

Before You Were mine

Carol Ann Duffy

OVERALL SUMMARY

During this poem, the speaker reminisces on behalf of their mother, reflecting on the adventurous, joyous life she had prior to giving birth to her first child (the speaker) **who burdened her** with more responsibility. There is an air of **self-loathing** (hatred of oneself) and a **certain resentment** towards the happiness and freedom experience by their mother prior to their arrival.

STANZA SUMMARY

- The first stanza presents an image of a woman enjoying a day out with her friends, inducing an air **of authenticity**. A comparison of the subject of the poem with Marilyn Monroe presents an image of a carefree, joyous woman celebrating her femininity.
- The second stanza continues this image with references to a life of glitz and glamour, whilst hinting at a sense of jealousy from the speaker, as they mention that they are not included in their mother's life and do not even cross her mind.
- During this stanza, again, the speaker begins with an example of a way in which they have **dulled the life** of their mother. They talk about the red shoes they played with that were one of the few **"relics"** that gave them access to the past. The line **"whose small bites on your neck?"**, worded like gossip, refers to the engagement of the mother of the speaker in exciting romantic relations.
- The final stanza summarises the overarching message of the poem, portraying the idea that the speaker somehow misses the past life that they were not a part of and resents the fact that their mother cannot seem to sparkle in the same way since they were born.

CONTEXT

- As the eldest of seven, it was likely that Duffy became very much aware of the **sacrifices** her mother had to make in order to care for her children, adding a very personal aspect to this poem.
- This poem refers to the experiences of a woman living in the 1950s, Duffy having been born in 1955. During this era, women were expected to live as housewives immediately after their marriage and entrance into motherhood.
- Duffy was raised **Roman Catholic**, referenced in the poem by the mother's return from 'mass'. This places further restrictions on the women of the period and reiterates the idea that her mother had to bear a lot of responsibility for a lot of children.
- Duffy's writing occurred during the **post-modern era of literature**, when time/flashbacks would be prominent theme. Unlike many other poets who wrote works included in the anthology, she was not as strongly influenced by traditional poetic devices used at the time as the modernist and post-modernist eras centred around change and experimentation.

Key Themes & Analysis

FREEDOM / CARELESSNESS

- During the first stanza, Duffy conjures up somewhat **childlike imagery** when she describes the speaker's mother with her friends: ***"The three of you bend from the waist, holding / each other, or your knees, and shriek at the pavement."*** The verb ***"shriek"*** describes an **unfiltered and expressive release of positive emotion**, as though these women are allowed to be themselves and make their voices heard.
- During the last line of the first stanza, the speaker's mother is **likened** to the actress, Marilyn Monroe (***"Marilyn."***), specifically referring to the well-known photograph within which she stands over a vent which blows up her skirt and she playfully pushes it down (***"Your polka-dot dress blows around your legs."***). This conjures the image of a **free-spirited, candid** (unfiltered) woman, developing the image of her that is presented throughout the previous lines of the stanza.
- The presentation of her mother in the context of some form of 'childhood' **underlines the contrast** between her experiences before and after having a child, as though it was representative her transition into adulthood.
- This contrast is also emphasised by the **exaggeration of the extravagance of the lifestyle of young women living in the 50s**. Not only is this **reinforced** by the inclusion of the glamorous actress, Marilyn Monroe, but the speaker uses language that **induces a semantic field of performance and glamour**.
- For example, the nouns ***"movie"***, ***"lights"***, ***"ballroom"*** and verb ***"sparkle"*** conjure up the image of a rich and desirable lifestyle. This is also done by the verb ***"winking"***, presenting an air of **mischief** as though there are no consequences to scandalous behaviour, as well as the adjective ***"glamorous"*** itself. This exaggerated vision is an example of **hyperbole**.

FAMILY

- There is **irony** in the fact that, despite their blood relation to their mother, the speaker remarks upon the familial life of her mother as an outsider, suggesting that they will never be a part of it. This is not only demonstrated by her **comradery** with her friends but by the inclusion of her own mother: **"Your Ma stands at the close..."**. This separates the speaker from their mother, as though they are in no way related.
- When considering the theme of family in relation to the speaker and their mother, the reader is presented with a **vivid depiction of the chaos of family life** in the few lines Duffy writes about the mother-child dynamic.
- For example, at line **"Cha cha cha!"** – not only does the repetition of the word **"cha"** indicate a **reinforcement of an instruction, foreshadowing the way that a mother would exasperatedly scold a child**, but it also indicates an **exclamation of excitement** that contrasts this mood.
- When reading the following phrase, **"you'd teach me the steps on the way home from Mass"**, the implication of the verb **"teach"** reminds readers of a figure of authority passing down their knowledge to a child.
- Mention of **"Mass"** introduces the **religious aspect** of the speaker's mother's life, pointing to the literal teaching of religion by the mother to her child.
- **"Whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart?"**. This question is one that would typically be asked by a parent to their child, **reiterated by the endearing pet name**, "sweetheart". This reinforces **the subversion of the roles of mother and child**, developing the presentation of her **mother in a stage of childhood**, free of responsibility before having to care for a child of her own.

