In Mrs Tilscher's Class

SUMMARY

You could take a trip up the Nile River, tracing its course on the map with your finger, while your teacher, Mrs. Tilscher, described the scenery along its banks, the countries and cities it runs through: places like Tana, Ethiopia, Khartoum, and Aswân. That might last an hour, and then you'd have milk from a bottle shaped like the bowling pins used in the game *skittles*. You'd forget all about the Pyramids in Egypt when they were erased from the chalkboard, as if they had crumbled out of existence. Someone would open the windows using a long pole. You'd hear the happy sound of the school bell as another student ran back and forth to ring it.

Being in school was better than being at home. At school there were books that sucked you in. The classroom was as bright as a candy shop. There was paper the color of sugar, and different-colored shapes. Brady and Hindley, a couple who murdered children in the 1960s, disappeared from your mind when you were at school: they were just a mistake, like the smudge of an eraser. Mrs. Tilscher loved you. Sometimes when you got to class, you'd find she'd put a gold star by your name. There was the smell of a pencil as you slowly sharpened it, and the confused sound of a xylophone echoing down the hall from another grade.

Over the Easter break, the black tadpoles grew from squiggly comma-shaped creatures to long, slinky things that looked exclamation points. A dumb kid let three frogs go and they jumped around the playground. A line of kids left the lunch line and followed them, hopping and making croaking noises like the frogs. A tough boy told you how sex works. You kicked him, but then when you got home you stared in horror at your parents.

In that agitated July the air tasted electric. A feeling of panic made you constantly feel messy, overheated, and full of conflict, while sultry sky weighed on you. You asked Mrs. Tilscher how sex worked and she just smiled and turned away. Final grades were released. You ran out of the school, eager to be grown up, as a thunderstorm started.

THEMES

GROWING UP

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" draws a strong contrast between childhood and adolescence. The speaker depicts childhood as sweet and innocent, full of simple pleasures. But adolescence—with its growing knowledge of sexuality—is both seductive and scary, full of tension, trouble, and disturbance. And once a person learns about sex, the poem suggests, they can't turn back. The poem's speaker thus looks back on childhood with nostalgia—as a blissful period that can't be recovered once it's been lost.

The speaker of "Mrs Tilscher's Class" describes childhood as a period of innocent pleasures. Over the first two stanzas of the poem, the speaker describes the joys of childhood in precise, vivid detail: listening to a teacher describe the "scenery" along the Nile River; having a "skittle of milk." For the speaker, these pleasures are depicted as welcoming and safe. For instance, the speaker describes the classroom as "glow[ing] like a sweet shop"—in other words, it looks like a candy store. It is thus associated with sweetness; it is a place of indulgence designed specifically for children.

In the classroom, the speaker feels protected, safe from the dangers of the outside world. For instance the "Brady and Hindley" case "faded like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake." This is an allusion to a real case in which two adults, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, sexually assaulted and murdered several young children near Manchester in the 1960s. The speaker makes this allusion to illustrate how the children feel safe and protected from such abuse in Mrs. Tilscher's class. Her classroom is a world without threats or violence, where violence itself is a "mistake" rather than an active, persistent thing students need to worry about.

However, in the poem's final two stanzas, something changes. Mrs. Tilscher's classroom ceases to be so safe and protected from the outside world. This change begins in lines 17-18, where the speaker notes that "Over the Easter term, the inky tadpoles changed / from commas into exclamation marks." The tadpoles are undergoing a physical transformation, their bodies are maturing. As they do, they become symbols of alarm or surprise: exclamation marks. And the students are undergoing similar physical changes: they're maturing and becoming aware of sexuality. The speaker describes learning "how you were born"—that is, about sex—from "a rough boy." Quickly thereafter, the speaker develops his or her own sexual desires: the speaker experiences the "sky" as "heavy, sexy"; he or she is "always untidy, hot."

As the speaker learns about sex, he or she experiences it as threatening and unpleasant. The speaker describes him or herself as being "appalled" by sex. And the speaker describes his or her own desire in terms of danger and chaos: it's like electricity, a thunderstorm. It creates physical discomfort: the speaker is "untidy, hot." Rather than experiencing pleasure and joy in sexuality, the speaker finds it threatening, confusing, and violent. At the same time, the speaker is also "impatient to be grown." He or she wants to get through this transitional period. The speaker's desires are thus contradictory, as "untidy" as the

speaker him or herself.

What's more, Mrs. Tilscher is unable to help or protect the speaker. When asked "how you were born ... Mrs Tilscher smiled, / then turned away." Though her classroom has been a space of innocence, security, and protection, she cannot protect the speaker—or even explain what's happening. As a result, her classroom and its pleasures feel fundamentally cut off from the complicated, adult world of sexuality. The speaker can yearn nostalgically for its safety, its pleasures, but he or she can't return to them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

You could travel ...
... Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân.

The first four lines of "In Mrs. Tilscher's Class" establish the poem's theme and its form. The poem begins with the speaker describing the comfortable, pleasurable routines of life in Mrs. Tilscher's classroom. In lines 1-4 ("You could travel [...] Khartoum. Aswân"), the speaker focuses on a geography lesson in which Mrs. Tilscher describes the course of the Nile as it runs through Africa. The speaker finds this relaxing and pleasant—in part, simply, because of the way Mrs. Tilscher delivers the lecture. Her voice is soothing and musical; the speaker describes it as a "chant," almost a song.

In describing this lecture, the speaker addresses someone, calling that person simply "you." Though the speaker never explicitly says so, it seems clear that this "you" is the speaker themself. In other words, the speaker is an adult reflecting back on his or her time in school. The recollection is so powerful that the speaker begins to address his or her younger self, calling him or her "you." This suggests that the speaker feels very distant from his or her youth: so much so that, when the speaker thinks of his or her childhood, it's almost like it happened to a different person.

The poem is written in free verse: it has no set rhyme scheme or meter. But the speaker uses other formal elements to carefully reconstruct the experience of being a child—in these lines, the experience of listening to Mrs. Tilscher lecture about the Nile. For example, the first two lines of the poem are enjambed. As a result, the sentence flows across the line breaks, just like the river Mrs. Tilscher describes. And the alliterative /t/ sound that appears in "travel," "tracing," and "Tilscher" further binds the lines together, making them even more liquid and smooth—while also giving the reader a taste of the chant-like quality of Mrs. Tilscher's voice.

In line 4, the speaker uses four sentence fragments, each of which names a location on the Nile: "Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân." The speaker doesn't use a word like "then" or "next" to establish the relationship between these places, so these fragments are an example of parataxis. The reader has to figure out for themself how they are connected. (Since these paratactic phrases are sentence fragments, each ending with a period, they create a series of caesuras—there are three just in this line.) The speaker will rely on parataxis throughout the poem. Though it means different things at different points, here it mimics the speaker's childhood experience of the lecture: grabbing on to certain things, ignoring the rest. In other words, the parataxis mimics the way children think and speak, jumping between ideas without always articulating the connections between them.

LINES 5-8

That for an ...
... a running child.

