

The Way My Mother Speaks – Understanding Notes

1. Why is the poem called “The Way My Mother Speaks”?
 - The poem focuses on Duffy’s memories of colloquialisms / turns of phrase that her mother uses, using it as a way to reflect on Duffy’s relationship with her mother and the influence she has had on her life.
2. **Where** is the speaker during the events described in the poem?
 - Duffy / the speaker is on a train travelling south through England.
3. What is she **doing**?
 - She is leaving her family home behind as she moves to start a life on her own down south.
 - This is a significant rite of passage in her life, as she moves towards becoming an independent person.
4. What is she **thinking about**?
 - She thinks about her mum. She remembers significant phrases that her mum uses, like “The day and ever” (Today and forever after) and “What like is it?” (What’s it like) These are Scottish *colloquialisms*.
 - Duffy identifies these phrases with her mum and turns them over in mind during the train trip.
 - This in turn causes Duffy to reflect on her mother and the influence she has had on her. Duffy reflects on the fact that she uses some of these phrases “when I think”, suggesting the profound impact her mother’s speech has had on her.
5. How is she **feeling**?
 - Calm, nostalgic, sad/homesick.
 - Duffy perhaps feels anxious, using the comforting phrases she associates with her mother to put her mind at rest.
 - A mixture of conflicting emotions – she is “happy and sad”.
 - While Duffy clearly is already missing her home, she is also excited about the prospect of being “free” – having independence from her parents.
6. Themes

The poem explores themes of **childhood** and the **loss of innocence**. “a child who stood on the edge of summer and dipped a net into a green erotic pond” suggests Duffy is moving away from her childhood towards adulthood and looking ahead to the exciting dangerous world in front of her.

In a broader sense, the poem explores the idea of **change**, and **family / relationships**.
7. Which of the **other poems** we have studied so far does this one relate to? Explain your ideas.
 - Mrs Tilscher’s Class – childhood, loss of innocence.
 - Originally – childhood, change, cultural identity.
 - War Photographer – memory, isolation
 - Mrs Midas – isolation, family

8. What unanswered questions do you have about the poem?

- “like a child / who stood at the end of summer / and dipped a net / in a green, erotic pond.”
Duffy uses this simile to suggest that, at this point in her life, she is nearing the end of childhood and looking ahead to the excitement, danger and sexual awakening of adulthood. “the end of summer” seems to symbolise the end of childhood, and the “green, erotic pond” could be taken to mean adulthood. In her train journey from her family home to start an independent life, she appears to be making the move from childhood to adulthood.
- “I say her phrases ... under the shallows of my breath, / restful shapes moving.”
On her train journey, Duffy seems to be remembering the colloquial phrases her mother uses, and also saying them under her breath. “restful shapes moving” seems to suggest the “shape” of the words in her mouth as she repeats them, suggesting the calm, relaxing effect they have on her at a time of anxiety as she thinks about having left her family home behind.