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Carol Ann Duffy and War Weariness

Carol Ann Duffy's poetry consists of verses written in the voices of those who are most affected by society. Her writing reads in the voices of people who have grievances and resentments towards the world and the harshness of it (Poetry Foundation). She is well known as a feminist writer. However, many of her poems speak on the issues of war. Duffy uses imagery and characterization to make her poems come alive and invoke emotion as she discusses sensitive topics such as social and political issues. She explores the concepts of change; both in how people must adapt to it and by using her poems to challenge a variety of societal issues. Her war poems are written in ways to invoke emotions and make the readers understand what the characters are feeling, exploring the negative effects and changes people go through during times of war. Carol Ann Duffy's "War Photographer," "Last Post," and "Poker in the Falklands with Henry & Jim" explore the effects of war on civilians and soldiers alike, describing the war weariness and troubles the afflicted face during these times.

Carol Ann Duffy's writing is inherently feminist and works to challenge traditional female roles. Literary scholar Sean O'Brien explains her works have also confronted religious bigotry, racial inequality, and nuclear war (92). Her poems are written in familiar language and read like monologues, making them more accessible to a wider variety of readers (Britannica Academic). Many of her poems, and the three poems chosen for this analysis, have strong

imagery to mentally place the reader into the poems. Duffy uses imagery to describe the setting of the poem as well as the emotions her characters are feeling- whether that be physical or mental. She uses this imagery to help readers understand what exactly the characters are going through. The characterization in her poems is also quite strong given that they are so short. Her characters and narrators all have strong voices and differing tones. In the three poems chosen for this analysis, I will be discussing the tones of the different narrators in further detail. Literary scholar Brenda Allen claims Duffy's poems bring light to concerns and issues in society, raising awareness to both advocate for change, and to display changes that must be dealt with by affected parties (4). Duffy uses her poems and her voice to highlight these issues in a way that makes it easier for people to understand, through strong characterization, imagery, and by her monologue writing style.

Literary scholar Danette Dimarco recounts a reviewer who said Carol Ann Duffy has been described as a "poet of 'post war England: Thatcher's England'" (2). Her poems would confront "the political indifference exhibited by the Thatcher Administration towards the unemployed and the underprivileged" (O'Brien 92). Duffy was born in Scotland and moved to England at the age of six. She was an adult during Margeret Thatcher's administration and would write on what she witnessed during that time. She's also been described as one of the daughters of the feminist movement, given the nature of her feminist poems and the time-period in which she wrote them. From 2009-2019, she was given the position of poet laureate. She was the first woman ever appointed the position in Great Britain. Years prior, she was up against another poet for the position. However, she had lost after they thought a lesbian winning would not have been "well received during 'middle England'" (Britannica Academic). Duffy fought back against this, claiming she would have won ten years prior if it wasn't for her sexuality, advocating for herself

and others who have been in similar situations. She said her reasoning for accepting the position was only because a woman had never held the position before. Duffy uses her voice to advocate for people who need one, fighting back against oppression, injustice, and political issues, advocating for change through her poems, voice, and actions.

In “War Photographer,” readers follow the inner workings of a man who has been tasked to take photos of war and battlegrounds. The tone of the poem is despondent. The reader can see the emotions of the photographer as the poem goes on. The man does not like looking at these photos; however, he acknowledges that he “has a job to do” (line 7). He is back in his darkroom in rural England, and although he is safe back home, the memories of where he had been taking the photos sit with him still: “his hands which did not tremble then / though seem to now” (lines 8-9). This goes to show that as the man was photographing and capturing images in real time, he was seemingly simply going through the motions of his job, performing his duty as he sees the soldiers performing their own. However, by the trembling in his hands, one can conclude that by photographing these scenes, he has been deeply unsettled- perhaps even traumatized. The man has been changed by what he has witnessed. As the photo develops, he watches the face of the man whom he photographed, remembering “the cries \ of [the] man’s wife” when her husband had fallen, and how he had captured his face before death (line 15-16). The poem is written in third person point of view; however, it captures the desolate feeling of the man’s mind. There is a somber feel to the poem as he reflects on the photos and what he has seen- and what has affected him- while photographing the war.

