The poem ‘Ninetieth Birthday’ tackles the issue of old age and the generation gap through a description of a journey to meet an old lady. It raises issues that make you think about old age and how people are viewed by younger generations.

The poem shows how lonely and isolated old age can be. The journey is up a “long track”: the old lady is isolated from the real world. She isn’t named, which may show that the poem is a general comment on old age, or may reflect her anonymity and lack of importance for most people. The village is described as the “lost village” because she has no contact with people and real life anymore. It is “a place that exists/ In her memory only”, meaning that it has changed so much that the place she knew no longer exists, so her history is lost.

The isolation of old age is also shown through the lack of visitors – the narrator is only visiting because it’s her birthday. The only other life mentioned is nature; there’s the sound of insects, “voices sound, blue-fly and gnat” but no human voices – this suggests she has no human contact but the fact that she “waits for news” shows she is patiently waiting for her visitors to come.

By using cold language such as “that old woman”, the poet emphasises distance and sounds impersonal and uncaring. The language is patronising when talking about how people speak of this woman – they “praise” her for “having lasted so long” and “lean kindly”, suggesting they think they are being kind by visiting her. The alliteration of the final line, “words that were wise” emphasises the lack of interest shown in her views, although it could also hint at the onset of dementia. There is an “abyss” between the old woman and her younger visitor, suggesting they are from different worlds, and the poet says there is “no bridge” between them, emphasising the old woman’s isolation again. This metaphor is part of the only rhyming couplet in the poem, emphasising how the old and the young cannot relate to each other.

The metaphor “time’s knife” is an effective but harsh sounding metaphor, suggesting she is close to death. This makes me think that the journey in the poem which takes place over two stanzas – travelling towards the old woman, then the meeting with her – might represent the journey towards death. The journey along the road could represent the journey of life, which is why the “long track” is better taken “on slow foot”. On reaching the top, it’s almost as if the traveller is going towards heaven, “buttressed with cloud.”

The poem’s rhythm also suggests this: it is slow, with lots of pauses in the middle of lines, which might represent pausing for breath. The old lady is patiently waiting for others to join her, as they too grow old. The message of the poem seems to be that the journey of life is hard and might end in loneliness. This is shown in the use of imagery to show how isolated the old woman is and by the sad tone throughout. The poem puts across how the old and young don’t understand each other and makes the reader question their own attitude towards getting old.