**Response to Anne Stevenson’s ‘To My Daughter In A Red Coat’**

Late October. It is afternoon.

My daughter and I walk through the leaf-strewn

Corridors of the park

In the light and the dark

Of the elms' thin arches.

Around us brown leaves fall and spread.

Small winds stir the minor dead.

Dust powders the air.

Those shrivelled women stare.

At us from their cold benches.

Child, your mittens tug your sleeves.

They lick your drumming feet, the leaves.

You come so fast, so fast.

You violate the past,

My daughter, as your coat dances.

**Candidate 1**

In Anne Stevenson’s ‘To My Daughter in a Red Coat’, she addresses her daughter as they walk through a park together. Stevenson admires and watches her daughter as they walk and explores the relationship between herself, her daughter and the park in which they are walking.

The structure of the poem is very interesting – each stanza is made up of two rhyming couplets ‘afternoon/strewn’ and a single line that half-rhymes with the last lines of the other stanzas. While the rhyming couplets create a slightly childish tone, the enjambment undercuts the rhymes, making the rhyme less effective and disrupting the rhythm of the poem – ‘I walk through the leaf-strewn/Corridors of the park’. It creates a more uneasy atmosphere as reciting the poem becomes much harder, more of an effort. The singular last line and it’s half-rhyme ‘arches’, ‘benches’, ‘dances’ gives a sense of the continuity to the poem – although again this continuity is undermined by the awkwardness of the half-rhyme.

The mood of the poem is slightly eerie – the youth of the ‘daughter’ is juxtaposed with the ‘shrivelled women’ who stare from their ‘cold benches’. The women are clearly old and seem slightly inhuman as they are described only as ‘shrivelled’ and their lack of movement is emphasised by the full stop in the middle of the phrase; ‘stare. At us from their cold benches’ while the daughter’s movement is full of commas and repetition ‘You come so fast, so fast’ and ‘My daughter, as your coat dances.’ This is a sign of her movement and speed compared both to the women and the ‘minor dead’ of the leaves. That too is an interesting contrast – while the ‘brown leaves’ are simply ‘spread’ on the ground the child is wearing a bright ‘red coat’ and her ‘drumming feet’ which tread on the leaves. The poem is full of death and stillness – except for this girl.

It is also interesting to note how both the girl and the park are described. While the park is described in great detail, full of ‘leaf-strewn corridors’ and the ‘elms’ thin arches’, creating a strong visual picture for the reader, the girl is only described by her clothes – her ‘Red Coat’, her ‘mittens [that] tug’ and her ‘sleeves’. Again this could be to reflect her movement – she is too fast and energetic to be easily described – only bright colours and her clothes can be captured – whereas the park is so still that the poet can sum it up with a few choice words and phrases by simply looking around.

The mother’s relationship with the daughter is very clear throughout the poem – she describes the girl as ‘my daughter’ and worries about how her ‘mittens tug [her] sleeves’, a clear contrast to ‘those shrivelled women’ who stare ‘at’ them and the leaves that fall ‘around’ them and which are described as ‘they’. In the first two stanzas particularly, the mother clearly wants to emphasise her closeness to the child and how it is them against the world – both other people and seemingly nature itself.

Death seems close at hand for much of the poem. The opening phrase ‘Late October. It is afternoon.’ sets the tone for the rest of the poem – both time phrases suggest something coming to an end – just slightly past its prime of life, either summer or the noon of the day - the very setting of the poem seems closer to death. The description of the leaves as ‘minor dead’ is also quite unsettling – they have fallen from their trees but their deaths are so numerous that it is of no consequence. Compared to the deaths of humans – as hinted at by the ‘shrivelled women’, the falling of leaves seems pretty ‘minor’.

Perhaps the most interesting lines of the poem are ‘You come so fast, so fast/You violate the past.’ Stevenson is addressing the daughter directly, something she only does in the third stanza. For the first time, she seems more separate from her daughter as she calls out to her – there is a repeated ‘You’, replacing the ‘us’ from earlier stanzas. However, it is unclear why there is this separation – the reader does not know what ‘violate the past’ means. It could be that the constant movement of the girl is destroying the leaves on the ground, removing their presence and erasing the fact that they ever existed or perhaps Stevenson is reminded of her own childhood as she watches her daughter – a reminder of when she was not a passive spectator but a child too, who would run ‘so fast’.

In conclusion, the poem is a slightly eerie description of a mother and daughter walking through the park. Through watching her daughter run and play, however, the poet becomes more aware of the death and decay around her – making her marvel at her daughter even more as the contrast between the young girl and the dead leaves and old women is heightened.