‘Ninetieth Birthday’ and ‘My Grandmother’ both present rather distant and unsympathetic relationships between a young speaker and an elderly woman. The poets use narrative voice, form and language in contrasting ways to present these relationships.

‘Ninetieth Birthday’ is written in the second person. By addressing the reader directly (“you go up the long track), Thomas turns the poem into a general comment on relationships between young and old, and encourages the reader to think about their own relationship with the elderly. In contrast, ‘My Grandmother’ uses the first person to present the poem as a reflection on the speaker’s relationship with her own grandmother (“I remember”). This gives ‘My Grandmother’ a more personal tone than ‘Ninetieth Birthday’.

Both poems use form to reflect the relationship between the speaker and the old woman. ‘My Grandmother’ has a regular form, with four stanzas of six lines each and a regular ABABCC rhyme scheme. This regularity gives the poem a controlled, almost rigid tone which may reflect the rigid, cold relationship between the speaker and her grandmother. The form of ‘Ninetieth Birthday’ is much less regular. Thomas’ poem has no regular rhyme scheme but does use a lot of enjambment (“you can hear it spin/ On warm evenings”) and caesura, such as the full stop in line 5. These techniques create an irregular rhythm with lots of pauses, possibly reflecting the way the speaker pauses repeatedly on the journey to “that stone farm” because (s)he is reluctant to spend time with the old woman.

In both poems, the language used demonstrates a sense of emotional distance between the speakers and old women. The distance is emphasised by the metaphorical language used in both poems to describe the women’s emotional isolation. In Jennings’ poem, the grandmother is surrounded by the “smell of absence”, a metaphor which shows that the grandmother’s focus on her possessions rather than “love” has left her emotionally isolated. Even though she has “All her best things” round her, she has no close relationships – “absences” surround her, rather than people. Similarly, in ‘Ninetieth Birthday’ Thomas uses metaphorical language to show that the old woman is emotionally cut off. The metaphor of the “abyss” vividly describes the emotional distance between the speaker and the woman, suggesting that the narrator finds it impossible to reach her in “her own/ World”.

Although the narrative voice, form and language used in ‘Ninetieth Birthday’ and ‘My Grandmother’ are different, the two poems use these techniques in similar ways to present similarly distant relationships between a younger speaker and an elderly woman.