POEM FOR MY SISTER

My little sister likes to try my shoes,
to strut in them,
admire her spindle-thin twelve-year-old legs
in this season's styles.
She says they fit her perfectly,
but wobbles
on their high heels, they're
hard to balance.

I like to watch my little sister
playing hopscotch,
admire the neat hops-and-skips of her,
their quick peck,
never-missing their mark, not
over-stepping the line.
She is competent at peever.

I try to warn my little sister
about unsuitable shoes,
point out my own distorted feet, the callouses,
odd patches of hard skin.
I should not like to see her
in my shoes.
I wish she could stay
sure footed,
sensibly shod.

Liz Lochhead

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE POEM?

The poem is about how children or impressionable young people spend their time imitating adults and the poet’s sister is the central focus of a child’s precocious development. The poet uses high
heeled shoes and feet as a metaphor for life. The child is experimenting with her growing life. It shows a child’s desire to develop quickly and experiment with adult life and role models.

In the first stanza we get a picture of the 12 year old sister struggling to walk in the author’s high heels. Words like ‘strut’ suggest the bravado and confidence of the young girl which are contrasted with the adjective ‘spindle-thin’ which suggests she is still an awkward and developing child.

In the second stanza, the poet admires the way the child moves while she plays hopscotch which is a children’s game. Her young sister is confident; she does not miss even a step though she wearing outsized shoes. But is she ‘over-stepping the line’ between childhood and adulthood?

‘Peever’ is a Scottish dialect word for the game hopscotch (the poet is Scottish).

In the final stanza, the poet is warning the sister about trying to live some else's life. " I try to warn my little sister/ about unsustainable shoes" The author gives herself as an example and that she is living proof of trying to be someone you are not. Her “distorted feet, the callouses/odd patches of hard skin” are all evidences of her unfortunate brushes with life. She wants to spare her sister any pain.

The writer wants her sister to stay rooted in the real world and be ‘sure footed’ and sensibly shod’, metaphors for treading carefully and not engaging in dangerous activities. Hopscotch may be safe but not in high heels!! She does not want her to follow her example as she has had experiences that have left her scarred. She enjoys watching her sister being herself and achieving what she is good at. She identifies that when her sister tries to be some else she struggles and strays e.g. " she wobbles/ on their high heels, they're/ hard to balance"

This is a poem which is seeing childhood as a precious time and giving advice about not growing up too quickly and not trying to copy reckless adult behaviour. The poet is trying to warn her sister but her sister seems quite stubborn: ‘she says they fit her perfectly’.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN IDEAS AND THEMES?

- Childhood and not growing up too quickly
- Women's issues e.g. needing the right role models
- Learning from mistakes and advising others
- Choosing your own path and not wanting to be someone else

WHAT ARE THE ASPECTS OF STYLE WHICH ARE EFFECTIVE?

- The central metaphor is high-heeled shoes, a female image of adulthood and ‘stylistic show’ and the game of hopscotch which is a childhood game involving fast foot movements.

- There are contrasts in words between ‘hopscotch’, ‘sure footed’ ‘sensibly shod’ and ‘strut’, ‘wobbles’.

- The three stanzas have a central stanza of the game of hopscotch which involves jumping and skipping, an action which involves feet and accuracy in movement, something impossible in high heels.