Before You Were Mine

SUMMARY

Ten years before I was born, you're laughing in the street with your friends, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff. The three of you are bent double, hugging each other or leaning on your knees, hooting with laughter. Your polka-dot dress billows like the one Marilyn Monroe wears in that famous photograph.

I haven't arrived yet, not even as a thought in your mind as you attend a ballroom dance, where onlookers stare at you, and the night is full of possible glamorous futures that might be brought into being by a romantic walk home. I always knew you'd be a good dancer. Well before you belonged to me, your own mother waits on the corner ready to smack you for coming home late. You figure the punishment's worth it.

The ten years before the sound of my noisy, demanding screams came along were the best years of your life, weren't they? I remember sticking my hands inside your old high-heeled red shoes, which are now just symbols of a bygone era. Now I see your ghost rattling towards me over George Square. I see you, as plainly as the smell of strong perfume, sitting under the square's lit-up Christmas tree—and whose love bites do you have on your neck, my dear?

I remember you teaching me the cha-cha on our walk home from church, stamping on a pavement that really should have been Hollywood Boulevard. Even as a little girl I wanted to know your younger, confident self, the one giving a wink to someone at the seaside in the years before I arrived. Your charming self still exists—you shine, dance, and laugh eternally in that time before you were my mother.

THEMES

MOTHERHOOD AND SELFHOOD

"Before You Were Mine" is about the way that the responsibilities of motherhood can change women's lives completely, sweeping away the carefree joys of their youth. In reminiscing about what her mother was like as a young woman in 1950s Glasgow, the speaker considers how her own birth forced her mother to sacrifice some of her happiness, her glamor, and even her identity. The speaker honors the full person her mother was before she "belonged" to her daughter, and in doing so creates a poignant lament (and perhaps even an implicit apology) for the way that mothers' identities tend to get overtaken by their children.

The speaker begins by imagining her mother's adolescence and young adulthood as a joyous and carefree time—in sharp contrast with her eventual adult responsibilities. As a young woman, the speaker's mother dances, stays out late, and laughs with her friends. She's also not afraid to suffer the wrath of her own mother, thinking it "worth it" to disobey her.

Though there are perhaps consequences for her youthful actions, the speaker's mother doesn't really have any responsibilities—at least, nothing like the kind that come with caring for a child. She lives her best "decade"—that is, the one before her daughter arrived—with "sparkle."

But parenthood cuts this youthful freedom short—a reality the speaker illustrates by remembering how she used to stick her hands inside her mother's red high-heeled shoes. The shoes' relocation from the dance floor to the home represents the mother's own journey from passionate, rebellious young woman to mom. As a child's playthings, the shoes become "relics" of a glamorous, exciting time that is irrevocably gone. The mother's life becomes organized around her daughter's "loud, possessive yell."

The poem thus acknowledges the sacrifices that come with motherhood, even as the speaker remembers wishing that her mother was again "the bold girl winking in Portobello"—that is, the vibrant young woman she once was. Perhaps the speaker is also lamenting the fact that her mother came of age during a time of limited opportunities for women outside the home, and thus never stood a chance of escaping the strict confines of her role as a mom.

Through her vibrant portrait of her mother's youth, the speaker gives her mother back a part of herself, permitting her to be young again through the power of memory. She even notes how bits of that other woman remained, in the way that her mother would dance on the way home from church when the speaker was growing up. Yet the "pavement" her mother ended up dancing on was the "wrong [one]" (suggesting the mother was sparkling enough have her own star on Hollywood Boulevard) and the "glamorous love" she once possessed, the speaker says, exists only in the time "before you were mine"—that is, before she became a mother. Paradoxically, the poem brings the mother's youth back to life, insists that it endures—and underscores the fact that it's truly gone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I'm ten years ...
... and Jean Duff.

In "Before You Were Mine," the speaker (who, from context, seems likely to be the poet Carol Ann Duffy herself) bends time and space to address her mother—before she was her mother. This vibrant young woman, the poem suggests, wasn't just a mother-in-waiting, but a lively, colorful, and charming person in her own right.

The first two lines establish that the poem takes place 10 years before the speaker was born. In this moment, the speaker's mother is still a young woman, carefree and full of life. She and her friends stand on a street corner and "shriek" with laughter so hard that they nearly fall over.

Here, the poem doesn't just *bend* time and space, but also mixes them together. The first line puts the speaker 10 years away from the specific "corner" of the street on which the three girls are laughing, rather than just 10 years away from being born. This idea of the past as a far-off place speaks to the youthful freedom of the moment: to these young girls, the future from which the speaker writes is as distant and strange as a foreign country.

The speaker's mother seems right at home in the world of the past. She's accompanied there by her friends "Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff." The specificity of these names makes these women seem more real, like people the speaker might have known or heard about while she was growing up. They also set the scene in mid-20th-century Glasgow, where Duffy's mother grew up. And the colloquial word "pals" in line 2 shows that these three are close. The alliteration of "Maggie McGeeney" also has a playfulness that suggests the shared laughter and joy between the three young women.

But those spelled-out names could also be a little melancholy: the mother probably wouldn't have used surnames to describe her "pals" back when they were hanging out on street corners together. The surnames thus make the friends seem realer, but also more distant—like historical figures, or names on a tombstone. This will be a poem about how the past is both living and lost.

