Originally

SUMMARY

The speaker describes her family leaving their home country in a red car that sped through the fields, her mother saying her father's name over the music of the car's wheels as they spun. Her brothers were crying, one of them repeatedly shouting out for home as they drove farther away from their former city, street, house, and all the empty rooms in which they no longer lived. The speaker looked into the unseeing eyes of her stuffed animal and held its paw.

The speaker says that childhood itself is like leaving one's home country behind. Sometimes this process is slow, and leaves you on your feet, grimly accepting things, on a road where nobody you know lives. Other times this emigration seems to happen all of a sudden. Your accent is out of place, and familiar-looking corners actually lead to bewildering suburban developments, where older boys eat worms and yell out words you don't know. The speaker felt her parents' nervousness like a loose tooth rattling around in her own head. She wanted to go home, back to her own country.

But in time, the speaker says, you start to forget things, or you change, and when you see your brother swallowing a slug, you only feel a splinter of shame. She remembers leaving her former accent behind like a snake sheds its skin, until she spoke just like everyone else in her class. Does she really believe that she lost the landscape and culture of her country, her voice, and a sense of her first and rightful home? Now, when people she doesn't know ask her where she's from originally, she's not sure what to say.

THEMES

THE PAIN OF GROWING UP

Through a melancholy look back at the identity she lost when her family emigrated from Scotland to England, the speaker of "Originally" touches on a broader human feeling of displacement—that is, the sense of being always a bit out of place. The very act of growing up is a loss of "our own country," the poem argues, of a feeling of being at home in both the world and in oneself.

As her family drives away from Scotland, the speaker feels that she is making a miserable journey away not just from her home, but also from her childhood itself. In the backseat of her family's car, she's frightened and bewildered as she's taken away from the places she grew up. And when the speaker turns to her stuffed animal for comfort, she finds it has become an unresponsive object, a "blind toy." This loss of the power to imagine a toy as a friend suggests she's been abruptly forced out of her childhood innocence as well as her country.

Emigrating, here, means not just the loss of a homeland, but of everything that home represents: safety, comfort, and connection. The speaker's *literal* homesickness for Scotland is thus also a *metaphorical* homesickness for the security and happiness of childhood.

As her family begins its new life, the speaker more explicitly links emigration to growing up: "All childhood," she says, "is an emigration." Both relocating and getting older, she argues, entail painful, disorienting losses of self. "Corners" that "seem familiar" lead to strange and dreary places, but the issue isn't just that the speaker doesn't know her way around. It's that, turning these misleading corners, the speaker encounters "big boys"—menacing creatures who swear and eat worms. These "big boys" again link the strangeness of a new country to the fear of getting "big" yourself—that is, of growing up.

Emigration also makes the speaker feel ashamed of herself in a way that evokes the end of childhood: her Scottish accent becomes suddenly "wrong." Even this awareness that one's voice can be wrong marks a loss of childhood innocence and lack of self-consciousness. Building on this mood of sudden shame, the speaker describes her "tongue / shedding its skin like a snake" as her accent changes, evoking the treacherous serpent of the Garden of Eden. Her loss of Scottish identity is thus also presented as a kind of fall from grace: she loses the security of childhood and falls into the compromise, conformity, and alienation of adulthood.

It's not just children who emigrate who feel displaced and homesick, this poem suggests. Everyone who grows up feels in some way severed from their sense of "first space / and the right place." Everyone is homesick, the poem implies, for their childhood selves.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

EMIGRATION AND IDENTITY

Though the poem primarily uses emigration as an extended metaphor to describe the painful process of growing up, it also speaks to the confusing, isolating experience of *literal* emigration itself. The poem illustrates how leaving one's home country results not simply in homesickness, but also in painful isolation and a confusing loss of identity.

The speaker presents driving away from Scotland as driving away from familiar touchstones—from markers of her former

self. As she imagines the road "rush[ing]" back behind the car, she zooms in on the places that her family doesn't "live any more": "the city, / the street, the house, the vacant rooms" that they've left behind.

Her new land is filled with things that at first seem to resemble her home, but prove decidedly different. The "Corners" in England, for example, are deceptive in their familiarity; they may look like the corners back home, yet they lead to "unimagined" places. And whereas in the speaker can easily envision "the vacant rooms" of Scotland that she's left behind, in England she feels dislocated and unmoored, suddenly unsure of what she'll stumble upon next. She's alone, "up an avenue / where no one [she] know[s] stays"—a description that reflect the initial loneliness and disorientation of moving to a new country.

Adding to her sense of isolation and confusion is the fact that she also can't "understand" what older kids shout. Her accent feels "wrong," implying that her voice itself—how she communicates who she is with the world—no longer fits in with her surroundings. And while the speaker eventually transforms herself into something resembling an English kid, she can never fully integrate. Even as she describes losing her accent and assimilating into English culture, her Scottish origins poke out: her use of the dialect word "skelf," meaning "splinter," suggests that her birthplace is still very much with her, separating her from "the rest."

