

Example of a GCSE Poetry Analysis: “War Photographer” by Carol Ann Duffy

This poem considers the job of the war photographer and explores the relationship he has with the subjects of his photographs, the effect that the horrors he has seen have had on him and the impact that his work has on the newspapers which publish it and the general public who view it. It is a poem that is vivid in its depiction of the horrors of war and is scathing in its presentation of the apathy of people in our country towards the suffering of those caught up in conflict abroad.

The poem opens with the image of the photographer at work in his darkroom, developing his war photographs. His organising and making sense of the horrors he has captured on film is caught in the phrase “spools of suffering set out in ordered rows, which stands out through its use of alliteration. His task is made to sound like he is conducting a religious service for the dead- his photographs honour their memory. As the poem says, he is like “a priest preparing to intone a Mass.” And it uses the biblical phrase “All flesh is grass”, which talks about how shortlived human life is in connection with a number of well-known war zones- “Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh.”

Verse two shows the deep impact that the scenes of war have had on him when he comes home and has time to reflect on them. It says when he was at work, his hands “did not tremble” but that they seem to now. It brings home the contrast of the peace he experiences in rural England to the violence he has left behind in the wars- it does this by emphasising the calm of England to the horrific, strong images of war: at home, fields

“... don’t explode beneath the feet
of running children in a nightmare heat”

and there is “ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel.” Mentioning children increases the horror as they are innocents caught up in this horror.

Verse three describes one of his photographs starting to develop on the photo paper and how the picture brings alive the photographer’s memories of the people in it suffering. The poet uses graphic words to emphasise this suffering. The victim’s features are said to “twist” before his eyes- the word “twist” may just refer to the photograph curling in the developing solution, but it also suggests the casualty writhing in agony, and the word “ghost” suggests death as well as describing the picture slowly emerging into sharp relief. The injured man’s sufferings are not clearly explained, so that our imaginations supply some of the detail; but the use of graphic words of distress cause us to visualise the horror- the cries of the man’s wife, blood staining the dust.

After the horror the reader visualises from the images of the previous three verses and our awareness of the disturbing impact these sights have had on the photographer himself, the poem becomes a scathing attack on the cynicism and apathy of people back in England to these horrors, which is meant to contrast sharply with our response to what we have read so far. Such contrasts are used throughout the verse: out of “A hundred agonies”, the newspaper editor will pick out only “five or six” for publishing. The reader will be moved to cry, but rather than deep emotion, his or her eyeballs will only “prick with tears” and this will only last for the short time between “the bath and

the pre-lunch beers”, not like the long lasting effect the pictures have had upon the photographer. The contrast is caught strongly in the final lines of the poem that act as a harsh indictment by the poet of the apathy of those at home who are lucky enough not to have to experience such horrors of war for themselves: England is where he earns his living through publishing his pictures but the public “do not care”. These damning words stand out through being the last ones of the poem.

This poem is effective in getting the reader to look afresh at the job of the war photographer and to consider the impact such work might have on him as a human being rather than just a professional man doing his job. The contrast it makes between the suffering of others people in foreign war zones and people in England is brought home strongly in its differentiating the quiet safety of our lives with the violent images of conflict abroad- it should make us realise how lucky we are, but also make us ashamed of our selfishness in not really caring for the suffering of victims of such conflicts; after all, we who are reading the poem are probably the also the readers of newspapers and behave in the exactly the same way as the poem describes. Hopefully, this poem will make us react differently and feel more active and long lasting sympathy next time we see a photograph of suffering abroad.