head across his rough cheek and look into his brown eyes. I see a pupil opening and closing slowly. Once over the forehead and its wrinkles, which are far apart and easy to navigate, I arrive at my grandfather's thick mop of hair (soft and white because of how high up it is), before finally arriving at the summit. Here, I catch my breath, lying back to watch the clouds and birds in the air. I can feel my grandfather's body warmth, and the gentle beat of his good heart.

THEMES

CHILDHOOD, ADULTHOOD, AND FAMILIAL LOVE

In "Climbing my Grandfather," a first-person speaker climbs up the body of their grandfather, starting at the feet before finally coming to a rest on the head. Using extended metaphor, the poem imagines the grandfather as a mountain, with the speaker doing their best to make the at-times difficult journey to the top. Through this idea, the poem explores the tender relationship between a grandchild and their grandfather, and in doing so the poem also turns the grandfather into a kind of mythic figure that captures how the young often look up—literally and metaphorically—to the old.

Though the poem never specifies the age of the speaker, the surreal difference in size between the climbing speaker and their mountain-like grandfather calls to mind the way adults are perceived by children. Through its carefully constructed metaphor, the poem investigates this sense of largeness and smallness. The poem builds its unusual sense of scale right from the opening. The speaker describes their grandfather's "brogues"—a relatively old fashioned type of shoe—as "dusty and cracked," like boulders at the foot of a mountain. These adjectives conjure a sense of old age, and the speaker's close focus on the specific details of the grandfather's appearance suggests the intense physical impression the grandfather made on the speaker in the first place.

In lines 3-7, the speaker continues this focus on the clothes of the grandfather. The speaker climbs up the trousers, the "overhanging shirt," and then the belt. This detailed focus on different items of clothing suggests the way adults can seem mysterious to children, as though they are dressed in clothes from another world. It also captures the way that children are both focused on and interested in the physical details of the world, in a way that many adults no longer are.

Furthermore, the methodical listing of the clothes suggests that the child observes the grandfather from a particular kind of vantage point, one in which the sheer sense of scale allows for the child-speaker's intense focus on each item. There is a sense, too, that the speaker knows these objects in part because of the close affection shared between the speaker and their grandfather. As these details are remembered in the poem's metaphorical climb, the reader gets the sense that the relationship between the two characters was close and physically affectionate.

From line 9 onwards, the poem develops this sense of affection while also continuing to explore the unusual sense of scale between a child and adult. Indeed, these lines focus on aspects of the grandfather's body—rather than clothes—which creates a sense of loving intimacy. This focus also creates an image of a child really studying the physical presence of their beloved and interesting grandfather, and of the loving grandfather allowing the child to conduct such study.

One of these bodily details is especially telling: in line 11 the speaker climbs past his grandfather's scar. A scar could well be the kind of thing that a child fixates on, something that they ask their grandparent about. The scar also humanizes the grandfather, giving this man described only through clothes and physical features a history—something must have happened, after all, to result in a scar. The scar, then, amplifies both the close connection between the child and grandfather and also the way that, to the child, the grandfather's past is an amazing, mysterious thing.

The speaker can only rest after reaching the summit: the grandfather's soft white hair. At this moment, the poem candidly reveals its main subject. The speaker, breathless, lies on the grandfather's head, "feeling his heat, knowing / the slow pulse of his good heart." In other words, the climb's purpose has been to reconnect with the affection of the grandfather: to feel

the "heat" of his love. The "pulse" of the heart also reinforces the importance of this child-adult connection, suggesting the shared love between the two.

"Climbing my Grandfather," then, presents a surreal but moving portrait of a loving relationship between a child and their grandfather. Though there is the sense that, now speaking from adulthood, the speaker is trying to reclaim something that has been forever lost, there is also the strong impression that the shared love between the two can *never* be lost. The poem is a memorial to what can never be lost, and the act of creating the poem is itself a way to preserve that familial love and connection.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-7
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 18-27

MEMORY

"Climbing my Grandfather" is a profound exploration of the way that memory works. Through imagining (or imaginatively remembering) climbing the grandfather—as though he were a mountain—the speaker strives to bring a memory of their grandfather back into vivid and vibrant color. The poem implicitly argues that memory requires a kind of effort—that memories have to be kept actively alive. By imaginatively reconstructing the grandfather as a mountain, the speaker brings him into sharp focus—and, further, keeps the memory of the grandfather, of the speaker as a young child, and of the relationship between the two alive.

The poem centers around one main extended metaphor: the grandfather as a climbable mountain. Through this metaphor, the poem examines the way that memory works, and how people relate to memories. From the beginning, climbing the grandfather is portrayed as something that requires effort. Indeed, it takes bravery too—that's why the speaker decides to "do it free," without the safety of guide ropes or nets. Throughout the poem, the climb is characterized as physically tough, requiring focus and determination. And it's through this effort that the speaker is able to remember details about their grandfather—how he dressed, the shape and texture of his skin, and his moral goodness ("the slow pulse of his good heart").

