

BBC Byte size notes on TWMMS

In this poem the poet/persona is on a train that "goes down England". The journey is both literal and metaphorical, as here Duffy is concerned with the transition between childhood and adulthood, from dependence to independence, from seeing herself as being closely tied to her mother to then forming her own identity. Like *Originally* and *In Mrs Tilscher's Class*, Duffy explores how change causes conflicting emotions, which is why this poem is full of contradictions and contrasts.

The poem's title could imply "the way" her mother speaks in terms of her use of dialect and set expressions, but it might also suggest the manner in which her mother's words come to her – they are bound up with her own thinking and breathing – they are part of her being.

The poem ends on a note of optimism insisting that you can be "free" but also still connected to your background and family.

Form and structure

The poem takes the form of an opening five-line stanza followed by two stanzas of nine lines. In the first stanza, she describes repeating her mother's words in her head and under her breath. This suggests that they are bound up with her own self.

This union between mother and daughter is emphasised by the brevity of the stanza and the inclusion of the two women in it. The next two stanzas then, could represent the 'journey' or the different stages ahead of the speaker in becoming an adult, which she embarks on, equipped with the close connection she had with her mother.

Duffy also uses rhythm and rhyme throughout this poem to great effect. The repetition of her mother's expressions create the rhythm of the train in each stanza to remind us that she is on a journey. The use of half rhyme "**head**" and "**breath**", "**think**" and "**silent**" also work to hold each stanza together. There are also stronger rhymes such as "**moving**" and "**evening**". These connect the words, in this case implying that this moment in time is one of transition.

Stanza one

I say her phrases to myself/ in my head

Duffy writes in the first person and the reader is immediately drawn into her personal thoughts and feelings. She links herself with her mother in a sentence that mixes "**her phrases**" with "**myself**" and "**my head**". "**Her**" is possessive suggesting the words belong to her mother but the fact they are in "my head" clearly shows a deep and personal bond.

under the shallows of my breath

Duffy is saying the words quietly to herself. Shallow breathing suggests anxiety - she is nervous on this journey. Perhaps she is repeating her mother's words to comfort herself.

The word "**shallows**" has connotations of water and perhaps recalls the sound waves themselves merging with the poet's own breathing. This implies that her mother's sayings are integral to her very existence.

They become "**restful shapes moving**," which suggests the daughter is soothed by them. This links the words with the journey.

The line relates to the journey taking place, as scenes and landscapes that are still or resting seem to move when viewed from a train. "**restful**" and "**moving**" is a contradiction which perhaps links to the fact that on a train you seem to be still while the rest of the world races past you.

Although it is Duffy who is on a journey, this seems like a moment of stillness and reflection while it is the world that changes around her.

"**Moving**" can also be seen in another sense, suggesting the poet's feelings - the phrases and journey are emotionally moving.

The day and ever. The day and ever.

Just as Duffy has linked her mother's words with what she sees through the window, now she uses a repeating phrase to suggest the sound of the train. The repetition mimics the rhythm of the travelling train. It also suggests the poet repeating the words to herself, calming herself.

Italics stress the importance of the phrase and show that this is a direct quotation - one of the mother's phrases.

The use of "**ever**" at the end of phrase refers to eternity, as if this journey will last her whole life and this connection with her mother will always be there.

Stanza two

The train this slow evening/ goes down England

In this stanza, Duffy refers in more detail to the train journey. She sets the time "**this slow evening**" and the place "**goes down England**". The use of "**this**" tells us that this is a very specific time Duffy is referring to, possibly "The day" from her mother's phrase.

The journey seems to be taking forever. The evening is "**slow**" suggesting that time itself has stretched, and that she has the chance to think and reflect. The train is "**browsing**" also has an unrushed, leisurely feel to it. Moreover, the use of long vowel sounds in "**slow**", "**goes down**" and "**browsing**" slows the pace of the words adding to the unhurried mood.

the right sky/ too blue swapped for a cool grey.

Here Duffy uses another contrast between the colours "**blue**" and "**grey**" to reflect both a real and a metaphorical change. The move from blue to grey reflects the change from day to night on this evening journey. It also represents the move from child to adult.

The "**too blue**" could represent childhood, as it has connotations of sunshine and happiness – the use of "**too**" also makes us think of the phrase "too good to be true", as if we always look at our youth with rose-tinted spectacles. The "**cool grey**" suggests the uncertainty of becoming an adult. Life is becoming darker.

