

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love & Relationships
Before You Were Mine - *Carol Ann Duffy*

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BEFORE YOU WERE MINE

Carol Ann Duffy

Brief Summary

This is a poem addressed to the speaker's mother. The speaker is looking at a photograph of her mother and blending her own childhood memories of her with the life she imagines her mother had before she was born. The poem shifts tone to one of regret as Duffy reflects on the sacrifices her mother must have made when she was born to accommodate her in her life.

Synopsis

- The speaker is thinking back ten years before she was born to her mother's life, and she imagines her on a street corner with two friends in a polka-dot dress.
- The speaker compares her mother to Marilyn Monroe.
- Describes her mother dancing and having a good night out, before getting told off by her parents when she returns home.
- Then, when the speaker is born, she is taken to Mass by her mother and they would dance down the street together.
- Concludes with a tone of regret, comparing how good her mother's life seemed to be before the speaker was born and disrupted it.

Context

Carol Ann Duffy (1955 -)

Duffy's mother died in 2005, about a decade after this poem was written. The impact her mother had on her life is evident as she told the Guardian about the "*bereavement following close behind the heartbreak she chronicles with such searing brilliance in Rapture*". 'Rapture' is another poetry collection by Duffy.

She was raised in the 1950s by her parents as a Roman Catholic, which helps to explain the religious references within her work. The poem explores the strong conventions of society women were expected to adhere to during the 1950s, such as to remain at home, not work, and raise their children.

Generationally, she would have been separated from her mother by the Second World War, which may contribute to this perceived distance between them in the mother // daughter relationship.

Summary

Context – mother died decade after poem written and it had an effect of "heartbreak" on Duffy // raised in the 1950s as a Roman Catholic

Structure - separated pronouns // simple sentence & stanza structures // caesura // enaleptic frames housing flashbacks

Language – synesthesia // colloquial & possessive language // religious connotations

Key Points – written as a response to a photo of Duffy's mother when she was younger // reflective of the strict expectations placed on both mothers & children in the mid 1900s.



From the collection 'Mean Time' (1993)

About 'Mean Time' Pan MacMillan (the publisher) wrote: "Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy dramatises scenes from childhood, adolescence and adulthood, finding moments of grace or consolation in memory, love and language amid the complexities of life. These are powerful poems of loss, betrayal and desire."

KEY THEMES	BREVITY OF HAPPINESS, REGRET, CHILDHOOD, AGING, SACRIFICE
RELATIONSHIP	MOTHER / CHILD
LOVE	PARENTAL, MATERNAL, DISTANT

Before You Were Mine

This is a poem centred around a daughter reflecting on her mother's life before she was born, and her life during the speaker's childhood. It explores an intimate, yet **distant, maternal relationship**, between the speaker and her mother. The poem also explores the **theme of female suppression and the restrictive society for women in the mid 1900s**.

The distance implied throughout the poem may be reflective of generational divide. It is assumed that the poem is auto-biographical (and this fits in with the popular culture references made, for example "Marilyn."), then the speaker and her mother will have had their childhoods and formative years separated by the second world war. **This may imply that there is a tertiary level of theme, with Duffy exploring the effects of childhood and motherhood, and relationships involved, in a conformist, post-war society.**

The poem uses an array of poetic devices, which is typical of Duffy's work, as well as a stable stanza structure, which could possibly be considered atypical of her poetry - this may set it aside from the majority of her work, as it is a more intimate piece than the concentration on societal commentary she often works within the frame of.