And given that "the slow pulse of his good heart" is what awaits the speaker at the summit, it's fair to say that this is the ultimate goal of the climb. The speaker metaphorically brings their grandfather back to life through the intensity of imagination and memory. Indeed, the existence of the poem is itself part of the implicit argument that memory requires care and attention. The poem is a memorial to the grandfather, and the imaginative work needed to create the poem is mirrored in the description of the physical effort necessary to climb to the top.

The poem also explores the nature of memory, and what memory can achieve, through ambiguity. Most critically, it's unclear from the poem whether the speaker's "climbing" of the grandfather is purely an imaginative effort and a metaphor for closely attempting to remember the grandfather, or whether the speaker is actually remembering times when the speaker really would clamber and climb around the grandfather's body.

If it is a memory of actual events, it is nonetheless an imaginatively augmented memory. It seems unlikely that the speaker either ended up lying on top of the grandfather's head, or that the speaker paid such clear attention to each detail of the grandfather's body. But this also speaks to the nature of memory, which is almost never a pure and accurate reproduction of an event—and sometimes can exist regarding an event that never even took place! All memory is changed and augmented by time, and even by the act of remembering.

In fact, the very fact of the clarity of this memory seems to imply that the speaker engages with the memory often, that the speaker regularly visits the grandfather through this memory—just as the speaker, likely, regularly climbed on the grandfather as a child. The poem, then, seems to suggest that memory, like the remembered grandfather, is a thing to climb; that it requires effort, attention, and engagement, and in turn can offer comfort, connection, and even the "slow pulse" of life to those things that have been lost.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I decide to ...
... get a grip.

The poem opens by making clear that the "Climbing" of the title, though unusually combined with "Grandfather," does relate to a kind of mountain climb. The speaker feels that it is important to make this climb "free, without a rope or net." That is, they see what is coming as something that requires effort, an element of risk, and determination.

The fact that the poem opens with the first person singular pronoun, "I," makes it clear that this is a personal poem—one in which the speaker will attempt metaphorically to explore the memory of their grandfather through the imagery of a mountain climb. And though perhaps it is not revealed yet, the reader gets the sense that the speaker sees this as an important mission worthy of undertaking.

The climb itself, then, begins at the base: the grandfather's

shoes. These shoes are a "dusty and cracked" pair of brogues, which are a rather old-fashioned shoe (signaling the grandfather's age). The phrase "dusty and cracked" also hints at the way memories deteriorate and change. Indeed, part of the poem's purpose is to keep this particular memory fresh and vivid, even if it is surreally adapted to the imagery of a mountain climb.

The sibilance in line 2 has a dusty sound to it, which is picked up in line 3 and creates a sense of slipperiness—though this is still the easiest part of the climb:

> First, the old brogues, dusty and cracked;
> an easy scramble onto his trousers

In these first few lines, the speaker focuses their attention on the clothing of the grandfather, partly because the speaker has not yet reached high enough to find the grandfather's features, but also because this is the way that memory works. That is, certain details come back first, and show the way to the more intimate and affectionate aspects of a memory (ultimately, the grandfather's face and "the slow pulse of his good heart").

LINES 5-10

> *By the overhanging ...*
> *... like warm ice.*

The speaker reaches the grandfather's shirt in line 5. This line's enjambment ("I change / direction") is followed immediately by a caesura ("direction, traverse"), signaling the unpredictability of the journey. Climbing horizontally along the belt, the speaker reaches "an earth-stained hand."

This is the first bodily detail of the grandfather, and it's an interesting one. Though the speaker doesn't delve into its implications, the "earth-stained" hands of the grandfather seem to be a particularly vibrant part of the speaker's memory. Maybe, for instance, the grandfather was a keen gardener, and as a kid the speaker would watch or help. Part of the poem's power is in the way it *doesn't* provide these kind of explanatory details, but leaves them up to the reader's imagination.

The speaker finds a surefooted hold on the grandfather's nails, the "splintering" of which suggests old age and manual labor. The two alliterative /g/ sounds in "give good" provide the line with a sense of security to match with the speaker's mention of "good purchase."

Line 9 sees the speaker exploring the rest of the grandfather's finger, and the sibilance ("the skin of his finger is smooth and thick") here conveys the smoothness that the speaker notices. Here, the speaker employs an oxymoron by likening this finger, through simile, to "warm ice." Ice, of course, is not an unusual thing to encounter when scaling a mountain—but equally obviously, it's not usually warm. Perhaps this warmth is indicative of the emotional warmth between the speaker and the grandfather, whether real or through the lens of memory.