In lines 5-8 ("That for an hour [...] swung by a running child"), the speaker continues to describe the routines in Mrs. Tilscher's classroom. After the lecture on the Nile wraps up, the students have a "skittle of milk"—in other words a snack. They forget about the "chalky Pyramids," which are metaphorically "rubbed into dust" (i.e. forgotten). This is one of the rare places in the poem where the speaker doesn't use parataxis. Instead he or she notes that the snack follows the lecture, using the word "then" to specify that one event follows the other. And the order is important: it suggests that Mrs. Tilscher is taking good care of her students, making sure that they are well-nourished after a taxing lecture. One begins to get the sense that the classroom is a safe, welcoming space—perhaps unusually so.

The next two lines return to parataxis, presenting two events without explaining how they relate to each other—or when they happen. Someone opens a window, using a "long pole" to do so. Then a bell rings, a child running back and forth, swinging the bell to make it ring ("The laugh of a bell swung by a running child"). The speaker uses a metaphor to characterize the bell's ringing. It sounds like a "laugh": in other words, even the bell is happy and joyful, something pleasant to listen to. And the consonant /l/ sound that appears in "long," "pole," "laugh," and "bell" echoes that pleasant sound: it is soft, lulling, comforting. In the first stanza of the poem, then, the speaker portrays Mrs. Tilscher's class as a safe, pleasurable, and welcoming space.

These lines continue to be in free verse. As the speaker settles in, though, something important changes: he or she uses less enjambment. Although the first two lines of the poem are enjambed, the poem then settles into a series of solid, definite end-stopped lines. This is partially a consequence of the speaker's reliance on parataxis—his or her short, disconnected phrases often end at the end of lines. But it also reflects the speaker's contentment and happiness remembering these

pleasant experiences.

LINES 9-12

This was better ...
... of a mistake.

In the first stanza of "In Mrs. Tilscher's Class" the speaker described the pleasant, comforting routines of life in Mrs. Tilscher's classroom. In the second stanza, the speaker's attention widens a little bit. In the first four lines ("This was better than home [...] uneasy smudge of a mistake"), he or she begins to compare the safety and comfort of Mrs. Tilscher's class to the outside world. The speaker is pretty clear on this account: he or she likes being in class better than being just about anywhere else, including home.

Mrs. Tilscher's class, the speaker notes, "was better than home." The speaker then offers a series of reasons: he or she loves the "enthralling books," the "sugar paper," and the "coloured shapes." The speaker even compares Mrs. Tilscher's classroom to a "sweet shop"—in other words, a candy store. This simile is a high compliment coming from a child: Mrs. Tilscher's classroom is like the most indulgent and pleasurable place a kid can imagine.

And Mrs. Tilscher's classroom is also a safe place, protected from the dangers that children face in the outside world. The speaker signals that those dangers by alluding to "Brady and Hindley." In the 1960s, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley abducted, abused, and murdered children around the city of Manchester, in the north of England. The allusion thus fixes the poem in a particular historical moment: it is describing the time, in the 1960s, when their murders were important news in the United Kingdom. It also suggests that these murders frightened the speaker, causing him or her to feel anxious about his or her own safety.

In Mrs. Tilscher's classroom, that anxiety fades away—but it doesn't disappear entirely. Instead, the speaker uses a simile to compare it to the "the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake." The anxiety is like a mistake in a handwritten essay or composition—something that's been erased but left a smudge on the page. And the assonant long /a/ sound that runs through the line, linking together "faint" and "mistake," underlines the persistence of the speaker's anxiety, even in Mrs. Tilscher's class. Even though the speaker never tells the reader what's bad about "home," this allusion to "Brady and Hindley" provides some hints: outside Mrs. Tilscher's classroom, the speaker doesn't feel entirely safe.

Like the previous stanza, this one is in free verse. The speaker's free verse is not particularly radical, here or elsewhere. It remains more or less within the acceptable boundaries for English poetry in terms of line length. And whereas some free verse poets experiment with surprising, bold enjambments, the speaker largely refrains from doing so in this stanza. Indeed, in the first four lines of stanza 2 there's only one enjambment, in line 11 ("Sugar paper. Coloured shapes. Brady and Hindley / faded"). Otherwise the lines are solid, contained, and end-stopped. This reflects, in part, the speaker's reliance on parataxis: many of his or her fragmentary sentences end at the end of the line. Here the parataxis continues to model the way that children think and talk—jumping from one thing to another without explaining the connections between them.

LINES 13-16

Mrs Tilscher loved ...
... from another form.

In lines 13-16 ("Mrs Tilscher loved you. [...] A xylophone's nonsense heard from another form"), the speaker retreats from the frightening world outside Mrs. Tilscher's classroom and focuses instead on the pleasures of being there with her. The speaker celebrates the "love" that Mrs. Tilscher feels for her students—and the positive reinforcement the students receive from her, in the form of an occasional "good gold star." And the speaker also celebrates the sounds and smells of the classroom: the smell of a pencil being sharpened ("shaved") and the sound of a xylophone tinkling in another grade. (The speaker uses the British word for grade, "form.")

These lines are quiet, undramatic. But they do some important work in setting up the next two stanzas. The speaker is describing a world which is unpredictable, even a little chaotic: with random noises and unpredictable expressions of approval from the teacher. But that unpredictability isn't threatening or confusing. Instead, the speaker finds it soothing and even comforting. But, soon, new forces will enter the speaker's life—bringing with them an altogether different kind of chaos, chaos the speaker finds much less comforting.

Lines 13-16 are in free verse. With the exception of line 13 ("Mrs Tilscher loved you. Some mornings, you found / she'd left a good gold star"), all these lines are end-stopped. Once again, this reflects the speaker's reliance on parataxis—the way that he or she uses short, unconnected sentence fragments to describe Mrs. Tilscher's classroom. The strong, consistent end-stops that fill these first two stanzas thus establish a formal expectation: the reader begins to think that this poem will be mostly end-stopped, with an occasional enjambment here and there. But the next stanza seriously disrupts that expectation.

LINES 17-21

Over the Easter ...
... the lunch queue.

In the poem's first two stanzas, the speaker describes Mrs. Tilscher's classroom as a warm, safe space, full of innocent pleasures. But in the poem's final two stanzas, something changes, radically: a new and frightening force enters the poem. The speaker doesn't name this force right away. Instead, in lines 17-21 ("Over the Easter term, [...] away from the lunch queue"), the speaker describes a series of disturbing, inexplicable transformations in the environment of the class.

First, the "inky"—dark or black—"tadpoles" in the class's aquarium transform from "commas into exclamation marks." In other words, while the class is on Easter break, the tadpoles grow—in a dramatic, even shocking, way. Indeed, the speaker compares their bodies, using a metaphor, to "exclamation marks," the punctuation that people use to express shock, surprise, dismay. Something shocking, even disturbing, has happened to the tadpoles as they've grown up. In this way, they hint that something shocking and disturbing is happening to the kids in Mrs. Tilscher's class. (Indeed, the tadpoles become symbols for the disturbing transformations that happen as children grow up.)

Then the speaker describes another chaotic, disconcerting event—there are three frogs hopping around in the playground. They've been freed by someone who the speaker describes as a "dunce"—another student, but not a particularly bright one. This student might be dumb, but the speaker's classmates don't mind: the other kids imitate the frogs, hopping and croaking like frogs in the lunch line. The kids are imitating animals, disobeying orders, becoming unruly. There is something threatening, disturbing about this incident. Mrs. Tilscher's class no longer feels quite as orderly and safe as it did in the first two stanzas.

