

The Colour of Black & White

Poems by Liz Lochhead

Suggestions for learning and teaching Scottish literature and language

James Alison

'I remember, can I really remember, or is it just mythology – Power
Cuts and Sweetie Rationing?'

(from *A Protestant Girlhood*)

These notes focus on ten poems composed between 1984 and 2003, which are included in Lochhead's most recent collection *The Colour of Black & White* (2003). The purpose of these notes is to suggest some ways in which the poems may be read and explored by students, and also to encourage enjoyment of other poems in the collection. The suggested assignments are not designed as practice examination questions but are aimed approximately at SQA's Higher Grade and Advanced Higher Grade English courses. Some deal quite generally with matters of theme and style while others look at the effect of key choices of image, vocabulary, grammar, rhythm and rhyme. The questions are frequently open-ended and are not intended to be comprehensive, but we believe that selectively used they trigger interesting and worthwhile ways of getting to grips with the texts. The chosen poems, which present different facets of the poet's achievement, are:

The New-married Miner.....	p12
Kidspoe/Bairnsang.....	p19
The Metal Raw	p25
Sorting Through	p39
View of Scotland/Love Poem	p45
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RANGE

- S5–S6. Higher Grade and Advanced Higher Grade

KEY TEXT

- *The Colour of Black & White: Poems 1984–2003*, Liz Lochhead (Polygon, 2003)

RECOMMENDED

- *Dreaming Frankenstein & Collected Poems 1967–1984*, Liz Lochhead (Polygon, 2003)
- *Dracula, adapted from Bram Stoker's original*, Liz Lochhead (Penguin Plays, 1989)
- *A Protestant Girlhood*, Liz Lochhead, an autobiographical memoir in *Jock Tamson's Bairs: Essays on a Scots Childhood*, edited by Trevor Royle (Hamish Hamilton, 1977)
- *Handfast*, Liz Lochhead and Lizzie MacGregor (Polygon, 2004)
- *Dracula*, Bram Stoker (Penguin Classics, 2003)
- *Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry*, edited by Douglas Dunn (Faber, 1992)
- *100 Favourite Scottish Poems to Read Aloud* edited by Gordon Jarvie (Luath Press, 2007)
- *Sonnets from Scotland*, Edwin Morgan (Mariscat, 1984), also in *New Selected Poems*, Edwin Morgan (Carcenet, 2000)
- 'The Lady of Shalott', in *Tennyson: Selected Poems*, edited by Christopher Ricks (Penguin Classics, 2007)
- *Lanarkshire's Mining Legacy*, Guthrie Hutton (Senlake, 1997)

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Dictionary of the Scots Language: www.dsl.ac.uk
- Queen's University Belfast has recordings of Lochhead's own readings with commentary:
www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SeamusHeaneyCentreforPoetry/pa/II

Association for Scottish Literary Studies, c/o Department of Scottish Literature, 7 University Gardens,
University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QH, Scotland. ASLS is a registered charity no. SC006535.

Tel/Fax: +44 (0)141 330 5309

Email: office@asls.org.uk

Website: www.asls.org.uk

LEARNING AND TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS

1. PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

These are focusing assignments which may be undertaken in discussion or writing before students respond to the ten poems.

In her poetry Liz Lochhead is intrigued by reminiscence – its power and its fallibility. She emphasises that her poems are not necessarily directly autobiographical; yet she clearly and vividly exploits memories of her early life in Lanarkshire in the 1950s and 60s. She frequently works into her poems recollections of childhood, stories and rhymes, parents, adult relationships and friendships, travel, living in Scotland, and her life as a writer.

- You can search out useful biographical information in her own memoir, *A Protestant Girlhood*; in Margery Palmer McCulloch's introduction to her Scotnote on *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*; in websites such as those of the British Council, The Scottish Poetry Library, and SCRAN; and also a general comment in Lochhead's preface to the 2003 edition of *Dreaming Frankenstein and Collected Poems 1984–2003*.
- We are all likely to remember situations and stories from our own childhood. In solo presentation or group discussion, give an account of an early episode which still sticks vividly in your memory. It might feature a favourite place, an encounter with relatives or strangers, an embarrassing experience, Hogmanay, a christening, wedding or funeral, a risky exploit with friends – anything, in fact, that has left its mark on you!
- Write a brief report on any folk tales, local stories or legends that impressed you as a young child. Can you tell one aloud to your group or class?