LINES 10-12

> *On his arm ...*
> *... and move on.*

Following the caesura (in the form of a full stop) after "ice" in line 10, the speaker discovers the "glassy ridge of a scar" on the grandfather's arm. While "glassy ridge" plays into the poem's extended metaphor by comparing the scar to a mountain crest, the mention of a scar dials up the poem's sense of intimacy and warmth of affection. A scar is a kind of minute detail that, in order to be noticed, requires physical closeness. The speaker places their feet "gently" on the scar, and this gentleness also evokes the tenderness of the relationship. If the speaker were climbing recklessly, unobservant of the details of the grandfather's body, it would suggest a very different kind of relationship.

It's noticeable here, as with elsewhere in the poem, how little time the speaker has to rest on their climb. There is a clear sense of mission and purpose, a deep longing to arrive at the summit (the purpose of which is revealed at the end of the poem). The gentle assonance at play between "in" and "stitches" conveys this sense of cautious but determined purpose, the speaker insistent on reaching the top but not at the expense of causing damage on the way up.

The end-stop at the end of line 12 ("and move on."), as with the other end-stops in the poem, creates the sense of a journey moving through different stages. Much as a real climber would have to take note of each part of the mountain as they climb, so too the speaker has to be attentive to their environment.

LINES 13-20

> *At his still ...*
> *... open and close.*

In line 13, roughly halfway through the poem, the speaker reaches their grandfather's shoulder. Here, they rest in the shade, the alliteration between "shoulder" and "shade" evoking the shadows. But though this is a rest of sorts, it doesn't last long. Indeed, the use of enjambment and caesura indicates a kind of restlessness, the poem refusing to settle into a regular line pattern.

It's significant here that the speaker states clearly that they refuse to look down, "for climbing has its dangers." Perhaps looking down would break the spell of the imagination, and cause the memory to fall away. But it also signals the single-minded determination of the speaker to reach the summit—to keep going without pausing to look back.

From here on in the reader starts to get more of a sense of the grandfather's character. Although he is still described through objective observations—as a mountaineer might assess a mountain—these now start to focus on more emotionally revealing details. In line 17, the grandfather's mouth is described as "smiling." This indicates familial warmth between

the poem's two characters, and generally starts painting a picture of the grandfather as a loving and caring figure.

Significantly, the speaker imagines metaphorically drinking from the grandfather's teeth, as though stumbling upon a natural spring on the mountain. This suggests the nourishment and sustenance of family relationships, the adult providing for the child.

To get to the eyes, the speaker "cross[es] the screed cheek." The consonance clusters here are suggestive of textural roughness, evoking the terrain of the mountain side *and* the weathered face of the grandfather. The /ee/ assonance of "screed cheek" has a stretched sound, suggestive of the horizontal movement of the speaker.

In lines 19 and 20 the speaker makes it to the grandfather's eyes, watching one of them "open and close." Though the poem is framed by its surreal mountaineering metaphor, this represents a moment of contact and intimacy. Indeed, it seems that connecting with this emotional warmth is the purpose behind the climb in the first place.

LINES 20-27

Then up over ...
... his good heart.

After line 20's caesura (the full stop in the phrase "open and close."), the poem begins its long final sentence, which stretches over eight lines. It's here that the speaker closes in on the summit, which for any mountaineer is the ultimate goal—to reach the top.

It's interesting to note how the grandfather's features seem actively designed to help the speaker with their climb. The "wrinkles" here are "well-spaced / and easy," for example. It's also worth noting that the use of "-ing" words here: "reaching," "gasping," "watching," "knowing." These give the poem a sense of ongoing action, as though this memory is frequently revisited in order to keep it vivid and vibrant.

The "thick hair" of the grandfather, meanwhile, evokes the presence of clouds or snow on a mountaintop, as the speaker arrives at the summit. The "soft and white" hair suggests old age, but also a comforting quality.

The actions of the speaker when they reach the top are revealing. They aren't there to place some kind of flag on the surface to mark their achievement, but simply just to *be* there—to take note of the surroundings and enjoy the atmosphere of the memory. The speaker takes in the environment at the summit, "watching clouds and birds circle."

In the final two lines the climb's purpose is put most clearly: it's here at the top that the speaker can feel the "heat" of their grandfather, and "know[] / the slow pulse of his good heart." Evidently, then, the purpose of the climb—indeed, of the poem itself—has been to maintain and nurture a kind of knowledge: memory. Through this metaphorical climb, the speaker revisits their intimate relationship with their grandfather, and is reassured by his emotional warmth and moral goodness.