The sense that something important has changed is reflected in the poem's form. The poem remains in free verse. But while the first two stanzas were heavily end-stopped, this stanza is almost all enjambed: only its final line is end-stopped. It feels like the speaker is rushing through something awkward or embarrassing. And the form also registers the sudden and disturbing changes taking place in the classroom: the lines are no longer as confident and contained. The speaker continues to use parataxis, but unlike the sentence fragments that appeared earlier in the poem, the speaker stretches things out, using longer, more complete sentences—while also failing to explain the connection between them. The form of the poem registers the full stress of the transition the speaker is describing.

LINES 21-23

A rough boy ...
... got back home.

In the first half of stanza 3, the speaker described a couple of troubling events that suggested the safety and security of Mrs. Tilscher's classroom was under threat. Now, in lines 21-23 at the end of the stanza ("A rough boy [...] when you got back home"), the speaker provides an initial hint about what might be driving that change.

The speaker describes a rude, tough kid—a "rough boy"—telling the speaker "how you were born." In other words, the "rough boy" explains how sex works. This is news to the speaker—and it's not welcome news. The speaker is offended, grossed out, and responds by "kick[ing]" the rough boy. But the speaker still believes him. And when the speaker gets home he or she is "appalled" by his or her parents' sexuality. The information that the "rough boy" gives the speaker about sex haunts him or her; the speaker can't get it out of his or her head. The alliterative /b/ sound that appears in "boy," "born," "but," and "back" reinforces the sense that the speaker is haunted, even obsessed. Since the /b/ sound starts with "boy" it almost feels like the boy is following the speaker through the next several lines.

These are key lines for the poem. And they help to clarify some of the changes that the speaker discusses earlier in the stanza—for instance, the "tadpoles" changing into "exclamation marks." Their bodies are changing, just as kids' bodies change as they enter adolescence. As the speaker and his or her classmates learn about sex, it changes the environment in Mrs. Tilscher's classroom, making it less safe, less comfortable.

The poem's form reflects these changes. After the heavily end-stopped first two stanzas, the third stanza is almost all enjambed—only line 23 ("at your parents, appalled, when you got back home") is end-stopped. Additionally the first two stanzas are each eight lines long, while the poem's final two stanzas are each seven lines. As the speaker describes the transition to adolescence, the stanzas get shorter—as though life itself is speeding up in response to the flood of new information and new desires.

LINES 24-28

That feverish July, ...
... then turned away.

In lines 24-28, the first half of stanza 4 ("That feverish July, [...] then turned away"), the speaker describes developing his or her own sexual desires. The speaker begins with a complex metaphor, saying that "the air tasted of electricity." This metaphor does two things at once: first, it takes a mundane bodily act—breathing—and turns it into something sensual, something to savor. And then the speaker notes that the air tastes strange, like "electricity." This isn't literally true; instead it's another metaphor. "Electricity" is a metaphor for desire, with its sparks and prickly feelings. The whole environment around the speaker seems infused with desire.

As a result the speaker always feels alarmed, uncomfortable, hot. His or her experience of the world becomes contradictory—for instance, the speaker finds the "sky" to be both "heavy"—that is, threatening—and "sexy." It's both alluring and dangerous. The speaker's use of asyndeton here heightens the sense of contradiction: the speaker doesn't tell the reader how to understand the relationship between "heavy" and "sexy" or "untidy" and "hot." Instead, he or she simply lists all the different things he or she feels at once and makes the reader sort it out. Meanwhile, the assonant /ee/ sound in "heavy" and "sexy" suggests that these contradictory feelings have a common source: they come from the speaker's sexual desire.

The speaker turns to Mrs. Tilscher for help sorting out all these

contradictory feelings, but she can't or doesn't help the speaker. Instead, she simply "smile[s] / then turn[s] away." The protection and safety that she offered in the early part of the poem don't extend to the complicated, confusing experience of adolescent sexuality.

As the poem negotiates these complicated issues, it continues to be in free verse. But the character of that free verse changes again. In the second stanza, the speaker used almost exclusively enjambments. Now, the speaker uses almost exclusively end-stops. Only line 26 ("You asked her / how you were born") is enjambed. The speaker seems to be trying out different poetic styles and discarding them—in much the same way that teenagers try out styles and identities until they find something that fits.

LINES 28-30

Reports were handed ...
... into a thunderstorm.

As its title suggests, "In Mrs. Tilscher's Class" is about school. It describes its narrator growing up, moving from innocent childhood pleasures to the complex world of adolescence—with all its messy sexual desire and confusing new information. The poem ends with the speaker leaving school for summer vacation: grades come out, the speaker runs through the school gates. As the speaker does so, a thunderstorm starts.

This is an ominous, unsettling ending. As the speaker leaves the safety of Mrs. Tilscher's class, he or she confronts a violent storm. While this is a literal storm, it's also a symbol. It's a symbol for adolescence, with its violent, chaotic feelings. It suggests that the speaker is entering a dangerous, threatening new stage in life. The speaker does so alone, without the protection that has, up till now, kept him or her safe. In other words, the poem does not portray sexuality as pleasant or pleasurable: instead it is a source of anguish and anxiety. It exposes the speaker to violence. And it requires giving up protection, innocence, and simple childhood pleasures. As the speaker leaves Mrs. Tilscher's classroom, the departure is permanent: the speaker cannot return to its safety, its pleasures, because the speaker is no longer the person who enjoyed those pleasures.

The final lines of the poem are in free verse. They are all end-stopped—though line 29 ("You ran through the gates, impatient to be grown") is a fairly weak end-stop. The speaker has switched from using almost all enjambments in stanza 3 to using almost exclusively end-stops in stanza 4. This switch mimics the way teenagers try out new styles and identities, struggling to define themselves. And like stanza 2, this stanza is just 7 lines—one line shorter than each of the first two stanzas of the poem. Those stanzas described the slow, peaceful pleasures of childhood. The shortening of the last two stanzas suggests that life as an adolescent goes by faster than childhood does—that life itself is accelerating, slipping away from the speaker.

SYMBOLS

SWEET SHOP

In line 10, the speaker compares Mrs. Tilscher's classroom to a "sweet shop." The sweet shop symbolizes the comforts and joys of childhood.

"The classroom glowed like a sweet shop," says the speaker. In Britain, a "sweet shop" is a candy store. In other words, the speaker is using a simile to say that Mrs. Tilscher's classroom is a very pleasant and happy place for a child—a place of indulgence and pleasure. In turn, the "sweet shop" becomes an important symbol in the poem. It symbolizes comfort, pleasure, and hope—everything sweet and indulgent that a child might wish for. Implicitly, it stands in contrast to some of the other things the speaker mentions in the stanza: darker, less pleasant things, like "home" and the child murderers "Brady and Hindley."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "sweet shop"

TADPOLES

The tadpoles in the poem symbolize transformation. In lines 17-18, the speaker notes that, during Easter break, the classroom's "tadpoles changed / from commas into exclamation marks." The speaker is using a metaphor here, comparing the size and shape of the tadpoles' bodies to punctuation: after Easter, the "tadpoles" look like exclamation marks. This transformation foreshadows the other transformations the speaker describes: reaching adolescence, and learning about sex. In this sense, the "tadpoles" are also symbols for the schoolchildren themselves. Like the schoolchildren, the tadpoles aren't full grown: their bodies are shifting and changing. And like the schoolchildren, those changes are shocking and disorienting. So much so that they're best described with the grammatical mark that expresses shock and surprise: the exclamation mark.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "tadpoles"

THUNDERSTORM

In line 30, the speaker describes leaving school for summer vacation just as a "thunderstorm" starts. This thunderstorm symbolizes the powerful emotions of adolescence.