2. READING ACTIVITIES

You may tackle some or all of the poems, and in any order that you choose. For each one, we suggest that you read the poem over carefully for yourself, identifying words or phrases that puzzle or intrigue you. The **Google** search engine offers an invaluable source of miscellaneous background information. Try, for example, 'Bauhaus' in '5th April 1990' (p75) or 'liquid stockings' in 'Sorting Through' (p39). Preferably someone should then read the poem aloud. Thereafter in group or class discussion try to come to conclusions about the point and effectiveness of each poem. Record your views in some form.

The New-married Miner (p12)

Liz Lochhead reads and comments on the Lanarkshire origins of this poem on the Queen's University Belfast website listed above. You will find evocative photographs of the lost world of the Lanarkshire pits in Guthrie Hutton's *Lanarkshire's Mining Legacy* (see for example pp26, 27, 95 and 100).

Here are some questions to open up your discussion.

- Drawing your evidence from the imagery of this text, justify its inclusion in a collection titled *The Colour of Black & White*.
- What is the antecedent of 'it' in line 7?
- Identify the related images of roundness in lines 1–18.

- In the closing lines of the poem the noun 'man' is probably being used in two senses, one of which is a Scots usage. How do these relate to the title?
- The miner, like the ploughman and the weaver, has been celebrated in poetry and folk song as an alluring and sexually potent figure. Is there evidence in the imagery of Lochhead's poem of this representation?

If you are interested, find for example Burns's version of 'The Collier Laddie' and the Northumbrian rhyme and pipe tune 'The Bonnie Pit Laddie'. One Lanarkshire folk song, 'The Blantyre Explosion', tells the tragic story of Johnny Murphy, a handsome young miner lost in a devastating pit disaster on his wedding day in 1877. Versions sung by Ewan MacColl, Luke Kelly and Dick Gaughan are available.

Kidspoem/Bairnsang (p19)

- Consider closely the language of lines 1–12 and 25–32 in this poem. Try to identify in these the features of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation/spelling which are Scots; and distinguish them from the expressions which are simply informal domestic English.
- How would you describe the language features of lines 13–24?
- Tease out some of the complexities of what the speaker is saying. Evidently she has not in fact forgotten her mother's domestic idiom. What does the final sentence suggest about the difference in status and authority between speaking and writing? Why is this sentence largely expressed in the forms which she describes as 'dead'? Try expressing it in any Scots style with which you are comfortable.
- Liz Lochhead once described *Kidspoem/Bairnsang* deprecatingly as 'that silly wee poem'. Decide whether you agree or not, and say why. You can hear her reading and commenting on the piece on Queen's University Belfast website listed above.
- For two other treatments of awkward language issues of speaking and writing, consider Tom Leonard's poem 'Unrelated Incidents 3' (In *Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry*) and Nancy Nicolson's 'Listen to the Teacher' (in *100 Favourite Scottish Poems to Read Out Loud*).

The Metal Raw (p25)

Here the poet is exploring memories of one of the landscapes of her childhood in the Lanarkshire village of Newarthill.

- Comment on the devices of style she uses in lines 7–17 to convey her complex impressions of the 'raw'.
- Is there such a word as 'mulchy' (line 33)? What does it suggest to you? Consider also the aptness or otherwise of the use of 'blizzards' (line 45) and 'buy' (line 49).
- Why do you suppose the poet sets in italics phrases such as 'wouldnae do me any harm' and 'mushroom cloud'?
- Two very different social groups impinge upon each other via the 'raw'. What are they? Is there any evidence in the poem of their attitudes to each other?
- What do you think the references to 'Baby Jesus' and 'Old Meg' reveal about the little girl's developing cast of mind?

Sorting Through (p39)

- Here Lochhead is tackling one of life's most affecting experiences. State briefly what the situation is, and comment on the contrast identified in the first sentence.
- Explore the poem's references to clothes, cosmetics and fashion brands. How do these position the mother in time and class?
- 'Every mote ... this is useful' (lines 15, 16). Tease out as fully as you can the allusions and implications of this sentence, and suggest what it is that might be 'useful'.
- The poem concludes with some unexpected collocations of language. What do you make of attaching human qualities – 'sadness', 'decency' and 'gravitas' – to features of clothing?
- Discuss whether this poem could be regarded as an elegy.

