

The Map Woman – Places, the Past and Identity

Gabi Reigh maps the structure of Carol Ann Duffy's poem – a childhood environment, a new life, a (cathartic?) return – showing how well the metaphor of the map on the skin captures the way in which places and the past are an inescapable part of who we are.

In a review of *Feminine Gospels*, Elaine Feinstein described the collection to which 'The Map Woman' belongs as

a dark book [...] exposing equally the trash of our aspirations and the crumbling urban landscape around us.

The poem itself has at its heart the failed aspirations of an individual to escape an oppressive environment which has permanently shaped her identity. The central character of this poem is a woman who is said to have the map of the places where she used to live printed on her body. The map on the woman's body is an extended metaphor for how the places where we have come from and our memories of them shape who we are. This idea is introduced through the first two lines of the poem:

*A woman's skin was a map of the town
where she'd grown from a child.*

Stifling Suburbia

Using asyndetic listing, Duffy describes 'the alleys and streets and sidewalks' of the town as merging with the woman's 'veins', highlighting the way that her memories of the places have become tied to her innermost being.

Duffy describes how specific geographic locations of the woman's town are marked on her character's body. The names of the places mentioned portray the town where she used to live as a typically suburban place. The 'Market Square', 'Picture House' and 'St. Mary's Church' create an image of a mundane, small town existence, while the colour imagery used to describe the 'grey haired teachers' paints its inhabitants as staid and dull. Personification is used to convey a more sinister image of the town, as the 'ice cream van crying', the 'motorway' that 'groaned' and a kid which 'was tossed by a lorry into the air like a doll', indicate that underneath suburbia's civilised veneer lies the

potential for explosive violence and misery. The poet suggests that the girl had felt trapped in her environment, using a simile to describe her

tiny face

trapped in the window's bottle-thick glass like a fly.

In the memories of the past, she is continually described as passive, verbs such as 'sit', 'waiting', 'wonder' suggesting that she feels alienated from the groups of 'mothers', 'wives', 'priests', an outsider without a legitimate place in this world. Her disconnection from that community is portrayed as she is

waving

goodbye to strangers who stared

at her as she prepares to separate herself from them and 'vanish' into an uncertain future.

Trapped in the Past

However, the past is presented as a burden which limits our ability to reinvent ourselves and claim new identities. The woman attempts, in vain, to free herself from its suffocating hold, suggested through sibilance as she 'sponged, soaped, scrubbed' away the reminders of her former life. Parallel phrasing conveys the past as holding a sinister power over her as 'the map perspired under her clothes' and 'seethed/on her flesh'. Enjambment and listing are two structural techniques repeatedly employed by Duffy to create the sense of her character's endless obsession with her past. Duffy uses enjambment to highlight key words as the woman wishes to 'cover up' her previous self. The listing of the items of clothing which she piles on to cover up the 'map' ('a dress, with a shawl, with a hat') could be seen as her attempt to suppress or hide memories of a life she wishes to leave behind.

Inevitably, her encounters with new people and places are weighed down by the 'looped soundtrack of then'. She tries to find solace in romantic relationships, yet she and her lover feel like 'lost tourists', strangers who cannot fully understand one another. She becomes a 'lost tourist' for the rest of her life, as Duffy metaphorically describes how, in her desperation to distance herself from her former world, she 'ate up the miles', a rootless nomad

moving abroad, en route, up north, on a plane or train.

The listing of the new places she visits renders them insignificant, unable to match the visceral intensity with which she still feels attached to 'her father's house pressing into the bone' or

the river again, heading south, clear as an operation scar.

Verbs such as 'pressing', 'marked' and 'thumping' portray the oppressive effect of these memories which neither love nor the exploration of new places can shield her from.

Return and Estrangement

In her collection *Mean Time*, Carol Ann Duffy displayed a concern with the way that time changes us and forces us to see what was once familiar in a new light. In 'The Map-Woman', Duffy similarly explores this idea as the female character returns to the place that was kept alive in her memory only to find it altered. Feinstein's description of Duffy's 'crumbling urban landscape' finds a particular resonance here as Duffy describes

*the stale cake
of the castle [which] crumbled up on the hill.*

As in poems such as 'Never Go Back' from the collection 'Mean Time', where houses have 'cancer' and 'the living dead' populate the streets, images of death and decay convey a neglected environment, as well as portraying the characters' feelings of estrangement from the place to which they once belonged. Caesura marks the shock the character experiences at the unfamiliarity of her old home as she perceived that 'something was wrong', and her disorientation becomes increasingly pronounced as

*she got lost in arcades,
in streets with new names.*

Again, echoes can be found in other Duffy poems such as 'Nostalgia' where mercenaries returning home find themselves initially reassured by 'the same bell chiming the hour on the clock', only to discover 'everything changed'. Here too, the character finds that what was 'familiar/ was only facade', forcing her to reassess her relationship with the past.

Reinvention or Not?

The return to her former town is presented as cathartic for the central character, as she believes that she is finally released from its influence. A simile describes how her skin 'sloughed like a snake's', an archetypal image of renewal, her past self being described as a 'ghost', suggesting her final renunciation of her former identity. However, the character fails to embrace this new-found freedom. Separated from the mark of the past, she feels unbalanced, diseased, as her 'skin itched, like a rash'. Transformed miraculously into a *tabula rasa*, her 'new skin barely [showing] a mark', it is perhaps hinted that without her history she feels incomplete and that the process of reinvention frightens and overwhelms her. The poem's structure could be described as circular as its final images of the 'old streets' which 'tunnelled and burrowed' 'deep in the bone' mirror the descriptions of

*the veins
like shadows below the lines of the map*

at the beginning. The layers of our past and our memories, the poet seems to argue, are inextricably bound with our identities.

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