

### Meaning and Content

The title refers to the ordinary and manual task of digging. This seems unusual and unromantic as a subject for a poem. The poet shows the enjoyment of simple actions. Even something as repetitive and physical as digging can bring joy and contentment.

# Digging

### Language

The poet focuses on the sense of smell throughout the poem.

### Structure

The opening line of each stanza makes a clear statement. The tone is decisive and matter-of-fact.

Today I think

Only with scents, – scents dead leaves yield,  
And bracken, and wild carrot's seed,  
And the square mustard field;

5 Odours that rise

When the spade wounds the roots of tree,  
Rose, currant, raspberry, or goutweed,  
Rhubarb or celery;

The smoke's smell, too,

10 Flowing from where a bonfire burns  
The dead, the waste, the dangerous,  
And all to sweetness turns.

It is enough

To smell, to crumble the dark earth,

15 While the robin sings over again  
Sad songs of Autumn mirth.

### Language and Meaning

The contrast between 'sad songs' and 'mirth' suggests that autumn will be followed by the harsh months of winter.

### Themes and Meaning

The act of digging into the roots of the tree is compared to the 'wounds' received in war or conflict. This negative image is transformed later in the poem as 'sweetness' through autumn's bonfires.

*Edward Thomas*

### Language and Structure

There is a repeated direct statement that questions the reader's use of the sense of sight. It has an accusing tone, challenging perceptions.

### Meaning

Colour blindness is the inability to see certain colours.

### Structure

The rhyme scheme (ABCBDEFE) is unusual but regular throughout the poem. Apart from the final stanza which only has seven lines. Perhaps this supports the feeling of anger that is only just controlled throughout the poem.

# Colour Blind

### Language and Content

A list of colours is used showing vibrant colours in a range of situations; some are beautiful and literal images ('purple in petals of the rose'); some are abstract images ('violet peace') while some images are darker in tone ('blue anger', 'radiating bloodshot').

- If you can see the sepia in the sun  
Shades of grey in fading streets  
The radiating bloodshot in a child's eye  
The dark stains on her linen sheets
- 5 If you can see oil separate on water  
The turquoise of leaves on trees  
The reddened flush of your lover's cheeks  
The violet peace of calmed seas
- If you can see the bluest eye
- 10 The purple in petals of the rose  
The blue anger, the venom, of the volcano  
The creeping orange of the lava flows  
If you can see the red dust of the famished road  
The white air tight strike of nike's sign
- 15 the skin tone of a Lucien Freud  
The colours of his frozen subjects in mime
- If you can see the white mist of the oasis  
The red, white and blue that you defended  
If you can see it all through the blackest pupil
- 20 The colours stretching the rainbow suspended  
If you can see the breached blue dusk  
And the caramel curls in swirls of tea  
Why do you say you are colour blind when you see me?

### Language and Themes

A violent and shocking image suggesting the colour red dramatically. This is especially shocking as it is linked to a 'child', an image normally associated with protection and comfort. There is a political/angry tone throughout the poem.

### Structure and Themes

Change of direction in the final lines of the poem. The narrator challenges the reader to consider why people declare themselves to be 'blind' to skin colour if they can see the other colours surrounding them.

*Lemn Sissay*

### Language, Themes and Meaning

The title suggests emptiness and silence. The house in the poem is used as a metaphor for death. The house is the body. The 'tenants' of that body have moved to another place.

## The Deserted House

### Language

There is a sense of loss and a solemn tone. Everything is missing 'Life and Thought'. If these elements have gone, what else is left?

Life and Thought have gone away

Side by side,  
Leaving door and windows wide:  
Careless tenants they!

### Structure

The exclamation mark is surprising. It suggests anger or astonishment with the 'Careless tenants'.

5 All within is dark as night:  
In the windows is no light,  
And no murmur at the door,  
So frequent on its hinge before.

### Themes

There are no sounds or light. These images reinforce the 'Deserted' atmosphere from the title of the poem.

### Language and Themes

References to 'close' and 'shutters' lead to 'vacancy' in the 'dark deserted house' creating impressions of loss and abandonment.

Close the door; the shutters close;  
10 Or through the windows we shall see  
The nakedness and vacancy  
Of the dark deserted house.

### Structure

Repetition. It is an imperative, therefore commanding, but its repetition changes the tone to pleading.