The speaker appears to flit between a defensive stance and tone of regret, when considering her mother's past, and seems to express guilt that she may have changed her mother's life for the worse. This could be interpreted from the line: "you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were mine". The poem also works to **reverse roles in the traditional maternal relationship** - the speaker describes her mother as "mine", and this can be seen as a reversal on the typical power balance in a mother - child relationship.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:James_Jebusa_Shannon_-_Mother_and_Child_\(Lady_Shannon_and_Kitty\)_-_1909.6.100_-_Smithsonian_American_Art_Museum.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:James_Jebusa_Shannon_-_Mother_and_Child_(Lady_Shannon_and_Kitty)_-_1909.6.100_-_Smithsonian_American_Art_Museum.jpg)



Before You Were Mine

This situates the poem in fiction, as Duffy cannot be sure of what is actually happening in the photo, but it is taken ten years before Duffy is born. The separation between the address “you” and “I” highlights a tone of distance between the two individuals. “Corner” may symbolise that the mother is in a liminal state between childhood and adulthood, but isn’t ready to get older yet.

Duffy is comparing the image of her mother to the famous actress Marilyn Monroe, and this is enclosed in a single word sentence to really emphasise a separation between her mother in the past and then during Duffy’s childhood. Monroe committed suicide, so potentially this reference could reflect the unhappiness which was associated with Duffy’s birth ten years later. Monroe was iconic and a symbol of glamour. Female sexuality is intrinsically linked to a woman’s individual freedom.

Duffy repeats the phrase “before you were mine” to emphasise the importance of this title and the separation she feels from this earlier version of her mother compared to the version that she knew as a child and then an adult, but also sets a slightly ominous tone.

Duffy employs synaesthesia by blending smell and sight, and this may be Duffy reflecting on her first memories of her mother, though it is vague and unclear as to whether this is

I’m ten years away from the corner you laugh on

with your pals, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff.

The three of you bend from the waist, holding

each other, or your knees, and shriek at the pavement.

Your polka-dot dress blows round your legs. Marilyn.

I’m not here yet. The thought of me doesn’t occur

in the ballroom with the thousand eyes, the fizzy, movie tomorrows

the right walk home could bring. I knew you would dance

like that. Before you were mine, your Ma stands at the close

with a hiding for the late one. You reckon it’s worth it.

The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best one, eh?

I remember my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics,

and now your ghost clatters toward me over George Square

till I see you, clear as scent, under the tree,

with its lights, and whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart?

The relaxed, informal tone of “pals” suggests she is comfortable about her mother and they have an intimate bond.

“Shriek” suggests a very jovial and playful image, and Duffy may be mulling over the carefree life her mother was able to live before her birth. She has no need at this point to consider the future, she is simply living in the moment, and introduces the theme of freedom and independence which comes before women give birth and have the societal pressures of being a mother. Duffy may be commenting on the unfair discrepancies in expectations between mothers and fathers when they have a child.

Sounds slightly bitter and jealous.

Duffy refers back to her earlier comparison of her mother to Marilyn Monroe, and the mention of “movies” connotes fiction and stories, which contrasts with the harsh realities of life she was subjected to when Duffy was born, and the responsibilities of being a mother.

Tone of regret that Duffy may have caused her mother to lose the carefree nature of her earlier life before her daughter was born. “Eh” creates a rather conversational tone.

Referring to her mother as “sweetheart” is rather patronising, and perhaps demonstrates a reversal in roles.



a fictional or concrete memory.

The religious suggestions of "mass" contrast with the behaviour described of her mother in earlier stanzas, which may be Duffy suggesting a level of hypocrisy in her mother's actions. On the other hand, Duffy's theme of admiration is clear as she attentively recalls her childhood in a positive light, demonstrated by the use of exclamatory punctuation.

Cha cha cha! You'd teach me the steps on the way home from **Mass**,

stamping stars from the **wrong pavement**. Even then

I wanted the bold girl winking in Portobello, somewhere

in Scotland, before I was born. That glamorous love lasts

where you **sparkle and waltz and laugh** before you were mine.

Contrasts with the "right path" from the second stanza, which suggests Duffy thinks her mother made the wrong choice in having a child.

Very positive and jovial verbs, written in present tense, to highlight the change in behaviour and lifestyle her mother experienced after having Carol as a child.

The title "Before You Were Mine"

The preposition "before" creates a sense of time and place and implies this may be a reflective poem.

The direct address of "you" creates a very intimate and personal tone, as a poem directed towards her mother, however this is initially ambiguous.