The "thunderstorm" is a literal event: "You ran through the gates, impatient to be grown, / as the sky split open into a thunderstorm." There's really a thunderstorm in the poem's final line. But it's also symbolic. A thunderstorm is a violent, chaotic event with wind, rain, thunder, and lighting. For the speaker, confused about sex, just entering adolescence, the "thunderstorm" is an apt symbol for his or her own violent and chaotic feelings. In other words, the "thunderstorm" is a symbol of adolescence with all its difficulties. As a symbol, it suggests that entering adolescence—and learning about sex—is not a pleasurable or peaceful experience. Instead, it is a violent, dangerous, and powerful experience: something that might end up damaging the people who have to endure it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 30:** "thunderstorm"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

In the first two stanzas of "In Mrs Tilscher's Class," the speaker uses end-stop often—but without any obvious pattern. For instance, the first two lines of the poem are enjambed. But then the speaker switches things up and starts using end-stop regularly: in lines 3-8 ("while Mrs Tilscher ... a running child"), every line except one is end-stopped.

The second stanza uses end-stop even more often: every line except 11 ("Sugar paper. Coloured shapes. Brady and Hindley") and 13 ("Mrs Tilscher loved you. Some mornings, you found") is end-stopped. This is partially due to the poem's reliance on parataxis: many of the poem's sentences are short fragments; they end with the end of the line. As a result, the poem feels both deliberate and jerky. The poise and control of the adult speaker is disrupted by his or her imitation of the quick jumps in logic that children make as they play and talk.

In the poem's final two stanzas, the speaker describes moving from childhood to adolescence: the speaker learns about sex and develops his or her own sexual desires. The poem's use of enjambment and end-stop changes in these stanzas. Stanza 3 has only one end-stop, the final line. Becoming adolescent seems to upset the speaker in more ways than one: the poem ceases to be heavily end-stopped. It speeds up: becoming breathless and urgent as the speaker tries to negotiate the uncomfortable things he or she is learning.

Then, in the poem's final stanza, the speaker almost exclusively uses end-stop—with just one enjambment, in line 26 ("You asked her / how you were born"). The switch between using almost all enjambments in stanza 3 and almost none in stanza 4 is surprising, even unsettling: but also reflects the speaker's state of mind as he or she becomes an adolescent. Just as adolescents try out identities and styles, the speaker is trying—and quickly abandoning—different ways of organizing his or her poem.

Whereas the use of end-stop in the first two stanzas reflects the speaker's childhood—the ways that children think and talk—the final two stanzas use end-stop in a different way: to reflect the instability and questioning of adolescence.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "scenery."
- **Line 4:** "Aswân."
- **Line 6:** "dust."
- **Line 7:** "pole."
- **Line 8:** "child."
- **Line 9:** "books."
- **Line 10:** "shop."
- **Line 12:** "mistake."
- **Line 14:** "name."
- **Line 15:** "shaved."
- **Line 16:** "form."
- **Line 19:** "dunce,"
- **Line 23:** "home."
- **Line 24:** "electricity."
- **Line 25:** "hot,"
- **Line 27:** "smiled,"
- **Line 28:** "out."
- **Line 29:** "grown,"
- **Line 30:** "thunderstorm."

ENJAMBMENT

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" uses enjambment to reflect the speaker's state of mind, his or her priorities and desires. The way that enjambment works thus shifts as the poem proceeds: in the first two stanzas, it reflects the speaker's experience of being a child, but later in the poem it reflects the confusing and difficult experience of becoming an adolescent. One can see this in the poem's opening lines. Both of the first two lines of the poem are enjambed. The sentence flows down the stanza—just like the Nile flows north through Africa. In this instance, then, the enjambments closely mimic the innocent classroom pleasure the speaker is describing: hearing about a foreign country from a trusted teacher.

Compare this to the long series of enjambments that start in line 17 ("Over the Easter term, the inky tadpoles changed / from commas") and run through line 22 ("You kicked him, but stared / at your parents"). Each of these lines, apart from line 19 ("hopped ... dunce"), is enjambed. And that's surprising, since the speaker has used a lot of end-stops in the poem's first 16 lines. The shift suggests that the speaker is unsettled, uncomfortable, rushing through things that he or she finds awkward or embarrassing.

But that approach doesn't last for long. In the next stanza, only line 26 is enjambed: "You asked her / how you were born." Every other line is end-stopped. The speaker can't settle on an approach, a way to deal with adolescence, so he or she keeps switching between things. Where enjambment once registered the pleasures of childhood, here it shows how uncomfortable and disorienting adolescence can be.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Nile / with"
- **Lines 2-3:** "route / while"
- **Lines 5-6:** "milk / and"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Hindley / faded"
- **Lines 13-14:** "found / she'd"
- **Lines 17-18:** "changed / from"
- **Lines 18-19:** "frogs / hopped"
- **Lines 20-21:** "croaking / away"
- **Lines 21-22:** "boy / told"
- **Lines 22-23:** "stared / at"
- **Lines 26-27:** "her / how"

CAESURA

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" contains a lot of caesuras. For instance, the poem's third stanza (lines 17-23) has 9 caesuras—that's more than one per line! A lot of these caesuras are the result of the poem's use of parataxis. Because the speaker is using short, choppy phrases and sentences, many of them break in the middle of the line, creating caesuras.

One can see this at work in the poem's fourth line:

> Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân.

The line has three caesuras and each is the result of the speaker's decision to list places on the Nile without explaining how they're connected. In that way, the caesuras—working with parataxis—help to capture the mindset of a child, the way children pick up on details or ideas without always understanding the relationships between them.

But not all of the poem's caesuras are the result of parataxis. For example, look at the caesura in line 5:

> That for an hour, then a skittle of milk.

In other words, the teacher describes the Nile for an hour and then the class has a snack. Here the caesura helps reinforce the connections between the two parts of the line: one thing happens and then another. The caesura might be read as the pause in between these two moments as the teacher brings out the snack. This is a subtly important moment: Mrs. Tilscher doesn't just challenge her students academically, she also takes care of them, making sure they aren't hungry.

So, though the poem often uses caesura to underline the lack of logical or grammatical connection between the speaker's ideas and phrases, caesura can also do the opposite: indicating the order of events and the relationship between them.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "finger, tracing"
- **Line 4:** "Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân."
- **Line 5:** "hour, then"
- **Line 9:** "home. Enthralling"
- **Line 11:** "paper. Coloured shapes. Brady"
- **Line 12:** "faded, like," "faint, uneasy"
- **Line 13:** "you. Some mornings, you"
- **Line 15:** "slowly, carefully, shaved."
- **Line 17:** "term, the"
- **Line 18:** "marks. Three"
- **Line 19:** "playground, freed"
- **Line 20:** "kids, jumping"
- **Line 21:** "queue. A"
- **Line 22:** "born. You," "him, but"
- **Line 23:** "parents, appalled, when"
- **Line 24:** "July, the"
- **Line 25:** "untidy, hot,"
- **Line 26:** "heavy, sexy sky. You"
- **Line 28:** "away. Reports"
- **Line 29:** "gates, impatient"

CONSONANCE

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" uses alliteration and assonance with restraint. Not consonance: the poem is over-flowing with consonant sounds. Sometimes consonance makes a poem feel harsh and prickly. But, at certain points in the poem, the speaker uses it to emphasize the sweetness and pleasure of his or her time in Mrs. Tilscher's classroom.