In “Poker in the Falklands with Henry & Jim,” the unnamed narrator is engaging in a game of cards with two other men: Henry and Jim. The narrator and the other men are using the game as a distraction from the outside world: “We three play poker whilst outside *the real world*

/ shrinks to a joker” (line 1-2). Outside their game, in the real world, a war is raging. The tone of the poem seems exasperated, and perhaps a little irritated, as the narrator’s inner monologue speaks of the game and the war. After the narrator mentions “the real world” and its diminishment, he follows it with “So” and simply describes his card game, perhaps proving his exasperation of the war (line 1-2). While the poem gives no indication of how long the war has been raging, the narrator’s inner monologue conveys that it has been a long enough time for him to grow exasperated over it rather than worried. The poker game seems to be something of a distraction for the narrator and the other men playing. Throughout the poem, between describing the game, the narrator makes connections to the outside world: “In my country / we do this. But my country sends giant / underwater tanks to massacre and I have / another queen” (line 6-9). Henry tells the narrator how at “any second the room could explode,” yet they keep playing the game as a way of distraction (line 17). The narrator dwells on this fact and looks at his cards, seeing his full house, thinking that at any moment, his “full house might explode” but he wouldn’t know (line 20). Through that he loses interest in the game, going so far as to say “God this is an awful game” (line 23). The exasperated and nonchalant tone of the narrator could be Duffy’s way of showing how people internalize fear and change quite differently. Henry speaks of the possibility of their demise at any moment, perhaps displaying his worry. The narrator, while recognizing this fact and the world outside of this game, maintains a nonchalance. However, his annoyance in the game can also make readers conclude that he has worries about the war, too, yet he manifests them in a different way. The men keep playing, even as they all recognize that at any moment, the war-riddled country could be the cause of their demise.

Carol Ann Duffy’s “Last Post” details the story of a man who fought in World War One and survived. The poem is written in second person point of view, so the use of “you” and

“your” makes it all the more wrenching as the reader thinks about being in a position like that. It describes the way soldiers kiss photos of their loved ones back in the trenches before they go off to battle, and as the soldiers go off to die, “you walk away” (line 14). It’s a heart wrenching tale of a soldier watching his comrades die during the war, but the soldier walks away. The soldier then drops his weapon and goes back home, where he can enjoy bread and coffee, but the memories of the “thousands dead” still haunt him (line 21). There is a preface of the poem, a description of what the soldier sees in his dreams. He sees himself on the battlefield once more, and another soldier “plunges at [him], guttering, choking, drowning” (line 2). It’s a clear connection to the soldier’s survivor’s guilt. Scholar Janet Lewison explains the soldier’s feeling of confusion and hope after he realizes he can go home, however there is still that “what if” mentality, for the soldier knows there could have been a very different ending for him (Lewison). He had gone off to fight in a war where his friends and comrades have died, only to have survived and be sent home, expected to live life and move on. He knows that he easily could have been with his comrades and could have perished on the battlefield. He knows better than anyone the horrors one can witness while in war, horrors that plague him in the night. The preface of the dream, and his inner thoughts as he describes his cessation of fighting proves how deeply the war has affected him. The poem delves into the trauma and survivor’s guilt that soldiers have once they return home from war, highlighting the difficulty of adapting after witnessing such horrors of war. Whilst the poem is from the point of view of only one man, it encapsulates the mindset of traumatized soldiers in any war as they return home.

Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry advocates for change by describing the innermost struggles of coping with the cruelty of life. Whilst these poems have no clear call to action, the emotion they draw from readers can leave an impact. This impact in and of itself could be considered a call to

action. These poems may be works of fiction; however, they highlight the very real experiences and emotions felt by people affected by war. In “War Photographer,” “Last Post,” and “Poker in the Falklands with Henry & Jim,” Duffy has painted the wrenching picture of emotion and trauma from the effects of war on both soldiers and civilians alike. She uses imagery and tones that portray specific emotions of the characters, effectively depicting the effects war has on people. The poems display how war changes people, both emotionally and physically. These three poems display very different emotions, from dread and uneasiness to exasperation and guilt. Regardless of the emotions, the theme in the three poems is clear; war weariness leaves a lasting effect on every individual involved.

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