View of Scotland/Love Poem (p45)

- Do you assume that the voice in this poem is that of a woman? Could the speaker possibly be a man? Consider carefully the evidence of the text.
- The speaker brings to mind three moments in time. What do these have in common and how do they differ?
- '... too ordinary to be nostalgia ...' Explore the meaning of this assertion and try to identify the items in lines 1–22 which suggest that '... it's thirty years since ...'.
- Comment on the mood you think is being conveyed by the syntax of lines 16–18, repeated in parenthesis in lines 41–43.
- Consider the effectiveness of the poem's title.

The Bride (p55)

A third of the pieces in *The Colour of Black & White* deal in some way with love, marriage and sexual relations – mostly but not exclusively from the point of view of the woman. Their moods range widely, dealing in responses such as passion, lust, tenderness, pathos, comedy, disillusionment and cynicism. Lochhead's feeling for these areas of human experience has led her recently to supply an introduction to *Handfast*, an anthology of Scottish poems for wedding and affirmation celebrations. In this she writes touchingly of her own registry ceremony, 'It wasn't the signing of the paper, it was the speaking out of the words.'

'The Bride' is cast in one of Lochhead's favourite forms, the dramatic monologue. For further comment on monologues see the note below on 'Almost Miss Scotland' (p108).

- From the first dogmatic line of the poem it is clear that you need to have some idea of what Elsa Lanchester looked like. Find out in **Google** what you can about her appearance and personality (she is best known for starring in a horror film, *The Bride of Frankenstein*).
- How would you describe the narrative structure and movement of this poem? Consider its stages, and the tenses used throughout.
- '... and the corncrake domesticity of dawnchorus toast getting scraped' (paragraph 1). Identify the stylistic effects at work in this phrase. The poem contains many striking images of this kind. Taken together, what do they suggest about the bride's personality and attitudes?

- Can you find anything within the poem to justify rationally the bride's conviction expressed in the last three lines? Can you suggest your own plausible reason for her conclusion? How effective do you find this ending?
- Compare in mood and style the view of the wedding contract revealed in 'The Bride' with those offered in two other poems in the collection, 'Epithalamium' (p53) and 'In the Beginning' (p112). With reference to 'Epithalamium', find out what the word means and read if you can Lochhead's description of her own wedding in the introduction to *Handfast*.

Lucy's Diary (p67)

This poem draws upon and elaborates a character in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. You do not need to read the book, or view any of its film versions, to appreciate something of what the diary entries are disclosing about Lucy. To that extent the poem can stand on its own, but you may well be tempted by its revelations to read the original. You will find examples of Lucy Westenra's diary in chapter IX of Stoker's *Dracula*.

Lochhead has also written a play based on the *Dracula* narrative.

- Drawing only the evidence of the poem, indicate briefly what seem to be the facts of the situation in which Lucy finds herself. What, for example, can you infer about her family?
- In the light of other references and images in the poem, do you find anything puzzling about the reference to 'the big car' in line 1?
- If you know a little of the basic *Dracula* story you may detect telltale ominous undertones in what Lucy is saying. Comment on a few of these highly-charged expressions.
- Consider the effectiveness of language and image in paragraph II (lines 18–26).
- In real life and in fiction, diaries are often a genre for intimate confessional revelations. What do we learn of Lucy's psychological state from entry V of her diary (lines 51–64)? Invent a brief entry from Lucy's mother's journal in which she reacts to her daughter's behaviour.

5th April 1990 (p75)

This is one of several poems in the collection that celebrate artists whom Lochhead admires. Composed in anticipation of the birthday of the poet Edwin Morgan, it is an allusive and demanding piece, but is dated only in the sense that it refers closely to particular events in a particular place and time. Using **Google** or other sources of reference, you should be able to explore and respond to its moving quality (Morgan's birthday falls on the 27th of April).

- Among the bits and pieces of the poet's luggage, two items come together to catch her attention. Describe their appearance and condition briefly.
- As a visitor to Berlin Lochhead shows herself in two roles. From the evidence of the text explore the differences between these.
- To appreciate the reference to the power of Morgan's poetry, you should seek out a copy of the original edition of *Sonnets from Scotland*, notice its format, and consider the sonnets

dealing with the writers Hopkins and De Quincey. Do they seem to you relevant in any way to Lochhead's experiences in Berlin?

- 'I think who could make sense of it?' (line 80). Looking at the poem as a whole try to identify the mystery that needs to be clarified.
- 'And outside there was Berlin' (line 9). Consider Lochhead's use of detail in building up impressions of the Kreuzberg, Zoostation and Polish Market districts, and try your hand at catching in prose or verse the atmosphere of a shopping precinct near you. It could be shabby or luxurious – or both.