Come away: no more of mirth  
Is here or merry-making sound.  
15 The house was builded of the earth,  
And shall fall again to ground.

### Meaning

Suggests that the inhabitants had moved to a better place – a 'great and distant city'.

Come away: for Life and Thought  
Here no longer dwell;  
But in a city glorious –  
20 A great and distant city – have bought  
A mansion incorruptible.  
Would they could have stayed with us!

### Themes

Change of tone at the end of the poem: regretful? Grieving?

*Alfred Lord Tennyson*

### Language and Meaning

The title plays on the two meanings of 'Living Space'. It is a space – a place where people live. It is also a space that is 'Living' – it's alive. The poet presents the place as teeming with life – everything is unpredictable. It is vibrant and 'miraculous'.

## Living Space

### Language and Structure

'Beams balance' – the alliteration reinforces the precarious nature of the beams; they are balanced at the moment but they are balancing 'crookedly', suggesting that this 'balance' is temporary. The enjambment reinforces the precarious balance as this idea is split across two lines.

### Language and Meaning

The joyous and crazy tone of the poem changes to a reflective tone at the end of the poem. The fragile and delicate eggs are 'thin walls of faith'. Perhaps suggesting that our human spirit is like these fragile eggs in a haphazard life?

There are just not enough straight lines. That is the problem.

Nothing is flat

5 or parallel. Beams balance crookedly on supports thrust off the vertical.

Nails clutch at open seams.

10 The whole structure leans dangerously towards the miraculous.

Into this rough frame, someone has squeezed a living space

15 and even dared to place these eggs in a wire basket, fragile curves of white hung out over the dark edge of a slanted universe, gathering the light  
20 into themselves, as if they were the bright, thin walls of faith.

### Meaning

Even though the lack of straight lines suggests that the space is a 'problem', the tone of celebration and laughter suggests that it isn't a problem at all!

### Language

A suggestion of a desperate action – everything is holding together as it best it can.

### Structure and Form

The structure of the poem reflects the unpredictable shape of the building. In this line the word 'dangerously' extends further out across the page – like the dangerous lean of the building.

### Structure

Does the exclamation mark suggest determination? Pride? Surprise? Relief?

## I Am!

### Themes

The theme and tone of the poem could be read as self-pity. The narrator suggests that no one loves or cares about him and that everyone has abandoned him.

### Themes and Content

Despite self-pity, the speaker is also defiant, a defiance that is reinforced and explained in the final stanza.

### Language, Themes and Meaning

The speaker uses the final stanza to reinforce his theme: rather than worrying about being abandoned, he yearns for complete solitude and aloneness. He wants peace, security, lack of responsibility for anyone except himself and his relationship with God.

I am—yet what I am none cares or knows;  
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:  
I am the self-consumer of my woes—  
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,  
5 Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes  
And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed  
Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,  
Into the living sea of waking dreams,  
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,  
10 But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;  
Even the dearest that I loved the best  
Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.  
I long for scenes where man hath never trod  
A place where woman never smiled or wept  
15 There to abide with my Creator, God,  
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,  
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie  
The grass below—above the vaulted sky.

### Structure and Themes

The rhyme scheme (pattern) is different in stanza one from in the other two. It is very predictable: ABABAB. Perhaps that reinforces the idea of inevitable abandonment?

### Language and Meaning

The speaker represents the society he feels excluded from as a kind of hell of 'scorn and noise', etc.

### Language and Meaning

The speaker also represents society in an extended metaphor of a storm at sea.

*John Clare*

# Woman Work

## Language

'Woman' rather than 'woman's', perhaps suggesting that the speaker is using her own normal dialect. Perhaps this is her quoting the way her bosses speak to her: "Woman – work!"

## Language and Structure

The effect of the direct, contracted form of 'I have got (to)' is to make us feel the speaker is in a hurry and that she *must* do these things. It also sounds as if she is speaking in her own voice.

## Language, Structure, Form and Content

Sudden change of tone: more thoughtful, quieter. Imperative verbs make the poem now sound more like a beautiful prayer of yearning rather than rhythmic moaning.

## Themes

As in the poem 'I Am!', the speaker finally asks for solitude – a place and time to herself. Her paradise also seems holy. The 'curving sky' recalls the 'vaulted' sky in 'I Am!'

