The Good Teachers

SUMMARY

The speaker, looking at a panoramic class photograph from her school days, imagines running around the back of the group to the other side (before the camera finishes taking the photograph) in order to appear in the image twice. The speaker's former teachers, a noble group of women reduced to the size of the speaker's thumbs in the picture, are situated in the front row of the group. They look out from the photograph, judging the speaker. Not long after this photo was taken, the speaker would join Miss Ross's double-period history class. In the present, the speaker's breath creates fog on the photo's glass frame that makes Miss Ross look ghostly. The speaker recalls the names of two significant historical events that learned about in Miss Ross's history class: the South Sea Bubble and the Defenestration of Prague.

Miss Pirie was the speaker's favorite teacher back then, so she worked to become her best student. The speaker loved Miss Pirie so much that she felt compelled to appear in the school picture twice, looking dedicated and devoted. She'd memorized Rudyard Kipling's poem "The River's Tale." One of Miss Pirie's eyes was green, warm, and sharp; the other was cold and blue. The speaker wrote poetry for Miss Pirie in her mind.

The speaker didn't like Miss Sheridan, the French teacher; thinking of her, the speaker recites the phrase "What is your name" in French. She also didn't like Miss Appleby, the math teacher; thinking of her, the speaker recites part of the Pythagorean theorem. The speaker really didn't like Miss Webb, the geography teacher; thinking of her, the speaker recites the name of the largest city and mountain in Tanzania. The speaker can see them all now, those supposedly good teachers rustling down the hallway in their long, brown skirts, looking haughty, well-groomed, and capable.

Those teachers saw right through the speaker, who would roll the waistband of her skirt over in order to shorten it and show off her legs. She was thoughtless, rude, and rebellious then, always blowing smoke rings. She'd flunk and wasn't living up to her potential. But time passed and the speaker metaphorically climbed over the school's walls: she danced, kissed, got married, got a mortgage (or started to work for the mortgage provider), and eventually ended up in the present day. The same day all those "good" teachers said she'd regret her choices.

THEMES

THE POWERFUL INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS

In "The Good Teachers," an old school photograph prompts the speaker to reflect that the "good teachers" at her school weren't the ones people might expect. Looking back on her schooldays, the speaker recalls that the most polished and professional of her teachers used to fill her with dread, while her more down-to-earth literature teacher inspired her to write poetry. The poem suggests that truly "good" teachers unite academic rigor with kindness and passion.

The speaker's vivid memories of her teachers as she looks at an old school photograph suggest that these women made a deep impression on her. The speaker remembers all the teachers' names and the lessons they taught with ease. Even with their faces small as "thumbs" in a class picture, "Miss Ross," "Miss Pirie," and "Miss Sheridan" are instantly recognizable. In other words, the speaker's memory of these relationships runs deep.

Some of these teachers, however, left a better impression than others. It wasn't the most polished and "qualified" teachers who stuck with her, the speaker says, but the one who was "kind" and captured her imagination. The "good teachers" at the school were "snobbish and proud and clean and qualified": highly competent, but also distant and cold. The speaker remembers hollow soundbites from their classes—the French teacher's "Comment vous appelez" and the math teacher's "Equal to the square / of the other two sides"—and the way that they used to scold her, telling her she'd be "sorry one day" (presumably for not listening to them).

But the "kind" literature teacher, Miss Pirie, the speaker loved. This memorable teacher made the speaker feel "serious," "passionate," and committed, and inspired the speaker to learn poetry by heart and work her way to the top of the class. Truly good teaching, the poem thus suggests, demands not just skill and intelligence, but kindness and passion.

As the speaker grows up, leaving school behind for "dancing, lovebites, marriage," she remembers both her stern "good teachers" and the kind Miss Pirie (and is forced to admit that the stern teachers "[had her] number": she *did* waste a lot of time and didn't necessarily live up to her potential). But it's Miss Pirie's influence that stuck with her. If readers interpret this speaker as a version of Duffy herself, they might even imagine that Miss Pirie inspired the speaker to become a poet!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

YOUTHFUL REBELLION, GROWING UP, AND REGRET

While the speaker of "The Good Teachers" clearly liked some teachers more than others, she wasn't necessarily the easiest student to handle. The speaker readily admits that she was, at the time, all "dumb insolence" and "smoke rings"—a rebellious teenager who couldn't be bothered with rules and propriety. The poem implies that this was in part a response to a rigid educational system that she couldn't connect with. Ironically, though, the poem also implies that she ultimately ends up part of the same conventional world the "good teachers" represented. It's not clear if her settling into a steady yet traditional path constitutes victory or a defeat for the speaker, or if she regrets her younger self's choices. The poem does, however, illustrate the way youthful rebellion so often fades into middle-aged mundanity.