LINES 3-5

The three of ...
... your legs. Marilyn.

These lines complete the poem's opening scene. It's possible to view the stanzas as a series of photographs, with this being the first one in the set. Readers can easily picture the speaker's mother caught mid-laugh with her two friends, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff.

Caesura and enjambment shape the lines to reflect the image they describe:

> The three of you bend from the waist, holding
> each other, or your knees, and shriek at the
> pavement.

The caesurae divide this section into multiple short phrases—as though the poem, like the young women, is overwhelmed with laughter to the point of losing control. Likewise, the enjambment makes the sentence itself seem to bend at the line break.

The poem specifies this laughter as a kind of "shriek," evoking the women's youthful confidence and vigor. The assonance of the long /ee/ sound in "each," "knees," and "shriek" evokes that high-pitched laughter as well. Through all this, the speaker paints a picture of her mother as a young woman truly enjoying herself—in this moment, at least, free from any major worldly cares.

The speaker's youthful mother also wears a polka-dot dress, typical of the fashion of the time. The wind is blowing the dress up around her legs, an image that evokes a famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe—the quintessential example of 1950s beauty and glamour.

The speaker directly alludes to the Hollywood star in the one-word sentence "Marilyn," associating her mother's own youthful vitality and good looks with Marilyn Monroe's. The full-stop caesura just before "Marilyn" carves out a special place for the word, creating an effect that mimics the way that someone of such star quality as Marilyn Monroe would have everyone's attention as soon as she entered the room. In other words, the caesura helps show that Marilyn—and, therefore, the speaker's mother—is in a class of her own.

This is also the first of the poem's two mentions of "pavement," which essentially bookend the poem and represent the speaker's mother being on either side of motherhood.

LINES 6-10

I'm not here ...
... it's worth it.

This stanza starts like the last one ended—with a short sentence. The speaker reiterates that she is not "here yet." In other words, her mother is not yet her mother, and certainly not thinking about the responsibilities and restrictions of having a child. The "thought" of the speaker existing "doesn't occur" to her mother at all yet, who is instead depicted dancing in a "ballroom."

Like the first stanza, the second reads as though it's inspired by a photograph. The use of present tense—which is the case for most of the poem—makes this memory feel alive and immediate. The speaker again uses apostrophe, addressing this

younger version of her mother directly. This lends the poem a sense of intimacy. The speaker is trying to imagine how her mother felt in the moments being described. Memory, here, is thus a way for the speaker to connect with the young woman her mother once was, to recognize the full life she had before becoming a mother.

The ballroom itself is a place filled with possibilities, of lust and desire, where "a thousand eyes" are looking on. The speaker seems to feel a vicarious sense of excitement, knowing how the dance promises "fizzy, movie tomorrows." In other words, the night is full of possible fairy tales, of potential romances and happily ever afters. Consonance brings this synecdoche (the eyes stand in for their human owners) into vivid color:

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

The /z/ sound in "thousand eyes," "fizzy," and "tomorrows" gives the line itself a kind of fizziness, as if it's a bottle of cola. The assonance of "fizzy" and "movie" is a bit giddy as well, a sound that fits right in with the description of youthful longing and romantic fantasy.

The speaker, of course, knows that her arrival in the world put an end to these "movie tomorrows," narrowing the near-limitless possible futures into one very specific reality. In another life, the mother's charms and good looks might have whisked her off to fame and riches—but in this life, the responsibilities of motherhood soon took hold.

As with the earlier reference to Marilyn Monroe, the speaker views her mother as a glamorous, vibrant young woman—or wants to imagine her that way, at least. That's why she states that she "knew you [the mother] would dance / like that." The implication here is that her mother's dancing is graceful, exciting, and, importantly, *excited*. This is all about conjuring the vision of the speaker's mother as more than just a mother, a vision of her life beyond the part that the speaker knows first-hand.

The caesura after "that" in line 9 signals a shift into a different aspect of this scene—the mother getting in trouble with her own "Ma" for getting home too late. The poem thus draws a thread between three generations of women, and shows how the daughters of yesterday become the mothers of tomorrow.

Because the speaker's mother was young, she felt that getting in trouble was "worth it"—like many young people do. But it's also here that the poem succinctly establishes the divide between two different lives lived by the same person. The mother's youthful days were the ones "Before you were mine"—the days before she belonged to the speaker as a mother to a daughter.

But in the blink of an eye, everybody changes roles; the speaker's mother will no longer be getting disciplined by her own mother, but will become the one doling out that discipline. The mother's mother will fade from view as the dominant figure in her (the speaker's mother's) life, quickly usurped by the arrival of a new ruler—a helpless new-born child. The speaker acknowledges the debt he owes to her mother by attempting to give the mother back a part of herself—by conjuring a powerful vision of her pre-motherhood life.

LINE 11

The decade ahead ... best one, eh?

The third stanza consists of two rhetorical questions, both addressed to the speaker's mother through apostrophe. The first comes in line 11:

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

The speaker asks her other mother whether the decade before she (the speaker) was born was the best time in the mother's life. It's a disarmingly simple question phrased in a way to make the answer seem like an obvious yes. The speaker views that decade as a period of maximum fun, freedom, and possibility in the mother's life.