## Structure

Short lines, each listing a domestic task, plus the quickly-occurring rhymes and the repeated line structure ('the...[noun]... to...[verb]') confirm the idea of work as repetitive drudgery.

## Themes

The speaker looks to wishes and prayers to free her from her hard, boring, routine work. Nature is seen as a source of liberation.

## Themes

Nature is also portrayed as a source of love and healing.

## Structure

The quickly-occurring rhyme scheme stops after the first stanza to give the poem a more majestic, reflective tone. The rhyme scheme in the final stanza is separated by a line so that it has a more dignified effect than in stanza one.

I've got the children to tend

The clothes to mend

The floor to mop

The food to shop

5 Then the chicken to fry

The baby to dry

I got company to feed

The garden to weed

I've got shirts to press

10 The tots to dress

The cane to be cut

I gotta clean up this hut

Then see about the sick

And the cotton to pick.

15 Shine on me, sunshine

Rain on me, rain

Fall softly, dewdrops

And cool my brow again.

Storm, blow me from here

20 With your fiercest wind

Let me float across the sky

'Til I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes

Cover me with white

25 Cold icy kisses and

Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky

Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone

Star shine, moon glow

30 You're all that I can call my own.



# Piano

## Language

'Vista' is a long, thin view into the distance – like a tunnel of vision/memory.

## Language, Structure and Meaning

Sibilance gives a hushing sound like a mother soothing a child – very appropriate to the topic of the stanza.

## Language

Onomatopoeia is used to render the sounds that the speaker associates with childhood.

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;  
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see  
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings  
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

5 In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song  
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong  
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside  
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

## Structure

There is a simple AABB rhyme scheme, but lines vary in length so that the rhymes do not arrive at regular points. This irregularity dampens the rhymes' effect.

10 So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour  
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour  
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast  
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

## Meaning and Themes

Adulthood 'manliness' and its emotional control are weak compared with the pull, the 'glamour', the security and freedom of childhood.

## Meaning and Themes

The speaker wants to resist being drawn back into his childhood, but cannot. The past is cunning ('insidious') in 'mastering' – overcoming – him. It's as though nostalgia is unfair by working through the senses, not reason and thought.

## Meaning and Themes

He knows that it is unmanly to cry, but he cannot help it: the lure of childhood and its 'glamour' are too strong. It offers him something valuable: 'belonging' and cosy security.

### Language and Themes

This is a vague title, non-specific. It suggests that time may be the theme of the poem. The poem's opening makes the 'days' more specific – the days while it is raining.

### Language and Structure

The speaker finds herself frozen in time, just waiting, unable to be positive and active. She is passive. However, the repetition of 'wait'(s)'/waiting' does give the poem some structure, as though there are signposts, markers for the speaker to get hold of – if only she would make the effort.

### Structure

The poem's short lines make the poem quick and slippery – like the speaker's experience of time: it is something that she cannot control. It passes her by.

## In Between Days

In between the days

I am waiting

for the rain to stop,

the fruit in my kitchen ripens,

5 then rots. While the clothes

in my wardrobe

wait for me to lose

weight. The novel

inside me waits, while I

10 try to unblock

my fear. The womb

waits to be filled.

My insomniac self waits

for sleep to come.

15 In between days

waiting,

buses arrive,

planes take off;

summer comes and fades.

### Themes and Meaning

As in the poem 'Piano' the speaker seems to be made helpless – paralysed – by time's power. Here though time seems to push the speaker to one side, not involving her at all.

### Content

The speaker could achieve a number of things including being thinner, a writer, a mother, a good sleeper, but she makes very little active attempt to make any of these ambitions come about (except the feeble 'try' to overcome writer's block).

### Content

The ending reminds us of the ripening and rotting fruit in lines four and five: events happen without involving the speaker who is only waiting.



### Language

The name of the daughter – a Welsh equivalent of Catherine.

# Catrin

### Content

Dramatic contrast between the special thing happening in the room – a birth, and the routine world outside.

### Themes

The umbilical cord that joins them in love but is soon cut, thus beginning the separation of mother and daughter.

### Themes

Birth is not just the beginnings of the child's independence: here it is the mother too who 'struggles' for her own independence.