***Almost Miss Scotland* (p108)**

Liz Lochhead is one of Scotland's most distinguished dramatists. In her poetry she has assumed and played around with many different voices, and over the years she has honed her skills in writing and acting what she has called 'out-loud performances'. A selection of these short works has been published as *True Confessions and New Clichés*.

They belong to the very broad literary category of *dramatic monologues*, in which the speaker addresses a real or imagined audience and usually manages to reveal more than he or she realises. Such solo presentations in verse or prose can range from the complacent ruthlessness of Browning's 'My Last Duchess' to the odious hypocrisy of Burns's 'Holy Willie's Prayer'; and on to the wistful humour of Alan Bennett's lonely people in 'Talking Heads' and the satiric bite of the women in Carol Ann Duffy's 'The World's Wife'. They have also revealed anarchic tendencies in traditional music hall, variety, revue sketches, stand-up and pantomime routines – particularly in the Scottish theatre. Lochhead's 'Almost Miss Scotland' and 'The Bride' (p55) owe something to this comic tradition.

- Describe briefly the essentials of this 'stramash' as they might be reported in a paragraph by a newspaper's TV critic.
- What does the contestant's 'confession' reveal of her personality? Suggest a few Scots adjectives that might fit.
- Tease out the main ingredients of the contestant's idiolect, i.e. her own personal and distinctive way of speaking. Consider in particular the following three expressions:

'... a pearl

Everybody kennt the price of' (paragraph 6)

'All for One and One for All' (paragraph 9)

'Her hale fortune isnae in men's eyes' (paragraph 10)

Explain what they have in common. What do you make of their use by the contestant?

- What serious issue is expressed in the last paragraph of the poem?
- Perform this monologue with gusto for the edification of your group or class.

***The Lady of Shalott* (p119)**

- To begin with, you will notice in this poem a possibly distracting example of shifting meanings in language: semantic change. Since the text was composed, probably about twenty years ago, one of its key words has developed

an additional and hilarious popular meaning which almost certainly Lochhead, who delights in double entendres, did not have in mind. What is the word? How far does it undermine your response of the poem?

- This poem depends largely for its impact upon the reader already knowing another work of literature, Lord Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott'. For its own sake as well as for comparison, you should make a point of reading this tragic and colourful tale of Arthurian romance. Make sure you experience some of it being read aloud. You should also see, if you can, John William Waterhouse's Pre-Raphaelite painting 'I am Half-Sick of Shadows': www.victorianweb.org/painting/jww/paintings/22.html

How well do you think Lochhead in her version exploits the possibilities of Tennyson's original?

- 'Fairy tale haunted' (line 48). Identify briefly the four other folk/fantasy tales which Lochhead works into the girl's situation.
- Consider how the speaker switches between third person commentary and second person address in referring to the girl. Taking the poem as a whole, how would you describe the poet's attitude to her?
- Suppose this girl, like Lucy (pp67–69), keeps a secret diary. Write an entry conveying her feelings about her night out.

3. GENERAL ASSIGNMENTS ON *THE COLOUR OF BLACK & WHITE*

These suggestions can be tackled using the ten selected poems, but they also encourage you to explore the whole volume.

- Look carefully at Willie Rodger's lino- and woodcuts punctuating the book. How do they seem to relate to the poems? Are they simply illustrations? Do they add their own special qualities of wit and insight? Consider for example the link between graphic and poem on p54 and on p118.
- Several of Lochhead's poems refer, autobiographically or otherwise, to relationships with parents. Discuss her treatment of mothers, and also of fathers.
- 'View of Scotland/ Lovesong' (p45). At the beginning of Lochhead's best-known play, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, La Corbie croaks: 'Country: Scotland, Whit like is it?' What view of Scotland have you gleaned from reading Lochhead's poems? How prominent is this theme? Think in terms of topics, moods, people, language and places.
- Survey and comment on Lochhead's sensitivity to details of obsolescent domestic bricabrac, furnishings, food, fashion, clothes, cosmetics and other apparent trivia.
- How do you respond to the linguistic ferment of Lochhead's monologues: Patter, 'the Langwij a thi guther', Scots forms, oblique echoes of the Bible, Shakespeare and other literary sources, adspeak, wordplay of many kinds and in many registers? Create and perform a monologue uttered, for example, by an MSP, a rap artist, a fashion designer, a football manager, a business entrepreneur, a reality TV contestant, a celebrity chef, a Highland laird, a best-selling author, or any other larger-than-life personality, female or male, that occurs to you.