The speaker addresses her mother less like a daughter and more like a friend, as though they are sharing in a nostalgic reflection about the good old days. This supports the way that the speaker wants to present her mother as more than a mother, addressing her not from the vantage point of being a daughter but of being a woman who can understand and empathize with her mother's life.

In line 9, the speaker uses the title phrase to indicate the way that a child takes possession of its parents. The speaker acknowledges this here, imagining her "loud, possessive yell," how her cries as a baby would have dominated her mother's life and made that life almost unrecognizable from the carefree years that came before.

The prominent /d/ consonance in "decade," "ahead," and "loud" links two different eras together through reference to noise—the fun, loudness of the dancing days vs. the "possessive yell" of the young speaker. The "eh" on the end is surprising—it's a colloquial expression that helps suggest that more friend-like feeling of empathy on the speaker's part towards her mother.

LINES 12-15

I remember my ...
... your neck, sweetheart?

These lines mark an important shift in the poem, with the speaker now talking directly about her own memories—as opposed to *imagining* her mother's life pre-motherhood. This allows the speaker to highlight how her mother's life changed, and to acknowledge her own role in that change. It also lends

the poem tenderness and vulnerability; now that the mother's carefree youth has been explored, the reader can better understand how life changed when her child came along.

The speaker begins with her earliest memories as a young child:

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

These are probably the mother's old dancing shoes. To the speaker at the time, the shoes were like strange, alien objects, so large that her child hands could fit inside them. The height of the heels reflects a time when the mother could choose her shoes according to their look as opposed to their comfort/practicality. Their red color, meanwhile, symbolizes glamour, sexiness, and romance.

Yet the shoes are now "relics," a word that playfully alliterates with "red" and sums up how these shoes have taken on a completely different meaning than they once had. While the shoes used to be an active part of the mother's life, now they merely represent the fact that that youthful life is gone. The mother's possessions are now her child's playthings. Like a statue of a lost civilization, the shoes speak of a time in which life was utterly different.

The poem then performs its next magic trick of time and space, seamlessly slipping into a more *present-tense* present tense. In line 13, the speaker now sees her mother's

> [...] ghost clatter[ing] toward me over George Square

This line raises the possibility that the speaker's mother is dead, though the speaker might also be referring to the specter of the mother's lost youth; that is, the "ghost" might be the ghost of her younger self. In either case, the verb "clatter" indicates a loud noise caused by movement, linking the image of the ghost to the mother's earlier dancing days (and the mention of the cha-cha in the next stanza).

When the ghostly mother figure comes into view, the speaker uses the simile "clear as scent." This mixes up the visual and olfactory (smell-related) senses, suggesting that this version of the mother is not fully graspable in reality.

And it's now that the speaker asks her second question of the mother figure, wondering "whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart?" in line 15. This is a kind of throwback to the mother's earlier years, when she would stay out late at the ballroom and, perhaps, return with hickeys on her neck from someone she met there. The /t/ consonance in "its lights," "bites," and "sweetheart" evokes those sharp love bites.

The use of "sweetheart," as with the earlier "eh," plays with colloquial language to make the mother-daughter divide more blurry. "Sweetheart" is the kind of thing a mother might call a daughter, rather than the other way round. This is part of the poem's overall goal of giving the mother back a part of her youthful self, the part that was taken away by becoming a mother.

LINES 16-20

> *Cha cha cha! ...*
> *... you were mine.*

The fourth and final stanza begins with a reference to the cha-cha, a dance that originated in Cuba. The dance is named after a triple-step during which the dancers' feet make a "cha cha cha" sound. The phrase, then, is inseparable from the energy of the dance itself.

The speaker recounts a vivid memory of her mother teaching her how to cha-cha when they would walk home together after church. It's worth noting that the mention of church, though explored no further, could relate to societal expectations about motherhood—that, for example, a young mother should give up her desire to go dancing and focus on taking care of her baby (as if the two things can't coincide).

This is an intimate moment that shows that the mother retained some of the sparkle and glamour that defined her earlier years, but also speaks to the way that youth—and the passions of youth, like dancing—gets traded in for "growing-up."

Line 17 returns to the pavement image—only this time the mother's life has changed forever. Now, she walks with the young speaker (as a child) in tow, while before (in stanza 1) she was keeling over in fits of laughter with her young friends. On the other hand, something *hasn't* changed. The mother retains an element of that youthful glow, now expressed by dancing with her daughter.

There's another layer to this second mention of the pavement. Earlier, when the speaker alluded to the famous image of Marilyn Monroe, the mention of "pavement" chimed with the actual pavement in that photograph. But this mention of pavement also gestures towards what is perhaps the most famous stretch of pavement in the world: the Hollywood Walk of Fame on Hollywood Boulevard. Tourists delight in stamping on the names of celebrities (like Marilyn Monroe) honored by stars embedded in the floor, and the implication here seems to be that the speaker's mother is just as worthy of that kind of tribute as any movie beauty (at least in the speaker's mind).

In other words, the speaker's birth deprived the mother of the true adoration and attention that she deserved. This Scottish pavement is "wrong" because it is unworthy of her glamour and grace.

The speaker claims to have felt a similar sentiment even back then, as a little girl. She "wanted the bold girl winking in Portobello" (a seaside area in Scotland where people would often vacation in the 1950s). In other words, even as a young child the speaker could sense that her mother was more than just a mother; she longed for her mother's playful, vibrant

younger self.