As a schoolgirl, the speaker bristled against the strict authority of the "good teachers." She'd hike up her skirt (perhaps part of a uniform) to show more leg and blow "smoke rings." She says that the good teachers had her "number," meaning they could see right through her. And she remembers hearing, "You won't pass. / You could do better." It's not entirely clear if the teachers themselves said this or if these are ideas the speaker had internalized about herself. Either way, it's obvious the speaker resented these supposedly "virtuous women" for their snobbish propriety and didn't want to be part of their world.

Looking at it from her adult perspective, the speaker wonders whether there was some truth in this criticism. Even though the speaker scoffed at most of her teachers at the time, the poem suggests that, maybe, she *could* have done better. After all, she was at the top of Miss Pirie's class—proving that she could do well when she applied herself.

Now, her adult life is fairly conventional: the "dancing" and "lovebites" of youth turned into marriage, and she got a mortgage (or took a job working for the bank that provides mortages; the poem isn't clear). Despite having metaphorically (and perhaps literally) climbed "the wall" of the school (that is, escaping its rigid confines and expectations), the speaker seems to have ended up in the same conventional world the brown-skirted teachers represented all those years ago.

Today (the poem's present) is the day her teachers predicted: the "day you'll be sorry one day." It's ambiguous whether this phrasing is ironic. That is, the speaker might genuinely be proud of landing herself a steady, safe existence; she might consider this life a success, and thus believe that she proved her teachers wrong.

Of course, it's just as possible that she *is* "sorry" about the way things have turned out. Perhaps if she'd rebelled less and studied harder, she could have had a different, more successful, life, further from the world in which she grew up. She thus ultimately seems to look back on her teenage self with a mixture of fondness and regret, admiring her rebellious spirit while acknowledging her ignorance and naivete.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 16-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

You run round ...
... the front row.

When the poem begins, the speaker is looking at a class photograph from her school days. This is more specifically a panoramic photograph:

- Imagine a group of school children and their teachers posing in rows. Everyone stays still as the camera pans across the scene in order to fit everyone in the shot.
- The speaker "runs round the back" of the group so that she reaches the other side before the camera does—and thus appears in the photo twice.

The speaker is clearly excited to be in this picture. Readers might already get a sense of her rebellious personality as well, given that she refuses to stand still as the picture gets taken.

Notice that the poem is written in the present tense despite the fact that the speaker is describing scenes from many years ago. Indeed, these lines essentially set the poem in the present and the past *at the same time*: the speaker bounces back and forth between what it's like to be the child *in* the photograph and what it's like to *look* at the photograph as an adult. This makes the poem feel immediate and visceral, and it also illustrates the lasting hold these school experiences have on the speaker's life.

The speaker's teachers are in the front row of the group, and they stare out at the speaker from the photograph. Their bodies in the picture are "No bigger than your thumbs," the speaker says, conveying the literal size of the teachers in the photograph and also suggesting how these women have been figuratively diminished in the speaker's mind over the years. That is, these women who were once towering figures of authority in the speaker's life can now be blotted out by her thumb.

The speaker calls her teachers "those virtuous women," a line that readers might guess is ironic given that these women also

"size you up." That is, they come across not at virtuous but as snobbish and judgemental. On some level, it seems, the speaker feels like these teachers are *still* judging her—just like they did then.

These opening lines give readers a sense of the poem's interesting form. The poem is written in free verse, making it sound authentic and conversational. Yet though the speaker is talking about herself, she doesn't use any first-person pronouns. Instead, she opts for the more unusual second-person: "You."

This divides the speaker into two distinct people: the woman she is *now* and the person she was *then*. It also places the reader into the speaker's shoes and creates a sense of camaraderie. By making the reader feel as though these memories belong to them, too, the speaker is more likely to garner readers' sympathy.

LINES 3-6

Soon now, ...
... Defenestration of Prague.

There's a full-stop caesura in line 3 after "front row," creating a pause for the poem to shift back in time. The speaker transitions from describing the way her old teachers seem to size her up through the photograph *in the present* to describing what awaits her younger self *in the past*.

