

'Before You Were Mine'



Before You Were Mine – is a poem that explores the way in which motherhood changes a woman, how she can lose her sense of identity and how children rarely get to know the free, independent woman their mother was before they had children.

Carol Ann Duffy



Duffy was born in 1955 in Glasgow. She is a writer of poems and plays and in 2009 was appointed as the Poet Laureate. She sometimes uses her poems to explore the silent voices of historical and mythical females. She presents their feelings and turns the table on patriarchal narratives. Duffy often uses the dramatic monologue. Memories are often a feature of her poetry and their link to our sense of identity.

What is the poem about?

The poem seems to begin with the narrator looking at a photograph of her mother having fun with her friends. The narrator imagines her mother when she was younger, possibly informed by her mother's own memories and anecdotes- her mother stays out late dancing and isn't put off by being told off by her own mother.

The speaker says that her mother was happiest during the ten years before she was born. She remembers glimpses from her childhood of her mum's fun-loving past.

She remembers her mum teaching her to dance. She wanted her to be like this more often, but realises that her mum was only really fun-loving and glamorous before she was born.

Stereotypes

How would you describe a mother?



3 – Adjectives to describe a mother.

2 – Expectations of a mother.

1 – Role of a mother.



**3, 2, 1...
GO!**

The Mother

What do you learn about the writer's Mother in this poem:

When she was young?

As a Mother?

How has 'Ma' changed as the poem progresses?
Track the changes in each stanza.

What is the relationship like between the writer and her mother?

Some Prompt Questions (Or you can ask your own):

- How does she know about her Mother's friends and how they look? Why does she know their names?
- Why 'Marilyn'? What does this suggest? (Link to context)
- What might 'the thousand eyes' refer to?
- What is the 'right walk home'?
- How was her mothers relationship with her own mother- 'your Ma stands at the close with a hiding for the late one'?
- What was the writer's upbringing like, 'you'd teach me the steps on the way home from Mass'?
- How did her mother change after the writer was born? How does the writer feel about this?

The first three stanzas each start with a reminder of the distance in time between the narrator's birth and her mum's youth and fun.

The present tense is used to talk about an event in the past. This creates a vivid image – she could be imagining it, or looking at a photograph.

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.

Compares her to Marilyn Monroe- she was a glamorous and desirable film star, but also a tragic figure who committed suicide aged 36. This could hint at unhappiness to come.

The first three stanzas each start with a reminder of the distance in time between the narrator's birth and her mum's youth and fun.

There could be a hint of jealousy here. Why?

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.

Her mum wasn't scared of the consequences of enjoying herself

The narrator sees her mother as having freedom before she was born, but she was also restrained by her own mother.

Figurative language that suggests energy and exciting possibilities- she may have hoped for a life like a movie heroine.

The first three stanzas each start with a reminder of the distance in time between the narrator's birth and her mum's youth and fun.

The narrator was a demanding baby

This creates a conversational tone.

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?

Simile appeals to the senses to show that her imagination is so vivid that she can smell her mother.

Sounds like something a parent would say to their child, but here it's the other way around

Relics are sacred religious objects from the past –to the narrator, her mother's glamour is precious, but "ghost" highlights how it's in the past and won't return.

Alliteration stresses her mum's defiance and energy.

Contrasts with the "right walk home" (line 8). Maybe she's made the wrong choice in life.


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**.

As a child, the narrator wanted what she couldn't have – her birth meant that her mum couldn't be a "bold girl" any more.

The caesura emphasises that the narrator's birth was the turning point in her mum's life.

Repetition of "and" emphasises how many energetic qualities the narrator thinks her mother had.

Repeating this emphasises the difference between then and now. It also develops the possessive tone by repeating the word "mine"



The narrator admires her mum's glamour and her head strong, rebellious approach to life.

She wishes her mum was still fun-loving and carefree. This is ironic- the child wants the version of the mother before the child was born, but this is impossible because then the child wouldn't exist.

The narrator seems to criticise herself for taking away her mum's freedom.

Have a go at answering the questions to help you come up with your own ideas about the poem.

- 1. What evidence is there to suggest that the mother's life was better before her child was born?**
- 2. Why do you think the speaker creates such vivid images of her mother as a young woman?**
- 3. What is the effect of describing the mother's shoes as "relics"?**

Key Themes

Family Relationships

You could compare the admiration of the daughter in this poem with the admiration that the son in 'Follower' has for his father. The childhood memories are important in both 'Follower' and 'Eden Rock'