

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict
War Photographer - Carol Ann Duffy

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WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

Carol Ann Duffy

Brief Summary

A war photographer contemplates his job whilst developing their photos. He realises that the public does not care about the issues they are trying to shed light on.

Synopsis

- A man is alone in a darkroom. The mood is calm but sombre.
- Places that are experiencing conflict are listed.
- The man is revealed to be developing his photos.
- He is relieved to be in England away from the threat of violence.
- The photographer sees his photos come into focus and remembers the suffering of his subjects. He expresses a sense of vocation.
- He realises that the photo will only affect the reader momentarily.
- The setting changes from his darkroom to an aeroplane. He stares **“impassively”** out the window reflecting on the indifference of the English people.

Summary

Context – Alludes to the picture taken of a girl running from a napalm attack in the Vietnam war // this picture led to protests to end the war.

Structure - Cyclic structure shows the futility of the photographer's attempt to make a change.

Language – Darkness // suffering // internal conflict.

Key Points – Photographer has a sense of duty they feel they are not fulfilling // they know that the public will not care enough or make a change.

Context

Carol Ann Duffy (1955-)

Duffy was the UK's **Poet Laureate** from 2009 to 2019. She is friends with two famous war photographers hence why she is interested in the difficulties and responsibilities posed by their role.

War photographer

The poem was published in 1985, ten years after the end of the Vietnam war. A contemporary reader would be aware that the line **“running children in a nightmare heat”** is a reference to a famous photo of a girl in a napalm attack. That photo did however, have a large impact on the public who protested and campaigned against the war. This contrasts with society today in which war photography is largely ignored.



War Photographer

This setting of the darkroom creates a foreboding atmosphere.

Here the poet references various conflicts: the Troubles in Ireland, the Siege of Beirut (part of the Lebanese Civil War), and the Cambodian Civil War.

Sibilance is used here to develop the harsh atmosphere.

He has business to complete. This is reinforced by the businesslike tone created by the monosyllables and the short sentence.

In 'rural England' problems are trivial and a sunny day can make it all better. This contrasts with the wartorn settings he has been in, where pain, both emotional and physical, is devastating.

The man is a 'half-formed ghost' in that his image has not yet fully appeared on the photo paper. The phrase also alludes to the fact that he has died.

He is aware that his presence and camera might seem intrusive but believes it is important to document conflict.

The agonies of war are curated for the Sunday supplementary papers. This seems distasteful.

The use of alliteration emphasises the readers' frivolous nature. The singsong rhyme 'beers' and 'tears' also suggests this.

While the readers are seemingly moved to tears, these seem disingenuous to photographer; he later states 'They do not care'.

In his darkroom 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.

This religious simile reveals that he is aware of the impact that his photos have on the public. There is also a parallel between the job of a priest and the job of a war photographer: both are exposed to death and suffering. The simile also suggests that his mood is sombre.

A phrase from the Old Testament, which is often interpreted as meaning that life is transitory (fleeting).

It seems that at the scene of the conflict he was calm but now he is agitated, perhaps because he will soon relive the conflict through the photos he is developing.

This line literally refers to the process of the photograph coming into focus in a developing tray but also gestures towards perhaps his dying agonies.

Auditory imagery is used here to develop the horrific image created.

The choice of the word 'eyeballs' instead of eyes suggest the act of crying after seeing the photos is almost mechanical, a reflex. It suggests they are not truly affected by the photos - it is only the physical process of secreting tears that they go through; they don't have a genuine, non-superficial emotional response. 'Eyeballs' is also ugly, which reflects the ugliness of the reader's disingenuous response.



Perspective

The poem is written in the **third person** despite it describing an emotionally fraught moment for the man. This reflects the feelings of detachment the photographer experiences at the scenes of conflict, which allow him to continue with his job. The speaker sets himself off from the British public by the use of the accusatory pronoun **“they”**. He appears a solitary figure who is alienated from his fellow citizens.

Structure and form

Rigid form

Duffy uses a tight form of **six lines per stanza** as well as a **constant ABCDD rhyme scheme**. This rigidity of the form is at odds with the chaos caused by conflict and perhaps reflects the order of **“rural England”**. As this structure does not change throughout, it can be interpreted that war photographers lack the power to change anything as his work falls upon an unreceptive audience.

The structure also reflects the meticulous way in which the photographer works, as he places his photos into **“ordered rows”**. His sombre, careful ritual is perhaps his way of trying to maintain a sense of normality or attempting to control his thoughts, emotions and memories, which perhaps threaten to overwhelm him (his hands **“tremble”** in anticipation of what will be revealed and therefore relived).

