‘The Good Teachers’

Things you need to know:

**Rudyard Kipling** was a poet, short story writer and novelist born in 1865 in India. His short stories were widely taught in English schools in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

**Cheltenham and Gloucester** – a building society that loaned money for mortgages for buying houses.

Carol Ann Duffy’s first two schools were Roman Catholic schools, she then went on to a high school. In the Catholic schools some of her teachers may have been nuns and not actually qualified as teachers, in the high school all the teachers would have been qualified.

In ‘The Good Teachers’, Carol Ann Duffy refers to teachers by name and probably, like Mrs Tilscher, her primary school teacher, these were real people who taught her.

1. Who are the ‘virtuous women’ from the front row? Check that you understand the meaning of ‘virtuous’. Does this have any part to play in the title of the poem?

2. What does ‘size you up’ mean? What about ‘they’ve got your number’?

In the first stanza it sounds as if the persona is still quite young – she loves Miss Pirie, wants to be in the school photograph twice and she breathes ‘on the glass, making a ghost of Miss Ross – but by the final stanza she has grown up, married and bought a house.

3. What tense is the poem written in? What effect does this give?

4. Despite the choice of tense, it is clear that time passes in the poem. Which words in the first stanza tell you that the persona is probably about to move schools or go up a year group? What tells you that the persona in stanza four is older than in the first stanza?

5. Whose words do you think ‘You won’t pass’ and ‘You could do better’ were originally? When would such phrases be used?

6. Where do you think the phrase ‘you’ll be sorry one day’ would have been heard by the persona?

7. How does the character of the persona change through the poem? Make sure you can back up your points with a quotation.

8. What do you think the poet means by the title of this poem? Is she being literal: ironic: reflective: regretful: none of these?
This poem seems quite different to the other poems collected in this section. The persona is male and in most of the other poems Carol Ann Duffy writes in a female persona – however remember that she was the older sister to four brothers.

1. The voice is very young – look at the language – most of the words are short and simple: most of the sentences are very short and simple: the stanzas are only three lines long. The emotions shown are those of someone very young ‘The world is terror’, but you know that the persona is ‘grown-up’. What effect do the simplicity and the ‘youness’ of the voice have when you know it doesn’t really fit the persona’s age?

2. Which words in the second stanza show a sort of distaste for some of the changes that happen to the human body as it develops to adulthood. Try to explain what you think this stanza tells you about the persona.

3. The two images of childhood in the third stanza – the child praying and the letter to Father Christmas being sent up the chimney – both suggest an old fashioned innocence and nostalgia for the lost security of childhood. Why do you think the persona looks back with such longing?

4. What do you think is the meaning of the fourth stanza? Who might the ‘older woman’ have been? How do you know it’s not the persona’s ‘mummy’?

5. What does the need to get ‘the wording right/ for the Lonely Hearts verse’ suggest the persona has decided?

6. Look at just the first phrase of the first line of each stanza. Do you think this poem sounds like someone trying to explain about his life – maybe to himself – and shows the persona slowly coming to terms with what needs to be accepted?
‘Miles Away’

The paragraphs below are for you to read and think about. What is written here is a sort of written conversation about the poem – an exploration – for you to consider. Your English teacher has probably told you that different interpretations of poetry are possible and even to be encouraged. You won’t get the highest grades unless you are really able to engage with a poem and think about alternative ‘readings’. Of course you can’t just go off on one and say any crazy thing that comes into your head – you must be able to show how your interpretation comes from the text. Soooooo … the ideas below are just that – ideas. See if you agree or disagree. The poem is very rich in imagery and will repay thinking about. And for those of you with a technical interest in poetry … what do you know about sonnets?

In this poem the person appears to be thinking about her (his?) lover who is ‘miles away’. It often happens that when you try to remember everything about someone you love and make a picture of them in your mind, perhaps because they are working away from home, you realise that you can’t ‘picture’ them exactly – you aren’t quite sure of the colour of the eyes or you get the ‘mouth wrong’.

However, ‘miles away’ is also a phrase (a cliché really) for describing someone whose thoughts are wandering. There are lots of images and ideas in the poem suggesting that the persona is ‘inventing love’ and that it isn’t a case of remembering someone but a case of making someone up, or at least making up the closeness of the relationship; it’s all in the persona’s mind.

Like the image of the ‘pale ghost’ this poem seems to ‘dissolve’ and ‘will not stay’ clear for long enough for the reader to decide whether the lover is real or is simply wishful thinking. Perhaps that is the purpose of the poem – perhaps we are being asked to think about the importance of love and the human need for love. It is so important that when love is not there we invent it but, like the misty form breath makes as you ‘exhale’ on a chilly night, invented love simply fades away and what … ‘was certain’ turns ‘into memory’.

Of course the poem may not be about love at all – it might be about writing poetry, or at least about language. Perhaps the persona (the poet Carol Ann Duffy herself?) is wandering in her garden looking for inspiration. On this evening is she trying to find the right words but all she has is a colourless wisp of ‘thought’ which she cannot put life and body into because she can’t find the words. (Look at lines 2–3) However hard she tries the right words elude her and even a bird’s call – the nightjar – is enough to ‘interrupt and turn what was’ beginning to be clearer and more ‘certain’ into just a memory. The right words escape her and so there is no poem to share with readers.

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