"**Browsing**" suggests that the train hasn't quite decided where it is going - the poet is not sure of her destination. This could reflect the idea of a young person leaving home, trying things out and looking for a new place in life. The fact that she is still trying to find "**the right sky**" implies that she is yet to find a way of life that suits her.

What like is it

Again, in this stanza, her mother's voice emerges. Duffy introduces another of her phrases and again the use of italics tells us this is her mother speaking. As before, the phrase repeats and suggests the sounds of the train.

Duffy says that these words come to her when she '**thinks**', which conveys that her inner voice is linked to her mother's. These phrases repeat themselves in her

head. She is not speaking them out loud. This shows just how much of an effect her mother had on her development: she is still within her thought processes.

Nothing is silent. Nothing is not silent.

The relationship between internal and external dialogue is explored further in the line. Here the repetition of "nothing" connects the two short sentences. The double negative in the second implies that, what doesn't exist in the here and now (your memories, your past) still has a voice in your head. It still has influence.

Stanza three

Only tonight/ I am happy and sad.

This stanza begins with "**Only tonight**" which asserts that this transition, this journey is a singular experience. She expresses contradictory, uncertain emotions. Perhaps she is sad to be leaving her mother behind or even mourning the end of her childhood. But she is also positive about what the future holds for her and that fact she still has this connection with her past to take with her.

Like a child/ who stood at the end of summer

She compares her feelings to those of moving from childhood to adulthood to the change of seasons. It is the "**end of summer**" which links back to her switching the "**too blue**" sky for "**cool grey**".

The delight and innocence of childhood is ending. She alludes to the archetypal image of a child by the frog pond, but this time it is a "**green, erotic pond**". There is a slight contradiction here as "green" has connotations of naivety while "erotic" connotes a more adult theme. This juxtaposition could reflect the innocent child coming face to face with the wider world.

Perhaps because of this, she returns to her mother's phrases "**The day and ever**", repeating them like a comforting mantra. No matter what she has to confront, she has her mother's voice within her, giving her strength.

Thus the poem concludes with:

I am homesick, free, in love with the way my mother speaks

These lines unite some of the contradictions from earlier in the poem. She is "homesick" for her childhood, her past, her mother, but she also feels "free" to establish her new identity, to stride forward, to continue travelling "down England" and further.

The line break just after "in love" leaves it hanging for a moment, as if she is "**in love**" with life, a love which was given to her earlier by her mother. The final line then confirms this. It returns to the title and tells us that she is pleased to have such a bond with her past. She loves that in this "**slow evening**" her mother's voice comes back to her and will continue to do so for "ever."

Themes

Change/growing up



The reference to the child by the frog pond is an effective way of portraying the act of growing up

This poem describes a transition between a nostalgia for youth and an anticipation of what's ahead. Duffy uses the train journey to signify this. She repeats her mother's phrases which have obviously been with her since she was a child. This implies the 'child-in-her' is still present. Her reference to the child by the frog pond is an effective way of portraying the act of growing up, but her overall message is that we still keep hold of that part of ourselves who was so closely nurtured by a parent. We still remember our mother's words.

Relationships

The relationship between Duffy and her mother is poignantly handled in this poem. The poet recalls her mother's expressions with fondness. They are part of her. She hears them in her thoughts and "**under the shallows of my breath.**" At the end she says she is "homesick" for her childhood, which she remembers in a positive light. She refers to her "love" for her mother's words, as if she is still comforted by them.

Comparisons

This poem would connect well with *Originally* as both explore the transition between childhood and adulthood as a journey or 'emigration'. The idea of moving from a brightly coloured, protective environment, and a nurturing female figure, to a more greyer, more threatening future is shared with *In Mrs Tilscher's Class*.

TLS

In "The Way My Mother Speaks", first published in the *TLS* in 1990, Duffy captures the experience of hearing again the outmoded language one's parents often use. The phrases she recalls seem to swim in her mind ("restful shapes moving") during a spacious and "slow evening" as her train "goes down England". In Duffy's emotionally layered poem, contradictions abound, and the recollected phrases themselves ("What like is it" and "The day and ever"), resist easy definition. A "too blue" sky is soon "swapped for a cool grey"; the world around her sounds both silent and not; and in the final stanza, the speaker remains ambivalent, both "happy and sad", to be dipping a net in the pond of memory, catching only a few snatches of her mother's lost voice. A kind of forgiveness also lives in the final lines since, as this poem proves, both mother and daughter now speak the same phrases, using a common language that both can comprehend.