And yet, this Scottishness is buried and fragmented, itself a "skelf," and so her identity feels fragmentary to her, too. Asked where she comes from "originally," she can only "hesitate." The poem thus implies that she has lost more than "a river, culture, [and] speech"; without a clear sense of her origins, she's lost a clear sense of who she is.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

We came from ...
... of the wheels.

The speaker of "Originally" sets the scene: she's one of a "we," a family, traveling together "in a red room / which fell through the fields," and listening to "our mother singing / our father's name" as they go.

These images immediately immerse the reader in a child's perspective. To a little kid, a car is as big as a room, and a mother's call to a father as they drive could indeed sound like music; imagine the way people draw out someone's name when they're trying to tell them how to drive without offending them.

The strangeness of these images reminds the reader of what it feels like to experience the world as a child, and the poem's sounds follow suit. The alliteration here, matching up pairs of sounds, is as singsong as the mother speaking to the father, almost like a nursery rhyme:

> We came from our own country in a red room
> which fell through the fields [...]

But this childhood world doesn't seem to be perfectly peaceful. The "red room" is not driving, but *falling* through the fields, out of control. That red room itself is potentially a little ominous—and perhaps a subtle allusion. Anyone who's read *Jane Eyre*, in which a cruel aunt locks the terrified young Jane away overnight in the "red-room" as a punishment, will have a sense that a red room might be a place of danger. This echo of a famous story of childhood alienation underlines the speaker's misery.

LINES 4-8

My brothers cried, ...
... holding its paw.

Just as the vaguely ominous "red room" hinted, no kid in this car seems happy: the family is leaving its home, and nobody is pleased about it. The speaker remembers her brothers weeping for "*Home*, / *Home*," and everything around them seems to feel the same way. Even the "miles" seem to "[rush] back to the city, / the street, the house, the vacant rooms / where we didn't live any more."

Notice how the shape of those lines matches their meaning? The asyndeton means that each of these individual places seems to rush past independently, like landmarks passed on the road. But they also rush *backwards*, and they zero in, moving from the city to the street to the house to the rooms. There's a sense here of a yearning for home so intense that it takes over the whole world, personifying the road itself. And there's a sense of the speaker yearning for a really precise spot: it's not just her city she wants, but her own house and her own room, now empty.

Bewildered in the back of the moving car, the speaker turns to her stuffed animal for comfort, "holding its paw." But as she stares into its eyes, nothing stares back: it's only "a blind toy." Readers might themselves remember a moment when a toy they'd considered a friend became only an object; it's one of the sad milestones of the end of childhood.

With that, the poem's emotional world is set up. This is going to be a poem about leaving home, in many senses of the word. The speaker's family is emigrating, leaving their "own country." But the speaker is also leaving her own internal home country: her childhood sense of self.

LINES 9-11

All childhood is ...
... you know stays.

The first stanza is immersed in a particular scene: the day the speaker's family left their home, seen through the speaker's young and bewildered eyes. But the second begins with a big, abstract declaration. "All childhood," the speaker says, "is an emigration."

This is the poem's central metaphor, straightforwardly spoken. This plain statement, breaking from the scene the speaker has just set, shows the reader that the speaker has come some distance since the journey she describes. She has certainly completed both a literal emigration and the metaphorical emigration from childhood to adulthood, and she can feel the comparison. Sometimes this "emigration" is a "slow" process, the speaker says—happening in bits and pieces until you find yourself in a totally different world, separated from everyone you know.

By now, the reader can see that this poem is in free verse, not using a regular meter or a rhyme scheme. This lines up pretty well with what's going on thematically here. To this speaker, this process of emigration (literal or metaphorical) is far from a joyful one. Even a childhood in which one isn't literally uprooted is isolating and sad, "leaving you standing, resigned, up an avenue / where no one you know stays." Free verse is a good fit for a poem about feeling displaced and alienated; the speaker's loss of culture and security is mirrored in the looseness of the poem's structure.

LINES 11-14

Others are sudden. ...
... you don't understand.

While some emigrations out of childhood are slow, the speaker says, "Others are sudden." Her own seems to have been of the sudden variety. She drops the reader back into her memories of childhood with an abrupt, disjointed fragment of a sentence: "Your accent wrong."

This might be a good moment to note that this poem is likely autobiographical. We're calling the speaker "she" here because "Originally" closely follows the life story of its author, Carol Ann Duffy. With that in mind, the reader can get some extra perspective on the speaker's accent. Duffy moved from Scotland to England as a small child, and later moments of dialect in the poem suggest that the speaker's "wrong" accent is likely Scottish, setting her apart from the surrounding kids in a very accent-conscious country.

But one doesn't need to be a Scot in England to relate to the feeling of being awkwardly singled out as a child for the way one speaks. "Accent" takes on more symbolic connotations here as well, perhaps relating to the different vocabularies of small children, adolescents, and adults. For the speaker, perhaps talking like a child is also what feels wrong, despite not yet fully understanding the adult world.

As the speaker reaches deeper into her memory, she moves away from the immediacy of her car memories into the day-to-day of her young self's disorienting new life. Here, she's also putting the reader into her shoes with her use of the second person ("Your" and "you"). While her memories are highly specific, they're also a *kind* of thing that happens to everyone. As she said earlier, "All childhood is an emigration."

