



WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

By Carol Ann Duffy

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FULL POEM

In his dark room he is finally alone
with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.
The only light is red and softly glows,
as though this were a church and he
a priest preparing to intone a Mass.
Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.

He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays
beneath his hands, which did not tremble then
though seem to now. Rural England. Home again
to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel,
to fields which don't explode beneath the feet
of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening. A stranger's features
faintly start to twist before his eyes,
a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries
of this man's wife, how he sought approval
without words to do what someone must
and how the blood stained into foreign dust.

A hundred agonies in black and white
from which his editor will pick out five or six
for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick
with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.
From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where
he earns his living and they do not care.





HOW TO FIGURE OUT A POEM

If you want to figure out a poem you have to figure out how the speaker is seeing the world

- If you want to figure out how the speaker is seeing the world you have to look at the symbolic language the speaker is using
 - There are many kinds of symbolic languages but one of the most important is metaphor
 - Metaphor is a counter-logical use of language but makes all the sense in the world on a higher level
 - This is how you know you are dealing with a metaphor
 - It makes no sense on the literal level
 - But it makes sense on a 'higher' level
 - We use metaphorical language everyday
 - 'the Whitehouse announced today that...'
 - 'she is a flower, the glory of the day'
 - the beauty, fragility, freshness, fragrance etc are all appropriate to the description of the woman
 - when the features of the thing which the speaker is comparing the subject to become so overwhelming that they have stopped seeing the differences, then we can see how the speaker sees the world

CONTEXT

Published 1985

- One of her older poems which explains the photographers method of using a dark room to develop the pictures

CAROL ANN DUFFY - BACKGROUND

Carol Ann Duffy was born in Glasgow on 23 December 1955 to a Scottish father and Irish mother.

- Current poet laureate
 - A position appointed by the Queen to be the nation's poet
- Raised Catholic, she spent her childhood in Staffordshire with her sister and four brothers.
- Friends with Don McCullin and Phillip Jones Griffiths
 - Both well-respected war photographers





- Her mother would often invent fairytales for her, a common theme in Duffy's writing (which often explores and manipulates feminine archetypes).
- Always an avid reader, Duffy recalls reading *Alice in Wonderland* aged seven and writing a poem to continue the story as she was sad that it had ended. From an early age she knew she wanted to be a writer and found encouragement from an inspirational teacher at her convent school.
- She established her name with the collection *Standing Female Nude* in 1985 and since then has become one of the nation's best-known poets.
- Her poems have a wide appeal and frequently appear in 'The Nation's Favourite...' collections as well as on the National Curriculum. Duffy is the author of many books for adults and children and is also an acclaimed playwright and editor. She was awarded an OBE in 1995, a CBE in 2001 and became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1999.
- After being considered and passed over for the role under Tony Blair's government, Duffy succeeded Andrew Motion as the UK's twentieth Poet Laureate on 1 May 2009, and is the first woman to hold the post.
- She was in a programme on Channel 4 in 1998 and said that what interested her in writing the poem were the difficult decisions the photographer might have to make while taking pictures in a war zone
 - o 'those photographs are in the background but I'm more interested in the photographer... in the dilemma of someone who has that as a job... to go to these places and come back with the images'
 - The focus is not on the photographs and analysing those, but it is about the person taking the photographs and the dilemmas they face

CAROL ANN DUFFY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH CONTROVERSY

Anvil Poetry Press became her publisher with *Standing Female Nude* in 1985; *Selling Manhattan* (1987) brought her the Somerset Maugham Award, and *The Other Country* (1990) gained a Scottish Arts Council Book Award.

- These volumes contain some of her best-known poems: 'Education for Leisure' (SFN), which was to become notorious in 2008 when it was removed from a GCSE poetry anthology after complaints that it endorsed a culture of violence
- Her first laureate poem was a sonnet on the British MPs expenses scandal

CAROL ANN DUFFY'S LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Duffy writes in everyday language

- it gives her poems an outward accessibility that hides the intricate technicalities and manipulation of language.





