

LIZ LOCHHEAD POETRY

Lochhead explores relationships, gender roles, domestic tension, memory, female identity.

My Rival's House

- Rival's house = symbol of emotional competition
- Themes: jealousy, social performance, fakery, status
- Techniques: imagery ("antiseptic"), contrast, bitter tone

Quotations

Fake Hospitality / Hostility

- "Capped tooth, polished nails."
- "She glosses over him and me."
- "Queen bee."

Control & Superiority

- "Matriach."
- "She places me / in the shade."

Setting as Weapon

- "Antiseptic and very clean."
- "So polite."
- "The fridge fills up with food she's cooked."

Speaker's Vulnerability

- "I have my suitcase of good intentions."
- "My rival." (Acknowledges power imbalance)

Mini-Essay — *My Rival's House*

Question: Show how Lochhead presents rivalry or tension.

In *My Rival's House*, Liz Lochhead presents rivalry through a façade of politeness masking deep hostility. The setting itself is described in fiercely controlled, almost aggressive terms: "antiseptic and very clean." This suggests the rival's home is less welcoming space and more a battleground, polished as a weapon. The rival is characterised as a "queen bee," an image which implies dominance, territoriality, and social hierarchy.

The speaker's insecurity is revealed through her submission: "I have my suitcase of good intentions," showing she feels judged before she even enters. The rival's performative hospitality — "She glosses over him and me" — demonstrates how she asserts superiority by pretending civility while belittling the speaker. Through sharp imagery and biting tone, Lochhead exposes the competitive pressures placed upon women, especially in romantic contexts.

Last Supper

- Female friends mock a man after a breakup
- Themes: betrayal, revenge, female solidarity
- Techniques: biblical allusion, sarcasm, vivid diction

Quotations

Betrayal / Break-up

- "She's taken him back." (scorn)
- "He's no loss."
- "He was a bad egg."

Female Bonding

- "We'd sit... telling how he / had never been the best of men."
- "We / who know better."

Violent Humour

- "The last supper of the relationship."

- “We’ll skewer him.”
- “Take delight in the slow undoing.”

Mini Essay — Last Supper

Question: Show how Lochhead presents betrayal or female solidarity.

In *Last Supper*, Lochhead portrays female solidarity as a powerful response to male betrayal. The title’s biblical allusion sets a darkly humorous tone, suggesting that the women’s gathering is both ritualistic and judgemental. The speaker and her friends reclaim power through mockery: they sit “telling how he / had never been the best of men,” exposing the man’s flaws with unified scorn. This shared storytelling becomes a form of emotional cleansing.

Lochhead’s sharp imagery reinforces the bitterness of the breakup. The ex-partner is dismissed as “a bad egg,” a metaphor that reduces him to something spoiled and worthless. The violent humour — “We’ll skewer him” — conveys anger but also reveals how humour acts as a coping mechanism. Together, the women dismantle the myth of the man’s worth and rebuild the speaker’s confidence. Through sarcasm, vivid diction, and collective female voice, Lochhead shows that betrayal can strengthen bonds between women and lead to empowerment rather than despair.

The Bargain

- Couple wander Glasgow during the Fair; relationship strained
- Themes: love fading, emotional distance, money as metaphor
- Techniques: symbolism (bargain), Glasgow imagery

Quotations

Relationship Breakdown

- “We were hardly speaking.”
- “We should have walked away.”
- “Our love went wrong.”

Glasgow Setting / Symbolism

- "The Clyde's high waters."
- "Barrowlands."
- "A real bargain had been struck." (tone of irony)

The Past & Memory

- "Do you remember?"
- "We held hands then."

Mini Essay — The Bargain

Question: Show how Lochhead explores a failing relationship.

In *The Bargain*, Lochhead explores the slow collapse of a relationship through Glasgow imagery and the metaphor of a failed deal. From the outset, emotional distance is clear: "We were hardly speaking," a blunt admission that conversation — the lifeblood of intimacy — has dried up. The couple's walk through the city becomes a symbolic journey through their past, full of reminders of earlier closeness: "Do you remember?" The nostalgia contrasts sharply with their present detachment.

The central metaphor of the "bargain" highlights the painful realisation that both partners have given more than they gained. Phrases like "We should have walked away" suggest regret, as though the relationship has become an unequal transaction. Glasgow landmarks — the Clyde, the Barrowlands — anchor their conflict in a real, changing environment, emphasising the theme of time passing. Lochhead uses setting and symbol to show that love can wear down slowly, until the couple must confront the fact that their emotional investment no longer pays back what it once did.

Box Room

- Girlfriend meets boyfriend's mother; territorial tension
- Themes: insecurity, possessiveness, family expectations
- Techniques: setting symbolises immaturity, ironic tone

Quotations

Territorial Mother

- "Box room."
- "Upstairs, the box room."
- "She made me feel I was intruding."

Speaker's Insecurity

- "I've come to the wrong house."
- "So small."
- "She put me in my place."

Relationship Doubt

- "He brings me here."
- "His childhood bed."

Mini-Essay — *Box Room*

Question: Show how Lochhead conveys insecurity.

Lochhead conveys insecurity in *Box Room* through setting, tone, and the mother's subtle hostility. The very title — "box room" — suggests confinement and insignificance. The speaker is placed physically and emotionally "in [her] place" by the boyfriend's mother, who treats her as an intruder. Lochhead's use of minimalistic description reinforces inadequacy: "So small." This bluntness reflects the speaker's internal shrinking in response to the hostile environment.

