



University
of Glasgow Scottish Literature
in the Classroom

Poems by Carol Ann Duffy for National 5 and Higher English:

‘Before You Were Mine’

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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on poems by Carol Ann Duffy. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

‘Before You Were Mine’ from Mean Time by Carol Ann Duffy. Published by Anvil Press Poetry, 1993. Copyright © Carol Ann Duffy. Reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers, Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

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Context

Poem overview

‘Before You Were Mine’ is an autobiographical poem that explores the themes of love, identity, youth, time, and memory. Although it is not stated directly in the poem, Duffy is responding to a series of old photographs of her mother and imagining her life in the decade before Duffy herself was born.

The title of the poem implies that the mother belongs to the speaker, representing the possessive love of a child for their parent. However, the poem also challenges this idea by portraying the mother as a young, independent woman with her own experiences and desires before she becomes a parent. Through memory and imagination, the speaker reconstructs a version of her mother’s youth that feels both affectionate and slightly mythical.

- Stanza 1 presents the mother as a carefree young woman laughing with her friends, establishing an image of youthful freedom.
- Stanza 2 imagines the mother at a dance hall, a lively setting associated with romance and the possibilities of the future.
- Stanza 3 blurs past and present as the speaker reflects on her childhood before imagining in the present day the ‘ghost’ of her mother as a young woman.
- Stanza 4 opens with a childhood memory of the speaker and her mother dancing together, before returning to a vibrant image of the mother before she became a parent.

Throughout the poem, the speaker recognises that her mother once had a life defined by freedom and possibility, which was later reshaped by parenthood. By imagining this earlier version of her mother, the poem celebrates her youth, glamour and independence, while also reflecting on how time and family relationships reshape identity.

Author background

Carol Ann Duffy (1955–) is a poet and playwright of Scottish-Irish heritage. The eldest of five children in a Roman Catholic family, Duffy was born in the Gorbals in Glasgow, a working-class area that was undergoing significant change in the postwar period. Although Duffy spent only her early childhood in Glasgow before the family moved to England, she has often spoken about the strong emotional and imaginative impact of her Scottish roots.

Duffy began publishing poetry in her early twenties. In 2009, she became the first woman, the first Scottish-born poet, and the first openly LGBTQ+ writer to be appointed as the UK's Poet Laureate, serving until 2019. Her writing often explores identity, gender, love, memory and power and engages with contemporary social and political issues alongside personal experience.



Image: Carol Ann Duffy.
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Publication details

'Before You Were Mine' was originally published in *Mean Time* (1993), which won the Forward Poetry Prize and the Whitbread Poetry Award. The collection draws on different scenes from childhood through to adulthood to explore themes such as love, loss, relationships, memory and time.

Online resources

[BBC Bitesize](#) provides a revision guide for students on 'Before You Were Mine'.

['Before You Were Mine'](#): a recording of Carol Ann Duffy reading the poem, with images of her parents.

[Carol Ann Duffy](#) on the Scottish Poetry Library's website includes a biography, a bibliography of Duffy's work, and a selection of her poems.

The version of 'Before You Were Mine' printed here and published on the [Scottish Poetry Library website](#) is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

'Before You Were Mine'

by Carol Ann Duffy

I'm ten years away from the corner you laugh on
with your pals, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff.
The three of you bend from the waist, holding
each other, or your knees, and shriek at the pavement.
Your polka-dot dress blows round your legs. Marilyn. 5

I'm not here yet. The thought of me doesn't occur
in the ballroom with the thousand eyes, the fizzy, movie tomorrows
the right walk home could bring. I knew you would dance
like that. Before you were mine, your Ma stands at the close
with a hiding for the late one. You reckon it's worth it. 10

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? 15

Cha cha cha! You'd teach me the steps on the way home from Mass,
stamping stars from the wrong pavement. Even then
I wanted the bold girl winking in Portobello, somewhere
in Scotland, before I was born. That glamorous love lasts
where you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were mine. 20

Ballrooms

In the mid-twentieth century, public dance halls and ballrooms were a popular form of social life and entertainment for many young people. They were exciting venues where men and women could meet and dance and which offered a space for self-expression and an escape from home life. Such venues often featured live bands playing swing, jazz or early rock and roll, and dancing styles like the waltz, foxtrot and jive were fashionable. In the poem, the ballroom symbolises the youthful freedom of the speaker's mother before parental responsibility reshaped her identity.



