









BEFORE YOU WERE MINE KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER




| Context – Before You Were Mine was written by Carol Ann Duffy, and was published in 1993. | |
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| <p>Carol Ann Duffy – Carol Ann Duffy (1955-present) is a Scottish author and poet. She is Professor of Poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University, and has been the Poet Laureate since 2009. She is the first woman, Scot, and LGBT poet to hold the position. She was born in Glasgow but grew up in Staffordshire. She studied Philosophy at the University of Liverpool, and was active in the city's underground poetry scene from the 1970s. Before You Were Mine is a eulogy: a tribute to her mother written after her death.</p>  | <p>Glasgow after World War II – Following World War II, much of the United Kingdom experienced a decade of austerity. The economy recovered extremely slowly, and food rations were in place several years after the war. Glasgow, which was an integral part of the ship-building industry aiding the bombing raids, was bombed badly in the German raids. The city was devastated, and conditions in areas such as the Gorbals estate (where her mother lived) were terrible. As a result, people lived with considerable restraint.</p>  |
| <p>Duffy's Mother – Duffy herself has revealed that the poem is 'entirely autobiographical', in the sense that it incorporates her own musings about the life of her mother before she was born. Her mother had grown up in Glasgow, becoming a teenager during the 1950s. The poem came about because Duffy looked back at old pictures of her mum when she was young and carefree, coupled with stories from her mother glamorizing her youth ('as all mothers do'). The end of the poem takes place in Stafford, where the family moved when Duffy was 6.</p>  | <p>Culture in 1950s – When the next generation became teenagers in the 1950s, they rejected their parents rigid restrictions. They began an era of rock and roll music, extravagant dresses, and more relaxed sexual attitudes – they rejected many of their parents' values. Much of this involved attending ballroom dancing and embracing music culture as a precursor to the 'Swinging Sixties.' In <i>Before You Were Mine</i>, Carol Ann Duffy, represents her spirited mother, subtly exploring the relationships and conflicts of the time.</p>  |

| Language/Structural Devices | |
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| <p>Sight and Sound Imagery – Duffy uses a number of adjectives and verbs to give specific details about the photographs and memories, helping her to create vivid sight and sound imagery. For example, the verbs used in the final stanza, 'stamping', 'winking', 'sparkle' and 'waltz' enable the reader to picture and hear the sights and sounds of the memory – the reader can thus imagine the finer details regarding her mother's mannerisms and attributes.</p> <p>Quote: "That glamorous love lasts...where you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were mine."</p> | <p>Colloquial Language and Rhetorical Questions – Both of these techniques help to create an oral, informal, conversational tone across the poem, as would be expected in an interaction between mother and daughter. For example the use of 'eh?' in line 11, to end the rhetorical question, is highly informal, and adds authenticity to the idea that the speaker and subject know each other exceptionally well. The rhetorical questions seem to help the mother jog her memory.</p> <p>Quote: "The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best one, eh?"</p> |
| <p>Figurative Language – Although figurative language is used sparingly throughout the poem, it does help to illustrate individual events and ideas. For example, the hyperbole used in describing the 'thousand eyes' in the ballroom helps to show her mother's beauty, turning heads wherever she went. It also has generated the idea of others being judgemental, perhaps referencing the prevailing attitudes of the time.</p> <p>Quote: "in the ballroom with the thousand eyes, the fizzy, movie tomorrows/ the right walk home could bring."</p> | <p>Personal Pronouns – Duffy addresses her mother in the second person, with the frequent use of 'you' and 'your.' The frequent use of these personal pronouns indicates that this is a poem dedicated to her mother, understanding the sacrifices that she made. The frequent additional use of the first person pronouns 'I' and 'me' show that this is poem intensively concentrates on the relationship between the two of them.</p> <p>Quote: "...my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics/ and now your ghost clatters toward me."</p> |
| <p>Form – The poem is written in four equal stanzas of five lines each. This could affect both the rigidity and restraint of the post-war life into which the speaker's mother was born. It may also represent the regularity of time passing. However, the rhyme scheme is irregular, perhaps demonstrating her mother's tendency to break free of shackles.</p> <p>Quote: "I'm ten years away from the corner you laugh on with your pals, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff."</p> | <p>Narrative Structure – The poem is roughly structured in chronological order, with events and ideas detailed in the order in which they occurred. Stanza 1 deals with her mother's teenage years, stanza 2 her carefree life on nights out and in ballrooms, stanza 3 shortly after the birth of the speaker, and stanza 4 during the speaker's childhood.</p> <p>Quote: "I'm not here yet. The thought of me doesn't occur/ in the ballroom with the thousand eyes, the fizzy, movie tomorrows"</p> |

| Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text. | |
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| <p>Motherhood – In a sensitive and sentimental fashion, the poem explores some of the ideas of what motherhood entails. The poem largely focuses on the sacrifices that her mother had to make after she was born, by detailing the young and carefree life that she gave up. The speaker reflects on how motherhood forced her mother to change.</p>  | |
| <p>The Past – The speaker (the poem is autobiographical, so this is Duffy) uses a photograph to reflect on the past. She uses details in the photographs (girls 'shrieking' and the 'red polka-dot dress') alongside her understanding of the time and her conversations with her mother, to note how people and events have changed over time.</p>  | |

| Line-by-Line Analysis | | | | |
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| STANZA | LINE | POEM | ANALYSIS | |
| 1 | 1 | I'm ten years away from the corner you laugh on | <p>The poem opens by asserting the <u>time and setting</u> of the subject matter: ten years before Duffy was born, her mother on a street corner with her friends. The <u>imagery</u> created in this opening snapshot is of three girls wholeheartedly embracing the <u>pleasure-seeking culture</u> of the era, in spite of the <u>austere times</u>. The 'polka-dot dress' is typical of the <u>fashion of the time</u>, with bright colours and bold prints symbolising the spirit of extravagance and free-spiritedness. The depth of detail suggests the speaker is perhaps <u>looking at a photograph</u>.</p> | |
| | 2 | with your pals, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff. | | |
| | 3 | The three of you bend from the waist, holding | | |
| | 4 | each other, or your knees, and shriek at the pavement. | | |
| | 5 | Your polka-dot dress blows round your legs. Marilyn. | | |
| 2 | 6 | I'm not here yet. The thought of me doesn't occur | | <p>Duffy opens <u>stanza 2</u> by reminding the reader that she is looking back to before she was born, when her mother was <u>young, free and unburdened</u> – she hasn't even considered children yet. <u>Hyperbole</u> is used to suggest that she used to turn heads (thousand eyes). <u>Enjambment</u> emphasises the mother's ability and propensity for dance. The repetition of the title shows Duffy's awareness that she, by being born, <u>intruded</u> in her mother's life. The last line makes reference to the generational difference in <u>attitudes of the 1950s</u> ("Ma...with a hiding for the late one").</p> |
| | 7 | in the ballroom with the thousand eyes, the fizzy, movie tomorrows | | |
| | 8 | the right walk home could bring. I knew you would dance | | |
| | 9 | like that. Before you were mine, your Ma stands at the close | | |
| | 10 | with a hiding for the late one. You reckon it's worth it. | | |
| 3 | 11 | The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best one, eh? | <p>Duffy's <u>rhetorical question</u> reminds her mother that her birth signalled an abrupt end to her mother's decade of fun. The use of <u>colloquial language</u> ('eh?') to end the question demonstrates their closeness to one another. The 'red high-heeled shoes' <u>symbols</u> of her fun, carefree past life, are now described as <u>relics (disused)</u> that have become a toy for her daughter. 'Ghost' references that her mother has now died – ghosts normally glide, but 'clatter' is a more fitting memory. Reference to the 'scent' is an example of <u>synesthesia</u>, where a sense triggers memories. Love-bites (young, free) are implied in the last line.</p> | |
| | 12 | I remember my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics, | | |
| | 13 | and now your ghost clatters toward me over George Square | | |
| | 14 | till I see you, clear as scent, under the tree, | | |
| | 15 | with its lights, and whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart? | | |
| 4 | 16 | Cha cha cha! You'd teach me the steps on the way home from Mass, | | <p>The cha cha is a <u>sensual</u> South American dance from the 1950s. It would be inappropriate to practice this on the way home from 'Mass', showing a <u>rebellious streak</u>, compounded them taking the 'wrong pavement.' This may also <u>metaphorically</u> represent her mother taking the 'wrong path' in her life, sacrificing her life for her daughter. 'Winking', 'sparkle' and 'waltz' reinforce the idea of her cheeky, fun character before her daughter's birth.</p> |
| | 17 | stamping stars from the wrong pavement. Even then | | |
| | 18 | I wanted the bold girl winking in Portobello, somewhere | | |
| | 19 | in Scotland, before I was born. That glamorous love lasts | | |
| | 20 | where you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were mine. | | |

| Poems for Comparison | The Poet's Influences |
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| <p>Mother, Any Distance...</p> <p><i>Before You Were Mine</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to theme of <u>motherhood</u>.</p> | <p><i>BEFORE YOU WERE MINE</i> is essentially a kind of love poem addressed to my mother. It is entirely autobiographical. In the poem, I am imagining my mother 10 years before I was born- almost trying to re-create her as a teenaged girl in language. The images in the poem come from old photographs of my mother. One in particular reminded me of the famous image of Marilyn Monroe where her dress is blowing up around her knees- ("your polka-dot dress blows round your legs, Marilyn.") Of course, my mother's name was not Marilyn, it was actually May. Other images come from stories my mother told me about her dancing days, tales about the weekend search in the ballrooms of Glasgow for "Mr Right"!</p>  |
| <p>Walking Away</p> <p><i>Before You Were Mine</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the theme of <u>the past</u>.</p> | |