

11. "War Photographer" by Carol Ann Duffy

POET

Carol Ann Duffy (1955-Present)

Carol Ann Duffy is Britain's Poet Laureate. She is the first woman to be appointed to this position. She was born to a working class Catholic family in Glasgow. Her family moved to Stafford when she was six. She always wanted to be a writer, and she began publishing her poetry when she was only 15. When she was 16, Duffy entered into a relationship with a famous Liverpool poet, Adrian Henri. She went to Liverpool University to be with him, where she studied Philosophy.

She has worked as a poetry critic, and a lecturer in poetry. She has published many collections of poems and won a number of awards. Her work is often distinguished by the way it gives a voice to the voiceless of society.

BACKGROUND

The poem was inspired by a real life friendship with a war photographer; a professional cameraman sent into areas of conflict around the world to capture the news in pictures. In conversation with him, Duffy realised the issues involved in communicating horrible events.

SUMMARY

The poem describes a war photographer who has returned to England. While developing the horrific photographs of war-torn locations around the world, the photographer contemplates the indifference of the people who look at his work in Sunday newspapers.

ANALYSIS

The title tells us immediately that this is about the profession of the man, and not an intimate portrait of someone; the experience of the "War Photographer" is depicted as something universal which we can learn from. The poem is structured around four stanzas of six lines. The final two lines of each stanza are a rhyming couplet. The rigid rhyme and rhythm of the poem might appear surprising when it is concerned with something so emotional, but the point Duffy is making is portrayed effectively by this calm. Duffy is communicating the apathy of the newspaper readers, so to have a structure which does not startle is appropriate.

The first stanza dramatically places the photographer at work. He is "In his darkroom". Interestingly, the poem describes the photographer in a place of safety and familiarity. He is not out in a war zone working. Indeed, the next phrase suggests this calm place of darkness is a sanctuary for him – "he is finally alone". The word "finally" implies that the man has been surrounded by people and noisy situations from which he is grateful to retreat. The next line employs clever sibilance; he has "spools of suffering set out". A spool is a cylinder on which the film of a camera is wound. To develop the film, it has to be removed from the spool and dipped in chemicals. The reels of film are full of "suffering" or pain, but they are "set out in ordered rows". This suggests that the photographer may observe the pain of war, but he is not part of it. He is able ultimately to organise it in a calm and controlled way.

The only light allowed in a darkroom is "red and softly glows". This is a necessity as other types of light deteriorate film, but here Duffy makes the red light symbolic. Red is a colour often associated with danger. It is a warning sign. However, she is showing the reader that all the danger has been transformed into something which "softly glows". It has been made gentle and appealing. The photographer has taken the horror of a real situation and turned it into a picture which can be viewed from a position of safety and comfort. She goes on to introduce a simile, "as though this were a church and he a priest". The darkroom is compared to a Catholic church in this image. In Catholic churches a red light burns continuously to symbolise the presence of the blood of Christ. Thus the photographer is like a priest communicating Christ's suffering to his congregation. This places the photographer in a religious and evangelising role. He is meant to bring the suffering of the world to our attention.

Duffy explains he is about to "intone a Mass". Mass is a religious service which remembers Christ's sacrifice by giving worshippers bread and wine. The bread and wine represent Christ's body and blood which were tortured and killed at the crucifixion. Therefore the photographer developing his pictures is like a priest reminding his congregation of a terrible death which happened to save their souls. The stanza ends with the names of three famous war zones: "Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh." Each city is given a separate sentence to show its importance. Belfast was the site of fierce Irish Republican conflict since 1970. Beirut is a city in Lebanon where a terrible civil war from 1975 to 1990 cost a quarter of a million citizens their lives. Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia which was taken over by the ruthless Khmer Rouge and their leader Pol Pot. Between 1975 and 1979, he orchestrated the systematic killing of two million Cambodians who disagreed with his communist regime. Duffy is employing the allusive nature of these names to make the reader think about the horrors which have occurred in the world and which have been photographed.

