

# More Than a Collection of Parts – Studying the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy

emagazine co-editor, Barbara Bleiman, tries to put her finger on what makes Carol Ann Duffy special, asking whether her whole oeuvre, from early collections like *Mean Time*, to later ones like *Rapture*, has qualities that are truly distinctive and unique.

There are some poets who are instantly recognisable. You only have to read a few lines and you know exactly whose work you are reading. Everything is shot through with their unique poetic identity (or what we usually refer to as their voice). Take Tennyson for example, or Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, Maya Angelou or E.E. Cummings. Each of these poets has a highly distinctive quality – perhaps something about the sound and rhythms, the look on the page, or a constancy to a particular set of places or vocabularies that make them stand out. The pleasure in reading the next poem comes partly from the fresh value of each new work in its own right but also from the accumulated knowledge of the rest of the work, a return to familiar experiences in a known and recognisable poetic world.

What about a poet who is as prolific and wide-ranging as Carol Ann Duffy, a poet who is willing to try her hand at many different styles and forms, even, most recently, making an impressive job of writing-to-order, as Poet Laureate? Is she recognisably herself in each poem? When you're studying her poems, one by one, are you appreciating each simply for its sake and in isolation, or is there something threaded through the whole canon of her work that allows you to see the continuities and appreciate what is common to her writing, what makes for her unique contribution?

One reason for asking this question is that all too often the study of a poet can become a bit of a conveyor belt – one poem and then the next and then the next – without the chance to step back and evaluate the bigger picture. Stopping the conveyor belt for a moment and observing what's in front of you, going to look at another part of the process on another bit of the belt, talking to other people about how it all fits together, can allow you to put everything into a broader perspective, rather than just being focused on the individual nut or bolt or single machine part that's travelling rapidly past you.

So is Carol Ann Duffy's oeuvre simply a collection of parts or does it make up a unified whole? If you're studying the *Selected Poems*, or just one collection, anything from *Standing Female Nude*, *Mean Time*, *The World's Wife*, *Feminine Gospels* or *Rapture*, what kinds of things might you be looking for that could be termed 'Duffyesque'?

Here are just a few of the key things that you might want to think about, drawn from my own reading and that of critics and commentators on her work. Some provide scope for debate – critics are divided and, like them, you might want to make your own judgement.

## 1. Simple, Conversational, Funny, Accessible?

Duffy is one of the UK's most popular poets and some critics put this down to the fact that she often has a conversational tone of voice – she draws into her poems everyday idioms, clichés that she subverts and the voices of ordinary people, with a humorous, jokey slant that makes the reader think afresh. Does that make her more or less of a serious poet? Critics differ on this.

Sean O'Brien praises her poetry for being

*as open to the reader of Catherine Cookson as to the educated student of the Brontës*

but others, like Simon Brittan critique her for 'simplistic language and overstated imagery', for writing prose 'as though it were poetry', using 'empty rhetorical effect(s)' with too much slang, flippancy and 'slapdash' writing.

Is the anecdotal style her only style? If you're reading her sonnets in Rapture or the beautifully simple 'Demeter' from *The World's Wife*, or *The Light-Gatherer* or 'North-West' in *Feminine Gospels* you might want to question whether the demotic style with witty punchlines is all that she has to offer. And is it a problem anyway, if it is? It's worth bearing in mind that one of Duffy's acknowledged greatest influences is TS Eliot, a poet who both uses the demotic style, including fragments of ordinary conversation and mixing these with the high style. No-one would accuse him of using too much slang or simplistic language in *The Waste Land*! The 'yeah, yeah, yeah' reference to the Beatles in 'North-West' isn't so different from the cultural allusions Eliot might make.

## 2. 'Carol Ann Duffy Is a Naughty Poet'

So say Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland as the very first words of their book *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: Choosing Tough Words*. What do they mean by this? I think it's true that Duffy has a strongly subversive streak, whatever she is doing. She likes to shock and surprise and turn the world's certainties on their heads. One only has to dip into her two collections *The World's Wife* and *Feminine Gospels*, to see how her 'naughtiness' works, taking the form of challenging the conventional ways of thinking about the world and over-turning expectations. The naughtiness can be in the use of language, or it can be in the ideas. She is unashamedly political, tackling subjects such as education, or social power and control. Nowhere is she more naughty than in her treatment of women and gender which deserves a point in its own right.

## 3. The Female, the Feminine and the Representation of Women

If Duffy has one overriding theme and preoccupation it is women, their place in the world and the way they are represented in art, history, culture and literature. This is not to say that she is uninterested in men. Men figure in the poems as well but the perspective is largely a female one.

Nowhere is this truer than in the collection *The World's Wife*, a deliberate and sustained re-writing of cultural history, in which the unheard voices of women (bit parts in a male story, or figures who are blamed for their femaleness or represented in highly stereotypical ways) are allowed to speak for themselves. The persona poems, in this collection and others, often have this function, of allowing women to have a voice. From the early collection *Standing Female Nude*, where the artist's model gives her perspective on the painter, to 'Mrs Tiresias' or 'Mrs Midas' in *The World's Wife*, Duffy gives the stage to women. By *Feminine Gospels*, she seems to have moved on, no longer interested in the

woman behind the famous man but more concerned with women in their own right, allowing ordinary and diverse women to speak about their circumstances and lives in all their variety.

#### 4. The Personal and the Public/Political

Duffy isn't a poet who distances herself from her subject matter. Just because she has a political agenda and uses the voices of characters in one strand of her poetry to express political ideas, it doesn't mean to say that the personal is absent. The fact is that for Duffy the personal and the political are deeply intertwined and her politics aren't of a lecturing or hectoring variety but more one that uses individual stories, anecdotes and details as the basis for broader, often not explicitly stated, messages. Humour (see above) is one of her ways of making telling points, with plays on words, allusions manipulated for comic effect and strong punchlines. In individual poems, and most obviously in *Rapture*, the personal can come to the fore. Memory, love, loss and reflections on the places of her growing up and family are all part of her repertoire.

#### 5. Informality in a Formal Setting

One aspect of Duffy's poetry that's worth noting is the fact that, whatever some of her critics may say about her prose-like, colloquial style, there seems to me to be a strongly formal aspect to her writing. By that, I mean that she uses the forms of poetry with great gusto and skill. She writes sonnets, she uses rhyme schemes, she likes nothing more than a pattern that she can establish and then undercut in some powerful, telling way. *Rapture* is stuffed full with formal poems with a strong structure but it is not only in this relatively late collection that we see her adopting conventional poetic forms and pouring words into them – words that are sometimes, but not always, surprisingly contemporary. Duffy is unconventional in thinking, vocabulary and intent, but not always in terms of the shape and structure of her poems.

Michaelis and Rowland chose the subtitle *Choosing Tough Words* for their collection about Duffy but that's not the aspect I would pick out as making Duffy's poetry special. Tough subjects yes, and a tough stance but the words are often as lyrical and 'poetic' as any. If I were to write that sub-title, I might say something more about her being a poet highly skilled in the conventional arts, who chooses to use them for radical purposes – 'a radical, yet lyrical, poetics of womanhood, self and society'. How does that sound?

**Article Written By:** Barbara Bleiman is co-editor of emagazine.

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