"Soon now," the speaker says, referring to the time period shortly after this picture was taken, "Miss Ross will take you for double History." The speaker might just be saying that Miss Ross will be her history teacher the following semester and that her schedule includes two history periods in a row. The phrase "will take you" might be ominous or positive: perhaps the speaker had hoped to get into this history class and is excited that Miss Ross is willing to give her a chance, or maybe it's a kind of punishment for falling behind. In this latter interpretation, the fact that it's a *double* lesson makes it seem particularly tedious.

Back in the present day, the adult speaker breathes on the photograph's glass frame. Her breath fogs up the glass, "making a ghost of" Miss Ross (i.e., it obscures her with mist, making her seem spectral). The speaker seems to be subtly claiming authority over her old teacher, transforming her into nothing but a spirit, a figment of the past.

The then speaker makes her first allusion to the specific things she studied in school. This line mashes two historical references together (both of which the speaker presumably learned about in that double history class with Miss Ross): the South Sea Bubble and the Defenestration of Prague.

- The South Sea Bubble was an early-18th century financial disaster caused by the falling stock value of the South Sea Company.
- The Defenestration of Prague was a 17th-century event that occurred during the ongoing religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants.

The speaker mentions both events without explaining them. They are taken out of context and mashed together, transformed into bits of gibberish irrelevant to the speaker's life now. Yet they're still in her head, showing the lasting influence of the speaker's school days.

LINES 7-12

You love Miss ...
... in your head.

The speaker jumps back in time again to talk about "Miss Pirie," a teacher she truly "love[d]." Miss Pirie, appropriately enough, taught English Literature.

The recalls how she loved Miss Pirie "so much" that she was "top of her class." This relationship is an important one in the poem because it proves that the speaker is capable of studying hard and excelling.

The enjambment in the following lines evokes the speaker's enthusiasm. Her admiration pours out of her and pushes the poem down the page:

> You love Miss Pirie. So much, you are top
> of her class. So much, you need two of you
> to stare [...]

Notice how the poem also repeats "So much" (an example of anaphora), doubling down on the speaker's admiration for Miss Pirie. The speaker had "So much" love, in fact, that she "need[ed] two" of herself in the photo, looking "serious" and "passionate."

The speaker recounts learning the poem "The River's Tale" by Rudyard Kipling by heart (which must surely have impressed Miss Pirie!). She then describes her teacher's striking eyes. Notice the anaphora of "Her," as well as the way the caesura in the middle of this line separates these two eyes from one another:

> Her kind intelligent green eye. Her cruel blue one.

These eyes represent two competing aspects of Miss Pirie's character. The parallelism between the two phrases perhaps suggests balance and harmony, as though kindness, intelligence, and even cruelty (perhaps in the sense of knowing when to be harsh/strict) are what make Miss Pirie such a singularly inspiring teacher.

The speaker ends the stanza by making up a poem for her favorite teacher. On the one hand, this conveys just how much the speaker admires this woman. It also might suggest that literature captures the speaker's wild spirit better than the

other subjects at school in part because it *encourages* the imagination (whereas some of the other teachers just want the speaker to remember facts and figures).

Of course, the reference to writing poetry might also hint that the speaker here is a version of, or inspired by, Duffy herself.

LINES 13-16

But not Miss ...
... es Salaam. Kilimanjaro.

Unfortunately, not all of the speaker's teachers are like Miss Pirie. The speaker wouldn't make up poems about any of the teachers in this stanza, whom she apparently finds dull and uninspiring.

From "But not Miss Sheridan" in line 13 till "Kilimanjaro" halfway through line 16, the poem goes through these teachers in quick succession. These descriptions lack the emotional warmth and enthusiasm that filled the previous stanza about Miss Pirie. Each teacher gets paired with a small nugget of information related to their given subject, but these nuggets are presented without context or commentary. The speaker's list comes across as cold and robotic; there's no talk of learning "by heart" here, but rather just reciting facts:

- First up is Miss Sheridan, the speaker's French teacher. Her name prompts the speaker to recall the phrase "Comment vous appelez," which means "What is your name."
- Then there's "Miss Appleby," the math teacher. Her name prompts the speaker to recall part of the Pythagorean theorem, a staple of geometry courses. Yet the phrase "Equal to the square / of the other two sides" is presented without any context that would make it useful; it's a throwaway piece of information that seems to have been lodged in the speaker's mind since childhood.
- The anaphoric "But not Miss," along with the general parallelism of these lines, links these teachers together through the speaker's hatred for them.