Note, for instance, the consonant /l/ sound in lines 7-8:

> A window opened with a long pole.
> The laugh of a bell swung by a running child.

The /l/ sound is soft and soothing, almost like the ringing bell the speaker describes. The sound might be grating, annoying. but the speaker interprets it as something pleasing, pleasurable, a "laugh."

Elsewhere, however, the speaker's use of consonance does become prickly and sharp—a powerful way of conveying the discomfort the speaker feels as he or she learns about sex and enters adolescence. Note the harsh /t/ sound in lines 24-25:

> That feverish July, the air tasted of electricity.
> A tangible alarm made you always untidy, hot

The /t/ sound feels like the "electricity" that the speaker

describes: it is prickly, sharp, a little threatening. It conveys the speaker's relationship to sexuality at this point in his or her life: it's both threatening and exciting. In this sense, consonance shifts with the speaker, registering the changes in the speaker's experience as he or she enters adolescence.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tr," "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 2:** "r," "t," "r," "r," "t"
- **Line 3:** "r," "s," "T," "r," "n," "t," "n," "r"
- **Line 4:** "T," "n," "t"
- **Line 5:** "k," "l," "l," "k"
- **Line 6:** "k," "d"
- **Line 7:** "w," "d," "w," "d," "w," "l," "l"
- **Line 8:** "l," "ll," "ng," "ng," "l"
- **Line 9:** "b," "b"
- **Line 10:** "l," "ss," "l," "l," "s," "s," "h," "p"
- **Line 11:** "S," "r," "p," "p," "r," "r," "sh," "p," "e," "d," "n," "d," "n," "d"
- **Line 12:** "f," "d," "d," "f," "n," "n," "s," "m," "m," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s," "l," "r," "l," "m," "m," "r," "n," "n," "d"
- **Line 14:** "d," "l," "g," "d," "g," "l," "d"
- **Line 15:** "sc," "n," "n," "c," "l," "s," "l," "l," "ll"
- **Line 16:** "n," "n," "n," "s," "n," "s," "r," "f," "r," "m," "r," "f," "r," "m"
- **Line 17:** "r," "t," "r," "t," "r," "m," "n," "t," "d," "n," "d"
- **Line 18:** "fr," "m," "c," "mm," "c," "m," "m," "rk," "r," "fr"
- **Line 19:** "pp," "n," "p," "n," "d," "fr," "d," "d," "n"
- **Line 20:** "f," "ll," "d," "l," "k," "d," "c," "k"
- **Line 21:** "b"
- **Line 22:** "y," "y," "r," "b," "r," "k," "ck," "b," "t," "t," "r"
- **Line 23:** "t," "r," "p," "r," "n," "t," "pp," "n," "b"
- **Line 24:** "t," "t," "s," "t," "tr," "c," "t"
- **Line 25:** "t," "l," "l," "m," "m," "l," "t," "t"
- **Line 26:** "c," "s," "s," "x," "s," "k," "k," "h"
- **Line 27:** "h," "r," "r," "n," "n," "d," "r," "s," "l," "r," "s," "l"
- **Line 28:** "r," "d," "R," "r," "ts," "r," "n," "d," "d," "t"
- **Line 29:** "r," "n," "r," "g," "t," "t," "g," "r"
- **Line 30:** "s," "s," "p," "t," "p," "n," "n," "t," "n," "r," "s," "t," "r"

ASSONANCE

"In Mrs Tilscher's Classroom" uses assonance often, though the speaker never overdoes it. When it appears, assonance is subtle, natural, and necessary—strong enough to make a point, but not so much that the poem loses its connection with the way people really talk.

Take a look, for instance, at the assonant /a/ and /u/ sounds in line 12:

> faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake

The /a/ sound runs through the line. It thus suggests that the "mistake" persists, even after it's been erased—a lingering anxiety about the speaker's vulnerability. And the /u/ sound, which appears in "uneasy," "smudge," and "of," itself feels a little uneasy, a little anxious. In this line, then, the use of assonance underlines the anxiety that the speaker can't quite shake, even in Mrs. Tilscher's classroom.

Later in the poem, assonance emphasizes the speaker's confusing and disconcerting first experiences of sexual desire. Look at the long /ee/ and short /e/ sounds that appear in line 26, for instance: "… fractious under the heavy, sexy sky." The sky is weighty, imposing, threatening—as the speaker notes later, it's about to burst open into a "thunderstorm." But it's also "sexy." The speaker has a contradictory experience of the sky: it is threatening and pleasurable, scary and attractive. And the assonance underlines the connection between these contradictory impressions. In this way, it underlines the speaker's confusion, the difficulty he or she has dealing with his or her new sexual desires.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ou," "ue"
- **Line 3:** "e," "y"
- **Line 4:** "a," "a," "E," "i," "i," "a," "A"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a," "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "u," "i," "u"
- **Line 7:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 8:** "u," "u"
- **Line 11:** "a," "a," "a," "y," "ey"
- **Line 12:** "a," "ai," "u," "u," "o," "a"
- **Line 13:** "o," "ou," "o," "ou"
- **Line 15:** "e," "e"
- **Line 16:** "o," "o"
- **Line 17:** "Ea," "y"
- **Line 18:** "o," "o," "a," "o"
- **Line 19:** "o"
- **Line 20:** "y," "i," "o," "u"
- **Line 21:** "a," "o," "u," "ueue," "ou"
- **Line 22:** "you," "you," "ou," "i," "i"
- **Line 24:** "e," "e," "i," "i," "y"
- **Line 25:** "A," "a," "a," "ay"
- **Line 26:** "ea," "y," "e," "y"
- **Line 28:** "a"
- **Line 29:** "a," "a," "a," "o"
- **Line 30:** "o"

ALLITERATION

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" is a casual, conversational poem. It doesn't use a lot of pretentious or difficult language. Instead, it imitates everyday speech: the way children and teenagers actually talk and think. As a result, the poem doesn't have a lot of alliteration—alliteration, when it's overused, often makes a poem feel more literary than it might otherwise. Instead, the speaker reserves alliteration for key moments in the poem.

For instance, an alliterative /t/ sound runs through the poem's

first four lines:

> You could travel up the Blue Nile
> with your finger, tracing the route
> while Mrs Tilscher chanted the scenery.
> Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân.

The /t/ sound links the lines together, so that they flow down the page—just like the Nile flows through Africa. In this sense, the alliteration echoes the pleasure the speaker takes as a child listening to Mrs. Tilscher, making the lines as musical as her "chant," flowing like the river she describes.

Later, the speaker uses alliteration to characterize the disturbing things he or she learns about sex. Take, for instance, the /b/ sound that pops up in lines 21-22:

> ... A rough boy
> told you how you were born. You kicked him, but stared
> at your parents, appalled, when you got back home.