After the caesura in line 19 following "born," the speaker concludes that her mother's "glamorous love lasts"—it isn't gone. The poem has bent space and time enough to make this feel like a plausible suggestion—that just because something is technically over doesn't mean that it is truly gone. On some other plane of reality, the poem suggests, the mother is still "spark[ling]," "laugh[ing]," and dancing the "waltz." Perhaps her love for her daughter is what brings out these qualities.

The speaker ends by repeating the title, emphasizing that what has come before aimed to conjure an image of the mother pre-motherhood—to show that there was more to her than being a mother, and that, somehow, this will always remain true.

SYMBOLS

THE RED SHOES

The mother's red high heels, her old going-out shoes, symbolize her lost youthful glamour. They appear in the third stanza, as the speaker shifts from imagined scenes of her mother's youth to an actual memory of her own childhood. In line 12, she says:

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

These shoes are probably the ones the speaker's mother wore to "the ballroom with the thousand eyes" mentioned in line 7. High-heeled and flashy, the shoes' glamour suggests that, back then, the mother's priority was looking good rather than being comfortable. Red is a color associated with passion, love, and lust, and the shoes' thus speak to the mother's youthful excitement and desire as well.

But by the time the speaker is playing with the shoes, they're "relics," like monuments to a lost civilization, showing how much the mother's life has changed. While once the shoes were part of the excitement and glamour of going dancing, now they're just a kind of toy for her daughter.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "I remember my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Each stanza in "Before You Were Mine" contains at least one example of alliteration. Sometimes this links two or more words or concepts together, and other times it works to bring the poem's images to life.

Take the repetition of voiced and unvoiced /th/ sounds in the second stanza:

> I'm not here yet. The thought of me doesn't occur
> in the ballroom with the thousand eyes

The alliteration between the two "the[s]" and "thought"/"thousand" is spread out, but the pairing of the phrases nevertheless creates a contrast between two worlds—pre- and post-motherhood. Soon, "the thousand eyes" of potential young loves at the ballroom will give way to "the thought of me [the speaker]"—the constant attention needed to take good care of a child.

Later in this stanza, alliteration links "mine" with "Ma," setting up another contrast between the two people with a claim to the speaker's mother—the speaker herself during childhood, and the mother's own "Ma" back when she (the speaker's mother) was young.

Line 12's alliteration marks another significant moment in the poem, coinciding with the speaker's first mention of one of her actual memories (the scenes in the first two stanzas predate her existence):

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

These shoes are an important symbol that represent the mother's lost youth. The /h/ sounds are breathless, suggestive of energetic movement (like dancing the cha-cha!). Red is a color associated with lust and passion, and the alliterative pairing with "relic" here underscores that fact that such lust and passion are now things of the mother's past.

In the final stanza, the poem dials up its alliteration. This mirrors the assertion that the mother's "glamorous love lasts"—she continues to "sparkle and waltz and laugh," perhaps through her love for her daughter. The alliteration in this stanza through "stamping stars," "somewhere [...] Scotland," "before [...] born,"and "love lasts [...] laugh" adds a sense of vibrancy and energy to the poem's final image.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Maggie McGeeney"
- **Line 6:** "The thought"
- **Line 7:** "the thousand"
- **Line 9:** "mine," "Ma"
- **Line 12:** "hands," "high-heeled," "red," "relics"
- **Line 14:** "see," "scent"
- **Lines 17-17:** "stamping star / s"
- **Line 18:** "somewhere"

- **Line 19:** “Scotland,” “before,” “born,” “love lasts”
- **Line 20:** “laugh”

ALLUSION

"Before You Were Mine" features a couple of important allusions, two of which evoke old Hollywood glamor.

Part of the poem's aim is to restore the image of the speaker's mother as a young beauty full of "sparkle." The speaker imagines her mother in her youth: attending dances, laughing with her friends, getting home late, and attracting attention for her good looks and natural charm. When the speaker mentions the way her mother's "polka-dot dress blows round [her] legs," she raises one glamorous parallel in particular: "Marilyn." She means Marilyn Monroe, the actress, model, and singer who became one of the most popular sex symbols of the 1950s and '60s.

There are many enduring images of Monroe, but perhaps the best known is this one, in which she's photographed with her skirt billowing up, caught on the currents from the subway air vent below her feet. This is an iconic image of the era—and the speaker feels her mother, in different circumstances and in her own way, is just as glamorously iconic. This is all expressed in line 5:

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

The one-word sentence here makes the allusion crystal clear. The speaker doesn't even have to spell out Monroe's whole name for the reader to know who she's talking about.

In line 17, the speaker's allusions return to Hollywood with an image of her mother *after* the speaker has been born. The mother teaches the young speaker to dance the cha-cha on their way home from church (an allusion to a kind of dance), "stamping stars from the wrong pavement." The "wrong pavement" suggests that the *right* pavement is Hollywood Boulevard, where celebrities—including Monroe—have stars embedded in the sidewalk in their honor. The speaker, starstruck by her mother's beauty as a child and wistful for her mother's youth as an adult, feels her mother belongs among just such esteemed company.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “Your polka-dot dress blows round your legs. Marilyn.”
- **Line 16:** “Cha cha cha!”
- **Line 17:** “stamping stars from the wrong pavement.”