Before You Were Mine

"Mine" creates an initial sense of possessiveness which could suggest the relationship described is unbalanced and perhaps detrimental.



Perspective

The speaker is a child who is reflecting on the changes her mother had to make in her life before she was born. There is also an element of the **mother's voice** throughout the poem.

The poem is **semi-autobiographical**, so the **speaker** in this case could be seen as Duffy addressing to her mother. A mix of **first and second person narrative** is used in the poem, which has the effect of creating a **personal and intimate tone** to reflect the relationship. It also ensures the reader is engaged.

The poem is from the perspective of a daughter directly addressing her mother and imagining the life her mother would have had before the speaker was born.

The opening

I'm **ten years away** from the **corner** you laugh on
with **your pals**, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff.
The three of you bend from the waist, holding
each other, or your knees, and **shriek at the pavement**.
Your polka-dot dress blows round your legs. **Marilyn**.

The poem opens on a focus on time - **"ten years away"** - which immediately suggests to the reader that the poem will be centered around reflection.

- This use of **specific temporal deixis** - which refers to events moving away - emphasises the importance that Carol Ann Duffy feels the connection between herself and her mother has on her life.
- The time reference shows how the speaker didn't exist when the picture was taken.

The separation between the address **"you"** and **"I"** highlights the distance between the two individuals. The **noun "Corner"** may symbolise that the mother is in a liminal state between childhood and adulthood, but isn't ready to get older yet.

On the other hand, the relaxed, informal tone of **"pals"** suggests she is comfortable about her mother and they have an intimate bond.



The **verb "shriek"** suggests a very jovial and playful image, and Duffy may be mulling over the carefree life her mother was able to live before her birth. This is in contrast to the pressures placed on mothers in the socially strict 1950s.



Her mother has no need at this point to consider the future, she is simply living in the moment.

- This introduces the theme of **freedom and independence** which comes before women give birth and have the **societal pressures of being a mother**.
- Duffy may be commenting on the unfair discrepancies in expectations between mothers and fathers when they have a child.
- Including this in the opening sets up the theme of social commentary initially as a theme for the poem.

Duffy goes on to compare the image of her mother to the famous actress **Marilyn Monroe**, and this is enclosed in a **single word sentence** to really emphasise a separation between her mother in the past and then during Duffy's childhood. Monroe committed suicide, so potentially this reference could reflect the unhappiness which was associated with Duffy's birth ten years later. Monroe was iconic and a symbol of glamour, and female sexuality is intrinsically linked to a woman's individual freedom.

By including this vast quantity of imagery and information right in the first stanza, Duffy is creating a vivid setting to mirror the visual image of the photo the poem is inspired by, as well as working to engage the reader.

Language

Vivid imagery

Duffy uses a range of **visual imagery**, much of which will appeal to the reader's sense of sight, including the lines:

high-heeled **red** shoes
ballroom with the **thousand eyes**
polka-dot dress blows round your legs

By referencing the patterns and colours of "**red**" and "**polka-dot**", Duffy is providing layers of description behind the photo she is basing the poem off of. The colour "**red**" connotes passion and beauty. The **hyperbolic** description "**thousand eyes**" suggests she has a lot of pride for her mother and thinks that other people are fascinated by her as well.

The **verbs** "**shriek**" and "**laugh**" which describe noises suggest that Duffy's bond with her mother is so strong she can imagine the auditory accompaniments to the photo. This creates a more vivid setting for the poem with this mild **synesthesia**.

SYNESTHESIA | Technique where the poet uses two or more senses to create a vivid tone or setting for the reader of the poem.



Colloquial language

Duffy uses a lot of **colloquial language**, such as *“pals”* to demonstrate the close mother-daughter bond she experienced with her mother. However, this **juxtaposes** with the formality of *“mother”*, which still implies there is an air of distance or perhaps a more traditional upbringing. This could reflect both Duffy’s **Catholic upbringing** and the tight social expectations surrounding mothers and children in the 1950s.