Image: A British dance hall, 1945. Public domain.

Biography

Carol Ann Duffy has written about the autobiographical context that inspired the poem:

BEFORE YOU WERE MINE is essentially a kind of love poem addressed to my mother. It is entirely autobiographical. In the poem, I am imagining my mother 10 years before I was born- almost trying to re-create her as a teenaged girl in language. The images in the poem come from old photographs of my mother. One in particular reminded me of the famous image of Marilyn Monroe where her dress is blowing up around her knees-

(“your polka-dot dress blows round your legs. Marilyn.”) Of course, my mother’s name was not Marilyn, it was actually May. Other images come from stories my mother told me about her dancing days, tales about the weekend search in the ballrooms of Glasgow for “Mr Right”!

The poem is about a child’s almost possessive love for her mother and about the freedom a woman loses when she has a child. There is a sadness in the poem because a child can never know her mother when she is truly free- i.e. before she was a mother. The child knows or senses that these years (“the decade ahead of my loud possessive yell”) were magical for the young woman who was to become her mother. Partly this is because the mother, as we all do, glamourised her young self when telling anecdotes to her child. The mother in the poem is perceived almost as a movie star- (“you sparkle and waltz and laugh...”).

My family moved from Glasgow, Scotland to Stafford, England when I was 6. The poem ends in England, with my mother teaching me the old dance steps as we walk home from Church. I remember that the metal studs in the soles of our shoes (cobbler’s repairs?) would make sparks on the pavement as we stamped out the steps.

Carol Ann Duffy, ‘Before You Were Mine’, published on [Sheer Poetry](#)

Full analysis

Form and structure

‘Before You Were Mine’ is written in four stanzas that each have five lines (quintains), which gives the poem a clear and controlled shape. However, there is no strict rhyme scheme and Duffy uses a free verse form. This gives the poem a natural and conversational tone, like someone remembering and reflecting.

Structurally, the poem shifts between past and present, from the time before the speaker was born, her own childhood, and the present day. This creates a sense of blurring time, showing how memory and imagination mix together.

Speaker

The speaker is a grown-up daughter looking back on her mother's youth. The speaker's voice is reflective, imaginative and nostalgic, but also slightly possessive: she sees her mother as 'mine', while also recognising her as an individual. This captures the complex feelings that children may experience as they grow up and start to see their parents as people in their own right.

Lines 1–2

I'm ten years away from the corner you laugh on
with your pals, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff.

The opening lines establish a personal and reflective perspective. 'I'm ten years away' shows the speaker imagining her mother's life ten years before she was born. This phrase suggests both temporal and spatial distance, as if the speaker is physically separated from the scene she describes. The mother's past life is presented as something the speaker can observe but cannot directly enter, emphasising that it belongs to a different stage of the mother's identity, before motherhood or domestic responsibility.

A street corner is an ordinary, everyday space. This situates the scene within a local community environment, which lends the image a sense of realism. Symbolically, a corner represents a turning point or moment of change. This reflects both the fleeting nature of youth and the impending changes that the speaker's birth will eventually bring. The laughter with friends evokes freedom and spontaneity. The speaker is aware that her eventual presence will reshape this carefree world.

The colloquial phrase 'your pals' makes the scene feel intimate and affectionate, while the reference to specific names suggests an authentic personal history.

Lines 3–4

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

‘The three of you’ establishes a collective identity rooted in youthful female friendship. The mother is not yet isolated as ‘mine’; she is part of a vibrant social group.

The image of the young women conveys physical abandon, intensified by the verb ‘shriek’ which suggests uncontrolled laughter. Their sense of joy is not composed or self-conscious. Together, these details symbolise a fleeting moment of freedom before adulthood.

Line 5

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

Polka dot dresses were popular in the mid-twentieth century and evoke playful and stylised femininity. ‘Blows round your legs’ introduces movement and sensuality, hinting at the young woman’s confidence and emerging sexuality.

The one-word sentence ‘Marilyn’ directly invokes the film star Marilyn Monroe, whose wind-swept dress in *The Seven Year Itch* became an iconic image of mid-century glamour. This cinematic reference transforms an ordinary street into a stage and elevates the mother into an icon of glamour and desirability.