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is woven into the fabric of "Before You Were Mine." The poem often uses the second person, with the speaker directly addressing her mother. But the speaker is also reaching across time and space to someone who can't reply. For example, the first stanza, though in the present-tense, is set in an era "ten years" before the speaker is even born. This younger version of the mother can't respond to her daughter in the present.

The poem also subtly suggests that the mother is no longer around in the present, at one point even referring to her as a "ghost." While this "ghost" might simply refer to the specter of her younger self, there's also the possibility that the speaker's mother is in fact dead at the time the speaker is reminiscing. Either way, the poem is built out of memory and imagination—and it's essentially *addressed* to memory and imagination. Though the speaker's mother/younger version of her mother is gone, the apostrophe makes her into a living presence in the poem.

Apostrophe allows the speaker to conjure an image of her mother as a youthful, glamorous figure unburdened by adult responsibilities. Through apostrophe, the speaker even can turn the mother-daughter relationship upside down, talking to her mother more like an old friend in line 11 ("The decade ahead [...] eh?") and like a mother herself in line 15 ("whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart?"). Apostrophe creates a sense of intimacy, granting the speaker the chance to address her mother as a fellow adult, with all the newfound understanding that such adulthood entails.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 8-10
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 16-17
- Lines 19-20

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs throughout "Before You Are Mine," supporting the poem's images and helping bring them to life on the page. Sometimes, assonance draws attention to connected ideas, and sometimes, it works almost like sound effects, mimicking sounds from the scenes at hand.

In the first stanza, the poem names two of the mother's friends. One of them, "Maggie McGeeney," has a playfully assonant (and alliterative!) name that gently hints at the carefree nature of their shared youth, and also links her to her friend Jean. In line 4, the poem uses the same /ee/ sound to evoke the girls' loud laughter:

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

The reader can hear the "hee-hee-hee" built right into the

sounds of the words.

Another significant example comes in line 11, when the speaker asks her mother the rhetorical question:

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

These /eh/ sounds echo throughout the line, as though the speaker keeps nudging her mother with that colloquial "eh"—*"Things were better than, eh? Eh? Eh?*

In the next line, assonance works with alliteration to link the mother's "red shoes" with their new status as "relics." These repeated sounds gesture to the fact that the shoes no longer serve their original function, and instead have become monuments to a lost era of giddy, carefree, pre-baby youth.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " Maggie McGeeney," "Jean"
- **Line 4:** "each," "knees," "shriek"
- **Line 7:** "the fizzy," "movie"
- **Line 8:** "knew you"
- **Line 11:** "decade ahead," "possessive yell," "best"
- **Line 12:** "red," "relics"
- **Line 15:** "lights," "bites"
- **Line 19:** "lasts"
- **Line 20:** "laugh"

CAESURA

Caesura appears throughout "Before You Were Mine." The poem is very conversational, and the many pauses within lines mimic the rhythms of natural speech.

Caesura also often helps the poem's shape to mimic what it describes. For example, here are lines 3 and 4, which portray the mother in her youth, laughing with her friends:

> The three of you bend from the waist, holding
> each other, or your knees, and shriek at the
> pavement.

These caesurae make the lines' rhythm unpredictable and irregular—shaky as the girls as they almost fall over from laughing so hard.

The caesura in line 5 has a different effect:

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

This emphatic period introduces the poem's allusion to Marilyn Monroe. The sudden pause, followed by the single word "Marilyn," suggests that no more needs to be said: the speaker's mother is a similarly beautiful, vivacious, and glamorous figure.

In the second stanza, the caesura in line 7 conjures the exciting, restless atmosphere of the ballroom itself: the energy of "the ballroom with the thousand eyes" streams right into "the fizzy, movie tomorrows" of the mother's romantic imaginings.

In lines 13-15, ("and now [...] sweetheart?"), the speaker sees a vision of her mother as a "ghost." It's not a scary vision, but rather one full of tenderness and love. The speaker momentarily plays mother to her mother, asking whose "bites" the latter woman has on her neck. Small clauses in line 14 and 15 mimic the "small[ness]" of these bites, giving the section a playful, cheeky tone.

Other significant pauses occur in lines 16-17:

> Cha cha cha! You'd teach me the steps on the way
> home from
> Mass, stamping stars from the wrong pavement.

The caesura in line 17 adds extra stress to "Mass" and "stamping," matching the weight with which mother and daughter stomp their feet as they attempt the cha-cha on their walk home. And their "Cha cha cha!" itself gets energy from being set apart by that emphatic exclamation point.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "pals, Maggie"
- **Line 3:** "waist, holding"
- **Line 4:** "other, or," "knees, and"
- **Line 5:** "legs. Marilyn."
- **Line 6:** "yet. The"
- **Line 7:** "eyes, the fizzy, movie"
- **Line 8:** "bring. I"
- **Line 9:** "that. Before," "mine, your"
- **Line 10:** "one. You"
- **Line 11:** "loud, possessive," "one, eh?"
- **Line 12:** "shoes, relics,"
- **Line 14:** "you, clear," "scent, under"
- **Line 15:** "lights, and," "neck, sweetheart"
- **Line 16:** "cha! You'd"
- **Line 17:** "Mass, stamping," "pavement. Even"
- **Line 18:** "Portobello, somewhere"
- **Line 19:** "Scotland, before," "born. That"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout "Before You Were Mine." Generally speaking, it helps bring the poem's images and ideas to life on the page.