But the specificity is important here too. Those "pebble-dashed estates" the speaker mentions evoke a specifically English kind of suburban dreariness. And the "big boys / eating worms and shouting words you don't understand" present both the threat of Englishness and the threat of getting older. Notice how the "worms" and the "words" are connected by both alliteration and assonance? Perhaps, to the speaker, there is something a little wormy, a little gross and alien, about the way these boys talk, too—the grown up vocabulary, slang, or curse words they use. Being big and being English both seem like pretty unappetizing prospects.

LINES 15-16

My parents' anxiety ...
... , I said.

Neither the speaker nor her family is resigned to the new life they find themselves in. In these last lines of the second stanza, the speaker's style suggests the way that she absorbed her parents' discomfort with their new home:

> My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth
> in my head. *I want our own country*, I said.

Here, enjambment plays a meaningful trick. The line "My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth" could easily stand on its own, a vivid simile. But the enjambment means that the idea isn't through yet: the loose tooth of anxiety is in the speaker's own head.

This image not only gives the reader the sense that the speaker is taking her parents' worries into her own body—as children often do—but reminds the reader of how young the speaker is, and how quickly she's having to grow up. A loose tooth means that an adult tooth is about to come in. This is a picture of the speaker's predicament: she's lost her childhood home, and with it her childhood. No new sense of self has yet arrived to fill the hole that's left behind.

Here, again, the speaker looks back. Her words—"*I want our own country*, I said"—echo the "our own country" of the very first line, the poem's origin point. And the internal rhyme between "head" and "said" in line 16 suggests that she's still reaching out for a sense of matching and rightness that England just can't give her.

LINES 17-19

But then you ...
... skelf of shame.

The speaker has lost her home, and her childhood with it. But these things don't seem to be gone *entirely*—and the poem implies that their ghostly presence is all a part of the pain of emigration and growing up.

The third stanza begins with a world-weary list, whose polysyndeton suggests a pile-up of days: "But then you forget, or don't recall, or change." The difference between "forget" and "don't recall" might seem negligible at first, but there's a meaningful distinction there. "Forgetting" just happens; anyone who's ever been told to "try to forget" something knows it doesn't work that way. But if one "[doesn't] recall," one might be a little more to blame for one's loss. To recall can be a conscious action. That the speaker caps her list with "or change" suggests that she might feel a little guilty about what she's lost.

She certainly feels "shame" over her brother's assimilation as he joins the "big boys" in their bug-swallowing. The hissing sibilance here ("seeing," swallow," "slug," "skelf," "shame") suggests that guilt; it quiets the line and evokes the scornful hiss of disapproval.

More specifically, the speaker feels "a skelf of shame." The non-Scottish reader will likely need a dictionary to figure that a "skelf" is a colloquial Scottish word for "splinter"—and that's the whole point. A "skelf" is all that's left of the speaker's Scottishness, and like a splinter, the word is lodged in her, a little painfully.

LINES 19-21

I remember my ...
... like the rest.

That "skelf of shame" seems to carry over into this next passage, in which the speaker remembers losing her accent. So does the sibilance of "skelf of shame": lines 19-20 are riddled with hissing /s/ and hushed /sh/ sounds.

That makes a lot of sense when one considers the central simile in these lines. The speaker describes her "tongue / shedding its skin like a snake." This is a particularly loaded image. Because of their skin-shedding and their venom both, snakes are ancient symbols of treachery and deceitfulness (think "snake in the grass"). In losing her accent, the speaker seems to feel that she's betrayed not just her homeland, but her own identity. She now sounds "just like the rest" of the kids in her classroom.

The combination of the snake image with this sense of loss suggests that the poem is alluding to a *particular* snake: the serpent of the Garden of Eden. That serpent is the notorious tempter who, in the Bible, persuaded Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This fruit makes them self-conscious; they rush to cover their nakedness, and then get thrown out of Eden for their transgression. This ancient story is another tale both of emigration and of growing up. It's easy to see a parallel with childhood in the Eden story: just think of how not self-conscious little kids are, as compared to utterly self-conscious teenagers.

More enjambment underlines the importance of voice in this passage. The speaker breaks her lines after the words "tongue" and "voice," leaving them hanging; the line "I remember my tongue" could stand meaningfully on its own. While the speaker seems to be describing her memory of *losing* her accent, the way the lines are shaped make it sound like she's also remembering her accent as it was.

LINES 21-24

Do I only ...
... And I hesitate.

The poem closes on unanswerable questions, and on echoes as the speaker reflects on her losses—both from Scotland and from childhood. The asyndeton in the speakers list here (" a river, culture, speech, sense of first space") sounds a lot like the asyndeton of the first stanza's nostalgia, with its litany of "the city, / the street, the house, the vacant rooms."

But here, the items in the list are bigger and more abstract than a city, a street, a house, or a room. In asking herself if she "only think[s]" she lost "a river, culture, speech," the speaker gestures at a feeling that she's lost something even bigger than these. She hints at the nature of that loss in another moment of internal rhyme. The "sense of first space / and the right place" both suggests and describes a feeling of pleasant matching, being at home in the world.

