

"in mrs tilscher's class" by carol ann duffy essay sample

[Life](#), [Childhood](#)



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“ In Mrs Tilscher’s class” by Carol Ann Duffy is about rites of passage, the transition from childhood to adolescence and the things we learn at school, from our teachers and from our peers. Duffy writes this accessible poem using a variety of techniques that make it a memorable read.

The opening stanza has no real hint of what is to come: Duffy shows us a typical day in Mrs. Tilscher’s class: You could travel up the Blue Nile with your finger, tracing the route while Mrs Tilscher chanted the scenery.

Throughout the poem Duffy refers to “ you”- while really she is referring to her own memories- but by writing in the second person she invites us to share her experience. The image itself tells of the wrapped concentration of the children, although I think that primary seven is a little old to be so advently following the river “ with your finger”, it does convey the level of eagerness of the children. The use of the enjambment adding to feeling of the journey that Mrs Tilscher has brought to life for them as seen also by the word choice in the first line that gives it a sense of actually taking the journey themselves. The use of the punctuation in the following line- “ Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân”- gives the line the rhythm of the chant, once more bring the lesson to life for the reader by further engaging them with the memory of the teacher’s chant.

From there it continues, “ That for an hour, then a skittle of milk”, suggesting the variation in her lessons, keeping them interesting for the children. Even the description of the milk has its connotation in fun due to the shape of the

bottle and the game of skittles. Then going back to talk about "The chalky Pyramids rubbed into dust" where the image has the idea of the pyramids really being there and then fading into dust through the ending of the previous lesson, strengthening the idea that Mrs Tilscher brought the lessons to life for her class. Duffy remembers "a window [was] opened with a long pole" suggesting how embedded the experience of this class was to her, as well as the heat of the room. The familiar images are continued in the final line of the first stanza "The laugh of a bell swung by a running child" where the transferred epithet suggests the happiness remembered at the end of the lesson. Alternatively, "laughing" may be a metaphor for the vigorous ringing of the bell, once again though suggesting the joyous feeling.

The start of the following stanza may be a little odd; "Better than home", but Duffy means that there was more to do and to satisfy an intelligent child's imagination than in her home. The use of the word "Enthralling" builds on this idea and suggest the magical experience of the books for her. The almost clichéd simile used in the following line: "classroom glowed like a sweetshop" suggests the simple thinking of the children as well as the sense of fun that is continued with the familiar images of "Sugar paper. Coloured shapes." Duffy then talks about how safe the classroom seemed to her as she talks about how "Brady and Hindley/ faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake."; these outside horrors could not penetrate the classroom although like the pencil rubbing, there was till that impression of the horrors, faint as it was.

The next line seems to offer the explanation as to why these horrors could not penetrate, " Mrs Tilscher loved you." simply stated in a small sentence as if the answer was obvious. This love, to the children, is clearly seen by the " good gold star" on their work and the positive sound of the line adds to the feeling of complete belief in this. This feeling of love for the classroom is seen at the end of this stanza when Duffy recalls the " scent of a pencil slowly, carefully, shaved" telling of the deliberateness of the motion and the wanting to please while the final line of this stanza goes back to recalling the fun had in Mrs Tilscher's class.

Thus far in the poem there had been no sense of time moving on, until we reach the third stanza which can be described as the transition stanza in the poem, for it is in this stanza that Duffy predominately describes the slow changes that take place in the closing terms of primary. Duffy describe how the " inky tadpoles changed/ from commas into exclamation marks" where the growth of the tadpoles is reflective of the children themselves. Using punctuation as the descriptive tool tells of some of the things that children had been learning in the class but also shows a growing confidence; " exclamation marks." The following section in the stanza where the " dunce" frees the frogs hints at the trouble to come for the children are not concerned about the frogs and are instead, amused. The word choice of " hopped" creates a clear image of the movement while also suggesting the energy and fun of the incident.

The line that tells of the " kids, jumping and croaking/ away from the lunch queue" ties the children to the frogs that have changed- as previously

stated- from tadpoles to fully fledged frogs; and also hints at the begins of puberty as their voices begin to break. The real catalyst for change, however, comes from the revelation from a "rough boy" who "told you how you were born" While by modern standards this is quite late to be making this discovery Duffy describes her actions as that of one who is making a change from childhood to adolescence believably. She may have "kicked him" for his troubles but placing "but stared" at the end of the line emphasizes the horror as she "at [her] parents, appalled when [she] got back home" with "appalled" once more emphasizing the horror as she suspects that he may have told her the truth. This is further cemented in her mind by Mrs Tilscher's evasion when she "asked her/ how you were born and Mrs Tilscher smiled,/ then turned away" in the following- and final- stanza.

In the final stanza Duffy associates the oppressive feeling we have in humid weather with the physical changes of puberty. Transferred epithet that begins the final stanza "feverish July" is a metaphor for the heat and humidity of the month. She mentions how "the air tasted of electricity" giving the sensation of the crackling sizzling air and perhaps of the danger and power to come. The electrical storm, about to break, is felt as "a tangible alarm" suggesting a touchable fear or warning; but it makes the child feel uncomfortable and irritable ("fractious"). When the "reports were handed out" it is as if these are reports on childhood which has officially ended. The word choice in "ran" and "impatient" suggest the children's eagerness. The breaking thunderstorm is an apt metaphor for adolescence -

a deluge of feelings, hormones and changed attitudes where the " heavy, sexy sky" could be seen as the calm before the storm fully hits.

There is nothing unconventional about the poems structure, however the highly effective contrast between the first half and the last two stanza's of the poem, moving from childhood security to dangerous growing up, make the poem work on a far more complex level then first appearances would have you believe. This movement of growing up is matched by the movement from images of the classroom and school to natural phenomena (tadpoles, frogs, weather) outside the security of Mrs. Tilscher's classroom. The poem gives specific details from the poet's childhood, but it records an almost universal experience. Although at times I found the children a little young to be in primary seven, I found the poem talked about issues of growing up that were still relevant some forty years on, increasing my enjoyment of the poem.

Bibliography

" In Mrs Tilscher's Class" by C. A. DuffyMrs Ford's class notes<http://learn.embc.org.uk/3/3391.htm>