

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict
War Photographer - *Carol Ann Duffy*



WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

Carol Ann Duffy

Brief Summary

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

Synopsis

- A man is described to be alone in his darkroom
- Places in a state of war are listed
- The man is developing his photos
- He is relieved to be in England away from the threat of violence
- The photographer sees his photos appear before him and remembers the suffering they endured in front of him
- He realises that the photo will only affect the reader momentarily

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 **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 use of visual imagery creates a dark, foreboding atmosphere.

Sibilance is used here to develop the harsh atmosphere.

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

The use of alliteration here emphasises these phrases to show their frivolous nature and how readers of the photographer's work do not take it seriously enough.

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 metaphor reveals that he is aware of his influence.

This metaphor is horrific and shows how much suffering he has witnessed.

This is an image of sheer brutality but the use of "foreign" shows how the listener is able to distance themselves from it.



Perspective

The poem is written in the **third person** despite it describing an intimate moment for the man. This reflects the feelings of detachment the photographer experiences, allowing him to continue with his job.

Structure and form

Rigid form

Duffy uses a tight form of **six lines per stanza** as well as a **constant rhyme scheme** to highlight the differences between **“rural England”** and a warzone. This consistent structure is at odds with a speaker's traditional ideas of the chaos caused by conflict. As this structure does not change throughout, it can be interpreted that photographers lack the power to change anything as his work falls upon an unreceptive audience.

This structure is also reflected in the meticulous way in which the photographer works, as he places his photos into **“ordered rows”**. This shows him trying to gain normality in his situation or control his thoughts and memories.

Cyclic structure

The poem ends by describing the photographer returning to the warzone he came from on **“the aeroplane”**. This creates a **cyclical structure** which gives a sense of futile repetition and continuation of past mistakes. This acts as evidence that nothing the photographer has done has changed anything, leaving the listener with his realisation **“he stares impassively at where he earns his living and they do not care”**.

Language

Internal conflict

The poem presents the photographer to be struggling with what his role should be. 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”**. This implies that he is struggling to reconcile the two sides of his life together.

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. Despite the initial relief he felt about returning home he now **“stares impassively”** at it from his anger that **“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**.



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 but the implicit meaning is that he is trying to offer solutions to the conflict that he sees by raising awareness of the issue to people take notice and pressure their government to help end it.

The painful **connotations** of ***“twist”*** in ***“a strangers features...twist before his eyes”*** shows the pain the images reflect as well as the painful memories they induce in the photographer. Contrastingly, his role also allows him to preserve the memory of those who have died, which is reflected in the **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 to 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 <i>“Forward, the Light Brigade!”</i>. 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 <i>“Into the valley of death”</i>. Contrastingly, in War Photographer, the harsh reality of war is shown in the description of <i>“running children in a nightmare heat”</i> and <i>“blood stained into foreign dust”</i>.