Of course, being at home in the world can work two ways. There's the external feeling that one lives in the right place—but also an internal feeling that one carries one's home within oneself. That feeling, this poem suggests, is one that we all lose somewhere on the way to growing up, and perhaps don't easily regain. The speaker's loss of Scottish identity is also a fall from the security of childhood—into the compromise, conformity, and alienation of adulthood.

The poem then ends with the speaker feeling unmoored—without a clear sense of home, or of self, into which she can cast an anchor for her identity. Thus, when people ask her where she's from ""[O]riginally," she isn't entirely sure how to respond. She "hesitate[s]" because the answer is complex and elusive; her origins can no longer be distilled into a simple statement such as "I'm from Scotland" or "I'm from England." The poem implies that this complexity extends beyond nationality to encompass adult identity itself, the "origins" of which are similarly confusing and complicated.

SYMBOLS

SNAKES

When the speaker imagines her "tongue / shedding its skin like a snake" as she gets used to life in her new country, she touches on a very classic bit of symbolism. The snake, with its venomous bite and its changeable skin, has long served as a symbol of treachery and deception. This tradition might be most familiar from the story of the Garden of Eden, in which the deceptive snake causes Adam and Eve's downfall.

In the biblical story, the serpent persuades Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which causes them, for the first time, to feel shame—to know they're naked. This story is, among other things, the story of the loss of childhood innocence that comes with adult self-awareness. (Just think about how happy kids are running around naked when they're little!)

In connecting her changing accent to snakes, the speaker evokes a story that is itself symbolically connected to the pains of growing up. Losing the "sense of first space / and the right place," in this poem as in Eden, is a matter of adopting the tricky, shape-shifting qualities of a snake.

Here, the speaker's snaky tongue thus speaks to her feeling that she has both lost something and betrayed something. As she mimics the kids around her and loses her Scottish accent, she does a quiet injury to her inner self. Through this image, she relates herself both to the fallen Eve and the traitorous snake.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-21:** "I remember my tongue / shedding its skin like a snake, my voice / in the classroom sounding just like the rest."

RIVERS

The river of the poem's final stanza can be taken as symbolic of the spirit of the place the speaker left behind in childhood—and also as the life she left behind. Rivers often serve as symbols for the souls of cities; think of the importance of the Thames to London, or the Tiber to Rome. But they also represent the onward rush of life and the movement of time. In losing a river, the speaker is not just losing a connection to her home city, but to the whole course of the life she would have had if her family had stayed in Scotland.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-23:** "Do I only think / I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space / and the right place?"

THE BLIND TOY

As the speaker's family drives away from Scotland in the poem's first stanza, the speaker turns to her stuffed animal for comfort, "holding its paw." But it has become "a blind toy," a sightless object that can't offer any real comfort. This toy is a poignant symbol of lost childhood innocence.

Readers themselves may remember a moment from childhood when a beloved toy turned from a friend to a mere object—a painful but inevitable loss. This transition mirrors the movement of the speaker's own life: from Scottishness to Englishness, and from childhood innocence to uncomfortable adult self-awareness. The toy's now-lifeless eyes represent how suddenly the speaker's life changes, and how impossible it is for her to return to the "first space / and the right place" of her early years.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "I stared / at the eyes of a blind toy, holding its paw."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "Originally" fits in with the poem's interest in feeling at home—or feeling homesick.

The poem's alliteration is strongest in the first stanza, which is told from a child's-eye perspective. Take a look at all the matching initial sounds in the poem's first two lines:

> We came from our own country in a red room
> which fell through the fields [...]

These pairs of /c/, /r/, and /f/ sounds make the poem's first lines feel almost like a nursery rhyme. Simple, matching sounds suggest the speaker's poignant youth. Perhaps there's also something a little sad in all those matched sounds as well: the speaker is about to move into a part of her life when she won't feel matched with anything around her.

The poem's alliteration drops off sharply after the first stanza (though there's plenty of sibilance—see the separate Poetic Devices entry for more on that). But it comes back again briefly when the speaker remembers "big boys / eating worms and shouting words you don't understand." Here, the blunt /b/ sounds of "big boys" makes those boys seem a little menacing, and the /w/ connection between the "words" they shout and the "worms" they eat suggest that there's something gross and wriggly about their speech to the speaker's Scottish ear.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “came,” “country,” “red room”
- **Line 2:** “fell,” “fields”
- **Line 3:** “father’s,” “to,” “turn”
- **Line 4:** “brothers,” “bawling”
- **Line 5:** “city”
- **Line 6:** “street”
- **Line 9:** “Some,” “slow”
- **Line 13:** “big,” “boys”
- **Line 14:** “worms,” “words”
- **Line 18:** “seeing,” “swallow,” “slug”
- **Line 19:** “skelf”
- **Line 20:** “skin,” “snake”
- **Line 22:** “speech,” “sense”

ASSONANCE

The assonance in "Originally" tends to be delicate and subtle, weaving sounds together across lines. Assonance turns up a lot in poetry simply because it sounds good, and it certainly plays that role here, contributing to the poem's more nostalgic side. But from time to time, a prominent moment of assonance draws attention to a more painful sense of loss.