And the speaker *especially* couldn't stand Miss Web, the geography teacher: "Never Miss Webb," she says in line 15. The speaker references two locations in Tanzania: "Dar es Salaam" (the country's largest city) and "Kilimanjaro" (Africa's largest mountain). Again, though, these locations are presented without any context or explanation. They're just tidbits, memorized names.

Notice how the many full-stop caesurae throughout this stanza make the poem feel slow and halting. This captures the way these lessons seem to drag on and on.

LINES 16-18

Look. The good ...
... clean and qualified.

The speaker suddenly uses an imperative verb halfway through line 16, forming a one-word sentence: "Look." This instruction is given to both the speaker's younger self and the reader, focusing their attention on the image of all these "good teachers" haughtily swishing down the school hallway in their "long, brown skirts."

It's clear by now that the speaker is using "good" (like "virtuous" in the opening stanza) somewhat sarcastically. These teachers are only "good" in a very specific way. Their "long, brown skirts" suggest that these teachers are straight-laced and not much fun. Their "swishing" movement also suggests an air of arrogance, as though they feel like they own the place.

In another context, the adjectives listed in line 18 could sound complimentary (well, aside from "snobbish"). Here, though, they capture the speaker's distaste for these "good" teachers. The sharp alliteration of "clean and qualified" feels biting and bitter.

The polysyndeton (the repetition of "and") adds to the speaker's resentful tone, making it seem as if the teacher's supposedly "good" qualities went on and on and on:

snobbish **and** proud **and** clean **and** qualified.

LINES 19-21

And they've got ...
... dumb insolence, smoke-rings.

The speaker says that these so-called "good teachers," the "snobbish" women from the previous stanza, have her "number." This idiom means the teachers have the measure of the speaker—that is, they can see what she's like and what motivates her, and they think they know where she'll end up in life.

The poem implies that they don't have much hope for the speaker. Whether this is *because* she bristles against their authority or whether this is what *makes* her bristle against their authority is unclear; it's likely a bit of both (that is, the teachers judge the speaker because she's rebellious and doesn't fit their definition of "good," and this only makes her *more* rebellious).

The speaker then paints a picture of her teenage self: she rolls up her skirt's waistband in order to flaunt more leg and also smokes. These are small acts of defiance that demonstrate the conflict between the speaker and the "good teachers." Whereas their skirts are long and brown, hers is short. Whereas they're "clean and qualified," she's blowing "smoke-rings."

These acts are ways for the speaker to show the "good teachers" how she feels about them. They also reflect the fact that the speaker is growing up, entering the world of sex and romance.

The speaker then describes her attitude as one of "dumb

insolence." In other words, she's rude and disrespectful. "Dumb" implies that the speaker isn't really even thinking about her actions. It also might suggest that the speaker, now an adult, has revised her opinion of her younger self. Perhaps looking back with the benefit of hindsight, she finds her youthful "insolence" unwise and even regrets her behavior.

LINES 21-24

You won't pass. ...
... sorry one day.

After "smoke-rings" in line 21, the speaker recalls the kind warnings that the "good teachers" would give her. "You won't pass," they would say, or "You could do better." It's also possible that the older speaker is talking to her younger self here. Perhaps the adult speaker regrets not living up to her potential.

Either way, the teenage speaker doesn't pay attention. She doesn't like her teachers (other than Miss Pirie, of course) and rejects the system that says they're "good." To her, they're stuffy, strict, and boring. Their seeming perfection and qualifications don't mean that they can actually get her excited about learning. They fail to reach her, and she doesn't want to be a part of the rigid institutions they uphold.

After the full-stop caesura following "better" in line 22, the poem speeds forward in time and describes what becomes of the speaker. She climbs over a "wall," a metaphor for escaping the strict confines of the school and the boring, rigid world it represents. This wall also suggests the transition from youth to adulthood.

The "But" before this metaphor might be read in two ways:

- If the teachers are the one's telling the speaker she'll fail, then this "But" feels triumphant. The speaker's climb, her escape, flies in the face of those "good teachers" who told the speaker she'd never succeed.
- But if the speaker is thinking that her younger self could, indeed, have done better, that "But" feels more ominous. That is, she might have done better *if only* she hadn't tried so hard to escape.

The way readers interpret this "But" ties into the way they interpret the final images of the poem, which relay the speaker's ultimate fate.

On the other side of that wall, the speaker finds

> [...] dancing, lovebites, marriage, the Cheltenham
> and Gloucester, today. [...]

