

## Discuss the presentation of childhood in “In Mrs Tilscher's class”

In Carol Ann Duffy's poem “In Mrs Tilscher's Class”, she describes nostalgia-tinted memories of childhood experiences in school, contrasting childish innocence with the realisation of the dark undertones as the child matures. Duffy juxtaposes sensory descriptions of the enticing and safe school atmosphere with the reality and horrors of the outside world. The first half of the poem concentrates on playful and happy images of the children in the class, whereas the second half of the poem describes the excitement and confusion of the child as they grow up.

In the first two stanzas, Duffy associates childhood with the happiness and innocence inside the bubble of safety in the classroom. Even though it is likely that the poem is autobiographical, these affectionate and vividly described experiences of her early years are universal, made instantly more immediate by using the second person, with the poem itself beginning with the personal pronoun “you”. By giving this trustworthy, special and lovely teacher a name, Mrs Tilscher is given humanity and identity and throughout the poem is portrayed as the figurehead of childhood. The usage of the verb “could” implies possibility, opportunity and the magical enchanting atmosphere of the classroom, while the verb “chanted” links with nursery rhymes and juvenile behaviour. The heavy use of caesuras in the line “Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswan.” implies that after each full stop Mrs Tilscher pauses and lets the children imagine these exotic and unusual places next to the river. The usage of the adjective “chalky” reminds the reader of the chalk on the blackboard, and although the phrase “rubbed into dust” shows how ephemeral and impermanent these Pyramids were, the noun “dust” hints at the fact that the children experienced them as if they were there. The word “skittle” suggests something childish, sweet and playful, while “milk”, due to its white colour, connotes purity, innocence and naivety. The personification in the phrase “laugh of a bell” followed by “a running child” also presents childhood as a time of freedom, cheerfulness and positivity. Duffy's colourful, vibrant and sugary presentation of the classroom depicts the cliched child's dreams of a sweet shop. The short sentence “This was better than home” makes the child's point definitive, after all, even the books are captivating and “enthraling”. Duffy emphasises these descriptions by using sensory language with verbs such as “glowed” and “coloured”. Overall, the author fills the first two stanzas with over-the-top and somewhat magical portrayals of a carefree young child's life, using both visual and tactile verbs.

As the poem moves on, the innocence of childhood is juxtaposed with the child's breakdown of the expectations of reality. In the first stanza, the “window” represents the outside world, and the adjective “long” shows how distant it is for the children. In the third stanza, however, Duffy's sweet descriptions abruptly end with a caesura,

interrupted by the enjambéd sentence about Brady and Hindley, a young serial killer couple who killed five children in the 1960s, the first mention of the outside world in this poem. In addition, the adjective “uneasy” makes the tone become more negative and foreboding. The following sentence “Mrs Tilscher loved you”, which shows a sweet child-adult relationship, is directly juxtaposed with a completely different type of relationship in the previous sentence. The noun “nonsense” implies that the xylophone music is chaotic but is nevertheless charming, hinting at the emotions of confusion in the child as they grow up. The third stanza uses many words associated with frogs: “tadpoles”, “hopped” and “croaking”, all depicting the child growing up and maturing, as the tadpoles turn into frogs. The change of “commas into exclamation marks” suggests shock and the intensity of change as the term passes. The usage of the word “dunce” implies the child’s realisation that the students are not all equal. In the same way that Brady and Hindley are mentioned half way through the line, there is a caesura before the sentence about the “rough boy”, revealing something that is an inevitable part of growing up. The event happens in the playground, showing how the child leaves the safe bubble of the classroom and learns about the facts of life. “You kicked him” indicates denial and fear of the unknown, while the parenthetical commas surrounding the word “appalled” show the speaker’s disgust and horror as the bubble of safety dissolves before them. Altogether, the reality of the world becomes apparent as the tone of the poem changes during the third stanza.

By the final stanza, the speaker is leaving the innocent part of childhood behind. The lexical field of tension and anxiety in words such as “feverish”, “untidy” and “fractious” is contrary to the calmness, joy and comfort of childhood at the beginning of the poem. The “laugh of a bell” in the first stanza has now transformed into “a tangible alarm”, pointing to the speaker’s feeling of apprehension. The use of the adjective “sexy” in reference to the sky gives the impression of an atmosphere of nascent sexuality. When the child now asks Mrs Tilscher, she is no longer there for them, as she is the figure of innocence; the verb “smiled” suggests her slight embarrassment. The act of running through the school gates is the speaker’s escape from the school safety bubble, into the outside world for the summer holidays. The emotions of the maturing child have turned into a desire to experience new things, as they are “impatient to be grown”. Despite the speaker’s excitement, the poem climaxes at the very end, as “thunderstorm” is an example of pathetic fallacy, revealing the danger and threat of the world outside.

In conclusion, the poem “In Mrs Tilscher’s Class” describes the speaker growing up and moving from childhood to early adolescence. The speaker leaves the innocence of their early years and the vividly described colourful and delightful classroom haven behind as they are introduced to the outside world and the knowledge associated with it. Throughout the poem and its vibrant sensory descriptions, Duffy deals with the universal and evocative memories of childhood.