One especially poignant moment of assonance comes in lines 7-8:

> [...] I stared
> at the **e**y**e**s of a bl**i**nd toy, holding its paw.

As the speaker clutches her stuffed animal, she finds that its "**e**y**e**s" have gone "bl**i**nd"—a vivid image of the loss of the childhood comforts of imagination. When even your stuffed animal has gone blind on you, you're in for some serious trouble. The strong /i/ assonance highlights the toy's shocking lifelessness.

Assonance also shocks in lines 13-14, where "big boys / [eat] w**o**rms and [shout] w**o**rds you don't understand." The matching sounds here (and the alliteration on /w/ sounds) suggest an uneasy connection between the worms that go into the boys' mouths and the words that come out of them. Both, to the speaker's childhood eyes, feel pretty gross and frightening.

The assonant "l**oo**se t**oo**th" of parental anxiety in line 15 also draws attention to itself, and again reminds readers of the pitifully young speaker's suffering.

The last stanza features quite a bit of assonance that suggests the speaker adjusting to her new country. The short, quick /eh/ sounds of "th**e**n you forg**e**t" add a sense of resignation to the speaker's experience, as do the short /uh/ sounds of "br**o**ther" and "sl**u**g." The sounds here again become a bit song-like, the echoes and internal rhymes suggesting a sense of inevitability, of this being a well-worn tune.

Long /ay/ sounds also weave throughout the entire final stanza and draw attention to thematically important words: "change," "shame," "snake," "space," "place," "strangers," and "hesitate." Assonance thus subtly connects the speaker's experience of "change" to her feelings of confusion and isolation.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “fields”
- **Line 3:** “wheels”
- **Line 8:** “eyes,” “blind”
- **Line 11:** “no,” “know,” “Others,” “sudden”
- **Line 14:** “worms,” “words”
- **Line 15:** “loose,” “tooth”
- **Line 16:** “head,” “said”
- **Line 17:** “then,” “forget,” “change”
- **Line 18:** “brother,” “slug”
- **Line 19:** “shame”
- **Line 20:** “its,” “skin,” “snake”
- **Line 22:** “space”
- **Line 23:** “place”
- **Line 24:** “strangers,” “hesitate”

ASYNDETON

There's a lot of asyndeton in "Originally," and its onward pull suggests the speaker's feeling of helplessness in the face of her lost childhood and lost identity. That effect shows up right from the start: the asyndeton of the first stanza suggests the unstoppable speed of the family car as it rushes away from "the city, / the street, the house, the vacant rooms / where we didn't live any more."

Notice how these lines move. The lack of conjunctions means that the passage speeds right along, so each of the items on this list feels like a landmark whipping past on the road. And the backwards, zooming-in motion of the lines as they move from "the city" to "the vacant rooms" mirrors the speaker's image of the miles "rushing back" as if the road itself is homesick. The speaker's nostalgia for the place she felt at home shows up in the very shape of these lines—but the speed of the asyndeton makes it clear that time keeps on moving forward no matter how much one longs to go back.

Later, asyndeton also helps to create the feeling of habitual, alienating experiences. The asyndeton in the second and third stanzas describe repeated events—like running into the menacing "big boys"—and the sad, slow erosion of the speaker's native Scottish accent. The final passage of asyndeton hearkens back to the first stanza: in leaving "the city, / the street, the house, the vacant rooms," the speaker has also "lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space / and the right place," and the parallel shapes of those lines show the connection between the different kinds of thing the speaker has lost.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "which fell through the fields, our mother singing"
- **Lines 5-7:** "the city, / the street, the house, the vacant rooms / where we didn't live any more."
- **Lines 13-14:** "leading to unimagined pebble-dashed estates, big boys / eating worms"
- **Lines 20-21:** "shedding its skin like a snake, my voice / in the classroom"
- **Lines 21-23:** "Do I only think / I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space / and the right place? "

COLLOQUIALISM

"Originally" uses one particularly important colloquialism: the word "skelf." Readers who aren't from Scotland or the north of England will probably have to look this word up, and that's exactly the point. This is a word that gives clear evidence of where the speaker is from—and thus a sense both of what she's lost and what she's kept from her childhood.

"Skelf" is a Scottish dialect word for "splinter," and it's also significant that *this* is the particular dialect word the speaker chooses to use. Here, she feels a "skelf of shame" as she sees her brother behaving like the rowdy English "big boys" and eating bugs for a dare. She could as easily have said "a stab of shame" or "a wash of shame"—but she chooses, instead, to use a word that means "a little fragment of wood that lodges in your skin." Her Scottishness, which rises up in disgust at her brother's new English habits, is something that's stuck in her just like that splinter. And perhaps it's as troublesome as a splinter, too. Her use of this single dialect word suggests how little of her original voice remains to her—and how painful it is to only have that tiny fragment of her old identity left.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-19:** "But then you forget, or don't recall, or change, / and, seeing your brother swallow a slug, feel only / a skelf of shame."

