

## Poem

# Sorting Through by Liz Lochhead

## The poet and her work

Elizabeth Anne Lochhead was born in Motherwell, Lanarkshire on 26 December 1947. Even though her teachers encouraged her to go to university, she had decided to go to art school by the age of 15. She entered the Glasgow School of Art in 1965 and started writing poetry. Lochhead became part of a group of talented young Scottish writers that included Alasdair Gray, James Kelman and Tom Leonard. At that time she stood out as a rare female presence in Scottish poetry and ever since has been instrumental in inspiring female writers and making space for women in the Scottish literary scene. Lochhead's writing draws on the Scottish oral tradition and has its own brand of distinctively West of Scotland humour and storytelling. Her poetry and plays have won great acclaim and have been very popular, resulting in her following in the footsteps of her friend Edwin Morgan, first by becoming Poet Laureate of Glasgow in 2005 and then Scots Makar in 2011.

## The Poem

'**Sorting Through**' is published in *A Choosing: Selected Poems* by Liz Lochhead (Polygon Books, 2011)

*Choose from the following activities to build your own Stage 3/4 or Senior poetry lessons.*

### Opening up the poem (reading)

LIT 3-04a/LIT4-04a, LIT 3-06a/LIT4-06a, LIT3-07a/LIT4-07a, LIT 3-16a/LIT 4-16a

NB: Teachers working with this poem should be sensitive to any bereavements that pupils may have experienced.

### Key questions

- What is the voice of the poem doing?
- 'The moment she died, my mother's dance dresses / turned from the colours they really were / to the colours I imagine them to be.' What do these lines say about how we remember those who have died?
- Can you work out when the mother's young dancing days were? Use clues and details in the poem to help you find out.

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- The sound 's' is very important in this poem and is used to create different effects at different points. Compare the line 'silver shoes/ swinging from their anklestraps as she swaggers' with 'the sadness of dispossessed dresses.' Which contrasting moods are being created here and emphasised by the 's' sound?
- Concentrate on the verbs in the poem – find the past, present and future tense verbs. What clues do these give you to the past, present and future moods of the poem?
- What human qualities does Lochhead give to the clothes? Why do you think she does this?
- Look at the final lines of the poem – what comment does the ending make about the character's attempt to create order?

### **Research**

- Pupils can ask their parents/carers about their youth. It's a great opportunity to get family photo albums out and share old photos and anecdotes. Can pupils bring to school a photo of an older relative when they were young? From this point, they can research more about the fashions, music and daily life at that time. Teachers who are feeling brave may want to bring a photo of themselves as teenagers and share it with the class.
- Find out more about the impact of WW2 on fashions and style in the 1940s. What can you research online or in the library about Utility fabrics? The link below will help.

### **Climbing inside the poem** (discussion and performance)

LIT 3-02a/LIT 4-02a, LIT 3-08a/LIT 4-08a, LIT 3-10a/LIT 4-10a

- Class discussion: how important are the clothes and styles that people choose? Do they say something important about our personalities and preoccupations or are they just superficial and frivolous? How much do we judge people by their appearances, consciously or unconsciously?
- Practise readings and performances of this poem. Which different tones and moods need to be conveyed through voice and expression (e.g. youthful light heartedness, wistfulness, grief etc.)?

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TEACHING RESOURCES: SECONDARY SCHOOLS



**Building on the poem** (writing)

LIT 3-23a/LIT 4-23a, LIT 3-25a/LIT 4-25a, LIT 3-26a/LIT 4-26a

- Using the photos assembled as research, ask pupils to write poems comparing their parents now to when they were younger.
- Ask pupils to sort through their own wardrobes to find an item which they haven't worn for a long time. Maybe they have grown out of it or it is no longer fashionable. Ask pupils to consider times when they did wear this item. Where were they? What did they do? How did they feel? How does the touch/look/smell of the item make them feel now? Use these reminiscences and feelings as the starting point for a poem which explores the past and the present in terms of the piece of clothing.
- In 'Sorting Through' the mother's clothes are being donated to Oxfam. Charity shops are full of fascinating objects. Challenge your class to visit charity shops and choose objects to write about. (N.B. They only have to look at the object, not buy it). What would the object say? Who did it belong to previously and why did they give it away? Write poems from the objects' point of view.

## Further reading and links

### Selected Books by Liz Lochhead

*Dreaming Frankenstein & Collected Poems* (Polygon Books, 1984)

*True Confessions & New Clichés* (Polygon Books, 1985)

*Bagpipe Muzak* (Penguin, 1991)

*The Colour of Black and White: poems 1984-2003* (Polygon Books, 2003)

*A Choosing: Selected Poems* (Polygon Books, 2011)

### Websites

<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/liz-lochhead>

includes biography, poem texts and In the Library

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00mr8yj/profiles/liz-lochhead>

BBC profile of Liz Lochhead

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/video/2011/aug/23/liz-lochhead-edinburgh-video>

<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/our-national-poet>

SPL page about Liz Lochhead's role as Scottish Makar

<http://www.1940.co.uk/acatalog/an-introduction-to-utility-clothing.html>

Information about Utility clothing in WW2