The rhythm of the last line seems especially important in an otherwise highly metrically varied poem:

> the slow pulse of his good heart

The two stress-couples here evoke the sound of a heartbeat, which in turn makes the grandfather seem more alive—and perhaps less remote than at the start of the climb. The speaker, then—in their own intriguing and surreal way—achieves their purpose of bringing their grandfather back to life.

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sparingly in "Climbing My Grandfather." This spare but precise usage helps the poem evoke its delicately calibrated imagery.

A good example is in line 7. Here, the poem employs the long /a/ (*italics*) and short /a/ (bold):

> to an earth-st*ai*ned h**a**nd. The n*ai*ls

The assonance is cleverly used here. The line describes markings on the grandfather's hand, evidence of some aspect of how he lived his life (perhaps gardening). The line is literally stained by these similar sounds, conveying the image in sound.

Another example is the shared /i/ sound is line 9:

> the skin of his finger is smooth and thick

The sound here is short and quick, evoking a kind of narrowness that fits with the description of a finger (and with "smooth" skin).

That example contrasts well with the longer /e/ vowels in line 18:

> Refreshed, I cross the screed cheek,

The speaker here has to travel horizontally rather than vertically, and the long vowels give a stretched sound that, read left to right, seems to match with this horizontality.

Another example of assonance is in "birds circle" (line 25). This is a pretty subtle moment, but perhaps helps to evoke the circular movement of the birds by repeating the same sound in quick succession.

In general, the poem uses assonance to capture the carefulness with which the speaker climbs the grandfather, observing every image with precision and traversing as gently as possible.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “o,” “o,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 2:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 3:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 4:** “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 5:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 7:** “a,” “ai,” “a,” “ai”
- **Line 8:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 9:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 10:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 11:** “ee”
- **Line 12:** “y”
- **Line 13:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 16:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 17:** “ee”
- **Line 18:** “e,” “ee,” “ee”
- **Line 19:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 20:** “o,” “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 22:** “i,” “i,” “a”
- **Line 23:** “a,” “i,” “a,” “i”
- **Line 25:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 26:** “o”
- **Line 27:** “o”

CAESURA

Caesura plays an important role in "Climbing My Grandfather," working closely together with enjambment and end-stopping throughout.

Essentially, the numerous caesurae are an integral part of the way that the poem's form reflects its content. The poem's main metaphor is the climbing of a mountain, and just as climbing a mountain is not a neat, straightforward thing (it's a lot more complicated than climbing stairs, for instance), so too the poem's form resists being too pretty or patterned. The speaker has to be ready—like a mountaineer—for whatever the climb throws their way. The caesurae help give the poem a sense of difficulty of movement and unpredictability of terrain, allowing the phrases to shorten or stretch as necessary, keeping the reader guessing throughout. It's for that reason that they are used in different places in the lines.

The first line's caesura is perhaps the most conventional, falling halfway through. But from there on in, the use of caesura occurs almost as if at random. The climb up the grandfather is an activity that takes part in stages, because physical effort requires moments of rest and observation—and the caesurae are part of how the poem creates this effect. Each one, in a way, is like a foothold dug into the body of the poem, the commas looking almost like the kind of equipment used by climbers.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “,”
- **Line 2:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “,”
- **Line 6:** “,”
- **Line 7:** “. ”
- **Line 10:** “.”
- **Line 11:** “,”
- **Line 13:** “,”
- **Line 15:** “,”
- **Line 18:** “,”
- **Line 19:** “,”
- **Line 20:** “.”
- **Line 21:** “,”
- **Line 22:** “,”
- **Line 23:** “,”
- **Line 26:** “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout in "Climbing my Grandfather." One of the first significant examples is in line 7:

> to an earth-stained hand. The nails

This line is one of the more obviously patterned lines in the poem in terms of sound. The consonance here works with the assonant vowel sounds to make the line itself literally stained with repeated sounds, bringing the image to sonic life.

Another significant example off consonance is in line 18:

> Refreshed, I cross the screed cheek

These consonant clusters of /r/ and /k/ sounds have a rough texture to them, which fits with the imagined terrain of the grandfather's cheek (which is presumably weathered from old age). This is interspersed with /s/ sounds, however, adding a sense of softness even amidst such roughness.

The last three lines also make effective use of /l/ sounds. These have a calming, almost lullaby-like quality. It works well because these lines come once the speaker has fulfilled their goal of reaching the summit—which is where they can enjoy their grandfather's heat and rest safe in the presence of "the slow pulse of his good heart:"

> watching clouds and birds circle,
> feeling his heat, knowing
> the slow pulse of his good heart.