One important example of consonance is in line 5, which compares the speaker's mother to Marilyn Monroe:

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

This vibrant burst of similar sounds draws attention the line and the original image it's referencing (Marilyn Monroe in her dress. The liquid /l/ sound in particular evokes the fluid swish of a skirt being blown about.

The following stanza depicts the speaker's mother having the time of her life—attending a ballroom dance where a "thousand eyes" look at her, promising the seemingly endless potential for "fizzy, movie tomorrows." The /z/ sound here is almost onomatopoeic, sounding just like the fizzy excitement it describes, and making the line sound as if it is about to burst with excitement. Think about the buzzing sound of a bee, and how the hubbub of human voices creates something similar.

In line 11, the poem again uses prominent, noisy consonance:

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

The speaker is talking about the cries she used to make as a child, and, more generally, how babies cry to get the attention of those who care for them. The noise of the line, then, relates to the noise being described not so much in the sound of the consonance itself but in its insistent *presence*. Here, consonance is how the poem creates its own big, loud, urgent noise.

In line 15, the speaker asks the ghost of her mother's younger self, which appears under the "lights," whose "small bites" she has on her neck, addressing her as "sweetheart." The bite of the /t/ and hiss of the /s/ create a playful, teasing tone.

In the final stanza, the poem dials up its consonance. Note in particular the /l/ sounds in "bold girl," "Portobello," "glamorous love lasts," and "sparkle and waltz and laugh." This sound is elegant and lush—a fitting sound for evoking the mother's enduring glamour.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Maggie McGeeney"
- **Line 5:** "dot dress blows," "legs," "Marilyn"
- **Line 6:** "not," "yet," "The ," "thought," "doesn't"
- **Line 7:** "thousand eyes," "fizzy," "movie tomorrows"
- **Line 9:** "mine," "Ma"
- **Line 10:** "one," "reckon"
- **Line 11:** "decade ahead," "loud," "possessive yell," " was," " best"
- **Line 12:** "hands," "high-heeled," "red," " shoes," "relics"
- **Line 13:** "ghost clatters toward"
- **Line 14:** "see," "as scent," " tree"
- **Line 15:** "its lights," "whose small bites," "sweetheart"
- **Line 16:** "Cha cha cha"
- **Line 17:** "Mass, stamping stars"
- **Line 18:** "bold girl," "winking in," "Portobello," "somewhere"
- **Line 19:** "Scotland," "before," "born," "That glamorous love lasts"
- **Line 20:** "sparkle and waltz and laugh"

ONOMATOPOEIA

Onomatopoeia appears once in "Before You Were Mine," in line 16:

> Cha cha cha! You'd teach me the steps on the way home from
> Mass, stamping stars from the wrong pavement. [...]

Here, the speaker remembers how her mother would teach her to dance the cha-cha after church. The cha-cha is an energetic dance with Cuban origins, named after the sound that the dancers' feet make while doing its main triple step. This phrase, then, sounds just like the stomping it describes.

That "Cha cha cha!" jumps out in a sudden burst of energy, a contrast with the sweeter, sadder tone of the speaker's visit with her mother's ghost in the previous stanza ("and now your ghost [...] sweetheart?"). For that matter, it forms a contrast with the seriousness of Sunday Mass. This speaks not just to the speaker's excitement as a child when spending time with her mother, but also to her mother's vitality and charm; her sense of fun and mischief lasted well into her motherhood, even if she didn't get to go out and use those cha-cha skills on the dance floor anymore. This moment of provides an echo of the mother's youthful glamor—and penchant for dancing—that reminds the speaker that her mother was always more than just her mother.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "Cha cha cha"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Before You Were Mine" asks two rhetorical questions, both in the third stanza, and both addressed from the speaker to her mother. The first is line 11:

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

Here, the speaker addresses her mother, not like a child, but like an adult friend. She acknowledges how difficult she must have been to take care of—not because she was an especially difficult baby, but simply because all children need a lot of attention and devotion! Her final "eh?" here gives her question a jokey tone: she's relating to her mother as a grown-up over both the difficulty of parenthood and the remembered fun of youth.

In her second rhetorical question, the speaker again addresses

her mother from an adult perspective—but this time, she herself seems to have become the mother:

> [...] and whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart?

The question has a gentle, affectionate scolding tone, as if the speaker feels she has caught her mother doing something naughty—but understandably and inconsequentially naughty, and pretty fun, too.

Both questions build a sense of intimacy between the speaker and her mother, who, given that she appears as a "ghost," is probably no longer alive. But they also remind the reader that the speaker, too, is an adult now, and perhaps can empathize with her mother even more deeply because she's been through some of the same experiences.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-15:** "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

"Before You Were Mine" uses one simile, in the third stanza:

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

Here, as the speaker sees her mother's "ghost" coming towards her, the simile intensifies the strangeness of this moment—which nevertheless remains tender and intimate. This simile compares the clarity with which the speaker sees her mother to a "scent," mixing up the visual sense with the olfactory (that is, the sense of smell). This mixing of the sense is known as synesthesia, and makes the encounter feel more unusual—as though the mother and daughter are on different planes of the universe. The simile shows that, though the speaker can see her mother clearly, she's not seeing her as she usually does.