ENJAMBMENT

The frequent enjambments in "Originally" help to create the feeling that time and identity are slipping through the speaker's hands. Like the car that "[falls] through the fields" as the speaker's family drives away from Scotland, the enjambments help the poem's lines to fall quickly away, rushing onward and carrying the speaker further away from her past.

But enjambment also helps to create moments of surprising, complicated meaning. For instance, take a look at the enjambment of lines 15-16. Here, the line "My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth" could easily stand on its own. But then the enjambment comes, and the speaker finishes the thought on the next line: "in my head." This surprise makes the speaker's feelings poignantly clear. As a small child, she's picking up on her parents' worries, invaded by their stress and able to deal with it only by wishing for what she can't have: "*I want our own country*, I said."

Something similar happens in lines 19-20, where the speaker remembers losing her accent. Here, the lines break so that the idea "I remember my tongue" hangs on its own for a moment before the speaker finishes the thought with the words "shedding its skin like a snake." The same effect comes again a moment later when she leaves "my voice" hanging alone before concluding "in the classroom sounding just like the rest." In both of these spots, there's an added layer of meaning. On the surface, the speaker is describing memories of things her tongue and her voice *did*. But the enjambments mean that, for a moment, she might also be remembering her tongue and her voice in themselves, as they used to be.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "room / which"
- **Lines 2-3:** "singing / our"
- **Lines 6-7:** "rooms / where"
- **Lines 7-8:** "stared / at"
- **Lines 10-11:** "avenue / where"
- **Lines 13-14:** "boys / eating"
- **Lines 15-16:** "tooth / in"
- **Lines 18-19:** "only / a"
- **Lines 19-20:** "tongue / shedding"
- **Lines 20-21:** "voice / in"
- **Lines 21-22:** "think / I"
- **Lines 22-23:** "space / and"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is an important part of "Originally," especially in the poem's final stanza. Lines 18-22, for example, features a barrage of /s/ and /sh/ sounds:

> and, seeing your brother swallow a slug, feel only
> a skelf of shame. [...]
> shedding its skin like a snake, my voice
> in the classroom sounding just like the rest. [...]
> I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space

This is a passage that is itself all about sound. The speaker is remembering how she and her brother slowly adjusted to life in England—and a big part of that had to do with how they spoke. As she describes losing her Scottish accent, her "tongue / shedding its skin like a snake," her words themselves hiss just like that snake. The sibilance here becomes ominous, as if she's whispering a terrible secret. Perhaps the "skelf of shame" she feels as she watches her brother "swallow a slug" has something to do with the sibilant secrecy here, too. As she loses her feeling of being at home (in the world and in herself) and moves into the uncomfortable self-consciousness of adulthood,

the speaker's language takes on the sounds of secrecy and concealment.

There's a touch of that whisper in the second stanza, too:

> All childhood is an emigration. Some are slow,
> leaving you standing, resigned, up an avenue
> where no one you know stays. [...]

Here, the subtler sibilance fits in with the quiet emptiness of adult resignation. It evokes the loneliness and isolation the speaker feels.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Some," "slow"
- **Line 10:** "standing"
- **Line 11:** "stays"
- **Line 18:** "seeing," "swallow," "slug"
- **Line 19:** "skelf," "shame"
- **Line 20:** "shedding its skin," "snake," "voice"
- **Line 21:** "classroom sounding just," "rest"
- **Line 22:** "lost," "speech," "sense," "first space"
- **Line 23:** "place"
- **Line 24:** "strangers ask"

METAPHOR

This poem states its big overarching metaphor outright: "All childhood is an emigration." "Originally" explicitly connects the speaker's feelings of loss, shame, and self-consciousness surrounding her emigration from Scotland to the feelings of growing up. Everyone, the poem suggests, is an emigrant from the happy home country of childhood, where one is simply oneself.

There are smaller metaphors within the poem as well. For example, when the speaker first leaves Scotland, she calls her family's a "red room." This is an evocative metaphor, reminding the reader of the speaker's smallness: the car feels like a whole room to her. This image also might allude to the womb, the "red room" that everyone travels in at first, and which everyone has to leave. As noted elsewhere in this guide, the "red room" may also be a subtle allusion to the ominous "red-room" in *Jane Eyre*, where Jane is sent as punishment and which evokes the speaker's sense of isolation and anxiety.

The image of the car falling through the fields is another metaphor that reflects the speed at which the speaker's family leaves Scotland behind. The word "fell" suggests that this motion is unstoppable, that there's no turning back. The speaker's mother also probably isn't *literally* "singing [her] father's name to the tune of the wheels." This metaphor suggests the sing-song way the speaker's mother addresses the speaker's father while driving, or perhaps simply alludes to the fact that the family is moving to be with the speaker's father (Duffy's own family left Scotland after her father got a job in England).

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "a red room / which fell through the fields, our mother singing / our father's name to the turn of the wheels."
- **Line 9:** "All childhood is an emigration."