- Traditional poetic forms, such as the dramatic monologue and sonnet form, are often transformed into modern, contemporary poems.
- She is known for playing with words to explore the ways in which meaning and reality are constructed through language.
- She writes of life and is not afraid to tackle the sadness or suffering that accompanies it, exploring themes such as gender, contemporary culture, alienation and social inequality.
- Carol Ann Duffy's combination of tenderness and toughness, humour and lyricism, unconventional attitudes and conventional forms, has won her a very wide audience of readers and listeners.
- Duffy has been quoted as saying that she is 'not interested, as a poet, in words like "plash" – Seamus Heaney words, interesting words. I like to use simple words, but in a complicated way';
 - and in the same Guardian profile, 'Childhood is like a long greenhouse where everything is growing, it's lush and steamy. It's where poems come from' (31 August 2002).

POWER AND CONFLICT IN THIS POEM

Power

- The powerlessness created by the impossibility of presenting the true horrors of war or conflict
 - This is similar to *Bayonet Charge* which is about expressing the inexpressible and so Hughes uses extreme metaphors and similes to try and give the reader a way to relate to soldier in the poem
 - *Poppies* is also similar in the way that the speaker is unable to express her grief adequately enough the author uses imagery and symbolism to try and help the reader relate

conflict

- The inexpressible horrors of conflict
- The conflict between trying to express the true horrors of war and the refusal of people to accept
 - The poem carries criticism of western attitudes to foreign conflict and the media's presentation of them. The photographs are not in the main newspaper, but in the 'supplement' that goes with the main newspaper. It can also mean something added or extra. There is an implicit lack of feeling in the way the editor discards a hundred images of death, choosing to publish only five or six.
- the reality of war beyond a very superficial level
- Apathy caused by being comfortable
- Moral conflict
 - The poem explores the difficulties faced by someone who does a job that records human suffering. The war photographer makes a living out of the horrors he captures on film. It is a dangerous and emotionally draining job. He shuttles between war-torn areas and his home, which is peaceful and removed from that other world, and is struck by the indifference of former to the latter. He also takes time to adjust to being home; it makes him 'tremble'. He knows his job is necessary because people should care about the brutalities of conflict but at the same time he is aware that his job can be seen as insensitive. He has to intrude on private grief and there is a suggestion that he despises the way he makes money out of suffering. He also dislikes the fact that his photographs are published, not in the main pages, but in the magazine supplement (they are marginalised). In the penultimate lines he





stares 'impassively' out of the plane, indicating that he has become emotionally numb. We are left to decide whether the indifference of his English readership is more to blame for his lack of feeling, than the horrors he has seen of war.

FORM

- It is free verse
 - It does not follow any particular rhythm such as iambic pentameter
 - However, there is a loose sense of rhythm created by the use of assonance and alliteration:
 - Alliteration
 - Spools of suffering
 - Belfast, Beirut, Phnom Penh
 - Assonance
 - The only light is red and softly glows
 - He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays
 - There is also a slightly irregular rhyme scheme
 - Stanza 1
 - A
 - B
 - B
 - C
 - D
 - D
 - Stanza 2
 - E
 - F
 - F
 - G
 - H
 - H
 - Stanza 3
 - I
 - J
 - J
 - L
 - M
 - M
 - Stanza 4
 - N
 - O
 - O
 - P