JUXTAPOSITION | Comparing two concepts, characters, or clauses, in close proximity in a passage for the effect of contrast.

Possessive language

The **possessive language** used in the title - such as *“mine”* - instantly sets up an **assertive tone** for the poem. It juxtaposes with the vague premise of a title, and the fictionalised series of events which Duffy imagines from the photo she sees of her mother.



Religious connotations

The **religious connotations** of *“Mass”* and her mother as a Roman Catholic creates conflict with the carefree and sexualised images of her earlier in the poem. This reference may be to emphasise the environment of responsibility and lack of freedom her mother is trying to break free from, but is eventually forced to return to after becoming a mother.

Structure

Separated pronouns

The first three stanzas describe the mother and the poet as separate entities. The **separated pronouns** *“I”* and *“you”* are still utilised to highlight the distance between them generationally but also emotionally.

However, they come together in the final stanza as Duffy describes the activities and behaviour they’d have together, such as *“you’d teach me the steps”*.

Simple sentence structure

As this is a poem from the perspective of a child, Duffy uses very short, simple, sentence formats. This contrasts with the often **polysyllabic language**, which reflects that she is talking about her childhood but through an adult lens.

Stable stanza structure

The **structure** is very uniform and has **four stanzas of five equal lines**. This may reflect the initial structure of her mother’s life before coming a mother, contrasting it with the flexibility and sacrifice



<https://pxhere.com/en/photo/1098679>



she had to make after giving birth. It could also represent the intensely **strong social conventions** in place for women during the 1950s. An alternative interpretation is that the stable structure mirrors a photo album.



Caesura

By using a lot of **caesura**, Duffy is creating a conversational tone to the poem, which suggests familiarity and a level of comfort in her bond with her mother, especially considering her mother was still alive when the poem was published.

Enaleptic frames

The narrative uses enaleptic frames where the reader is provided with a range of **flashbacks** to both Duffy's childhood and her mother's early adulthood.

ENALEPTIC FRAMES | Technique where the poet uses stories written within stories, such as using flashbacks.

Comparisons

Before You Were Mine	Porphyria's Lover
"red shoes"	"yellow hair"
"shriek"	"murmuring"
"polka-dot dress"	"dripping cloak and shawl"
Both poets focus on the women's clothing, but in PL it's to suggest a farcarse, whereas it's to enhance her mother's personality in BYWM.	

Before You Were Mine & Mother. Any Distance

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both written directed towards the speaker's mother Brought up a relatively similar time, in the mid 1900s. Colloquial language - "back to // base" and "pals" - is employed in both poems.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MAD is situated in one main timeframe, however BYWM flits between flashbacks through the use of enaleptic frames. Whereas MAD focuses on the changing relationship between mother and child, BYWM only introduces the mother / child relationship at one point in one time, so we don't get that changing perspective. In BYWM, the change is displayed in how the mother adapts from before being a mother after giving birth, and the impact this has on her life. MAD is structured more flexibly and fluidly than BYWM, which could reflect



the changing familial relationship.

- MAD doesn't include religious reference, whereas BYWM does.

Before You Were Mine & Eden Rock

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poets present speakers who have fond memories of their parents, and speak with a tone that suggests that love transcends the death of a loved one. • Both can be viewed as semi-autobiographical poems, if we examine the similarities between the authorial context of the poem and the poem's content. • Both connote the afterlife - in BYWM, Duffy mentions her mother's "ghost" (though this could be a reflection of who she was before she had a child) and Eden Rock seems to use the "drifted stream" as a metaphor for the river Styx and "crossing is not as hard as you might think" as passing through to the afterlife.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ER's speaker discusses a memory in the present tense, from the perspective of still being in childhood, however BYWM flits between different frames of memory, and goes beyond the speaker's childhood memories. • Duffy's speaker addresses her mother directly, using the pronouns "you" and "your", which may show more intimacy than Causley's speaker, who refers to his parents as "they", which implies that there is more distance between them.