REPETITION

The repetitions in "Originally" help to create one of the poem's strongest moods: nostalgia. In the first stanza, the speaker's brother cries, "*Home*, *Home*," and that poignant moment of epizeuxis is central to the poem's emotions. It matters that the brother cries the word twice. The pain of emigration, the speaker insists, isn't just that you lose your home country, but that you can't stop looking back for what you lost. Here, the brother doesn't even need to say "I want to go home." The word "*Home*" itself becomes a lament.

There's a similar effect in the speaker's repetition of the words "our own country." Separated from that country in the first line of the poem, she hasn't stopped looking back for it by the last line of the second stanza. This insistent repetition sets the poem up for its sad turn in the third stanza, when the speaker loses her accent and starts to forget her home. The childish insistence of the longing for "Home" and for "our own country" turns into adult resignation and a sense of something missing. The polysyndeton of the line "But then you forget, or don't recall, or change" then suggests that the process of forgetting is itself a repetitive one: a slow accumulation of new experiences that blot out the old.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "our own country"
- **Lines 4-5:** "Home / , / Home / ,"
- **Line 16:** "our own country"
- **Line 17:** "But then you forget, or don't recall, or change,"

SIMILE

The poem's similes often evoke the speaker's intense childhood emotions. For instance, when the speaker's "parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth / in my head," the image suggests not just worry, but a transitional point in childhood: the loss of baby teeth to make way for adult ones, and the hole that's left behind in the meantime. The speaker is at once internalizing her parents' worries and also referencing the unstoppable changes taking place in her own body.

The poem's other simile also touches on a change of mouth. In lines 19-20, the speaker remembers "my tongue / shedding its skin like a snake." In addition to evoking traditional symbolism

of treachery and deceit (see the Symbols section of this guide for more on that), this snake simile hearkens back to the loose-tooth simile in its image of a mouth reconfiguring itself for adulthood—in this instance, changing its accent to conform with the bland English voices around it. The symbolism of the shifty, changeable snake suggests that the speaker feels her changed voice as a betrayal of her roots.

Finally, the speaker says that once her accent changes she starts "sounding just like the rest"—that is, just like the other students in her "classroom." This might be more a general description than a true simile, but the word "like" is interesting; it implies that she isn't truly one of these students, but rather is imitating them.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth / in my head."
- **Lines 19-21:** "I remember my tongue / shedding its skin like a snake, my voice / in the classroom sounding just like the rest."

VOCABULARY

Bawling (Lines 4-5, Line 4) - Shouting through tears.

Vacant (Lines 6-7) - Empty, unoccupied.

Emigration (Lines 9-9, Line 9) - Leaving one's native country to settle in another.

Resigned (Line 10) - Grimly accepting (think "resigned to your fate").

Estates (Lines 12-13) - In British English, "estates" are housing developments, often state-sponsored.

Pebble-dashed (Line 13) - Pebble-dash is a kind of cement with small stones mixed into it, usually used to coat the exterior walls of buildings. It's often seen in English suburbs.

Skelf (Line 19) - A Scottish dialect word meaning "splinter."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Originally" uses free verse, with no consistent meter or rhyme scheme, but it does have a purposeful shape. The poem is broken into three stanzas of eight lines, and each of those stanzas marks a stage in the speaker's journey from her Scottish childhood to her displaced adulthood.

The first stanza is fully immersed in a child's perspective. The speaker imagines her family's car as "a red room" and remembers holding the paw of her stuffed animal. But the second stanza zooms right out, making a broad pronouncement on childhood from an adult perspective. While the first stanza focuses on a specific important incident in the speaker's life, the second presents the speaker's early experiences in England in more general, habitual terms: these are things that happened over and over.

By the third stanza, the speaker has transitioned fully into the "now" of her adulthood, and she presents her memories *as* memories. The shape of the poem reflects its themes, pulling her from the immediacy of childhood into a more general adult sadness.

METER

"Originally" uses free verse, without regular metrical feet or a consistent number of beats per line. The lines flow on here with a natural speaking rhythm, and their matter-of-factness underlines the fact that something like the speaker's experience happens to everyone as they grow up.

But there are still a few moments of metrical emphasis here. For example, take a look at how the stressed syllables fall at the beginning of the third stanza:

> But then | you forget, | or don't | recall, | or change,
> and, see- | ing your bro- | ther swal- | low a slug, | feel only
> a skelf | of shame. [...]

Here, the beats are almost all iambs (da-DUM) or anapests (da-da-DUM), both rising meters (meaning they move from unstressed to stressed beats). While this isn't part of a consistent meter throughout the poem, the stresses hit pretty regularly and insistently, evoking the way that the daily grind of the speaker's new life erodes her sense of identity.

RHYME SCHEME

"Originally" doesn't use rhyme—a choice that fits right in with the poem's mood and themes. This is a poem that's all about feeling lost and displaced, and the lack of rhyme scheme reflects that. There's no easy harmony or comforting pattern here.

However, there are a few little specks of meaningful internal rhyme here. Take a look at lines 15-16:

> My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth
> in my head. *I want our own country*, I said.