In these lines, the speaker learns how sex works from a "rough boy," a rude, tough young man. And the speaker is horrified, can't believe that his or her parents would do such a thing. The /b/ sound links together four key words in the passage, "boy," "born," "but," and "back." It's almost like the boy follows the speaker home, taunting him or her, so that the speaker can't help but stare in horror at his or her parents. In other words, the alliteration echoes the way that the speaker's new knowledge about sex remains stuck in his or her head, something he or she can't let go of.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "t," "r"
- **Line 2:** "t," "r"
- **Line 3:** "T"
- **Line 4:** "T"
- **Line 7:** "w," "w"
- **Line 9:** "b," "b"
- **Line 10:** "sh"
- **Line 11:** "S," "sh"
- **Line 12:** "f," "f," "u," "o"
- **Line 14:** "g," "g"
- **Line 15:** "sc," "s"
- **Line 16:** "f," "f"
- **Line 18:** "fr," "fr"
- **Line 19:** "fr"
- **Line 20:** "f," "k," "c"
- **Line 21:** "q," "b"
- **Line 22:** "y," "y," "b," "Y," "b"
- **Line 23:** "b"
- **Line 24:** "t"
- **Line 25:** "t," "a," "u"
- **Line 26:** "h," "s," "s," "h"
- **Line 27:** "h," "T," "s"
- **Line 28:** "t," "R"
- **Line 29:** "r," "g," "g"
- **Line 30:** "s," "s"

METAPHOR

The speaker of "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" uses metaphor throughout the poem to characterize the safe pleasures of Mrs. Tilscher's classroom, as well as the dangerous, powerful pleasures of sexuality.

In line 8, the speaker describes the bell ringing at the end of a class period. He or she uses a metaphor to do so, describing "the laugh of a bell." In other words, the bell sounds happy and fun. It's something pleasurable, something engaging. The metaphor thus suggests that, in Mrs. Tilscher's class, even mundane, everyday objects like bells become delightful and pleasant. And in that way, it suggests that everything around Mrs. Tilscher takes on the same rich pleasure as, say, her lectures about the "Blue Nile."

In fact, such lectures are compared metaphorically to traveling: "You could travel up the Blue Nile / with your finger." As the students trace the Nile in their schoolbooks, they imagine they are actually boating along the river. Even pieces of paper in the classroom takes on an aura of sweetness: the speaker calls them "sugar paper," comparing their whiteness to sugar in a candy store. And milk bottles become as fun as the bowling pins used in the game *skittles*. The speaker also uses a metaphor to describe how the students quickly move on from one imaginative activity to another. After the lecture, the speaker says, "the chalky Pyramids rubbed into dust." That is, the Pyramids of Egypt metaphorically crumble as soon as the children forget the lesson.

At the start of the third stanza, the speaker uses a metaphor to capture the changes the students are observing and experiencing. The speaker says, "the inky tadpoles changed / from commas into exclamation marks." Here, the speaker compares the shapes of the tadpoles to different-sized punctuation; the tadpoles are getting larger. Just as the poem as a whole uses school to talk about adolescence, this specific metaphor uses grammar to describe the tadpoles' journey into sexual maturity.

In line 24, the speaker describes how in July, "the air tasted of electricity." There are two separate metaphors here. First, the speaker compares breathing to "tast[ing] the air." This metaphor turns breathing into something sensual, even seductive. Instead of simply breathing, the speaker is treating the air like a fine wine, a delicacy: savoring it, testing its flavors. And it tastes strange, like "electricity." "[E]lectricity" is a metaphor for desire, with its sparks and prickly feelings. Taken

as a whole, then, the statement "the air tasted of electricity," suggests that even breathing has become erotically charged. These metaphors capture a world that is alive with desire. There is no longer any safe space—not even Mrs. Tilscher's classroom.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "You could travel up the Blue Nile / with your finger"
- **Line 5:** "a skittle of milk"
- **Line 6:** "and the chalky Pyramids rubbed into dust"
- **Line 8:** "The laugh of a bell"
- **Line 11:** "Sugar paper"
- **Lines 17-18:** "the inky tadpoles changed / from commas into exclamation marks"
- **Line 24:** "the air tasted of electricity"

SIMILE

The speaker uses simile twice in "In Mrs Tilscher's Class." In both cases, the simile serves to emphasize that Mrs. Tilscher's classroom is a warm and welcoming space where the speaker feels safe and happy. In line 10, the speaker compares Mrs. Tilscher's classroom to a candy store, saying it "glowed like a sweet shop." The classroom is as sweet, pleasurable, and enticing as a candy store. (Indeed, the "sweet shop" symbolizes everything comfortable and pleasurable that children want.) In other words, this is a big compliment: for a kid, there's nothing better or sweeter than a candy store.

The next simile appears in lines 11-12. Here the speaker alludes to "Brady and Hindley," a couple who abducted and murdered children in the North of England during the 1960s: "Brady and Hindley / faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake." The Brady and Hindley murders remind the reader that children are vulnerable—and that this vulnerability makes kids feel fear and anxiety about their own safety. However, in Mrs. Tilscher's classroom, this anxiety fades into the background: it becomes, the speaker says, "like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake." The speaker is comparing his or her fear to an erased line in a hand-written essay. The speaker's fear is like the eraser smudge that remains. In other words, the speaker still feels some fear and anxiety over his or her own vulnerability, but it's not consuming or overwhelming.

Taken together, the two similes suggest that Mrs. Tilscher's class is a safe and welcoming space—all the more so because the outside world is scary and threatening.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "The classroom glowed like a sweet shop."
- **Lines 11-12:** "Brady and Hindley / faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake."

ASYNDETON

In addition to its frequent use of parataxis, "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" often uses asyndeton. When the poem uses asyndeton, it echoes the speaker's confusion and attentiveness as he or she enters adolescence.

One can see this at work in lines 25-26:

> A tangible alarm made you always **untidy, hot,**
> **fractious** under the **heavy, sexy** sky.

These lines contain two examples of asyndeton. At the end of line 25-26, the speaker describes how knowing about sex makes him or her feel "untidy, hot, / fractious." Then, at the end line 26 the speaker describes the sky as "heavy, sexy." In both cases, the speaker purposefully withholds the word "and." The reader thus has to figure out the relationship between these listed words. This creates some confusion or uncertainty, which echoes the speaker's confusion as he or she deals with sex for the first time.

In line 15, the speaker uses asyndeton in the sentence "The scent of a pencil **slowly, carefully** shaved." Again, the speaker omits the word "and," slowing the phrase down to capture the methodical care with which the pencils are sharpened. While this use evokes calm, the "**faint, uneasy** smudge of a mistake" in line 12 captures the speaker's fear of "Brady and Hindley," an English couple who murdered children in the 1960s. Here, the absent "and" suggests imbalance or anxiety.

In line 19-20, the speaker uses asyndeton to capture a scene of confusion:

> ... Three frogs
> hopped in the playground, **freed by a dunce,**
> **followed** by a line of kids

The speaker once again omits an "and" here, causing the sentence to grow crowded and confused, just like the scene it depicts. In this way, asyndeton echoes the speaker's experience—and allows the reader to share it, briefly.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "faint, uneasy"
- **Line 15:** "slowly, carefully, shaved"
- **Lines 19-20:** "freed by a dunce, / followed by a line of kids"
- **Lines 25-26:** "untidy, hot, / fractious"
- **Line 26:** " heavy, sexy sky"

PARATAXIS

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" uses parataxis throughout the poem—although the way that it uses the device changes as the poem progresses.

