

My Parents Kept Me from Children Who Were Rough

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Some thoughts and then some suggestions for student work:

Spender's poem is divided into three verses of equal length, though the verse division seems more of a visual device than anything else. The lines are roughly the same length (all 10 11 or 12 syllables) and have an irregular rhythm. It sounds to me as if there are four strong beats in each line. On first reading, the lack of rhyme and the irregularity of the beat suggests informal prose, a person reflecting on his past in a fairly straightforward way. The irregularity also suggests an awkwardness, which is not surprising, given the theme of the poem. Yet it is expressed within a formal framework. One could read a lot into that...

However, neither the word order nor the word choice is not as simple we might think at first. Word order is inverted in lines like 'I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron' and there are repetitions which are unlike ordinary speech or ordinary, say, letter writing. For example, 'who were rough.., who threw..., who wore...' There are many 'ands', and especially in the last verse, 'they's'. Some writers would avoid using 'feared' twice, but he does not. Is he trying to suggest a child's vocabulary?

Imagery is confined to lines 2, 5 and 10 and each case is very direct. The more interesting image is salt coarse pointing which reminds me of brickwork but obviously isn't what Spender had in mind. The word salt is rich in associations – salt in a wound, refined and unrefined salt, sea salt, rock salt, sweat, salt of the earth, 'salty' meaning 'risqué'), salt and vinegar... why not get students to see how many associations they can find and then note the connotations of each?

Without some knowledge of the writer, we cannot be sure, but it seems likely that the poem's voice is autobiographical - a little research will support this. It is written very much from hindsight, however. It is an adult's view of a childhood feeling. How would it be written if the poet was experiencing these things NOW? Try asking students to rewrite the poem in the present tense.

The poet's ambivalent attitude and the fact that it is an adult way of trying to capture what the child felt is made explicit in the last lines. Students could be asked (perhaps in role) how a child might try to form these thoughts and feelings into words. In the process, a couple of other questions arise: could the speaker be a girl (if not, why not?) and what age is the speaker?

Finally, what about the children who were rough? I suspect none of them grew up to be poets so we have no record of their thoughts or feelings. What might they have been – and what might one of them say, in later life, looking back on that posh kid who lived in the next street?