Using asyndeton, the speaker compresses a long stretch of time into just a few words. "Dancing" and "lovebites" (that is, hickeys) suggest lust and passion, and they reflect the speaker's desire to have fun and break free from the restrictions of school life. But these belong to the world of young adulthood.

Soon enough, there's the adult world of "marriage," which is something presumably less exciting, and "the Cheltenham / and Gloucester," which is definitely less exciting. Cheltenham and Gloucester was a mortgage and savings provider in the UK; it's not clear if the speaker works for this company or has a mortgage with them, but either situation is a far cry from "dancing" and "lovebites." Indeed, marriage and mortgages seem more like part of the good teachers' brown-skirted world.

And just like that, it's "today"—the poem's present. This, says the speaker, is the proverbial "one day" that the good teachers warned her about, the day she would regret her choices.

It's hard to say if they were right. The speaker might be proud of what she's accomplished. After all, she does seem to have a stable relationship and job (or enough money to buy a house). Or, maybe, the speaker *is* sorry for having lost her rebellious spark and fallen into line. Perhaps the speaker is wondering whether her life would have looked different if the teachers at her school had been more like Miss Pirie and inspired her to try harder.

SYMBOLS

SKIRTS

The different skirts that the so-called "good teachers" and the speaker wear symbolize the conflict between their rigid authority and her rebellious spirit.

The speaker says that the teachers "swish down the corridor in long, brown skirts" (line 17). These skirts reflect the teachers' boring, buttoned-up, conformist lifestyle.

Contrast the teachers' style with the speaker's, as described in lines 19-20:

> [...] You roll the waistband
> of your skirt over and over, all leg [...]

The speaker believes that she's not like those stuck-up, stuffy teachers, and she uses her skirt as a way of demonstrating this difference to the world. She rolls the waistband up in order to show off more of her legs—essentially doing the opposite of what those teachers do. It's a small but significant act of rebellion that also anticipates the blossoming sexuality referenced in the poem's later lines ("dancing, lovebites, marriage").

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-18:** "The good teachers / swish down the corridor in long, brown skirts, / snobbish and proud and clean and qualified."
- **Lines 19-21:** "You roll the waistband / of your skirt over

and over, all leg, all / dumb insolence, smoke-rings."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The speaker makes numerous allusions throughout the poem to things she learned in school. These allusions, presented as snippets of information without further context, capture the way bits of information from childhood often stay lodged in people's minds for years.

In the first stanza, for example, the speaker breathes on the photograph in order to "make a ghost" of her old history teacher, Miss Ross. As she does so, she says, "South Sea Bubble Defenestration of Prague." This mashes together two historical allusions:

- The South Sea Bubble was a financial crash in the early 18th century.
- The Defenestration of Prague refers to a 1618 event when Protestants tossed three Catholic officials out a window, leading to the bloody Thirty Years' War.

The speaker presumably learned about these events in Miss Ross's history class; seeing her teacher in the photograph makes them pop into her mind in the present.

In the next stanza, the speaker says that she learned "The RIver's Tale by Rudyard Kipling by heart" in Miss Pirie's class. This refers to a poem by the British writer Rudyard Kipling, which was originally commissioned as a preface to a history textbook. The fact that the speaker learned the entire poem conveys just how much Miss Pirie inspired her. The other allusions in the poem are just fragments of information, but this poem is something lodged in the speaker's "heart."

In the third stanza, the speaker mentions a number of teachers whom she disliked. She presents each name alongside a random scrap of educational content that implies which subject each teacher taught:

> But not Miss Sheridan. Comment vous appelez.
> But not Miss Appleby. Equal to the square
> of the other two sides. Never Miss Webb.
> Dar es Salaam. Kilimanjaro.

"Comment vous appelez" means "What is your name in French," implying that Miss Sheridan was the speaker's French teacher. The next allusion is to part of the Pythagorean theorem, which the speaker presumably learned about in Miss Appleby's math class. The final allusions are to two locations in Tanzania, which the speaker learned about in Miss Webb's geography class.

These scraps of information don't have any additional context. They've become near-meaningless fragments of language that gesture towards the boredom of learning by rote and repetition.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "South Sea Bubble Defenestration of Prague."
- **Line 10:** "The River's Tale by Rudyard Kipling by heart."
- **Line 13:** "Comment vous appelez."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Equal to the square / of the other two sides."
- **Line 16:** "Dar es Salaam. Kilimanjaro."