Smell is an evocative sense, and perhaps the "ghost" the speaker encounters here also comes with a gust of her mother's signature perfume—an image that suggests not just the mother's glamorous, glittering youth on the dance floor, but the familiarity of a mom's smell to a child. Readers may remember having similar experiences of knowing someone's smell very well, and being reminded of them by a waft of the perfume they wear.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "clear as scent"

SYNECDOCHE

"Before You Were Mine" uses synecdoche once, in the second stanza, using "the ballroom with the thousand eyes" to describe a dance hall bustling with people.

Here, the speaker imagines her mother on a night out, long before the speaker is born. The mother goes to a ballroom to dance and meet other young people. The poem paints this as an exciting occasion filled with possibility, one that could lead to any one of many possible futures (through meeting a lover, perhaps).

The mother is an attractive figure, drawing the attention of the others at the dance. These others are "the thousand eyes," the synecdoche placing focus on the visual sense—the way that everyone at the dance is checking out everybody else. Overall, then, the image also helps create an atmosphere of intoxicating mystery that mirrors what the young mother would have felt at the time.

The synecdoche also speaks to an important shift in the speaker's mother's life. As a beautiful young woman, she was once the center of attention, used to meeting the eyes of other people at the dance. But as a young *mother*, she is no longer the focus of attention in her life—that honor belongs to speaker, who claims the mother as "mine."

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "the thousand eyes"

VOCABULARY

Shriek (Line 4) - To scream—in this case, with uncontrolled laughter.

Polka-dot (Line 5) - A pattern of circles spaced out to form a design on fabric—a fashionable look in the 1950s and '60s!

Marilyn (Line 5) - An allusion to Marilyn Monroe, the quintessential starlet of the 1950s and '60s. The poem is referring to this iconic image in particular.

Close (Line 9) - A street that has no through access; a cul-de-sac.

Hiding (Line 10) - A scolding, maybe including a physical beating.

Clatters (Line 13) - Moves clumsily and noisily.

George Square (Line 13) - Glasgow's main square.

Cha cha cha! (Line 16) - The "cha-cha" is an energetic dance from Cuba. Here, the speaker and her mother imitate the sound made by dancers' feet as they perform a triple-step

move.

Mass (Lines 16-17) - A religious service in a Catholic church.

Portobello (Line 18) - A seaside suburb of Edinburgh, a popular holiday destination for Glaswegians (that is, residents of Glasgow) like the speaker's mother.

Waltz (Line 20) - A romantic ballroom dance, performed to a three-beat rhythm—like this!

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Before You Were Mine" has a regular stanza form, but aside from that doesn't use a particular poetic structure. The poem consists of four quintains (five-line stanzas), written in free verse with no rhyme scheme.

The poem is framed as a direct address from the speaker to her mother's younger self. The poem is thus an apostrophe, addressing someone "off-stage" who isn't able to answer back. The speaker grants herself a kind of magical imaginative power, traveling through time and space to visit her mother pre-motherhood—to show her mother as more than a mother. Each stanza focuses on one particular scene, like a series of photographs or little home movies.

The poem can also be read as a kind of eulogy, a song in praise of the dead. The poem seeks to celebrate the speaker's mother—to show that her "glamorous love lasts"—while also acknowledging that, on some level, the mother's glamourous younger self is gone forever.

METER

"Before You Were Mine" is written in free verse, without a regular meter. This gives the poem a conversational, intimate tone. Remember, this poem is addressed from the speaker to her mother, as if they were just two friends reminiscing. The lack of meter keeps the poem from sounding too overwrought; rigid meter wouldn't have that freedom of expression that arises between two people who know each other well.

Though the poem doesn't use a regular meter, there are a couple of points where it uses stresses for emphasis. Line 11, for example, uses regular stresses to evoke the speaker's cries as a baby:

> The dec- | ade a**head** | of my **loud**, | po**sses**- | sive **yell** | was the **best** | **one**, **eh**?

The meter of this line is rising—meaning it goes from unstressed to stressed beats, here in a specific pattern of mostly iambs (da-DUM) and anapests (da-da-DUM). This creates a sense of predictability and monotony—one that perhaps reflects the seemingly endless work that comes with caring for a baby. The dense pattern of stresses at the end of the line also mirrors the "loud, possessive yell" of the speaker's baby self. Here, the poem turns up its own volume to match with its description.

The poem does something similar with the two heavy stresses at the start of line 17, in which the speaker describes coming home from "**Mass**, **stamp**ing **stars** from the **wrong pave**ment." Here, as the speaker remembers how her mother would teach her the cha-cha on their way home from church, her stresses at the start of the line mimic the enthusiastic stamping of mother and daughter as they dance—rather than walk—home.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't use rhyme, instead opting for free verse throughout. This grants the poem a sense of intimacy. The speaker and her mother were clearly close, and with this comes the ability to speak openly and casually; rhyme would probably make the poem feel too ordered and structured. The lack of rhyme scheme means that the poem unfolds freely and unpredictably, which reflects the mother's fun-loving sense of freedom as a young woman.