The final phrase of the first stanza is a quote from the Bible – "All flesh is grass". This famous phrase comes from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. The metaphor means that human beings are like grass; we are fragile and easily cut down. The expression explains that we will all die. Coming after the names of places where killings have occurred, it serves as a timely reminder that just because we live in the apparent safety of a rich and privileged country, like Great Britain, death and suffering can reach us too.

The second stanza focuses on the importance of the photographer's work – "He has a job to do". His job is both developing the film in the darkroom, and risking his life to take the pictures. Simile is used again in "Solutions slop in trays". These are not only the chemicals used to develop the pictures spilling, but also the idea of solutions or answers to questions which are contained "beneath his hands". The photographer is shaking as he watches the horrible images appear as the film is placed in the chemicals. Duffy notes that he did "not tremble" when he took the pictures, but now that he is safe he is able to take in the horror and allow his emotions out.

The stanza moves on to explaining the photographer's home. He is in "Rural England". Rural means the countryside. The phrase conjures up idyllic images of cottages and fields of corn. This is done to juxtapose the places the photographer has travelled to, which are destroyed by violence. Duffy explains that "Home" is a place of "ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel". She is suggesting that the pain which occurs in England is not

comparable to that experienced in war zones and that a spell of sunshine can “dispel” or get rid of it. She repeats this idea, describing the fields “which don’t explode”, highlighting how safe our world is. Unlike the field where “running children” are killed in “a nightmare heat”. This seems to be another historical allusion. One of the most famous war photographs was taken by Nick Ut during the Vietnam War in 1972. The iconic photograph depicts a group of children running and crying on a path through a field after they have been burnt in a napalm attack. Duffy is reminding the reader of the difference between the lives of children in war zones and those lucky enough to live in rural England.

The third stanza describes the image of the photograph becoming visible in the chemical tray – “Something is happening”. She then describes the picture. There is a stranger’s face, “a half-formed ghost”. The metaphor of the stranger being like a ghost, suggests that they may now be dead and that the picture has captured them and kept them present after death. The photographer “remembers the cries of this man’s wife”. The photograph seems to be of a man who is dying; his wife is weeping while he suffers. The photographer remembers how he “sought approval without words to do what someone must”. Here the photographer is communicating with the dying man through looks because he cannot speak his language. He wants “approval”. This means permission to photograph the man’s dying moments. The photographer justifies this invasion of the man’s and his family’s privacy because “someone must”. In other words, it is important that these events are recorded for the world to see in order to stop the suffering. The photographer is reminded of “how the blood stained into foreign dust”. This is a description of the stranger bleeding into the earth. The fact it leaves a stain suggests that his death will have a lasting meaning because the photographer can show the world what happened in his picture.

However, this justification seems misplaced as the final stanza explains that people are not paying attention to his pictures. The photographs depict “A hundred agonies in black and white”. Therefore the photographer takes many images of the pain of others, but his “editor will pick out five or six”. Thus many of these powerful photographs will be discarded and unused. Only a few will be chosen to appear in “Sunday’s supplement”. This is a reference to the magazine or “supplement” which accompanies newspapers on a Sunday. They often run stories with lots of photographs about serious issues around the world.

Although the pictures are being printed and communicated to the world, they seem to have little effect on their viewers. Duffy says “The reader’s eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.” This suggests that people read the magazine on a Sunday morning and feel briefly upset by them, but actually their enjoyable lives continue. They are exposed to the horrible images between having a relaxing bath and a drink before a roast. The routine of the lives of the readers implies that the pictures do not change them or make them want to change the world. Their “tears” are momentary.

The poem ends with the photographer setting off on another trip to a war zone. “From the aeroplane” he looks at England. He “stares impassively”. This means he looks at his own country without emotion. It is as though he cannot understand why his fellow countrymen are not more moved by his work. Duffy concludes the readers “do not care”. We are left with the suggestion that because we live such comfortable lives in England we do not have empathy for others; when we see suffering we cannot be bothered to help. It is a bleak ending.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Prayer Before Birth” – provides lots of comparisons with this poem as they are both about the cruelty of the world.

“Blessing” – provides a strong contrast with this poem as it depicts a moment of joy within a context of poverty and suffering.

“The Tyger” – provides interesting comparisons with this poem as they are both about the relentless nature of cruelty in the world.