In these lines note the additional consonance of /h/ sounds between "his," "heat," and "heart," which draws attention to the life force within the grandfather. All in all, the poem employs consonance to draw attention to certain phrases and images,

loading them with evocative power.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 2:** "d," "s," "d," "s," "d"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "t," "t," "g," "g"
- **Line 7:** "n," "n," "d," "n," "d," "n"
- **Line 8:** "n," "n," "g," "g"
- **Line 9:** "s," "k," "n," "n," "s," "th," "th," "c," "k"
- **Line 10:** "k," "r," "r," "s," "r"
- **Line 11:** "ss," "s," "c"
- **Line 12:** "n," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 13:** "r," "sh," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 14:** "sh"
- **Line 15:** "n," "n"
- **Line 16:** "l," "l," "k," "ck"
- **Line 17:** "m," "m," "n," "m," "n"
- **Line 18:** "R," "r," "cr," "ss," "s," "cr," "k"
- **Line 19:** "t," "st," "t," "p," "p," "l"
- **Line 20:** "l," "l," "p," "l," "p"
- **Line 21:** "s," "c"
- **Line 22:** "h," "h," "t," "t"
- **Line 23:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 24:** "r," "r," "l," "l"
- **Line 25:** "l," "ds," "d," "ds," "l"
- **Line 26:** "l," "ng," "h," "h," "ng"
- **Line 27:** "s," "l," "l," "s," "h," "h"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"Climbing My Grandfather" is, in essence, one long extended metaphor. Whether the poem is imagined from the speaker's perspective as an adult, or relates more to the way climbing the grandfather *used* to feel when the speaker was a child, the poem entirely depends upon its extended metaphor: that climbing the grandfather is a kind of mountain climb.

The use of this extended metaphor is important in more ways than one. Firstly, it helps establish the poem's surreal sense of scale. As much as it is about memory, the poem is also about the way in which children and adults perceive the world differently—specifically how large the grandfather seems to the speaker. Accordingly, casting the grandfather as a mountain gets across both the sense of physical size *and* the way in which he is a kind of mythic figure too—relating to the way that children look up to their elders, literally and figuratively.

The metaphor also allows for a lot of imaginative play on the poem's part. Suddenly, belts are no longer belts but giant obstacles to overcome. Shoes are boulders, fingers are ice patches, scars are mountain ridges, and so on. There is an almost child-like sense of imagination at the poem's core, which fits with the subject of a child-grandparent relationship.

But the metaphor also seems to be a comment on the nature of memory, suggesting that memories are something that have to be worked on with conscious effort. That is, people must keep their memories alive, revisit them, and spend time with them in order to keep them vivid and vibrant. And, ultimately, this is the speaker's reward: at the summit, they bask in the atmosphere of their grandfather's warmth and the "slow pulse of his good heart." Imaginatively, then, the speaker brings their grandfather to life.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "Climbing My Grandfather." It works together with caesura and end-stops to make the poem's phrases feel unpredictable in terms of where they start and stop. The poem is deliberately laid out in one solid block of text—representing the metaphorical mountain that is the grandfather—and enjambment helps conjure a sense of risk and unpredictability throughout the speaker's climb.

Accordingly, the placement of enjambment is unpredictable throughout. While the first four lines all have end-stops, lines 5 to 8 are all enjambed (beginning with the enjambment between "change / direction" and ending with that between "nails / are"). This helps signal the speaker's climbing momentum, their sense of determination and drive.

There are also a few instances in which a line ends with an active verb, the enjambment helping create a sense of action. Line 5's enjambment on "change," for example, sets up the surprise of the word "direction"—allowing the lines themselves to feel like they too are changing direction. Similarly, the enjambment at the end of line 10—on "discover"—allows the reader themselves to experience the thrill of discovery when the next line reveals just what the speaker has found (the grandfather's scar).

Line 15's enjambment on "pull" holds the phrase in tension, so that the next line has to complete it with, "myself up," Again, this helps the poem *sound* like the things it is describing. Thus, all these enjambments channel the energy and uncertainty of the speaker's climb, while at the same time they capture each description's unique resonance.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "change"
- **Line 6:** "direction," "belt"
- **Line 7:** "to," "nails"
- **Line 8:** "are "
- **Line 9:** "thick"
- **Line 10:** "like ," "discover"

- **Line 11:** “the,” “feet”
- **Line 12:** “gently”
- **Line 13:** “ while”
- **Line 14:** “in”
- **Line 15:** “pull”
- **Line 16:** “myself,” “neck”
- **Line 17:** “to”
- **Line 19:** “ pupil”
- **Line 20:** “slowly,” “over”
- **Line 21:** “the,” “well-spaced”
- **Line 22:** “and,” “ white”
- **Line 23:** “at ”
- **Line 24:** “ lie”
- **Line 25:** “watching”
- **Line 26:** “knowing”
- **Line 27:** “the”

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping is used often throughout "Climbing My Grandfather." In all, 12 of the poem's 27 lines are end-stopped.