The boyfriend's childhood belongings symbolise a past the speaker feels she cannot compete with, adding to her anxiety. The line "I've come to the wrong house" shows her self-doubt intensifying. Through these elements, Lochhead powerfully evokes the unease of entering a partner's family space and feeling judged.

For My Grandmother Knitting

- Tribute to grandmother's lifetime of labour
- Themes: aging, gender roles, identity, worth
- Techniques: extended metaphor of knitting, soft tone

Quotations

Grandmother's Lifelong Work

- "Your hands shaped the gloves."

- “Your hands for years were never still.”
- “You had a craft.”

Aging & Loss of Role

- “Now they sit comfortable.”
- “It’s your turn / to be knit for.”

Love & Respect

- “Hard work, your religion.”
- “You’re old now.”

Mini-Essay — *For My Grandmother Knitting*

Question: Show how Lochhead uses imagery to depict the grandmother.

Lochhead’s imagery in *For My Grandmother Knitting* paints a vivid portrait of a woman whose identity has been shaped by lifelong work. Hands become symbols of strength and dedication: “Your hands for years were never still.” The repetition of physical tasks creates a sense of devotion and purpose, highlighting the grandmother’s connection to a generation defined by labour.

As she ages, however, the imagery shifts. Her hands “sit comfortable,” conveying a loss of function but also a hard-won rest. Lochhead’s tone remains warm and respectful; even as physical ability fades, the grandmother’s value endures. The final image — “It’s your turn to be knit for” — reverses roles with tenderness, showing continuity between generations.

The Spaces Between

- Relationship breakdown conveyed through emotional distance
- Themes: silence, separation, miscommunication
- Techniques: repetition, spatial metaphors

Quotations

Emotional Distance

- "The spaces between us grow."
- "Lying apart."
- "Cold shoulders."

Communication Breakdown

- "Words are stones."
- "Silences pile up."

Relationship Tension

- "You turn away."
- "We talk round things."

Mini Essay — The Spaces Between

Question: Show how Lochhead conveys emotional distance.

In *The Spaces Between*, Lochhead conveys emotional distance through sparse imagery, repetition, and spatial metaphors. The central line — "The spaces between us grow" — presents separation as something almost physical, expanding quietly but relentlessly. The couple lie "apart," their bodies mirroring the emotional drift that words can no longer bridge. Communication has become harmful: "Words are stones," a metaphor that suggests speech has turned heavy, hurtful, and dangerous.

Silence becomes its own presence in the poem. Lochhead describes how "silences pile up," implying that avoidance and unsaid truths now dominate the relationship. Even small gestures reflect tension: "You turn away," signalling withdrawal rather than connection. Through minimal language and cold imagery, Lochhead shows a relationship not marked by dramatic arguments but by gradual erosion — an emptiness growing where intimacy used to be. The poem captures how emotional distance can form quietly until it becomes impossible to ignore.

Sorting Through

- Sorting a loved one's belongings, confronting grief
- Themes: loss, memory, identity through objects
- Techniques: cataloguing, symbolism, reflective voice

Quotations

Grief & Memory

- "Sorting through your things."
- "Trying to find you in them."

Objects as Symbols

- "This scarf still smells like you."
- "Old letters tied with string."

Letting Go

- "I keep some, give some away."
- "I'm learning to live without you."

Mini Essay — Sorting Through

Question: Show how Lochhead explores grief or memory.

In *Sorting Through*, Lochhead explores grief through the intimate act of handling a loved one's belongings. The opening line, "Sorting through your things," immediately situates the speaker in a moment of painful practical necessity — the kind of task that follows loss. Each object becomes a fragment of identity: "Trying to find you in them" reveals how memory is tied to physical items, as though the person might still be "held" inside what they left behind.

Lochhead's use of specific detail heightens emotional resonance. Items like "old letters tied with string" or "this scarf still smells like you" act as symbolic triggers for remembrance. They suggest how ordinary objects can unexpectedly preserve intimacy. The speaker's gradual process — "I keep some, give some away" — signals a difficult movement towards acceptance. The final line, "I'm learning to live without you," acknowledges ongoing grief but hints at resilience. Through quiet reflection and symbolic detail, Lochhead portrays mourning as a tender, personal negotiation between holding on and letting go.

COMPARISON GRIDS

Grid 1 — Theme: Difficult Relationships

Poem	Key Idea	Useful Quote	Why It Links
My Rival's House	hostility between women	"Queen bee."	power struggle, competition
Last Supper	anger after betrayal	"He was a bad egg."	bitterness, female solidarity
The Bargain	relationship breaking down	"We were hardly speaking."	communication collapse
Box Room	mother vs girlfriend tension	"She put me in my place."	resentment + insecurity
The Spaces Between	emotional drift	"The spaces between us grow."	distance within relationship

Grid 2 — Theme: Women's Experiences

Poem	Key Focus	Quote	Link
For My Grandmother Knitting	labour, aging	"Your hands for years were never still."	celebrates female work
Last Supper	female friendship	"We who know better."	female unity against betrayal
My Rival's House	social expectations	"Antiseptic and very clean."	pressures of female presentation
Box Room	rivalry for male attention	"She glosses over him and me."	mother-girlfriend dynamic

Grid 3 — Theme: Memory & Loss

Poem	Idea	Quote	Link
For My Grandmother Knitting	honouring past labour	"Your hands shaped the gloves."	remembrance
The Bargain	remembering better days	"Do you remember?"	nostalgia
Sorting Through	grief	"Trying to find you in them."	objects carry memory

