



# Carol Ann Duffy

A critical discussion of Carol Ann Duffy's poetry.

'Poetry has a strength because it is rooted in truth, not academia.' Defiant words from Carol Ann Duffy, a poet who is currently on several A-level syllabuses, and an increasingly popular choice at examination. But Duffy is such a refreshing poet to study, precisely because she conveys authentic human experience and emotion without obscuring it with inaccessible language. Unlike many of the more traditional poets studied at A-level, there are no complex literary allusions to identify or alienating references to be unravelled. Her writing has clarity and simplicity, while also being intensely well-crafted: 'I hope that the language I use is the language of my time, the late twentieth century. It isn't more poetic or separate from the language in which we think, speak or read.'

Duffy was born in Glasgow in 1955 into a Catholic working-class family. They moved to Stafford while she was still young, and Duffy found herself adjusting her speech in order to fit in:

*I remember my tongue  
shedding its skin like a snake, my voice  
in the classroom sounding just like the rest  
(‘Originally’)*

Luckily for Duffy, she had English teachers who encouraged her to write, drawing out her affection for language: 'It taught me to love words for their own sake. Originally I liked stories and things, but by the time I was a teenager, poetry was my real love. It was at the time when poetry was becoming more populist and kids would go to poetry readings the way they would go to pop concerts.'

By the time she had completed her degree at Liverpool, she was already being published and in 1983 she won the first of many awards - the National Poetry Competition.

Duffy has since published four collections - 'Standing Female Nude' (1985), 'Selling Manhattan' (1987), 'The Other Country' (1990) and 'Mean Time' (1993). In 1994 she herself edited her 'Selected Poems' for Penguin. Throughout her work, her respect for language as a tool, or even a character in itself, is prevalent. Language, for her, is: an almost physical presence, exciting, sexy, frightening, surprising. As she writes in 'Away and See':

*Test words  
wherever they live; listen and touch, smell, believe.  
Spell them with love.*

Her early work is renowned for its use of dramatic monologues, in which Duffy writes in a first person narrative to inhabit a character. The plain, punchy language takes us inside the personalities so we are looking at the world from their perspective. Often dark in tone, these poems introduce us to oppressed wives, immigrant school-children, psychopaths, Holocaust victims. A murderer tells us: Today I am going to kill something. Anything. ('Education for Leisure'). An artist's model undercuts his power over her with: I say / Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me. ('Standing Female Nude')

The first two collections were overtly political - unafraid to confront the greed, racism and sexism of Thatcher's Britain. But there has always been the contrast of Duffy's love poetry - which is intense, lyrical and sensual. Duffy manages to take us inside relationships without alienating us. She has said that: 'The 'you' in the poems is anyone. I like a love poem to have room in it for the reader.' Duffy's poetry has gently become less public and political, and more personal and intimate. In 'The Other Country', while maintaining the edgy social satire, there are also softer poems of death, love and childhood. The exploration of memory and the emotional past start to preoccupy the poet. By the publication of 'Mean Time', Duffy was able to claim: 'In 'The Other Country' I had begun to write more personal, autobiographical poems; and this switch from the dramatic monologue-dominated stance of earlier collections is intensified in 'Mean Time'.'

'Mean Time' further explores themes of emotional memory, parents and children, longing, death and love. There is less satire than before (except for the notable 'Fraud' about Robert Maxwell. Though his name is never mentioned, watch for the closing 'm' on every line). The language remains no-nonsense, yet sensitive, as we weave in and out of relationships and their repercussions. In 'Adultery':

*you are naked under your clothes all day,/*  
*slim with deceit.*

Duffy returns often to the power of language - here highlighting how the very word 'adultery' sanitises the act:

*You did it.*  
*What. Didn't you. Fuck. Fuck. No. That was*  
*the wrong verb. This is only an abstract noun.*

Language is a living entity to which dysfunctional adults can be compared:

*Memory's caged bird won't fly. These days*  
*we are adjectives, nouns. In moments of grace*  
*we were verbs, the secrets of poems, talented.*  
*(From 'Moments of Grace')*

Duffy's new book 'The World's Wife' is a witty collection of poems about the women behind great men. She has described these pieces as 'entertainments', and the book is possibly designed for a different, younger audience than her previous work. But Duffy might disagree: 'I've got no concept of writing for myself or anyone else at all. I suppose I'm writing for language.'

*Mrs Darwin*

*7 April 1852.*

*Went to the Zoo.*

*I said to Him -*

*Something about the Chimpanzee over there reminds  
me of you.*

*Prayer*

*Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer  
utters itself. So, a woman will lift  
her head from the sieve of her hands and stare  
at the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift.*

*Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth  
enters our hearts, that small familiar pain;  
then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his youth  
in the distant Latin chanting of a train.*

*Pray for us now. Grade 1 piano scales  
console the lodger looking out across  
a Midlands town. Then dusk, and someone calls  
a child's name as though they named their loss.*

*Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer -  
Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.*

Her editor, Peter Jay of Anvil Press Poetry, writes:

*My first encounter with Carol Ann Duffy's poetry was when judging the Greenwich Poetry Competition with Michèle Roberts and Tom Pickard in 1982. Her poem 'Words of Absolution' was among the 800 poems from which I had to make my short-list for the others, before we pooled our gleanings. And then we were simply unanimous about her poem: in skill, vitality and subject-interest it was a cut above the rest. Two years later, when the typescript of 'Standing Female Nude' arrived, not quite unsolicited because I said I would really like to see it, I accepted it by return of post. It has been a great pleasure to see how such an uncompromising poet, a poet who follows her own instincts and whose writing is quite unlike anyone else's, has become - without any publicity hype - so seriously popular. She has simply got better, book by*

*book. She can also entertain brilliantly, as anyone who has heard her work read knows. She has a wonderful line in pure performance poems. The pamphlet 'William and the Ex-Prime Minister' collects some of them; and 'The World's Wife'. The 'entertainments' she has been reading from in recent years (which should appear as a collection before the century is out) will be a new departure in intelligent popular verse. But none of this is at the expense of the hard core of her art. She has now written some of the subtlest, sharpest and most moving poems by which 20th century English poetry will be remembered.*

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