

The poetry of janet frame essay sample

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



What features of Janet Frame’s poetry contribute to the distinctive character and voice of her poems? Discuss.

There are several features of Janet Frame’s poetry that contribute to the distinctive character and voice of her poems. Without a doubt, the most distinctive characteristic of her poetry is her use of simple, yet extraordinarily rich imagery. Another characteristic of her work is her focus on the natural world. Yet another aspect of Frame’s work is that many of her poems deal with the themes of acceptance and the growth from innocence to experience.

Frame’s use of vivid imagery, bursting with meaning, is certainly what is most memorable about her poetry. She uses images familiar to all of us, but in unusual, extraordinary ways. The poem *Yet Another Poem about a Dying Child* is about a terminally ill boy who welcomes death as a release from his pain. His parents, naturally, do not want him to die and try to deny the fact that he is gravely ill. Throughout the poem, Frame uses images important to and appropriate for a small child – “ trees”, “ stars”, “ spring flowers”, “ pebbles”, a “ penny”. “ Trees and stars” are used as symbols of childhood wonder and a child’s fascination with the natural world. We understand clearly the boy’s painful situation when Frame describes his “ pebbles of diseased bone.” Frame uses the image of a “ penny of light” as a metaphor for life. These ‘ child -friendly’ images culminate in her use of a “ kind-furred spider” as a metaphor for death in the last stanza of the poem. She speaks of the boy caught in a “ web of pain”, unable to extract himself until the spider comes. What is particularly interesting about this last stanza is the way she juxtaposes images with connotations of comfort and peace – “

night-lamp eyes”, “ soft-tread”, “ wrap him warm”, “ carry him home” – with the reality and finality of death. In the abrupt last line of the poem she writes that the “ kind-furred spider” will carry the boy home “ to a dark place, and eat him.”

Frame’s use of imagery in her poem *The Chrysalids* is also very vivid and emphasises her message to us about the dangers of judging by outward appearances. Frame reflects on a childhood experience of picking chrysalids for fishing bait. She describes the chrysalids as “ gray-walled”, “ sober”, “ windowless”, “ hanging dungeons”, each description emphasising their dull, worthless outer appearance. She refers to them as:

“ houses with walls gray-folded, pleated
like the robes of monks; frayed hairshirts,
old sackcloth sealed at top and tail;”

Frame’s imagery here is rich with meaning. She likens the appearance of the chrysalids to the traditional dress of monks, men who have renounced worldly values and material things in order to focus on pursuing a closer relationship with God. To them, the life within is what is the most significant and this is what Frame is suggesting to us through her use of this imagery. The chrysalids, on the outside, look like nothing special. They are “ withered/ and ugly and useful only for fishing bait.” But their outward appearance betrays the “ jewel” or life inside. Frame writes:

“ I did not know. I would never have believed
that every house I stole contained a jewel.”

Another poem in which Frame creates strong, clear images in the mind is The Tree. The poem describes a tree that is about to be cut down. From the very beginning of the poem the tree is personified. It is given a life and therefore a voice, which make its situation even more serious. Frame writes:

“ There’s a tree that’s going to be cut down any day

And does not know it”

Throughout the poem Frame uses the technique of personification to emphasise the energy and vitality of the tree. The tree “ cannot keep still”. It “ waves finger-shaped branches” “ exploring, sensing in the blue surrounding swirl and stir”. The sibilance of these lines further enhances the imagery of the tree’s branches moving energetically about in the wind by appealing to the reader’s sense of hearing. Frame also stresses the innocence of the tree and that fact that it is completely unaware about what is about to happen to it. She describes it as:

“...helplessly rocking to and fro

in the overpowering entirety

of a tree’s night and day and night and day.”

By creating these images in our mind Frame’s message becomes clear. In the poem she is speaking of humankind’s insensitivity towards nature and is criticising the way the innocent natural world is destroyed in favour of progress and the concrete jungle. We cannot help but hear the ironic, sarcastic tone behind the word “ tastefully” when she writes:

“ Motels wait to be born; a new progeny, tastefully walled
With wisteria and clematis”

Another distinctive characteristic of Frame’s poetry is her focus on the natural world. In the first volume of her autobiography *To the Island*, she writes that her earliest memories of life are all set outside – “ in the cow byre, in the neighbour’s orchard, under the walnut tree” She also writes about her “ overwhelming sense of anticipation and excitement at the world” and “ everything Outside.” A strong sense of her love for the natural world is apparent in her poetry. In *The Chrysalids* and *The Tree* she shows compassion for the natural environment and its struggle to survive against the wiles of human beings. In the last three lines of *The Chrysalids*, Frame writes

“...Is it too late
to soften to a new shape and dimension the hard truth
that parallel worlds will never meet?”