MELANCHOLY / SELF-LOATHING

- Although the depiction of the speaker's mother as Marilyn Monroe could, upon surface-level, **present an image of joviality** (happiness), this arguably **foreshadows a decline** in the life of the parent as Marilyn Monroe is known to have committed suicide at the end of her career, whilst being mistreated throughout.
- ***"The thought of me doesn't occur"*** – there is a **tone of resentment** present here, as the speaker reminds both the reader and themselves that their mother did not associate a **free and exhilarating (exciting) life with the presence of her child**.
- A **sense of yearning** is brought about by suggestions that the speaker is desperate to get in touch with their mother's past, quite literally, to the point where they can **physically reach out and touch it**. The poem's first line, "I'm ten years away from..." uses language that one would see when referring to distance, for example, "I'm 10 [metres] away from...".
- The first line of stanza two, ***"I'm not here yet,"*** whilst most obviously referring to the speaker's presence in the world, could, **upon deeper reading of the subtext**, give the impression that they have not yet reached their destination physically.
- Later in the poem, at line 12, the speaker looks back on ***"my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics"***. Not only does this refer to the **playfulness of a child**, perhaps making a mess of their parents' belongings, but the **"hands"** of the speaker are significant. This connotes to physical touch, **underlining the previous point regarding a physical closeness to the past**.
- From the prior examples, it is made clear that a key feature of 'Before You Were Mine' is the presence of **double-entendre (double meaning)** within many of its phrases.
- The **idea of freedom that rings so loudly** during all stanzas of the poem is **starkly contrasted with the overarching theme of possession** that ultimately dominates the poem, firstly through the title, the **possessive pronoun "mine"** suggesting that the subject has been somehow stolen or snatched up by the speaker.
- This is later emphasised by the inclusion of the adjective, ***"possessive"*** itself during the first line of stanza 3. The **interrogative tone** on this line **hints at a requirement for reassurance** from the speaker's mother, as though they are expectant of her to disagree with that idea.
- The fact that these comments regarding the **unwanted presence of the speaker** are placed at the first line of each stanza highlights them as a dominant feature of the poem, constantly reminding the reader of the **self-loathing** of the speaker.

Form

LACK OF RHYME SCHEME OR METRE

- This injects the poem with a **very personal tone**, as though the speaker talks to their mother in prose (written or spoken language in its ordinary form, without metrical structure). This renders the message of the poem quite hard-hitting.

REGULAR STANZA

- Despite the complete lack of rhyme scheme and metre, the four stanzas of the poem all consist of five lines, introducing one **element of regularity**.
- Perhaps this indicates the **succumbing** of the mother to the traditional pipeline from freedom to a 'trapped' housewife and child-bearer that defined the lives of many women in the 50s. The **resentful tone** of the poem arguably indicates a criticism of this pressure and duty placed upon women of the time.
- Alternatively, it could suggest how she feels she **constrains and restricts** her mother's liberated and free side, thus the restricted stanzas replicates the **burden** she feels she has put upon her.

Structure

ENJAMBEMENT

- This poem is **heavily punctuated** but involves moments of **enjambement**, ultimately developing its very personal undertones.
- For example, repeated use of the **interrogative tone** points to the direct address of the speaker to their mother.
- The enjambment after ***“glamorous love lasts”*** resembles how the speaker wants her mothers glamorous and liberated life to last alongside her existence, yet the contrasting final end stop reinforces how she knows this is not possible.

END-STOPS

- The full-stops are often used for emphasis at certain moments. For example, the proper noun, ***‘Marylin.’***, as it summarises the message of the poem – the speaker’s seemingly **carefree** and happy mother had the world at her fingertips until she was **suddenly doomed** to a life of misery, much like the life of actress, Marylin Monroe.