I can remember you, child,

As I stood in a hot, white

Room at the window watching

The people and cars taking

5 Turn at the traffic lights.

I can remember you, our first

Fierce confrontation, the tight

Red rope of love which we both

Fought over. It was a square

10 Environmental blank, disinfected

Of paintings or toys. I wrote

All over the walls with my

Words, coloured the clean squares

With the wild, tender circles

15 Of our struggle to become

Separate. We want, we shouted,

To be two, to be ourselves.

Neither won nor lost the struggle

In the glass tank clouded with feelings

20 Which changed us both. Still I am fighting

You off, as you stand there

With your straight, strong, long

Brown hair and your rosy,

Defiant glare, bringing up

25 From the heart's pool that old rope,

Tightening about my life,

Trailing love and conflict,

As you ask may you skate

In the dark, for one more hour.

### Structure and Content

The short lines, lack of rhyme and punctuation at the ends of lines all make the poem flow quickly as though the memories are tumbling out of the speaker's mind passionately.

### Meaning

The speaker remembers the sterile environment of the delivery room, another contrast – this time with her fertility that leads to birth.

### Language and Structure

Presumably this is a metaphor in a poem of metaphors. Here she imagines the words she says/shouts printing themselves on the clean white walls.

### Themes and Meaning

Struggle and conflict changes both combatants.

### Themes and Meaning

The key could be both real and metaphoric. Perhaps the poem is a 'key', giving the speaker access to (her memories of) the past and her childhood.

## The Playhouse Key

### Meaning

Unlike 'Catrin', in which the speaker partly wants to break away, here the speaker is yearning to return, to re-join – this time with her own childhood.

### Language

As in 'Catrin', the speaker recalls visual details with precision and clarity. The memories are vivid.

### Structure

The poem's simple rhyme scheme – lines two and four rhyming – helps create a mood of simplicity appropriate to childhood.

### Language

Word choices are sometimes childish, showing that the speaker is not just remembering – they are re-living the past.

This is the key to the playhouse  
In the woods by the pebbly shore.  
It's winter now, I wonder if  
There's snow about the door?

5 I wonder if the fir trees tap  
Green fingers on the pane,  
If sea gulls cry and the roof is wet  
And tinkle-y with rain?

I wonder if the flower-sprigged cups  
10 And plates sit on their shelf,  
And if my little painted chair  
Is rocking by itself?

### Themes and Meaning

Perhaps the speaker worries that her past, her childhood, is going on without her. The theme of abandonment/separation is also an aspect of 'Catrin'.

### Language

Personal: this is a poem not just about old age or old people, it is a poem about the speaker's grandmother.

# My Grandmother

### Meaning

Is this a double meaning? It 'kept her' alive, but also controlled her and gave her identity. She sees herself in her possessions: they tell her who she is.

She kept an antique shop – or it kept her.  
Among Apostle spoons and Bristol glass,  
The faded silks, the heavy furniture,  
She watched her own reflection in the brass

5 Salvers and silver bowls, as if to prove  
Polish was all, there was no need of love.

And I remember how I once refused  
To go out with her, since I was afraid.  
It was perhaps a wish not to be used

10 Like antique objects. Though she never said  
That she was hurt, I still could feel the guilt  
Of that refusal, guessing how she felt.

Later, too frail to keep a shop, she put  
All her best things in one narrow room.

15 The place smelt old, of things too long kept shut,  
The smell of absences where shadows come  
That can't be polished. There was nothing then  
To give her own reflection back again.

And when she died I felt no grief at all,

20 Only the guilt of what I once refused.  
I walked into her room among the tall  
Sideboards and cupboards – things she never used  
But needed; and no finger marks were there,  
Only the new dust falling through the air.

### Language and Meaning

The possessions around her allow her to forget that she is alone and without love. They distract her from her loneliness and her pointless existence? The speaker is looking down on her grandmother, detached.

### Language

Example of unsympathetic word choice: 'smelt'. (Although it is not as unkind as 'stank'.)

### Meaning

The poem ends with a poignant image of the grandmother's identity (and perhaps memory) being finally erased: she can no longer fight back with duster and polish.

### Meaning

The speaker's feeling towards her grandmother – fear (especially of being used or having only the same worth as treasured possessions).

### Meaning

New feelings the speaker is experiencing: guilt, compassion, empathy.

### Meaning and Content

Is this pity? Contempt? The speaker does not generally feel warmly towards her grandmother. The speaker's tone is one of distance and detached observation.