Image: Marilyn Monroe.
Public domain.

Lines 6–8

I’m not here yet. The thought of me doesn’t occur
in the ballroom with the thousand eyes, the fizzy, movie tomorrows
the right walk home could bring.

Personal pronouns (‘I’m’, ‘me’) shift the focus back to the speaker. The short, declarative statement ‘I’m not here yet’ hints again at her eventual presence and the impact she will have on her mother’s life. ‘The thought of me doesn’t occur’ re-establishes temporal distance and implies the mother’s life before parenthood as carefree.

The ballroom represents a place of performance and romantic possibility. 'The thousand eyes' may refer to a mirrorball, which rotates and reflects light. This phrase also implies the scrutiny and attention of others during a night at the dance hall. 'Fizzy' implies giddy excitement while 'movie tomorrows' suggests the possibility of cinematic romance.

Transitioning from public space to private intimacy, the 'walk home' symbolises the threshold between youthful fun and the start of adult relationships. 'Right' implies chance and choice: the correct encounter could spark romance while other paths might lead to nowhere.

Lines 8–10

I knew you would dance
like that. Before you were mine, your Ma stands at the close
with a hiding for the late one. You reckon it's worth it.

'I knew' conveys certainty and intuition, suggesting a strong and intimate connection between the speaker and her mother. There is also an undertone of possessiveness: the speaker claims knowledge of a time she did not inhabit. The description 'dance like that' evokes the mother's energy and confidence as a young woman.

'Before you were mine' reasserts the distance between the speaker in the present and her mother in the past. The informal and familiar 'your Ma' conveys realism and intimacy, positioning the mother as a daughter within her own family structure. The term 'Ma' also echoes 'my', reinforcing the speaker's possessive claim over her mother's past self.

The setting of 'the close' – a Scottish term for a narrow lane or communal stairwell – situates the scene in a realistic context, grounding the poem in everyday life. 'Hiding for the late one' evokes social and familial discipline in an era when physical punishment was a normalised aspect of upbringing.

The short, emphatic sentence 'You reckon it's worth it' reflects the mother's defiance and agency. The informal tone mirrors youthful speech and rebellion. There is a sense of irony here in that the mother's youthful freedom – e.g. meeting boys at the dancing – ultimately leads her towards motherhood, which brings a more restricted domestic role later in life.

Lines 11–12

The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best one, eh?
I remember my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics,

The poem moves forward in time to when the speaker was a child. The demands of maternal responsibility ('My loud, possessive yell') contrast with the mother's freedom in her youth. The tag question 'eh?' creates a conversational tone, as if the speaker is addressing the mother directly. The question carries an undertone of insecurity, with the speaker presuming the decade before her existence as the 'best' of her mother's life.

'I remember' signals the speaker reflecting on her own early memories. 'High-heeled red shoes', a symbol of the mother's pre-maternal identity, are transformed into playful objects in the hands of the speaker as a young child. The standalone word 'relics' confines the mother's glamour to the past: her shoes are memorialised objects representing a time in her life that no longer exists.

Lines 13–15

and now your ghost clatters toward me over George Square
till I see you, clear as scent, under the tree,
with its lights, and whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart?

The phrase 'and now your ghost' blurs past and present. The speaker in the present day imagines her mother as a young woman in Glasgow, with 'ghost' implying that this version of her mother belongs to a past life.

The verb 'clatters' creates a sense of movement and sound, perhaps suggesting the noise of heels on pavement. The simile 'clear as scent' emphasises how vividly the speaker imagines the moment, drawing on the idea that smell can powerfully evoke memory. However, as scent is fleeting, it also suggests that this image of her mother cannot be fully grasped.

The setting 'under the tree' suggests a private, sheltered space associated with youthful romance and intimacy. Trees can also carry more general symbolic associations of innocence and experience. The teasing question 'and whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart?' introduces ideas of sexuality and playful intimacy, as the speaker imagines a romantic encounter from her mother's past. By asking about the identity of the lover, the

speaker momentarily adopts a reversed role of maternal authority. This challenge is softened by the tone and affection language.

