

The poetry of Fleur Adcock – some pointers to help you look at her style.

(You will need to think about these points in your private study of the poems and find examples of them in the collection.)

First person viewpoint – very common. Think about the effect of this in terms of subject-matter and poetic ‘voice’.

Use of dialogue, especially in the creation of the ‘dramatic moment’ which is conveyed so vividly.

Use and kinds of imagery – often from the natural world.

Language is, on the whole, very accessible, direct, sometimes colloquial. She is skilful in creating the child’s point of view which is effectively conveyed in a plain, convincing style.

Structure of poems often follows a ‘pattern’ in which a ‘scene’ is created followed by a comment. The comment may do a number of things e.g. widen the situation and draw a conclusion; suggest a shift in time or perspective.

Adcock obviously enjoys using strict verse patterns and employs a great variety of them in this small collection. However, the sense of ordinary language is maintained because of the use of enjambement which often ‘disguises’ the regular rhythm and rhyme patterns.

Don’t forget the use of humour in her poems.

Essays

EITHER

What do you find interesting about the way Fleur Adcock presents childhood in this selection? Refer to **three** poems in your answer.

OR

Write about what you have enjoyed in **three** of Fleur Adcock’s poems, paying close attention to her subject-matter and the ways in which she expresses it.

A sample examination answer

What do you find interesting about the way Fleur Adcock presents childhood in this selection? Refer to **three poems in your answer.**

Fleur Adcock's interest in childhood can be seen in many of her poems, several of which appear to be autobiographical. She successfully conveys the language and viewpoint of the child but her presentation of this theme is rarely sentimental or nostalgic.

In 'Earlswood', Adcock re-creates memories of a time at school and at home during the Second World War. She describes the air raid shelters at school as 'damp tunnels' whereas at home it was 'cosier and more fun' and where the restrictions caused by the war were seen as a game by the children; the 'Table Shelter' was viewed by the children as their new 'den' and at night they would giggle in their 'glorious social bed'. The simple, concrete language reflects the uncomplicated child-like viewpoint which is emphasised by the questions – 'What could be safer? What could be more romantic...' and by the puzzlement over their mother's 'neurotic' reactions to the siren when the children are quite 'content' if 'slightly cramped'. The reader is, of course, much more aware of the real dangers and it is this double perspective that makes the poem so interesting. Adcock uses Mrs Brent who had been 'bombed out' to bring the dangers home to the reader. To the child she 'seemed all right', the stress of the phrase falling on the significant word 'seemed', but the horror touches even the child when she wonders about the 'moaning' in the night and the way she thinks she may have just imagined Mrs Brent

'shaking
splinters of glass out of her long grey hair.'

Here the alliteration and long vowel sounds effectively suggest the violence that was only just out of the sight of the young child. The final isolated line reveals the consequences of such a 'close shave' for the family – 'The next week we were sent to Leicestershire.'

'Loving Hitler' is also about the war but focuses on the humorous aspects of a child's misunderstanding. The situation is presented briefly in the first two stanzas through a combination of narrative and dialogue, the latter being a common characteristic of Adcock's poetry. The reader hears the patronising tones of the adults, " 'Quiet now, children!' they said as usual:" - in which the words 'as usual' suggest the child's frustration with the adults' refusal to give her attention - and also the radio voice of Lord Haw-Haw 'Germany calling'. Again, as in 'Earlswood', the child's viewpoint is conveyed through the first person perspective and the colloquial expression;

'I came out with it: "I love Hitler."' '

whereas the reaction of the grown-ups' is suggested by the onomatopoeic effect of '(mutter, mutter, / the shocked voices buzzing together)'. By this point in the poem, the middle stanza, the reader is fully involved with the narrator, this amusing 'mini-*proto-neo-*

Nazi' who demands attention and achieves it if only for 'five minutes'. Adcock skilfully reveals the thinking behind this six-year-old's shocking statement in the direct thoughts and voice of the child – 'Everyone at school loved someone' and Hitler was chosen because 'well, he was so famous!'. However, as the poet draws the poem to a close she hints at a more serious side to the subject-matter. The little girl's objection to Albert is that he laughed at her whereas, young as she is, she knows enough about Hitler to comment

'one thing you could say for Hitler,
you never heard him laugh at people'

and to settle for Albert 'All the same'. This final line stands alone, like the last line in 'Earlswood', encouraging the reader to pay special attention to its humorous and ironic overtones.

In 'Nature Table', Adcock's interest in children and childhood is conveyed in a very different way. Here, she uses the third person narrative viewpoint to present a series of portraits of young children at the nature table in school. In the first five stanzas, the different personalities of Ben, Heidi, Matthew, Laura and Tom are expressed through vivid images all relating to their reactions to Nature. Ben is trying, in vain, to count worms but they will 'wriggle, wriggle' and Matthew, the mischievous one, is experimenting with worms – drawing them, putting them down Elizabeth's neck and eating mud as they do. Heidi sees 'purple clouds' in the tank and imagines 'a sky for the tadpoles' and Laura is 'drunk on pollen'. Adcock skilfully expresses this by describing the experience in terms of sound as well as vivid colour – 'a slow hum of fizzy yellow'. Finally, Tom 'squashes his nose against the window' hoping to attract the attack of a thrush.

The poet's more objective approach in this poem allows her to move smoothly from child to child and also to give the reader a sense of the whole scene – inside and out. Nevertheless, when she reveals a close-up of the way the wind 'ruffles a chaffinch's crest' and of the sparrow's 'frilly grey knickers', she uses images which cleverly reflect the close attention and perspective of a child. Again, humour in the poem is conveyed through direct speech, when Heidi whispers to the tadpoles – " 'Promise you wont start eating each other!' ", and the comment that follows – 'Matthew's rather hoping they will.'

In the final two stanzas the tone changes as the poet seems to draw away from her close-up view and suggest a broader perspective. The sudden sunshine which 'sluices the window' brings an end to the moments at the nature table which have been so vividly created for the reader. Laura is separated from her daffodil and the tadpoles have been disturbed. When the 'clouds flop down again' in the last stanza, the greyness, the wind, the flying birds, rattling windows and the 'pellets of hail among the birdseed' almost seem to convey a hint of menace and the suggestion that eventually the adult world will impinge on the freshness and innocence of the children's lives.

All three poems – 'Earlswood', 'Loving Hitler' and 'Nature Table' – effectively communicate the feelings and experiences of childhood but also demonstrate Adcock's variety of approach and her ability to combine her insight into the humour and carefreeness of childhood with the presentation of some very serious issues.