

SACAI Eng FAL Poetry Support Material: It was long ago (E Farjeon)

It Was Long Ago (Eleanor Farjeon 1881-1965)

- 1 I'll tell you, shall I, something **I remember**?
- 2 Something that still means a great deal to me.
- 3 **It was long ago.**
- 4 A dusty road in summer **I remember**,
- 5 A mountain, and an old house, and a tree
- 6 That stood, you know,
- 7 Behind the house. An old woman **I remember**
- 8 In a red shawl with a grey cat on her knee
- 9 Humming under a tree.
- 10 She seemed the oldest thing **I can remember**.
- 11 But then perhaps I was not more than three.
- 12 **It was long ago.**
- 13 I dragged on the dusty road, **and I remember**
- 14 How the old woman looked over the fence at me
- 15 And seemed to know
- 16 How it felt to be three, and called out, **I remember**
- 17 "Do you like bilberries and cream for tea?"
- 18 I went under the tree.
- 19 And while she **hummed**, and the cat **purred**, **I remember**
- 20 How she filled a saucer with berries and cream for me
- 21 **So long ago.**
- 22 Such berries and such cream as **I remember**
- 23 I never had seen before, and never see
- 24 Today, you know.
- 25 And that is almost all **I can remember**,
- 26 The house, the mountain, the **gray** cat on her knee,
- 27 Her **red** shawl, and the tree,
- 28 And **the taste** of the berries, **the feel of** the sun **I remember**
- 29 And the **smell of everything** that used to be
- 30 **So long ago,**
- 31 Till the heat on the road outside again **I remember**
- 32 And how the long dusty road seemed to have for me
- 33 No end, you know.
- 34 That is the farthest thing **I can remember**.
- 35 It won't mean much to you. It does to me.
- 36 Then I grew up, you see.

Such repetition is typical of children's rhymes and stories

See simple rhyme scheme in every stanza



Look at many examples of **using her senses** throughout the poem

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About the poet

Born: 13 February 1881 in London, England, UK

Died: 5 June 1965 (aged 84) in Hampstead, London, England

Nationality: British

Genres: Wrote children's literature – stories, poems etc.

Awards: Carnegie Medal 1955; Hans Christian Andersen Award 1956 (Amongst others)

Family background: Known to the family as "Nellie"; She was a small timid child, who had poor eyesight and suffered from ill-health throughout her childhood; Educated at home, spending much of her time in the attic, surrounded by books; Her father encouraged her writing from the age of five; Especially close to her brother Harry and they used to play imaginative games together. This game, called T.A.R. after the initials of two of the original characters lasted into their mid-twenties.

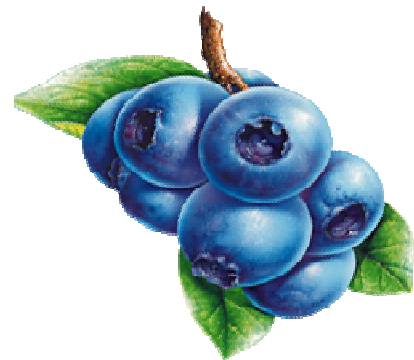
Most of her inspiration came from her childhood and from family holidays.

Summary of poem

"It Was Long Ago" is a simple poem by Eleanor Farjeon and records the poet's earliest memory, an incident that occurred when she was around three years old. While she was walking along a dusty road, she saw an old lady sitting under a tree. The lady invited her over and gave her bilberries (similar to blueberries) and cream to eat, a 'feast' that the poet recalls with pleasure.

Although it seems as if the poem has no serious theme or purpose, the last lines suggest some importance, more than just telling about her childhood. She shows that this simple, pleasant memory means much to her because, 'then I grew up, you see'. We are reminded that 'growing up' is not always so pleasant. Sadly, being an adult can sometimes dull us so that we no longer appreciate the simple pleasures of life.

The poem is also a reminder to the reader that moments that had passed can only live on in memory. "*Then I grew up, you see.*" And that is exactly what children do. With age and experience, their fresh, young eyes of innocence are replaced with adult eyes of knowledge and understanding.



Tone, mood and style

The poem is gentle and nostalgic. The poet wants to recreate the memories as well as the feelings of her childhood memories. The poet begins by asking our permission: 'I shall tell you, shall I, something I remember?' In the manner of a small child, she regularly checks to see that we are attending, that we understand: 'You know'; 'You see'. Thus the poem has a confiding, warm feel to it.

She uses a **conversational tone** in telling us of her memories – almost as if she is just chatting to the reader.

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The way in which the poet leads us is not as an adult having the experience, but as a child taking us by the hand. Through her “child eyes” she recalls that particular moment, feeling it as a young child. This enables her to live (relive) the experience as if for the first time. **This is the magic of memory.**

Structure and format

This poem has a **simple structure** of 12 stanzas of three lines each. Perhaps the most striking feature of it is the strong use of repetition.

This simple structure is appropriate for the situation of a child remembering the simple pleasures of her childhood. The language used is also simple. Words are uncomplicated, tending to be single syllables, with a lot of **repetition** of words. The first line in every stanza ends with the word '**remember**', and there are only two other sounds 'ee' and 'oh', used absolutely regularly throughout the poem. The rhythm is gentle and slow, appropriate to the subject matter. Such a simple structure and rhyme emphasise the simplicity of the child's memory.

Use of imagery and poetic devices

The poet succeeds in involving our senses. She introduces concrete objects ('a mountain, an old house, and a tree'), and simple colours ('in a red shawl with a grey cat'), to help us visualise the scene. She invites us to hear the memory ('and while she hummed, and the cat purred'), to taste it ('...the taste of berries'), and feel it ('the feel of the sun I remember') as she draws upon her own sense memories. Thus, the memory is evoked for us in a much clearer way.

By using the senses as well as the simple words, structure and rhythm, she involves the reader in the poem. While sharing the goodness of her memories we have longings for our own childhood.

The words "you know" are repeated constantly, appearing three times at the ends of stanzas, plus a concluding "you see". "Long ago" is used four times (apart from the title) and words rhyming with "me" and "know" are scattered throughout, lending a pleasing sense of rhythm to the lines.

A critique's view of the poem

“Although I will never have the opportunity to meet Eleanor Farjeon, I feel that through her poem I have met and taken a walk with her down a dusty road in summer; I have made a connection with her as a fellow human being on the path of life. This is the gift that Eleanor Farjeon gives to her reader in It Was Long Ago.”