End-stops serve an important function in the poem, working closely together with enjambment and caesura. Essentially, the poem is meant to act out something of the peril and risk that might face a climber as they go up a mountain. To do so, the poem resists settling into an easy and predictable form, particularly in the length of its phrases. The poem is intentionally set out as one long block of text, symbolizing the solidity and imposing nature of an actual mountain.

The end-stops primarily aid the poem in feeling like it completes itself in sequential stages. Just as a mountain climber has to constantly take stock of their surroundings, and break the climb up into manageable chunks, so too the poem creates a sense of unpredictability and distinct parts of the journey.

Line 4's end-stop, for example, a full stop after the phrase "onto his trousers," signals the moment that the speaker makes it from the grandfather's trousers to his belt. Likewise, line 12's full stop after the ending phrase "move on" shows the reader that the speaker is moving on from the grandfather's scar to the shoulders, reaching ever-closer to the summit.

In line 17, the end-stop after "teeth" indicates a moment's rest, while the speaker takes a drink from the grandfather's teeth. The full stop subtly suggests the passing of a short amount of time before the speaker continues with the climb.

Also important is the poem's very last end-stop in line 27. The poem ends with the "knowledge" of the "slow pulse of [the grandfather's] good heart." The full-stop is like a mark of achievement, the speaker coming to rest after having achieved the intended goal.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “.”
- **Line 2:** “;”
- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “.”
- **Line 8:** “,”
- **Line 12:** “.”
- **Line 14:** “,”
- **Line 17:** “.”
- **Line 18:** “,”
- **Line 23:** “,”
- **Line 25:** “,”
- **Line 27:** “.”

SIBILANCE

"Climbing my Grandfather" is a poem full of sibilance, which serves different functions at different stages of the poem. Put generally, though, sibilance is usually employed as a way of making the poem's sound reinforce its images. Sibilance appears both in the strictest sense—with repeated /s/ sounds—and more broadly with many /z/, /sh/, and /th/ sounds (which some people argue are not *technically* sibilant, but nevertheless work alongside the /s/ sounds here to reinforce the poem's images).

The second line is a case in point. Here, three sibilant /s/ (and /z/) sounds seems to conjure the "dustiness" of the grandfather's old brogues:

> First, the old brogues, dusty and cracked;

Then, throughout lines 7 to 12, sibilance is used extensively to subtly suggest peril and risk:

> The nails
> are splintered and give good purchase,
> the skin of his finger is smooth and thick
> like warm ice. On his arm I discover
> the glassy ridge of a scar, place my feet
> gently in the old stitches and move on.

/S/ sounds have a natural association with slipperiness, and the presence of them throughout these lines creates the sense that the speaker's climb is not a done deal—there's no guarantee that the speaker will make it to the top. Indeed, they have to proceed with caution and observation in order not to slip; as line 15 states, "climbing has its dangers."

In lines 18 to 20, the sibilance seems to be more suggestive of being "refreshed":

> Refreshed, I cross the screed cheek,
> to stare into his brown eyes, watch a pupil

slowly open and close.

Because of the hissing or buzzing sound it makes in the mouth, sibilance is also associated with saliva—and as this section marks the point at which the speaker takes a drink, there is a sense in which the /s/ sounds seem to refresh the lines themselves.

The /s/ sounds at the end of the poem in part recall this sense of being refreshed and rejuvenated, but also have a calming quality in keeping with the speaker's arrival at the summit:

> well-spaced
> and easy, to his thick hair (soft and white
> at this altitude), reaching for the summit,
> where gasping for breath I can only lie
> watching clouds and birds circle,
> feeling his heat, knowing
> the slow pulse of his good heart.

This is the point at which the speaker feels safe and secure in the grandfather's heat and the "slow pulse of his good heart." The poem's use of sibilance thus ends by capturing the sense of peace that the speaker finds.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 10:** "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "ss," " s," "c"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "s"
- **Line 18:** "sh," "ss," "s"
- **Line 19:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 20:** "s," "s"
- **Line 21:** "s," "s," "c"
- **Line 22:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 23:** "s," "s"
- **Line 24:** "s"
- **Line 25:** "s," "s," "c"
- **Line 26:** "s"
- **Line 27:** "s," "s," "s"

SIMILE

"Climbing My Grandfather" uses simile just once, in line 10. Here the speaker compares the finger of their grandfather—its surface texture—to "warm ice" (also an oxymoron).

The comparison of a finger to "warm ice" provides an extra dose of surreality to the poem's already strange central idea—the climbing of a grandfather as the climb of a mountain. "Warm ice" conveys the uniqueness of the speaker's imaginative experience. One way to read this simile is that the speaker's talking about the particular way that ice feels as it melts. Another way to read it is that the speaker has imagined what ice would feel like if it *didn't melt* as it got warm.