PARATAXIS

Parataxis, and the related device asyndeton, add to the poem's meditative tone. The poem is filled with short, declarative statements that could be rearranged without impacting the speaker's meaning. This technique helps convey the unpredictable nature of memory, as well as the way that one thought or image can suddenly spark another and another.

Look at lines 10-11, for example:

> The River's Tale by Rudyard Kipling by heart.
> Her kind intelligent green eye. Her cruel blue one.
> You are making a poem up for her in your head.

As readers can see above, parataxis also overlaps with the poem's many caesurae (all those full stops in the middle of these lines). Thinking about Miss Pirie makes the speaker recall memorizing a poem by Rudyard Kipling, which makes her think about her teacher's eyes, which makes her think about how she would write poems for Miss Pirie in her mind.

For another example, listen to lines 19-22:

> [...] You roll the waistband
> of your skirt over and over, all leg, all
> dumb insolence, smoke-rings. You won't pass.
> You could do better. [...]

Again, parataxis creates a choppy rhythm and a straightforward, no-nonsense feel. Parataxis speeds the poem along and makes its images feel more immediate and striking, effectively placing the reader in the speaker's shoes.

Asyndeton, a device that's related to and often overlaps with parataxis, works similarly in the poem. Listen to the poem's final two lines, which omit coordinating conjunctions as they moves from the speaker's adolescence to her adulthood:

> [...] dancing, lovebites, marriage, the Cheltenham
> and Gloucester, today. The day you'll be sorry one
> day.

The lack of conjunctions here pushes the poem along, evoking the speed with which time seems to have passed since the speaker's school days.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-9
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 19-21
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 23-24

METAPHOR

"The Good Teachers" is bookended by two metaphors. The first metaphor appears in line 5, while the speaker looks at her old school photograph. When she, notices Miss Ross, her former history teacher, the speaker says:

> You breathe on the glass, making a ghost of her

The speaker is describing the way her breath fogs up the photograph's glass frame. This fog obscures the image of Miss Ross, making her appear ghostly—like she's no longer alive, just an after-image of the past.

There's a fairly strong chance that Miss Ross *isn't* alive anymore, in the speaker's present. This metaphor also subtly conveys the fact that Miss Ross no longer has much power over the speaker's life. She was once a major authority figure, but, for a moment, the speaker turns her into a ghost, seeming to control her very existence.

The poem's other metaphor comes right at the end:

> You could do better. But there's the wall you climb
> into dancing, lovebites, marriage, the Cheltenham
> and Gloucester, today. [...]

Of course, it's possible that this wall is also literal—that there's literally a wall around the school that the rebellious speaker hops over. But it also represents the speaker escaping the rigid confines of the good teachers' world in favor of a world of "dancing" and "lovebites." The wall also suggests a border between the speaker's youth and her adulthood.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "You breathe on the glass, making a ghost of her,"
- **Lines 22-24:** "But there's the wall you climb / into dancing, lovebites, marriage, the Cheltenham / and Gloucester, today."

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears throughout "The Good Teachers," creating rhythm and emphasis. For example, note how many sentences/phrases begin with the word "You" followed by a present-tense verb: "You run," "You breathe," "You love," "You are," "You roll," and so forth. This parallelism makes the poem feel immediate and repeatedly places the reader in the speaker's shoes. It also creates a steady rhythm that helps propel the poem forward.

Anaphora works similarly in the second stanza as the speaker talks about the one positive influence in her school days: Miss Pirie. Notice how repetition creates an almost child-like sense of excitement and enthusiasm here:

> You love Miss Pirie. So much, you are top
> of her class. So much, you need two of you

The anaphora of "So much" makes the speaker's love for her English teacher seem doubly strong.

Later in the same stanza, anaphora helps to convey Miss Pirie's complex character:

> Her kind intelligent green eye. Her cruel blue one.

The parallelism of these phrases, set on either side of a full stop caesura, calls attention to the two sides of Miss Pirie. She was kind and clever, but she also could be "cruel" when she need to be. The anaphora gives the line itself a sense of balance that reflects Miss Pirie's personality.

This complexity makes the supposedly "good teachers" in the following stanza seem all the more one-dimensional. Here, anaphora again creates a sense of building intensity:

> But not Miss Sheridan. Comment vous appelez.
> But not Miss Appleby. Equal to the square
> of the other two sides. Never Miss Webb.

The repetition of "But not Miss" (and the thematically similar "Never Miss") calls readers' attention to just how *many* teachers the speaker didn't get along with. The polysyndeton in line 18 works similarly: the speaker calls these so-called good teachers "snobbish and proud and clean and qualified," and that repeated "and" makes the list seem to go on and on.

