‘The Kray Sisters’

This is the only poem in the collection *The World’s Wife* that is not a dramatic monologue. It is also one of only three poems based on real characters from the twentieth century; the other two being ‘Elvis’s Twin Sister’ and ‘The Devil’s Wife’.

The real Kray twins were brothers (Ronnie and Reggie): famous villains around the East End of London in the 1950s and 60s. They ran protection rackets and had money in various clubs. They were eventually imprisoned for the murder of Jack the Hat in 1969 after evading police for years, and it was recommended that they serve a minimum of 30 years in prison. Ronnie died in prison in 1996 and Reggie died a few weeks after his release in 2000.

For more information on the twins visit: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/crime/caseclosed/thekrays.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/crime/caseclosed/thekrays.shtml)

Firstly, make sure you know the translations of the Cockney rhyming slang used in the poem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cockney Rhyming Slang</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frog and toad</td>
<td>Friends and mates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savile Row whistle and flutes</td>
<td>Signs and signals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thr’penny bits</td>
<td>Minces and pies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mince pies</td>
<td>A meal for two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God forbids</td>
<td>An orchestra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orchestra stalls</td>
<td>A stall in the theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butcher’s</td>
<td>A butchers shop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remember, this poem is supposed to be funny and it is one of two from the collection (the other being ‘Elvis’s Twin Sister’) that largely rely on the aural impact to derive the humour: in other words, you need to attempt to read it out loud in a Cockney accent (although obviously not in the exam hall).

The characters in the poem are very boastful and the twins exude an air of confidence, which comes from their bullying and violent behaviour.

The poem opens with a declarative statement: ‘There go the twins!’ There is a cheerfulness implied here but the ‘geezers’ are probably actually fearful of the twins, not pleased to see them as they imagine and the line can be interpreted either way.

The repetition of ‘London’ in ‘Oh, London, London/London Town’ is reminiscent of patriotic, loyal and rousing songs often associated with the Second World War and its aftermath, such as ‘Knees Up Mother Brown’, ‘Maybe it’s because I’m a Londoner’ and ‘My Old Man’. They hint at a feeling of community spirit and unity which probably did not really exist but people like to imagine.

There are lots of internal rhymes in the poem, very much mimicking the rhythm, lilt and cadence of the East London dialect.

‘The Kray Sisters’ copyright © Carol Ann Duffy
© 2005 www.teachit.co.uk 4618.doc
The poem includes boastful reminiscences which verge on hyperbole: the grandmother, for example, knocking out the horse 'with one punch'. The mention of the grandmother and family life is supposed to show us that the family is strong and united: in other words, a 'proper' family: respectful and respected. Of course it is ironic that the twins convey this image and yet they are extremely violent, unreliable and bullying to others.

The twins are very masculine in their language and style: 'We wanted respect for the way / we entered a bar, or handled a car, or shrivelled/a hard-on with simply a menacing look'

The twins romanticise the past, 'holding the hand of the past' and 'there we for ever are in glamorous black and white'; similar to the way people now (and tabloid newspapers in particular) do – people apparently yearn for the 'good old days' of the Krays and the Blitz as the twins in this poem do.

It is an ironic contradiction that the twins behave in quite a chauvinistic way, 'enrolled a few girls/in the firm who were well out of order' and criticise them for fulfilling such roles as being, 'some plonker's wife' and yet they are perceived as being protective of women, 'The word got around and about/that any woman in trouble could come to the Krays, / no questions asked, for Protection.' Again the line can be interpreted in two ways, in that 'protection' might be capitalised because of its importance or alternatively it is capitalised because it is a proper noun: protection is another name for running an extortion racket.

These are very powerful women and yet, simultaneously, they belittle other females and are condescending to them, referring to them as 'girls' and lecturing to them, 'A boyfriend's for Christmas, not just for life.' The line also patronises men: Duffy takes the phrase, 'A dog is for life, not just for Christmas' and puts the male in the place of the soppy-eyed puppy dog.

There is use of alliteration to show the twins' success: 'the fruits / of feminism – fact – made us rich, feared, famous, / friends of the stars.' The lines mirror a public speech, such as an acceptance speech at an awards ceremony, in that it builds to a climax, each word or phrase that follows the last reveals increasing power: note that 'feminism' is the first and therefore the least important to the twins.

The voices reveal that celebrity is more important to them than the supposed effect they have on the security of London. Look at the way the list of female celebrities comes first and then the line about the Capital, almost as an aside or a throwaway remark: 'And London was safer then / on account of us.'

The extract from the letter that appears is supposed to reflect popular feeling and certainly the real Kray twins are often remembered in this way, with the memory that London had been safer 'in the old days'. The statements are still said a lot today: just look at some of the election slogans and declarations that have been used and the way in which politicians keep telling us they will return Britain to the state it used to be in. What Duffy is doing here is reminding us that 'the old days' were not better and were often much worse: her references to the twins in photographs reflect the fact that before the mass audience for television, people were sometimes unaware of current affairs and events beyond their own streets or towns so it was not that there was less crime, it was just that not so many people knew about it.

In the last stanza the poem has built to an almost frenzied crescendo of power, which mirrors the behaviour of the real twins, in that they felt themselves almost invincible. The phrase 'dressed to kill' has an ominous double meaning in that the twins are literally well dressed and yet they really are dressed ready to kill anyone who offends them.

The extract from the song at the end of the poem is indeed by Sinatra, but it is Frank Sinatra's daughter, Nancy. The song itself hints at a power within women that might remain dormant for many years, but once roused can not be ignored. The full song lyrics become darker as the song progresses which is possibly why Duffy has left the ellipsis at the end of the poem, hinting at the sinister events which were to end the Kray twins’ rule over East London.