Either way, this comparison suggests certain characteristics about the grandfather himself: namely, a combination of hardiness and gentleness. It also reinforces the close attention that the speaker is paying to their surroundings as they make the climb. And, more than anything, the simile suggests the pleasure of invention that keeps this poem going. The speaker is investing tremendous imaginative energy in bringing this memory of the grandfather to life.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "like warm ice"

VOCABULARY

Brogues (Line 2) - *Brogues* are a relatively old-fashioned type of shoe. They are usually leather and have a formal appearance.

Scramble (Line 3) - *Scramble* here means to climb hurriedly.

Trousers (Line 3) - *Trousers* is the British English word for "pants"!

Weave (Line 4) - This refers to the textured pattern of the grandfather's trousers, perhaps suggesting they are made out of corduroy. The weave relates to how the material of the trousers is stitched together.

Traverse (Line 6) - *Traverse* means to travel across, particularly relating to moving sideways.

Ridge (Line 11) - A *ridge* is a thin portion of ground rising above its surroundings, like a crest. It's especially found on hills and mountains.

Screed Cheek (Line 18) - The grandfather's cheek is described as "screed" in order to give a sense of its rough texture. It is actually the adjectival form of the word *scree*, which is loose and stony debris, the sort found on a mountain. Thus *screed* means "to be covered in stony debris." It shouldn't be confused with a *screed* as a noun, which is a kind of concrete used in construction work.

Summit (Line 23) - This is a word for the peak of a mountain. Essentially, it is the mountaineer's goal to reach the summit.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Climbing My Grandfather" is notable for its apparent *lack* of form. This, of course, is not some oversight on the poet's behalf. Waterhouse intentionally opts for one single block of writing, feeling that this is a better container for the poem's content than a more conventional stanza form.

There's good reasoning behind this. The poem has one central idea throughout, which is the reimagining of climbing the grandfather figure as an actual mountain climb. A mountain climb can be prepared for, but by its nature it's a risky and unpredictable venture. Weather can change, and the terrain itself is constantly changing and may not match up with what's on the maps—so the climber has to be observant, attentive, and respectful of their environment. And, of course, a mountain is an intensely solid and imposing figure.

Accordingly, the poem takes on this mountainous form, the lack of stanza breaks reflecting the solidity of the natural structure. This also helps the poem's phrases feel unpredictable in terms of where they start and end, an effect aided by caesura, enjambment, and end-stopping. This makes the poem unfold in stages that are hard to predict, evoking the way that a mountain climb must be done section by section, adapting its path as the terrain changes.

METER

"Climbing my Grandfather" does not have a single dominant metrical scheme. Rather, it's written in free verse. That said, it does use the careful placement of stresses to bring its language to life.

The first line gives the impression that the poem *will* be metrically regular, reading as a line of iambs with an extra first syllable:

> I | de**cide** | to **do** | it **free**, | with**out** | a **rope** | or **net**.

This initial regularity reflects the speaker's mindset. They have made a decision and intend to proceed with determination and purpose, and the forward momentum of the stresses reflects this. However, because the climb itself—as climbing a mountain would be—contains a high degree of risk and unpredictability, the poem refuses to continue with this metrical regularity.

Instead, the poem uses this irregularity to its advantage, deploying stress in a way that helps capture each line's meaning. Look at line 13, for instance:

> At his **still firm shoul**der, I **rest** for a **while**

Here, the bunching of stresses in the first half of the line emphasize the firmness of the shoulder, while the two unstressed syllables in "for a while" capture a feeling of rest amid the strenuousness of mountain climbing. Each line of the poem thus engages in its own way with stress, heightening the specific images it evokes.

There is an interesting metrical effect in the final line:

> the **slow pulse** of his **good heart**.

Here, the two stress pairs evoke the sound of a heart beating—which is exactly the sound that the speaker is listening to. Ending on this reveals that, most likely, this was the purpose of the climb in the first place—to hear the grandfather's heart, and to imaginatively bring him back to life. The sound of the line allows the reader to hear it too.

RHYME SCHEME

"Climbing My Grandfather" is an unrhymed poem. Accordingly, there isn't much to say about rhyme here! It's worth noting, though, that the decision to *not* include rhyme is part of the way that the poem evokes the perilous nature of the climb and the mountainous grandfather himself. Just as a mountain has unpredictable terrain, so too the poem refuses to offer up any sense of false regularity through rhyme. Instead, the poem employs rougher, subtler, and more unpredictable sonic effects to achieve a sense of music. That is, its use of devices like assonance and consonance, along with the erratic stresses of its free verse, captures a kind of rocky musicality in line with the poem's imagery.