Finally, note the anaphora of the final stanza:

> You roll the waistband
> of your skirt over and over, all leg, all
> dumb insolence, smoke-rings. You won't pass.
> You could do better. [...]

That double "all" calls repeated attention to the speaker's rebellious streak, while the return to the "You" pattern links

this streak with the speaker's life path. That is, her rebellious nature is why the "good teachers" (and maybe the speaker herself) believes that she "won't pass."

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "You run"
- **Line 5:** "You breathe"
- **Line 7:** "You love," "So much"
- **Line 8:** "So much"
- **Line 11:** "Her kind," "Her cruel"
- **Line 12:** "You are making"
- **Line 13:** "But not Miss"
- **Line 14:** "But not Miss"
- **Line 15:** "Never Miss"
- **Line 19:** "You roll"
- **Lines 20-21:** "all leg, all / dumb insolence"
- **Line 21:** "You won't"
- **Line 22:** "You could"

VOCABULARY

Double History (Line 4) - A history lesson that lasts two periods.

South Sea Bubble (Line 6) - A financial crash that happened in the early 18th century.

Defenestration of Prague (Line 6) - This refers to a 1618 event when Protestants threw three Catholic officials out a window. The event, which is often taught in school history courses, led to the Thirty Years' War.

The River's Tale (Line 10) - A poem by British poet and journalist Rudyard Kipling, originally commissioned as a preface for a history textbook.

Comment Vous Appelez (Line 13) - Formal French for "what is your name?"

Equal to the square of the other two sides (Lines 14-15) - A fragment of the Pythagorean theorem, which states that the square of the hypotenuse (the longest side) of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

Dar es Salaam (Line 16) - The largest city in Tanzania.

Kilimanjaro (Line 16) - The highest mountain in Africa.

Swish (Lines 16-17) - Move with a rustling sound.

Snobbish (Line 18) - With a sense of superiority.

Got your number (Line 19) - The speaker is saying that the "good teachers" have the measure of her; they understand her true character (or at least think they do).

Insolence (Lines 20-21) - Rude or disrespectful behavior.

Cheltenham and Gloucester (Lines 22-24) - An old mortgage/savings provider in the United Kingdom.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Good Teachers" consists of 24 lines broken up into four sestets (six-line stanzas). Each stanza essentially provides a snapshot of the speaker's life. For example, stanza 2 presents the speaker's relationship with Miss Pirie, while stanza 3 describes the supposedly "good teachers" whom the speaker dislikes.

The speaker begins and ends the poem in the present day: in the first stanza, she describes looking at a school photograph, and in the last stanza, she references "today." In between, she speaks as though she's still a young student. In a way, then, her adult self "run[s] round the back" of the poem "to be in it again" at the end.

The poem is also, arguably, a subtle example of ekphrasis (a text that interacts with/describes an artwork or image). The poem's world materializes in response to the speaker's photograph, which here functions as a kind of portal into the past.

METER

"The Good Teachers" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't follow a regular meter. This lends itself to the poem's stream-of-consciousness style, making it feel like an intimate, genuine, and spontaneous meditation on the speaker's past.

The speaker herself would readily admit that she's never been a particularly disciplined student. Given that a meter in poetry is effectively a set of rhythmical rules, it makes sense that the poem itself rebels against being held in a metrical straitjacket.

RHYME SCHEME

Just like many of Carol Ann Duffy's poems, "The Good Teachers" is unrhymed. Strict, predictable end-rhyme might have felt out of step with this discussion of youthful rebellion against authority.

SPEAKER

The speaker is an adult woman looking at a photograph from her school years. While she spends much of the poem speaking as though she were still in school, it's clear from the final lines that many years have passed since then (bringing with them marriage and a mortgage).

She uses second-person pronouns throughout the poem, which accomplishes two main things:

- "You" creates a distance between the speaker's present-day adult self and her younger self, as

though the speaker was an entirely different person back then.
- Using "You" also places the reader in the speaker's shoes, making the poem feel more vivid, immediate, and emotional.

It's hard to pin down how the speaker feels about her life. On the one hand, she was smart, capable, and imaginative. When inspired, as she was by her English teacher Miss Pirie, she excelled in school and made up poems in her head (a detail that suggests the speaker is inspired by Duffy herself).