SPEAKER

The overlap between Carol Ann Duffy's biography and the time and place described in the poem suggest that the speaker in "Before You Were Mine" is a version of the poet herself. (But one doesn't need to know this to appreciate the poem!)

The speaker, implied to be an adult at the time of the poem, is addressing her mother's younger self. The speaker is on a mission to remember and celebrate her mother as the whole and lively person she was before her daughter's birth, and in the poem she travels through space and time to get a glimpse of her mother's youth. The speaker delights in her young mother's vivacity, imagining her with the sparkle of a starlet, drawing all the eyes in a dancehall. There's a hint here of a childish worship for a mother's beauty (as when the speaker remembers playing with her mother's fancy high-heeled shoes), as well as an adult woman's understanding of her mother as a separate person with her own past life.

This speaker's admiration for her mother goes hand in hand with her gratitude. She understands that her mother gave up a significant part of herself so that her daughter could grow and flourish. Nevertheless, the speaker feels that—in some ghostly way—something of the mother's youthful "glamorous love" lives on.

SETTING

"Before You Were Mine" plays with space and time, jumping freely between different moments in the speaker's mother's

life. The poem thus seems to take place in two settings: the world of the past, and the world of the present.

The speaker's references to "George Square" and to holidays in "Portobello"—and her mother's friends' vividly Scottish names—set the scene in Scotland, and even more specifically, in Glasgow. This is Glasgow in the mid-20th-century, and it seems both mundane and glamorous: the speaker's mother can imagine "movie tomorrows" for herself, even as her own mother waits on the street corner to punish her from coming home late.

The speaker herself seems to have returned to Glasgow as she tells this poem, and can feel her mother's presence there: she sees her "ghost" crossing George Square in the present day. For the speaker, the Glasgow of the present is still interwoven with the Glasgow of the past, just as her mother's youth "lasts" even after it's long gone.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy's "Before You Were Mine" was published in *Mean Time*, her prize-winning 1993 collection that touches on themes of childhood, memory, love, and the passage of time. Readers may wish to check out "Nostalgia," "First Love," and "Stafford Afternoons"—among many others—from the book for comparison with "Before You Were Mine."

Readers often interpret this poem as being autobiographical, as its references to the speaker's mother's life in Glasgow match Duffy's own mother's history. And though this poem doesn't explicitly address feminist issues, it implicitly questions the sacrifices women have so often been expected to make in the name of motherhood. In this sense, the poem is in keeping with Duffy's work more broadly; her collections like *The World's Wife* and *Standing Female Nude* also speak to Duffy's poetic exploration of women's roles in society.

There is also, of course, a rich world of poetry that explores the relationships between parents and children, and more specifically the bonds between mothers and daughters. Part of this poem's aim seems to be to acknowledge the speaker's debt to her mother for all that she gave up upon motherhood. The poem "Mother Any Distance" by Duffy's contemporary and fellow Brit Simon Armitage touches on similar themes.

Duffy herself cites Sylvia Plath as a major influence on her work, and readers might also want to check out *The Republic of Motherhood*, a contemporary collection by Liz Berry—a poet who in turn references Duffy as an inspiration.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Before You Were Mine" is a contemporary poem, but it makes little reference to the time-period around its own composition. Instead, it focuses mostly on the mid-20th century, when the speaker's mother was a young woman. The poem's references to "polka-dot dress[es]," ballroom dance halls, and Marilyn Monroe all place it squarely within the mid-1940s to 1950s. Duffy herself was born in 1955, meaning that if the poem is taken autobiographically, it begins in 1945—"ten years away" from Duffy's entrance into the world.

This period, coming on the heels of World War II, was a time of relative optimism. The nature of youth itself was changing, with the notion of adolescence as a distinct period between childhood and adulthood becoming more widely accepted. Being a teenager was generally considered an exciting, vibrant, and rebellious period in an individual's life.

Like other teenagers of the time, the speaker's mother dressed up, went out late, and flirted. Still, women's roles remained relatively constrained in a society that expected them to be mothers and wives above all else. In showing how the speaker's mother was essentially forced to give up her own passions and ambitions upon having a child, the poem implicitly critiques, or at least laments, the pressures placed on women to sacrifice their own identities in the service of raising kids and taking care of the home. In this sense, Duffy is applying a more contemporary feminist lens to treatment of women in the past.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Motherhood in Poetry — Read a range of poems about mothers and motherhood. How do these compare with Duffy's version? (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/150160/poems-about-motherhood)
- The Poem Out Loud — Hear "Before You Were Mine" read aloud by the poet herself—accompanied by photos of her real-life family. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDXnEgD3_Yw)
- A Short Biography of Duffy — Read some background on Duffy's life and work from the Scottish Poetry Library, and find links to more of her poems. (https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/carol-ann-duffy/)
- Marilyn Monroe in The Seven-Year Itch — Watch the iconic Marilyn Monroe scene the poem alludes to in line 5—the very picture of 1950s glamor! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUjege2gYEU)
- Carol Ann Duffy in Conversation — Watch an interview with the poet from the Lincoln Review. (https://youtu.be/n5PVSMfwW2U)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Anne Hathaway
- Circe
- Death of a Teacher
- Demeter
- Education For Leisure
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Aesop
- Mrs Darwin
- Mrs Midas
- Mrs Sisyphus
- Originally
- Penelope
- Prayer
- Recognition
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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