SPEAKER

The poem is told entirely in the first person. In the first line, the speaker informs the reader of the decision to climb the grandfather, and the rest of the poem tells the story of that mission. Ultimately, the speaker realizes their goal by reaching the summit—the grandfather's head. It's here that the speaker can bask in the bodily and emotional warmth of their grandfather, which is, most likely, the whole reason behind the climb in the first place.

Of course, this is not a literal poem. It's central idea and sense of scale are intentionally surreal and a little disorientating. But it seems that, in a way, this is the point. The speaker must take action to climb the grandfather, suggesting that memories too require deliberate effort and care. After all, in some sense, memories keep people alive who are no longer around. Accordingly, the speaker proceeds with a quiet but strong determination, paying close attention to their surroundings while also refusing to linger in one place too long, until they reach the top.

Through this, the poem reveals an intimate and loving connection between the speaker and the grandfather. It's not clear whether this poem is based on an actual memory of

climbing into the grandfather's lap as a child, or is just part of an imaginative take on the relationship. Either way, it speaks to the way that children and adults perceive the world differently, the speaker literally and figuratively looking up to their elderly relative.

SETTING

"Climbing my Grandfather" has a very distinct and surreal setting. On a basic level, the setting is the grandfather himself. But this is part of the poem's overall extended metaphor, in which remembering the grandfather is compared to an actual mountain climb. Accordingly, the setting is both the grandfather and the typical terrain of mountaineering.

The poem's setting unfolds as the poem itself progresses. The speaker has one mission—to get to the top—and the poem tells that story largely through environmental details. The poem thus starts at the grandfather's "base camp": his shoes. The speaker then works their way up the trousers, the shirt, across the belt; then the hands, an unexpected scar, and on to the shoulders; arriving at the mouth, the speaker takes a drink of water as though from a mountain spring, before eventually making the final leg of the journey over the forehead and onto the summit.

At the summit—the grandfather's head—the speaker is able to relax, enjoying the view and also, most importantly, sensing the "heat" of the grandfather. It's here that the speaker can perceive the "slow pulse of [the grandfather's] good heart." This reveals that this was probably the purpose of the climb: to reconnect with the emotional warmth that the grandfather represents. Because this is such an imaginative poem, it's also fair to say that the setting is, in part, the speaker's memory and imagination.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Andrew Waterhouse was British poet and musician born in 1958. His first full-length collection, *IN*, was not published until 2000, but it won the prestigious Forward Prize for best first collection. The collection focuses on many of the themes found in this particular poem, including family relationships and the natural world. Waterhouse lived in the north of England and was a keen geographer and environmentalist. Sadly, his career was cut short when he died by suicide in 2001, and the poetry world mourned the writing that would never come to be.

Waterhouse was active at a time of a resurgent (and continuing) public interest in poetry. Other important poets affiliated with Waterhouse include Sean O'Brien, Simon Armitage, and Linda France. But in his focus on the natural world, Waterhouse is part of a long-standing poetic tradition. A fair comparison can be made with the work of Robert Frost, though Waterhouse's poetry is less formally and metrically regular. In the focus on the rural British environment, Waterhouse also shares a similar approach to Alice Oswald. To read more of this kind of thing, Owen Sheer's anthology, *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, is a good place to start.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Andrew Waterhouse grew up in the latter half of the 20th century. This was a time of increasing material wealth in the West, but also of deepening inequality. Most gravely, it's over the recent decades that humankind has started to face up to the potential catastrophe of climate change. Accordingly, Waterhouse's poetry seems rooted in a kind of global environmental anxiety—though perhaps less so in this particular poem. Regardless, the close attention to geological features in the poem shows a strong interest in the natural world.

The 1970's were especially important in the development of the environmental movement, as people increasingly took a stand against the perceived inaction of successive governments to take the climate threat seriously (a battle that is, of course, still ongoing). Friends of the Earth, a prominent campaign group, was founded in 1971, and is still one of the loudest voices in the climate movement. More recently, London's streets were brought to a standstill by the Extinction Rebellion movement, with the young Greta Thunberg becoming a figurehead.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More Thoughts on Waterhouse — Libby Brooks talks about Waterhouse's life, work, and death. (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/jan/03/artsandhumanities.highereducation)
- Thoughts on Waterhouse and His Poetry — A thoughtful piece about Waterhouse and his work by Helena Nelson. (https://anthonywilsonpoetry.com/2016/04/28/guest-blog-post-andrew-waterhouse-and-the-seventh-syllable-by-helena-nelson/)
- A Reading of "Climbing My Grandfather" — "Climbing My Grandfather" read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhR78XrealY)
- Waterhouse's Obituary — A piece on Waterhouse in the British newspaper The Guardian. (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/nov/07/guardianobituaries.books)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Climbing My Grandfather.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Climbing My Grandfather.*" LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/andrew-waterhouse/climbing-my-grandfather.