Here, the speaker, feeling her parents' nervousness as her own, also matches what's in her "head" with what she "said." The rhyme adds urgency to her childish insistence. Another moment of internal rhyme, between "first space / and the right place" in lines 22-23, harmonizes with the feeling of rightness that the line describes.

But something subtler and sadder happens with internal rhyme

in lines 6-8:

> [...] the vacant rooms
> where we didn't live any more. I stared
> at the eyes of a blind toy, holding its paw.

The words "more" and "paw" can work as an internal rhyme—but only if they're read in an English accent. The speaker's cultural loss is baked right into the sounds of her changed speech.

SPEAKER

Like this poem's speaker, Carol Ann Duffy moved from Scotland to England as a small child. Both the poem's narrative and its details—the use of the Scottish dialect word "skelf," the "pebble-dashed estates" of the speaker's new home—suggest that "Originally" is autobiographical. We're calling the speaker "her" throughout this guide for that reason, though the speaker's gender is never explicitly stated in the poem itself and thus doesn't have to be interpreted this way.

Even as an adult, this speaker feels like an exile from a half-forgotten home. But her vivid memory of the sensations and emotions of childhood means that the first part of her life isn't all that far away. Her experience of displacement and nostalgia is colored by her oddly strong grip on all that she's lost.

SETTING

There are two settings here: the family car in which the speaker leaves Scotland, and a gray, run-down, slimy-bug-ridden England. In describing her sense of loss and displacement, the speaker makes Scotland more a blank than a place; she knows it's the home she longs for, but its details have gone missing.

What's left of Scotland is presented in broad strokes that often touch on the natural world, not just the speaker's town: the fields and the river stand alongside—and stand for—a whole culture. England, on the other hand, is evoked concretely through faceless architecture; those "pebble-dashed estates" suggest a very English kind of suburban dreariness.

The poem's Scottish setting therefore becomes almost mythical, while the English setting feels oppressively solid, featureless, and limiting.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Originally" was first published in 1990 as part of Carol Ann Duffy's third poetry collection, *The Other Country*. The collection broadly focuses on journeys (literal and otherwise), emigration, language, and growing up (for another poem from this collection that touches on adolescent angst, check out "In Mrs Tilscher's Class").

Like the speaker of "Originally," Duffy (born in 1955) is a Scottish-born poet who emigrated to England as a small child. She became the first (and so far, the only) female Poet Laureate of the UK. A lesbian and a child of working-class Glaswegian immigrants, Duffy was seen as a potentially controversial choice—but regardless of politicians' squeamishness, she has become one of the best-known and best-beloved of contemporary poets.

Duffy grew up in the thick of the women's movement, and her feminism often appears in her poetry. One of her most famous collections, *The World's Wife*, draws on everything from Aesop's fables to Greek mythology to *King Kong* to tell the unheard stories of female characters in history and literature. She's deeply interested in folklore and fairy tales, but also in day-to-day life, and her poems speak through the voices of a wide cast of characters.

While her poetry is sometimes critical of institutions, Duffy considers herself part of an old literary tradition, and lists both Keats and Plath among her influences. She has in turn supported the poetic careers of writers like Alice Oswald and Kate Clanchy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy's poetic career took off during the age of Margaret Thatcher, whose long tenure as Prime Minister of the UK was marked by class struggle, poverty, and the dismantling of post-war welfare institutions. Thatcher rose to power in the aftermath of the turbulent 1970s, and her libertarian economics and conservative social policies (as well as her prominent role as the first woman Prime Minister of the UK) made her a divisive and much-reviled figure. Many working-class people took a particular dislike to Thatcher for her union-busting and her failure to support impoverished families in industrial fields like coal-mining.

Perhaps in response to a growing social conservatism, the '70s and '80s in England were also marked by a rise in feminist consciousness. Books like Susan Faludi's *Backlash* examined the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which society was reacting against the women's movement, and third-wave feminism, focused on identity and political power, began to emerge out of the second-wave feminism of the '60s. Duffy's work, with its interest in women's inner lives and in corners of working-class life often neglected by the literary world, reflects the tumultuous political world in which she came of age.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short Biography — Read about Carol Ann Duffy's life and work, and find links to more of her poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- Duffy's Coronavirus Poetry Project — Learn about Duffy's initiative to collect poetry about the pandemic. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/20/carol-ann-duffy-leads-british-poets-coronavirus-imtiaz-dharker-jackie-kay)
- A Reading of Another of Duffy's Poems — Read an analysis of another of Duffy's poems, "Vocation," which asks questions about autobiographical poetry—some of which might be relevant to "Originally," too! (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2019/jun/03/poem-of-the-week-vocation-by-carol-ann-duffy)
- An Interview with Duffy — Listen to Duffy give an interview about her position as British Poet Laureate. She was the first (and so far, the only) woman elected to the role. (https://youtu.be/wnt5p1DGD9U)
- In the Poet's Voice — Watch Duffy perform her own poetry. (https://youtu.be/s1kdQ_udxFg)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Mrs Midas
- Prayer
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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