Cyclic structure

The poem ends by describing the photographer returning to the warzone he came from on **“the aeroplane”**. This **cyclical structure** creates a sense of futile repetition and continuation of past mistakes and acts as evidence that the photographer’s work has not changed anything, leaving the listener with his realisation **“he stares impassively at where he earns his living and they do not care”**. In this way, the poem ends on a defeated note. The photographer’s sense of the readers’ indifference (or superficial sentimentality) contrasts with the firm sense of vocation that he expresses earlier **“do what someone must”** and the religious simile in the first stanza that suggests his work is as important as a priest’s.

Language

Internal conflict

The photographer seems to be struggling with reconciling his life in **“rural England”**. He is only capable of viewing **“rural England”** through the comparative lens of conflict as he notices that roads **“don’t explode”** and there is no **“nightmare heat”**. Rural England seems to be defined by its contrast to a conflict zone.

His struggle is further shown in the **simile** that compares him to **“a priest preparing to impart a mass”** as if like a priest connecting humanity to God, the photographer is duty-bound to connect people at home to those suffering in a war. While the photographer



may feel relief at his distance from the **“hundred agonies”** of the conflict zones, he also feels alienated from and disgusted by the English people, who live frivolously **“baths and pre-lunch beers”** and are indifferent to the horrors taking place abroad, on **“foreign dust”**. Therefore, he can only stare **“impassively”** at the country that is presumably his homeland. His tone is also angry (**“they do not care”**). This emotion is further shown through the **collective pronoun “they”** which creates an **accusatory tone** which could **invoke feelings of guilt in the reader**.

Themes

Response to conflict

The **sibilant alliteration** in **“solutions slop in trays”** highlights the phrase’s significance. The literal meaning is that he is developing photos in a dark room. However, the implicit meaning is that he is trying to offer solutions to the conflicts that he witnesses by raising public awareness of them, an awareness that might in turn lead to the public putting pressure on their government to help end them.

The painful **connotations** of **“twist”** in **“a stranger’s features...twist before his eyes”** shows the pain the images capture as well as the painful memories they induce in the photographer. His role allows him to preserve the memory of those who have died; which is reflected in the paradoxical **metaphor “half formed ghost”**.

There is a **juxtaposition** throughout the poem between **lexis from the semantic field of violence and religious imagery** to suggest that people are not doing enough to prevent war. The photographer is compared to **“a priest preparing to impart mass”** which reminds the listener of the Christian value of peace but is in opposition to the descriptions of violence also featured in the poem. This implies that people are hypocritical because in theory they are against violence but are doing nothing to stop it when it is actually occurring.

Suffering

Duffy’s use of **sibilance** in **“spools of suffering”** creates the impression of the true nature of war being hushed and quietened so people can continue with their everyday lives. By describing the photographer as having to **“pick out five or six”** photos, Duffy shows how the public will only want to see a few photos before the reality of the situation is too horrifying to continue viewing. This shows how people do not care about suffering that does not directly impact them as they can easily ignore it. The description of the dust as **“foreign”** creates a distinction between the two places that the people of England can easily make.

Impact on civilians

A **sinister tone** is established from the outset by starting with the photographer **“in his darkroom...finally alone”** as well as the violent connotations of the **colour imagery** in **“red and softly glows”**. This could be interpreted to show how even in the solace of his darkroom, the photographer is not safe from the horrors he has witnessed. The solitude of the photographer depicted throughout the poem implies that he feels he is alone in dealing with the emotions he is feeling.



The extensive scale of conflict

Duffy uses **asyndetic listing** in “**Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh**” to refer to a wide range of conflicts. The **plosives** in this list create an **aggressive sound**, highlighting the way in which war impacts so many people. Meanwhile the **caesura** causes the speaker to pause over each word and consider it individually.

Futility

There is a **half rhyme** between as “**the tears**” occur “**between the bath and pre-lunch beers**”. This creates an unsatisfying sound which shows the horrific speed with which people return to their privileged lives after glancing at the photos. The half rhyme also increases the pace of the line to contrast with the long, drawn out process of developing the photos to show how no one cares about these issues as much as he does.

Comparisons

Charge of the Light Brigade

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Similarities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems present characters who feel a sense of duty to other people. In Charge of the light brigade, Tennyson shows that the soldiers feel a sense of duty to their leaders which is shown in the reported speech “Forward, the Light Brigade!”. Likewise, Duffy shows that the photographer feels a sense of duty towards the victims of war he documents. |
| Differences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tennyson glorifies war through the grand religious imagery in “Into the valley of death”. Contrastingly, in War Photographer, the harsh reality of war is shown in the description of “running children in a nightmare heat” and “blood stained into foreign dust”. |

