Before You Were Mine

The poet, having seen a photo of her mother, thinks about the ten year period before she was born. She describes the photo and uses it to 'speak' to her mother, knowing that the thought of having a child has not yet occurred to her. She remembers her own childhood, and thinks of how she used to play with her mother’s red shoes and imagines when her mother might have worn them to meet a boy-friend in George Square. She also remembers how her mother used to teach her dance steps when she was a child - yet even back then, the young poet wished she could have known her mother when still young and carefree (before she became a mother).

Language:

- There are many references to her mother as happy and bright - you laugh / the bold girl winking in Portobello / you sparkle and waltz and laugh.
- Life back then is seen as very glamorous:
  - Her mother is linked to Marilyn (Monroe)
  - Her mother goes to a dance where a glitter ball hangs - the thousand eyes
  - Her mother dreams of fizzy, movie tomorrows
  - She imagines her mother meeting a boyfriend under the tree, with its lights
- There is a contrast between her mother’s life as a teenager and as a mother of the young poet. The poet assumes her mother’s life was better before her own loud, possessive yell appeared. She includes phrases like I’m not here yet. Could this be a veiled threat? Is she warning her teenage mother that all the fun will end as soon as she has a child?
- The poem is written in the present tense, as if the events in the photo are happening now. This has the effect of making her mother’s past as real as possible?
- The poet has a very confident, assertive voice, and makes definite statements. I’m not here yet. She speaks to her mother in a familiar way. The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best one, eh?

The poem is written to sound as if the poet is talking to her mother, so the poet follows patterns of speech. Many phrases begin with I, as if the poet wants to assert her presence even before she was a presence. I’m ten years away... / I knew you would dance like that. I echoes through the poem.

Structure:
The poem is written in four equal stanzas of five lines each, this could be like photos in an album, set out regularly over a page. or it could show the regularity of time passing. (The poem keeps reminding us that, ten years after the photo was taken, the happy, bold teen was a mother.)

Ideas

- The poet romanticises her mother and the glamorous life she used to lead.
- The poet longs to see her mother as she once was, before she was tied down with motherhood.
- The poet recognises that all mothers have mothers - her mother’s mother used to stand at the close with a hiding for the late one, perhaps as the poet’s mother now watches out for her.
- The poet is re-examining her own feelings as a daughter.
Because the poem is so personal, it is full of feelings. Which come across most vividly to you?

- The poem is very affectionate: it could almost be described as a love poem to her mother.
- The poet romanticises end her mother’s adolescence and the teenage dreams she had.
- The poet seems wistful in her memories - I remember my hands in those red high-heeled shoes - and in her imagined view of her mother’s life - your ghost clatters towards me
- The poet admires and is grateful for the way her mother livened up her childhood - You’d teach me the steps on the way home from Mass

Explore the ways that Carol Ann Duffy reflects on her mother’s past and shows her affection for her in ‘Before You Were Mine’. You may want to consider:

- The language she uses
- The form and structure of the poem

A Grade A answer might include:

- The ballroom with the thousand eyes sets a very romantic scene and we can understand how the poet’s mother would have been excited to go there and risk staying out late. As well as illustrating how the light played on the mirrorball, sending light across the dancefloor, the thousand eyes could refer to the eyes of five hundred potential suitors (real or imaginary) standing round watching, which would have enhanced the excitement even more.
- Throughout, the poet is very possessive of her mother. References to her appear constantly (I’m ten years away... I’m not here yet... I remember...). The word Mine appears in the title and the poem actually concludes with the same words as the title, as if the poet is locking her mother in a firm embrace of words.

A Grade C answer might include:

- The line I see you, clear as scent is difficult to understand, because you can’t see scent. I think it means that the poet has imagined what her mum must have looked like, waiting by the tree, so clearly that she can almost smell the scene. Also, scent is quite a romantic word - maybe her mum wore scent when she met her boyfriend.
- The fact that the poet names her mother’s friends, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff (which sound like typical names from those times) help us believe in what she is writing. It is more personal - we feel we can get to know her mother’s pals too.

A Grade E answer might include:

- The poet’s mum used to imagine herself having as a perfect life, as if she was in a film - fizzy, movie tomorrows, if she met the right boy.
- The poet says that her mother looked a bit like Marilyn Monroe in her polka-dot dress, which is interesting because her mother probably dreamed of being like Marilyn.

All of these answers make good points. The more you develop a point, the higher your grade will be. Ask yourself how you might develop the ideas that the E grade candidate and the C grade candidate wrote to earn the top grade!

Remember that in the exam you will be asked to compare two poems.