Comparisons

Mother, Any Distance	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p>Familial Distance</p> <p>The title of 'Mother, Any Distance' echoes the motif of distance present within Duffy's poem as the speaker attempts to get in touch with their mother's past. This distance is clearly present in Duffy's poem as the speaker feels out of touch with the carefree, 'real' version of their mother. Both poets refer to the typical mother-child dynamic, including the duty of a parent to help and support their child.</p>	No regular metre	<p>Both poems make use of full stops and minor sentences for emphasis. In 'Before You Were Mine' this is done after the proper noun, 'Marylin.', as it summarises the message of the poem - the speaker's seemingly carefree and happy mother had the world at her fingertips until she was suddenly doomed to a life of misery, much like the life of actress, Marilyn Monroe. In 'Mother, Any Distance', the minor sentences 'Anchor.' and 'Kite.' Are used for a similar purpose, as the contrast between the sturdy, grounded anchor and the high-flying kite mirror the physically vast distance between mother and son, but, ultimately, the anchor can still keep the kite on the ground. This also reflects the poem's overarching message.</p> <p>Both poems make use of enjambement and caesura. In 'Before You Were Mine', this continues the idea of detracting from the rigid structure of the poem, rendering it closer to prose and therefore more personal.</p>	Duffy and Armitage both wrote primarily during the post-modern era of literature, meaning they were less inclined to mimic the popular writing styles of the period and had the freedom to be more experimental and personal. Their poems often centre around with.
Different	<p>Whilst Duffy's speaker appears to believe that their mother was happier without the responsibility of children, the speaker in 'Mother, Any Distance' thinks the opposite, reassuring their mother that they will still want her support after they have left home.</p>	<p>There is no rhyme during Duffy's poem. This develops the personal tone of the poem as it is read in a manner that reflects how one would read prose.</p> <p>During 'Mother, Any Distance', the first stanza has a regular AABB rhyme scheme, the second stanza involves imperfect rhymes that all end with the repeated 'ing' suffix and a final line that disrupts this pattern, and the third stanza, despite involving rhyme, follows no regular pattern.</p>	<p>The presence of occasional end-stopping in Armitage's poem along with the presence of asyndetic listing and an ellipsis creates quite an interrupted flow</p>	

Follower	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p>Religion</p> <p>Both poems make reference to religious ideas, Duffy, who was raised as a Catholic, mentioning the '<u>mass</u>' that her mother attended in her youth and Shelley using a semantic field of religion to introduce an idea of pure intentions and a suggestion that the union of him with his partner is '<u>God's Plan</u>'.</p>	Not the same	<p>Both poems are quite heavily punctuated to induce a certain effect. In both, each stanza contains a line written in the interrogative tone as the speaker directly addresses the person to whom the poem is devoted.</p>	<p>Both of these poems were very much inspired by the childhood of each poet - Duffy in the sense that she recognised the responsibilities taken on by her mother since having children, whilst Shelley was almost hyper-aware of his natural surrounding after growing up exploring the countryside.</p>
Different	<p>Shelley compares human relationships to nature to emphasise the ways in which they are connected</p> <p>Duffy also draws attention to issues regarding the restricted lives of women during the 1950s as she was more focused on these social issues as opposed to those during the Romantic Era. Differing from this, Shelley subtly underlines his dislike of industrialisation through his celebration of nature - a common attitude during the movement.</p>	<p>"Love's Philosophy" includes a very regular ABAB rhyme scheme along with regular metre (iambic tetrameter). In this way, Shelley highlights the togetherness of nature and the reliance of certain elements on each other for survival and the continuation of natural processes. This completely contrasts Duffy's poem that includes no regular rhyme scheme or metre. This helps to underline the underlying sense of resentment (bitterness) the speaker holds towards the happiness of their mother prior to their birth and presents quite a personal tone as the poem would be read in a similar way to prose as opposed to a rigidly structured rhyme</p>	<p>Shelley distributes punctuation in a more pre-meditated way, his use of end-stops grouping pairs of lines together, whilst Duffy deliberately avoids this organised approach, giving the sense that her words flow naturally as though she is speaking in prose (written or spoken language in its ordinary form, without metrical structure).</p>	<p>Duffy wrote much later than Shelley, meaning she was less influenced by ideas of the Romantic era and drew attention to different social and political themes. In this case, this involved the lives of young women living in the 1950s.</p> <p>Duffy's poem is a lot more personal than Shelley's as Shelley was more focused on the ideas he wanted to discuss as opposed to the actual subject he the speaker addressed.</p>

Can also be compared to 'Walking Away' by Cecil Day Lewis