

In Mrs Tilscher's Class

This poem is about being in primary school (ages 5-11) in the 1960s in UK. It requires a lot of contextual knowledge about the time to understand the poem fully although the poem's theme is that of growing up and recognising the world beyond the safety of a classroom.

Firstly, see if you can find these references from the first two stanzas of the poem and underline or highlight all the words and phrases used to describe them:

1. A map on the classroom wall.
2. A drink.
3. A blackboard.
4. Something out of reach of the children.
5. The signal for breaktime and the end of the day.
6. Wall displays.
7. A reward for good work.
8. Writing equipment.
9. A musical instrument.

Now look again through the second stanza and see if you can identify two last names (or surnames); these are the names of two child murderers in the UK in 1960s. They are also known as the Moors Murderers and they are incredibly well known in the UK because of the horror of their crimes: the torture and murder of young children.

Why do you think Carol Ann Duffy has included the reference to these people in this poem? Why has she included the reference here, in the second stanza?

Next, look at the third stanza (verse) of the poem and highlight these references:

1. A particular time of year.
2. Animals changing.
3. Punctuation marks.
4. Children.
5. Minor misbehavior.
6. Violence.
7. Birth.
8. Sight.
9. Another word for home.

In the last stanza highlight and underline the following references:

1. A word which suggests unrest.
2. The month.
3. Something which causes static.
4. A feeling of fear.
5. A word (synonym) for mess.
6. Heat.
7. A synonym for irritation, annoyance or testiness.
8. An example of alliteration.
9. A topic which caused an adverse reaction in the speaker in an earlier verse.
10. A pleasant facial reaction.

11. A suggestion of someone trying to ignore a topic or having a lack of interest in the speaker.
12. A written document which students usually get at the end of the year.
13. A verb which is faster than walking; it suggests urgency.
14. A desire to be an adult.
15. Another example of alliteration.
16. Dramatic or violent weather.

Now look back at all the highlighting and underlining you have done and consider the way in which the imagery and language of the poem changes from the beginning to the end.

Think about the change in references from pleasant, innocent or 'safe' men to those which seem more sinister, violent or have a sense of the unknown about them; how might these be related to a child growing up?

In what way does the poem reflect that as a child grows up the possibilities seem to grow smaller not greater? How does the speaker reveal the way children become more interested in their own circumstances and situation than with the world about them? How does she show the changing relationship between the teacher and the child?

How does the poem appeal to the senses? Think about the suggestions of: sight; sound; smell; taste and touch in the poem. Which are most prominent? Why do you think Duffy has focused on some of these rather than explicitly describing the feelings of a child in primary school?

Does this poem remind you of your own experience of school when you were younger? In what ways is the poem comparable to your own memories?