For instance, in line 11, the speaker employs two sentence fragments right next to each other, with no explanation of their relationship: "Sugar paper. Coloured shapes." These are things the kids use in Mrs. Tilscher's class: one might imagine, for instance, that they're cutting the "coloured shapes" out of the "sugar paper." But the speaker doesn't make this connection for the reader: instead, the speaker simply puts them next to each other. The speaker uses this strategy regularly in the first two stanzas, whether describing the attractions of the Nile river—"Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân"—or comparing life at school to life at home: "This was better than home. Enthralling books."

The use of parataxis in these two stanzas is evocative and powerful: it conveys the way that children play, how their minds work, jumping from one thing to the next without connecting them (or explaining to adults how they relate to each other). In other words, the speaker, reflecting on his or her childhood, uses parataxis to mimic the way children think, play, and talk.

Unsurprisingly, then, parataxis changes in the poem's final two stanzas—as the speaker learns about sex and takes his or her first steps into adolescence. In the first two stanzas, the speaker uses a lot of short, disconnected sentence fragments. In the final stanzas, the speaker becomes more expansive, using complete sentences. But the speaker continues to leave out the connections between these sentences. For example, in lines 17-19, the speaker goes from describing the classroom's "inky tadpoles" to "three frogs" that a "dunce" has "freed." There's no obvious relationship between these events: they simply fall one after another. The reader has to figure out their relationship.

Indeed, there's only one case in the final two stanzas where there's a clearly implied relationship between two sentences. That case falls in lines 22-23, where it's clear that the speaker "kicked" the "rough boy" because he told the speaker how sex works. Even here, though, this connection is only implied.

So, in the first two stanzas, parataxis mimics the playful, disconnected thinking and talking that children do. In the final two stanzas, it suggests something different: the confusion of adolescence. Just as the speaker feels that the world has become strange, threatening, and confusing, the relationships between sentences also become unclear. The result is that these stanzas feel disorienting—as disorienting as adolescence itself.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- Line 4
- Lines 7-8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 17-22
- Lines 24-26
- Lines 26-30

ALLUSION

In lines 11-12, the speaker makes an allusion to two people who are mostly forgotten today, but who would've been terrifying figures for a child in England or Scotland in the 1960s: "Brady and Hindley." Between 1963 and 1965, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley abducted, sexually assaulted, and murdered at least five children in the countryside around Manchester, a city in the North of England. Because those rural areas are hilly—the English use the word "moors" to describe them—these murders became known as the "Moors murders." They were breathlessly covered by the British press. Before Brady and Hindley were caught, they would've been terrifying to children in the area—a constant source of anxiety and fear.

In this sense, the "Moors murders" get at something important in the poem: children are vulnerable. The Brady and Hindley murders remind the speaker that he or she is vulnerable to the whims of adults, to their capacity for violence and abuse. In Mrs. Tilscher's classroom, though, the speaker feels safe from such abuse—and so it "fades, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake." In other words, even though the speaker still knows such violence is possible, he or she doesn't worry about it in Mrs. Tilscher's classroom. In this sense, the allusion serves to remind the reader of the violence and abuse that children are vulnerable to—and it marks Mrs. Tilscher's classroom as a safe space, free from fear and violence.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "Brady and Hindley / faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake."

VOCABULARY

Blue Nile (Line 1) - The Nile River, which runs through Africa from Tanzania in the South to Egypt in the North. The Nile is Africa's longest river and one of the places where human civilization first blossomed. More specifically, the Blue Nile is one of two main tributaries of the Nile, so named because of the soil that turns it a dark color.

Chanted (Line 3) - Sang. The word suggests that Mrs. Tilscher's description of the scenery along the Nile is musical and soothing: she is almost singing it.

Tana (Line 4) - A lake in Africa and one of the sources of the Nile. The Blue Nile flows from this lake.

Ethiopia (Line 4) - A country in Eastern Africa. The Nile runs through the country—and some of the river's sources are also

in Ethiopia.

Khartoum (Line 4) - The capital of Sudan and a major city on the Nile.

Aswân (Line 4) - A major market city on the banks of the Nile in Egypt.

Skittle (Line 5) - "Skittle" is a kind of bowling game: a player tries to knock down nine pins with a ball. The pins look similar to milk bottles. In other words, the students' milk break has a fun, game-like quality to it.The game also comes up in a popular phrase: "Not all beer and skittles." This phrase means that life isn't all fun and games. The speaker may be alluding to this phrase. The "skittle of milk" is thus a break from the demands of the school day.

Laugh (Line 8) - Ringing. The bell is ringing and it sounds like it's laughing. In other words, the bell sounds happy and pleasant to the speaker.

Sweet shop (Line 10) - A candy store.

Brady and Hindley (Line 11) - An allusion to Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, who abducted, sexually abused, and killed five children between July 1963 and October 1965, in and around Manchester, England. These are often called the "Moors murders," because they took place in the hilly "moors" in that part of England.

Shaved (Line 15) - To sharpen a pencil by shaving the wood away from the lead.

Form (Line 16) - In the United Kingdom, a "form" is equivalent to a "grade" in the U.S. education system.

Dunce (Line 19) - A stupid or foolish person.

Queue (Line 21) - A line of people.

Tangible (Line 25) - Something that one can touch: that can be felt directly and immediately.

Fractious (Line 26) - Conflicted, argumentative, feisty.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" is not written in any traditional form, like the sonnet or the villanelle. It does not have a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, it is written in free verse. By the time Carol Ann Duffy wrote the poem in the late 1980s, free verse had become pretty standard for poets writing in English. In other words, the speaker isn't necessarily making an important argument by using free verse. Instead he or she is simply reflecting the poetic standards of his or her moment.

However, the poem does have an interesting and important formal pattern—something subtle that shapes the poem and reflects the speaker's experience. The first two stanzas of the poem are each eight lines long—in other words, they are octaves. The final two stanzas are each seven lines, called septets. The final two stanzas are thus one line shorter than the first two stanzas.

These shorter stanzas are where the speaker discusses learning about sex, growing up, and becoming an adolescent. In the first two stanzas, the speaker meditates on the innocent pleasures of childhood. Compared to these longer stanzas, the final two stanzas feel a bit rushed, compressed—as though time itself speeds up as the speaker enters adolescence. The stanza length switches from an even number of lines to an odd number, as if the stanzas have become unbalanced. Meanwhile, the first two stanzas feel slow and luxurious, uncomplicated by the pressures of time, just like childhood.

METER

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" is written in free verse, a kind of poetry that doesn't have meter or a rhyme scheme. In the early 20th century, free verse was a radical rejection of poetic tradition. But by the time Duffy wrote "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" in the late 1980s, it had become a tradition in itself. In other words, the use of free verse in Duffy's poem isn't necessarily rebellious or particularly radical.

Although there are no set limits on the number of syllables in each line, all of the poem's lines have at least 8 syllables; only a few are longer than 12 syllables. Line 12 in the second stanza has 13 syllables ("faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake"). Line 17 in the third stanza also has 13 ("Over the Easter term, the inky tadpoles changed").