### Meaning and Content

Although the poem describes old people, it is actually about childhood – how observing old people makes the speaker suddenly understand her own stage in life as a child. The first words of the poem hint that the speaker is going to have learned something by the end of the poem. The speaker in 'My Grandmother' learns too.

### Language

This is a harsh simile: 'small' and 'fat' are unflattering adjectives. (Note the unflattering descriptions in 'My Grandmother'.)

## Childhood

I used to think that grown-up people chose  
To have stiff backs and wrinkles round their nose,  
And veins like small fat snakes on either hand,  
On purpose to be grand.  
5 Till through the banister I watched one day  
My great-aunt Etty's friend who was going away,  
And how her onyx beads had come unstrung.  
I saw her grope to find them as they rolled;  
And then I knew that she was helplessly old,  
10 As I was helplessly young.

### Meaning

Is this attitude mocking?  
Affectionate?  
Amused?

### Structure and Content

This is the turning point in poem/learning point for speaker.

### Language

Use of irony: in being unable to escape the behaviours of their stage in life, the young are also 'helpless' – this is a surprising view, neatly expressed in the repetition of 'helplessly'.

### Structure

The rhyme scheme changes at the end so that the final rhyme is held back with the effect that its arrival reinforces the 'punch' of the poem's unique idea.

### Meaning

The speaker realises that old people are as they are because they can't help it: they are losing their powers. (This is a traditional view of old age. In 'My Grandmother' the grandmother is described as 'Frail'.)

# Poem for My Sister

## Language, Structure and Form

The poem's vocabulary is ordinary and everyday. Lochhead chooses simple, colloquial words that are appropriate to the innocence of the narrator's young sister. The poem's lines are short and ragged, giving it an informality that matches the word choices.

## Language

The poem opens with the young sister's naive likes and her pretence of being a woman. This image is contrasted in the second part of the poem with the reality that her sister is still a game-playing child.

My little sister likes to **try** my shoes,  
to strut in them,  
admire her spindle-thin twelve-year-old legs  
in this season's styles.

She says they fit her perfectly,  
but **wobbles**  
on their high heels, they're  
hard to balance.

**I like to watch my little sister**  
**playing hopscotch,**  
admire the neat **hops-and-skips** of her,  
their quick **peck,**  
never missing their mark, not  
over-stepping the line.

She is competent at peever.

**I try to warn my little sister**  
about unsuitable shoes,  
point out my own distorted feet, the callouses,  
odd patches of hard skin.

**I should not like to see her**  
**in my shoes.**

I wish she could stay  
sure footed,  
sensibly shod.

## Themes and Meaning

The narrator's observations are amused, but the third part becomes more serious: the older sister speaks from experience when she wants to 'warn' her sister of the dangers of growing up.

## Structure and Form

Now we realise that the poem is not just description: it is also a parable of growing up. 'In my shoes' is now metaphoric: the narrator wants her sister to avoid the pitfalls of growing up.

*Liz Lochhead*

# Nettles

My son aged three fell in the nettle **bed**.  
'Bed' seemed a curious name for those green **spears**,  
That **regiment** of spite behind the **shed**:  
It was no place for rest. With sobs and **tears**  
**The boy came seeking comfort and I saw**  
**White blisters beaded on his tender skin.**  
We **soothed** him till his pain was not so raw.  
At last he offered us a watery grin,  
And then I took my billhook, honed the blade  
And went outside and **slashed in fury** with it  
Till not a nettle in that fierce **parade**  
Stood upright any more. And then I lit  
A funeral pyre to burn the **fallen** dead,  
But in two weeks the busy sun and rain  
Had called up tall **recruits** behind the shed:  
**My son would often feel sharp wounds** again.

## Themes and Meaning

The poem shows two contrasting sides of parenting 'soothing' and reassuring, and angry and violent in protection of the son.

## Structure and Form

The poem is very regular in form: alternate lines rhyme, and each line is roughly an iambic pentameter ('dee-dum, dee-dum' rhythm). Perhaps this helps the reader to feel that the poem has a sense of purpose – to reach the lesson expressed in the last line.

## Themes and Context

Despite the narrator's fierce protection of the son, they realise that they cannot protect them from all pain and mishaps. The implication is that hurt – both physical and probably emotional too – are unavoidable during the process of growing up.

## Language

The nettles are presented in an extended military metaphor as enemy soldiers.