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 italicised exclamation '*Cha cha cha!*' brings the mother's youthful energy and playfulness into the present. 'You'd teach me the steps' shows the mother passing on knowledge to her daughter. The image of the pair dancing on the pavement recalls the carefree image of the mother in the street with her friends in stanza 1.

The setting 'on the way home from Mass' situates the scene in a realistic, everyday context. It highlights the tension between social or religious expectations and youthful freedom. The mother dancing on the walk home represents a small act of rebellion within the constraints of her environment.

'Stamping stars from the wrong pavement' continues the theme of playful subversion. By choosing the 'wrong' pavement, the mother defies rules and, in doing so, asserts her independence. It also echoes the earlier line about 'the right walk home': the mother navigates between conformity and freedom, shaping her own path even within social or moral constraints.

Lines 17–19

Even then
*I wanted the bold girl winking in Portobello, somewhere
in Scotland, before I was born.*

'Even then' creates a moment of tension. Even during a playful mother-daughter moment, the speaker recognises the constraints on her mother's life in adulthood. 'I wanted' conveys both possessiveness and admiration. The speaker simultaneously claims the mother emotionally while yearning for the mother's independence.

The image of the mother as 'the bold girl winking in Portobello' evokes flirtatious confidence and spirited youth. The geographical references are autobiographically

significant: Scotland, where Duffy's mother spent her youth, symbolises freedom. The ambiguity of 'somewhere' suggests a space of possibility.

Lines 19–20

That glamorous love lasts
where you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were mine.

The final line highlights the enduring power of memory and imagination. Even though the mother's present life is shaped by parenthood and domestic routine, the joy and energy of her youth are immortalised in photographs and in the speaker's imagination.

The list of verbs ('you sparkle and waltz and laugh') conveys movement and vitality, emphasising the playful joy of the mother's pre-maternal self. The slant rhyme between 'laugh' and 'lasts' subtly reinforces a sense of closure and ending, before the final repetition of the title returns the poem to its central tension between past and present. This creates a cyclical structure which reflects the speaker's ongoing imaginative connection with her mother.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What does the title suggest about the speaker's attitude towards her mother?
- How does the opening stanza set the tone for the rest of the poem?
- Identify words or phrases that describe the mother. How do these shape your impression of her personality?
- How does the poem make ordinary moments feel significant?
- How do photographs or memories shape your understanding of the people in your life?

Techniques

- Why do you think Duffy chose to write the poem in the first person?
- What is the effect of questions and direct address on the tone of the poem?
- How does the structure of the poem reflect memory or imagination?
- Identify an example of simile or metaphor. How does it enhance the poem's themes or mood?
- How does contrast between the mother's past and present life highlight key themes?

Themes

- How does the poem explore the theme of identity?
- In what ways does the poem show possessiveness in the mother-daughter relationship?
- Would you describe 'Before You Were Mine' as a love poem? Why or why not?
- How does the poem represent time, memory or imagination?
- How does the poem show the impact of parenthood on a person's life?
- How does the poem contrast freedom and responsibility?

Practice Questions

National 5

Look at lines 1–5.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet creates a vivid impression of the mother's youth. (4 marks)

Look at lines 6–10.

By referring to two examples of language, explain what we learn about the mother's life before the speaker was born. (4 marks)

Look at lines 11–15.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the speaker presents her relationship with her mother. (2 marks)

Look at lines 16–20.

By referring to one example of language, explain why this is an effective ending. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and at least one other poem by Duffy, show how the poet explores powerful emotions. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that Carol Ann Duffy's 'Before You Were Mine' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'Originally'
- 'Mrs Midas'
- 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class'
- 'Medusa'
- 'Havisham'

Higher

Look at lines 1–5.

Analyse how the poet’s use of language creates a lively atmosphere. (2 marks)

Look at lines 6–15.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet’s use of language presents the mother at different stages of her life. (4 marks)

Look at lines 16–20.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet’s use of language creates a sense of nostalgia. (4 marks)

By referring to this extract and to at least one other poem by Duffy, discuss how the poet uses setting in time and/or place to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Poems that Carol Ann Duffy’s ‘Before You Were Mine’ might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- ‘Originally’
- ‘Mrs Midas’
- ‘In Mrs Tilscher’s Class’
- ‘Medusa’
- ‘Havisham’

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.