Additionally, the first three lines of the final stanza range from 13 to 16 syllables, thus including the longest lines in the poem:

> That feverish July, the air tasted of electricity.
> A tangible alarm made you always untidy, hot,
> fractious under the heavy, sexy sky. You asked her

These lines are as heavy as the sky they describe, dense with extra words and syllables. They stand out as a turning point in the speaker's life, as he or she becomes more and more engrossed by sexuality.

Yet even though these lines deviate from the poem's typical line length, they don't do so that wildly. Although the rhythm of the poem is flexible and variable, it thus remains within relatively firm boundaries. And it doesn't disturb the basic expectations of English poetry—indeed, most poems written in English meters tend to have between 8 and 12 syllables per line. So though the poem doesn't have meter, it also doesn't break radically from the expectations associated with meter.

RHYME SCHEME

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" is a poem in free verse, which means that it doesn't have a set rhyme scheme. And while some free verse poems do use rhyme occasionally and in unpredictable

ways, "In Mrs. Tilscher's Class" is almost entirely free from such rhymes. After all, the speaker is emulating the natural speaking voice of someone reflecting on their childhood. By avoiding the artificial constraint of rhyme, the speaker thus maintains that sense of everyday speech.

The second stanza does contain a faint series of slant rhymes created by the assonance of the long /a/ sound in "mistake," "name," and "shaved." However, it's probably more useful to think of these moments as relating to the poem's general use of assonance, rather than in terms of rhyme. Thus, in general, "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" avoids using rhyme, preferring to rely on other devices like assonance, parataxis, asyndeton, and alliteration to create its sense of rhythm and music.

SPEAKER

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" describes someone—whom the speaker only refers to as "you"—going through the awkward, difficult transition from childhood to adolescence. The speaker never tells the reader who the "you" is—nor does the speaker specify their gender. But the speaker does provide some important details that help the reader situate the speaker and the "you." For instance, the "you" is in school. And the speaker notes that the "you" worries about "Brady and Hindley"—a couple who abducted and murdered children in the north of England in the mid-1960s. So the poem is likely set sometime in the 1960s.

Since the poem was published in 1990—around 25 years after the Brady and Hindley murders—it seems like the speaker is reflecting on an earlier time, perhaps the time when the speaker him- or herself was in school, grappling with sexuality, and becoming an adolescent. Indeed, it seems likely that the "you" that the speaker addresses *is* the speaker: just a younger, less experienced version of the speaker. In other words, the speaker is an older person, someone who has already passed through adolescence and graduated from school.

The speaker is reflecting back on his or her experiences in school. And the speaker seems to feel like his or her younger self is almost a different person, addressing him or herself as "you" rather than "I." This suggests that the speaker feels cut off from his or her childhood and early adolescence; its pleasures, as well as its turmoil and confusion, are permanently in the past. The memories in the poem are things the speaker can reminisce about, but can't return to.

SETTING

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" is set in the United Kingdom in the mid-1960s. It's most likely set in Scotland (where Carol Ann Duffy, the poet, was raised) or the north of England—where "Brady and Hindley" abducted and murdered children, and where their crimes were major local news in the 1960s. Though the poem considers a universal theme—the awkward process of learning about sex and becoming an adolescent—it is set in a very particular time and space. It emerges from the speaker's specific experience of becoming an adolescent.

In meditating on this theme—and on his or her own experience as a young adolescent—the speaker focuses on one place in particular: the classroom of a teacher named Mrs. Tilscher. The speaker describes the routines of this classroom in detail: snacks, lessons, sharpening pencils. The speaker depicts the classroom as a peaceful, protected space, full of innocent pleasures—at least until sex enters the picture.

The speaker is deeply engrossed in these innocent pleasures: his or her description of the classroom almost entirely excludes the other parts of his or her life. The reader doesn't learn much about the speaker's parents for instance, or his or her life at home—except that Mrs. Tilscher's class is "better than home." This suggests that the speaker's home life might not be that happy or peaceful—that Mrs. Tilscher's class is a kind of refuge from the world outside.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" was written in the late 1980s and published in 1990. In the early part of the 20th century, many poets had engaged in radical experiments—experiments that disrupted poetic traditions. By the time Duffy wrote this poem, however, many of those experiments were firmly in the past. Her poetry—like the poetry of many of her peers—is more relaxed, less obsessed with innovation and experimentation. Though she uses free verse, she doesn't radically break with the expectations and patterns of English meter.

Instead, Duffy's poem describes a personal experience in vivid, evocative detail. This makes her poem a good example of a poetic movement called *lyric narrative*. Lyric narrative poems are usually in free verse, but they don't do anything too crazy with the form. They are concerned with the details of everyday life, using those details to get at bigger, more universal themes. Lyric narrative writing represents one of the most important and widely celebrated forms of poetry written at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Indeed, Duffy's poems have elevated her to some of the highest and most prestigious positions in poetry. For example, in 2009, Duffy was appointed Britain's Poet Laureate—the first woman and first openly LGBTQ poet to hold the position.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"In Mrs Tilscher's Class" depicts Scotland or the North of England in the mid-1960s, when the speaker of the poem was a school-aged child. The poem focuses on the details of life in the

classroom of Mrs. Tilscher. It rarely glances outward to think about its broader social context. And when it does, it thinks about the kind of event that might interest or concern a child—like the "Brady and Hindley" murders, which took place around Manchester in the 1960s. These murders were constantly in the news in the North of England and in Scotland at that time. The speaker's awareness of them indicates that he or she is paying attention to the news—but only to the extent that it concerns him or her.

However, there were larger transformations going on in English and Scottish society during the years the poem describes, changes that the speaker doesn't fully acknowledge. The country was rebuilding after the devastation of World War II—in some cases, rebuilding entire towns from scratch. The government was highly involved in this rebuilding effort; as a result, this period is often known as post-war socialism. In order to fund the reconstruction, there were often shortages and key goods were rationed. In other words, this was a difficult period for the country—a period where people were required to make great sacrifices after a devastating war.

Though the speaker doesn't explicitly acknowledge these challenges, one might find evidence of them implicitly written into the poem. For instance, the speaker consistently describes the pleasures of Mrs. Tilscher's class in terms of food, comparing it to a "sweet shop" and celebrating a "skittle of milk." This might reflect the food rationing that sometimes happened in those years. The shortage of food makes Mrs. Tilscher's classroom with its snacks seem like an especially safe and welcoming place.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Brady and Hindley — An article on the Brady and Hindley murders from the Telegraph. (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/16/moors-murders-ian-brady-myra-hindley-shocked-nation/)
- The SRB Interview: Carol Ann Duffy — A recent interview with Carol Ann Duffy and the Scottish Review of Books. (https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2018/11/the-srb-interview-carol-ann-duffy/)
- Biography of Carol Ann Duffy — A detailed biography of Carol Ann Duffy from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- Winning Lines — A 2002 profile of Carol Ann Duffy from The Guardian Newspaper. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/aug/31/featuresreviews.guardianreview8)
- "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" at the BBC — A detailed exploration of the themes of "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" from the BBC. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zmx8t39/revision/1)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Education For Leisure
- Little Red Cap
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer

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