Q
Q

- The juddering rhyme scheme may reflect the fragility of the moral dilemma he finds himself in
 - o He makes money out of the horrors he captures on film but he knows his job is necessary because people should know about the brutalities of conflict
 - o He wants to have control over his emotions and morals but the trembling reflects moment of weakness and uncertainty about his 'job'
- It does not follow any particular form
 - o But it is told from the perspective of a fictional persona like a dramatic monologue
 - Duffy was known to change traditional forms like dramatic monologues and sonnets into more modern equivalents
 - Although *War Photographer* is not a dramatic monologue, the fictional persona was a feature of dramatic monologues that allowed female poets, particularly in the 1970s and 80s to explore the worlds of others and to challenge gender, racial, social and religious issues.
 - o Duffy uses it here to challenge society's sanitisation of violence with its 'ordered rows' and first world comforts such as 'Sunday supplements' and 'baths'
- The regular form of this poem in some ways mirrors the sense of the photographer's attempt to order his strong emotions.
 - o But this is contrasted by the juddering rhyme scheme which appears to reflect the second line in the second stanza that his 'hand did not seem to tremble then / though seemed to now'
 - The judder perhaps reflects his trembling hands which is caused by him reliving the horrific memories of the experiences he had in those particular war zones
- The form is a way of containing, controlling and dealing with the anger and pain the speaker feels.
 - o From another perspective it makes the speech seem natural and therefore creates the idea that this is a real person
 - Although we know the persona is not one particular real person, it is meant to speak on behalf of all war photographers who must make difficult choices when doing their work
 - Duffy wants to remind us that there are real people doing this kind of work and living through these difficult experiences and reliving these memories over and over again.
- The fact that the form is unchanging, that the stanzas are all of the same length and the rhyme scheme is constant suggests that despite the photographer's efforts nothing will change.
- This idea is re-enforced by the fact that the poem starts with the photographer home from an assignment and ends with him off on one again.
 - o The poem is circular, a closed loop where nothing can change.

SUBJECT

Duffy's poem is about how we deal with the suffering of others, who might be faraway





- It takes the character of a war photographer to represent someone more involved and committed than we are.

ATTITUDE

Duffy appears to admire the photographer, and be critical of the rest of us.

- The poem is powerfully anti-war. However, elsewhere Duffy does not spell out her feelings, she allows readers to make their own judgements.
- The form however suggests she is pessimistic about things changing for the better.

STYLE

Duffy uses the symbolic association of ordinary language.

- So that a simple word like 'dust' can carry lots of possible meaning.
- She also includes some powerful imagery to shock us out of our complacency.
- The use of a repetitive form suitably supports the ideas in the poem.
- When, on the aeroplane, the photographer is staring 'impassively' at 'where he earns his living' and says 'they do not care', who is the 'they' and what don't they care about?

STRUCTURE

Cyclical structure

- Begins with the photographer coming back from war zone and ends with him going back out to a war zone
 - This reflects the repetitive nature of his job and almost makes it seem pointless when he considers that it does not change the general apathy of the public

Juxtaposition

- The horrific realities of war vs people's apathy towards it
- Suffering vs comfort

Caesura

- Represents the disruption and death caused by conflicts in places like Beirut and Belfast
- It also reflects his need to stop and recollect his feelings when developing the pictures





METAPHOR and SIBILANCE

‘with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows’

- This line uses a combination of sibilance and metaphor
 - The sibilance is designed to make us focus on the metaphor
 - Spools of suffering
 - This suggests that suffering is still going on and that the photographer is having to relive the suffering of others by developing the pictures
 - Ordered rows implies that perhaps that’s how they died
 - As if they were lined up to be killed
 - This also suggests that war is very systematic and the killing is well-planned and thought-out

RELIGIOUS IMAGERY

The only light is red and softly glows,

- Red implies blood-shed and danger
 - Softly glows provides an unexplained antithesis

as though this were a church and he
a priest preparing to intone a Mass

- This is a simile
 - Comparing him to a priest
 - This comparison has an antithetic feel
 - Because his job involves watching people die and a priest works to save people
 - It also makes him appear very methodical and even lacking emotion towards his work
 - As if that is what is required of him to perform his task to an excellent standard
 - Because perhaps having emotional reactions to this work wouldn’t allow him to do it well enough
 - It shows that he feels his job as a war photographer is incredibly important
 - As if he is capturing crucial moments of history