The “ parallel worlds” that Frame speaks of are the natural world and the human world. Although these worlds exist together, side-by-side they are very different. Like parallel lines, they never meet. These worlds do not understand one another. Frame wonders whether it is “ too late/ to soften” this “ hard truth”. She is asking whether it is too late for human beings to learn to be more understanding of the natural environment and the destruction we sometimes cause to it without fully understanding the consequences.

Often in Frame's poetry, her focus on the natural world will spiral out into a wider discussion of society and its attitudes. In the last two lines of *The Tree*, Frame writes that the tree about to be cut down is

“...senselessly
alive in a world where it is far more tactful
to feign death too many years before you die.”

Most of the poem *The Tree* centres on the fate of the tree and the neighbourhood's lack of appreciation of it as a living, breathing creature. Here, however, Frame broadens out her theme to comment on how dangerous it can sometimes be to stand out or be different in society. It is far more sensible or “tactful”, she says, to conform or “feign death”, because otherwise you might be “cut down” or rejected by society.

Frame is a distinctive, unusual person and it is not difficult to understand, given her life experiences, why many of her poems, like *The Tree*, deal with the theme of acceptance. In *To the Is-Land* she writes about how others did not accept her and found for her “a nest of difference”. In her poetry she empathises with those people who, like herself, don't fit into the norms of society, those who society denies, shuts away and makes invisible. Through her poetry, Frame becomes the spokesperson for these voiceless people. She shows compassion for those people who are marginalised by society, the metaphorical ‘lepers’ of society (*Dunedin Story*). She criticises society and its attitudes towards these people.

The poem Flo comments on society's view of the mentally ill. It is about a mad woman, Flo, who has died in an institution. In the poem Frame herself celebrates Flo, who she saw as a splendid woman with a "mountain frown", a "spokeswoman for God (who else ever dared?)", who preached loudly, "magnificent with curses/with judgment." But the crux of the poem comes when Frame writes:

"not all your delicate death announcements in the newspaper your hiding of the fact
that she died you know where
in a back ward mad
can alter her white-haired splendour as I knew her"

Here, Frame is criticising society and the way society has sidelined this woman. Society has denied her existence and her illness by locking her away and euphemising her death notice. In the poem Frame is challenging society to accept those who are different and to celebrate their difference, as Frame is able to.

In the poem Dunedin Story, Frame issues a similar challenge for us. The poem tells the story of a man suffering from leprosy who is "accepted" into New Zealand. In Dunedin he looks forward to being cured, finding employment and living a normal life. But eventually he becomes ill with

"...a disease
worse than leprosy, worse than any other,
hardest to be cured of,

a fatal disease where the sufferer may yet last a lifetime in agony and mutilation.”

Ironically, Frame uses the image of a “ fatal disease” as a metaphor for the leper’s rejection and the way it kills people inside. The leper in the poem ‘ catches’ this “ disease” from the people in his community who do not accept him because he is different. Not only is he ostracised by his neighbours, but the woman with whom he stays constantly refers to him as “ my leper”. She speaks for him, taking away his longed for independence. Frame writes:

“ The disease of being at once outlawed and owned is worse than leprosy. It is, simply, terribly,
the indestructible virus
the gift of the living who are blind
to the living who are believed dead.”

The theme of acceptance is also addressed in the poems Yet Another Poem About a Dying Child and The Chrysalids. In Yet Another Poem About a Dying Child, Frame urges us to learn to see the death of a suffering child as a welcome release from pain, to accept it as part of the natural cycle of life. In The Chrysalids, Frame comments on the deception of outer appearances. Indirectly, she teaches us to accept those who may be different in some way and to strive to see the “ jewel” inside them.

Another common thematic concern in Frame’s poetry is the journey from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience. This theme is dealt with in The Chrysalids. Frame looks back on a childhood experience with an

adult eye and realises the destruction of life that she has caused so innocently.

The theme of the growth from innocence to experience is also central in Frame's poem *Rain on the Roof*. In this poem, Frame comments on the way her nephew copes with his grief by putting

"...a sheet of iron outside his window
to recapture the sound of rain falling on the roof."

This is a sound reminiscent of his childhood, a sound that he finds comforting. Frame comments on this realising that he must learn through experience, what she herself has learned through "the travelling life of loss".

"I do not say to him, The heart has its own comfort for grief. A sheet of iron repairs roofs only."

She knows that one day "he must find within himself"

"the iron that will hold not only the lost sound of the rain but the sun, the voices of the dead, and all else that has gone."

Here, iron becomes a metaphor for inner strength, which will give him character and the ability to survive anything. This "iron" will provide real comfort in painful times. From within, he will be able to draw on memories of a wide variety of things that will give him the strength he needs. In this way, through her use of simple, yet vivid imagery, so distinctive a characteristic of her poetry, Frame provides a valuable lesson for all of us.