At the same time, she clearly butted heads with many of the other, more "snobbish" teachers at her school and bristled against authority in general. She hiked up her skirt, smoked, danced, and kissed. Her teachers told her that she "could do better," and, in a way, they were right: the speaker could probably have performed better in school had she wanted to.

She's since grown up and settled down, and it's ambiguous whether the speaker regrets her rebelliousness in the present day. She might truly be "sorry" about how things panned out. She might think her younger self naive or wish she'd tried harder to transcend the typical world of marriage and mortgages. Alternatively, she's happy and considers her adult self to have proven her teachers wrong.

SETTING

The poem essentially has two settings:

- It begins and ends in the present day, as the poem's speaker, now an adult, looks at a school photograph.
- Yet the bulk of the poem takes place when the speaker was still in school, presumably a teenager.

Her school is a strict one, it seems, populated by teachers who are "snobbish and proud and clean and qualified." These supposed "good," "virtuous" teachers don't seem to like the speaker very much, nor does she like them. Their "long, brown skirts" suggests that they represent institutional conformity and rigidity. The speaker, meanwhile, is rebellious and imaginative, hiking up her skirt and writing poems in her head for her favorite teacher, Miss Pirie.

The entire poem is written in the present tense, which suggests that the world of the speaker's childhood feels as real and vivid to her now, as an adult, as it did back then

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Good Teachers" appears in Carol Ann Duffy's Whitbread Prize-winning collection *Mean Time*, published in 1993. This collection, Duffy's fourth, focuses on memory, childhood, and growing up, drawing on scenes from Duffy's life without being strictly autobiographical.

"The Good Teachers," with its reference to "virtuous women" in long skirts, was likely inspired by Duffy's own school days: Duffy attended convent schools taught by nuns. Duffy has also spoken of the vital influence of her literature teachers:

> I grew up in a bookless house—my parents didn't read poetry, so if I hadn't had the chance to experience it at school I'd never have experienced it. But I loved English, and I was very lucky in that I had inspirational English teachers, Miss Scriven and Mr Walker, and they liked us to learn poems by heart, which I found I loved doing.

These teachers likely inspired the character of Miss Pirie.

Other poems in *Mean Time* similarly look back into the past without losing touch with the present. For example, the speaker of "Before You Were Mine" considers her mother's carefree life before she was born, while "Litany" recounts the speaker's punishment for swearing at a "boy in the playground."

Education is also a consistent theme in Duffy's work. "Head of English," for example, portrays a hapless English teacher attempting to impress a visiting poet. And in "Death of a Teacher," Duffy poignantly explores the way one good teacher can shape a student's life for the better.

Of course, Duffy isn't the first poet to write about learning poetry or about school in general. There are many poems about these topics, including "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins and "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Good Teachers" was certainly influenced by Duffy's own experiences as a student in the 1960s and '70s UK.

Like many other countries, England underwent a number of social revolutions throughout this period. "The Good Teachers" nods to the youthful rebelliousness of the era through the speaker's desire to make her skirt ever shorter, to blow "smoke-rings," and to go out in search of "dancing" and "lovebites."

The countercultural movements of the '60s and '70s also led to a renewed interest in artistic expression, as people saw art as a way to bring about change and progress. It's possible that these cultural shifts affected Duffy as a student, since she took an active interest in writing during this time and was pushed by her teachers to pursue her talents in poetry. One of her English teachers, the aforementioned Miss Scriven, even encouraged her to submit poems to a publisher when she was just 15 years old—poems that were accepted and subsequently published, marking the beginning of Duffy's long and fruitful career.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Duffy on Poetry and Education — Learn more about Duffy's attempts to get young people interested in poetry (which she deems "a form of texting"), along with some background on her own literary education. (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/sep/05/carol-ann-duffy-poetry-texting-competition)
- Duffy's Life and Work — Take a deeper dive into Duffy's life with this biography from the Scottish Poetry Library. (https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/carol-ann-duffy/)
- A Duffy Reading and Q&A — Hear Duffy read a selection of her own work and talk about her life, including the strong influence of one of her literature teachers. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx4I1aYJQEE)
- "I Was Told to Get a Proper Job" — Learn more about the personal experiences underlying Duffy's poetry and why she understands poetry as a vocation. (https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interviews/carol-ann-duffy-i-was-told-to-get-a-proper-job-1739622.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Anne Hathaway
- Before You Were Mine
- Circe
- Death of a Teacher
- Demeter
- Education For Leisure
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- In Your Mind
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Aesop
- Mrs Darwin
- Mrs Lazarus
- 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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