

# Memory and retrospection in duffy's poetry

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In both "Before You Were Mine" and "Brothers," Carol Ann Duffy uses descriptions of memory as a means of re-living past family life. Throughout "Before You Were Mine," Duffy writes about her mother, and imagines her life before motherhood. This poem is designed as Duffy's recollection of her mother through her mother's own memories, and her recognition of all she was before the responsibilities and commitment on having children came into her life. Duffy seeks to reanimate and capture what her mother was like when she was younger, and does so by re-living her past through imaginings of what her mother's memories might have been. We get the impression that these memories are evoked by looking at photographs, an idea which is particularly prominent in the first stanza, when Duffy describes her mother laughing with her friends, likening her dress blowing around her legs to 'Marilyn.' She even speaks directly to her mother - 'I'm ten years away from the corner you laugh on' - to create a more personal, conversational mood within the poem. The tone of the poem is one of admiration and affection; after all, she looks back on her mother's life with fondness.

Throughout the four stanzas, Duffy jumps between different times in the past, yet writes in present tense. This strategy gives a sense of bringing her mother's past more vividly to life, almost as though she is narrating her life as it happens. Duffy uses memory to convey the contrast between her mother's life before and after motherhood. In particular, she portrays the sense of excitement and optimism in her mother's life before she was born. Duffy knows that the thought of having a child 'doesn't occur yet' to her mother, who is wrapped up in her own world of dances and in her dreams of the future. The 'fizzy, movie tomorrows' suggests a zest for life, that Duffy's

mother dreams of a future like the future presented by the movies. The 'ballroom with a thousand eyes' could be a metaphor for her beauty and the heads she turned while dancing in the ballroom, or simply a reference to the glittering balls of an active imagination.

The tone of the poem is tender, and Duffy conveys a sense of admiration and fondness when looking back on her mother's life: 'That glamorous love lasts where you sparkle and waltz and laugh.' This statement shows the affection that Duffy has towards her mother; perhaps these words also suggest that she recognizes that her mother hasn't lost the 'sparkle' of her youth, despite the responsibilities she has taken on as a parent.

Beyond the glamour and optimism that is bound up with re-living her mother's past, Duffy projects a sense of the inevitability of growing older. At the time when Duffy's mother was young, a woman's life was seen as more traditional, and the expected path in life for a woman was to get married and have children. We get a sense that these actions were inevitable; eventually, some of the wonder and excitement of youth is lost, as shown when Duffy recalls how her mother used to say 'the decade ahead of her loud possessive yell was the best one.' A slight sadness is created through looking back on the past in this poem. Duffy recognizes the sacrifices that her mother made for her children, and celebrates the optimism and hope of her life when she was younger.

In contrast, in "Brothers" Duffy alternates between past and present as a means of re-living past memories of her brothers. She describes her brothers when they were younger by remembering commonplace snapshots of their

younger lives: "...an alter boy, a boy practicing scales, a boy playing tennis with a wall, a baby..." They are described as four separate characters, so that the reader can imagine them as individuals. These descriptions have a greater sense of optimism and potential. As they grown up and move away, these men are defined simply by their occupations. As in " Before You Were Mine," Duffy uses the past to touch on the theme of dreams that are lost as time passes. Yet this poem lacks the sense of closeness and love that was evident in " Before You Were Mine." The way that Duffy refers to her brothers makes her seem distant from them: " occasionally, when people ask, I enjoy reciting their names." There is a sense of alienation when she recollects a memory of sleeping in a bed once with ' these four men.' With time, the brothers seem to be lost, leaving only their names, and not even photographs. This estrangement is emphasized when she says " we have nothing to say of now."

In a further departure from " Before You Were Mine," in which Duffy imagines her mother's memories, the memories in " Brothers" are Duffy's own but are fragmentary. Duffy's mother appears in both poems, but whereas in " Before You Were Mine" she is a vivacious, eye-catching presence, in the second poem she is more in the background. (The final phrase, in fact, can be interpreted as referring to the mother's death.) The memories in this second poem are less detailed, giving the sense that Duffy was closer to her mother than to her brothers.