

**Love as Sarcasm: The treatment of Love in the Poetry of
Carol Ann Duffy.**

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Abstract

*My paper investigates how Carol Ann Duffy has treated love in her poetry. It appears that she has treated love as a theme in an ironic and non-traditional way. She has always been preoccupied by the idea of love in her poetry. The paper also attempts to unfold the hidden messages which the poet wants to reveal through her poems. The paper introduces the definition of sarcasm and how it is employed by Duffy in a very subtle way. This is then followed by her views about love and how she looks at it. Major poems from her distinguished body of work are analyzed from a thematic and a symbolic point of view. Being a feminist and keen to present a different concept of love, Duffy introduces many types of women especially those who are preoccupied by the idea of gender and the social role of women. Her books *The World's Wife* and *Love Poems* as well as many other famous individual poems such as 'Valentine', 'You' and 'Warming Her Pearls' are extensively explained and interpreted to demonstrate how she employs sarcasm in very elaborate way.*

Although Scottish by birth, Carol Ann Duffy is the first female Poet Laureate of England in the role's 400-year history. Her combination of tenderness and toughness, humour and lyricism, unconventional attitudes and conventional forms, has won her a wide international audience of readers and listeners.¹

One of the defining features of Duffy's work is her use of sarcasm, wit and strange images (conceits) in her poetry, especially when she writes about emotional topics. Her poetry carries on the tradition of irony in English poetry and shows how the Irish, Scottish and English traditions all exert a literary influence on her writing and poetic imagination. This paper will investigate the sarcastic attitude of many personae in the Duffy's poems who is well known for her subtle dramatic monologues. Duffy has shared with many the experience of divorce and difficult friendships and this has been reflected in her poetry and influences the tone she uses in her poems. The paper will also investigate the use of sarcastic tone and irony in dealing with love relationships. Duffy's popularity stems from being aware of human nature especially women's psychology and their relationships to their male partners.

¹<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/carol-ann-duffy>

In many of her poems, sarcasm as a device is frequently employed in a skillful and this gives her poetry a witty tone and attractiveness to readers. Sarcasm is defined as "a form of **verbal irony** that mocks, ridicules, or expresses contempt." It is really more a **tone** of voice than a **rhetorical device**. You are saying the opposite of what you mean (verbal irony) and doing it in a particularly hostile tone. Sarcasm comes from the Greek words "sark" meaning "flesh," and "asmos" meaning "to tear or rip." So it literally means "ripping flesh" – a pretty bloody image for a type of speech that we use all the time!²

Stylistic and thematic analysis of her poetry can give an indication of what the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy can reveal, such as how sarcasm characterises the language of some women. Sarcasm can say many different things about a character depending on the way it is used; but most often sarcastic characters are cynical, slightly bitter, solitary, and perhaps arrogant. Think, for example, of Dr. Cox from *Scrubs* – he often uses verbal irony to mock other characters in the show, especially the **protagonist**, J.D. However, like many sarcastic characters, Dr. Cox is more often *brutally honest* than sarcastic. That is, he doesn't employ verbal irony at all – he says exactly what he means, which is the *opposite* of irony. And, as we've already seen, if a line is not verbally ironic, then by definition it cannot be sarcastic. But it can still be **sardonic** and *cynical*, which are probably the two most common character traits expressed through the use of sarcastic dialogue.³

As a Scottish poet working mainly in England, Duffy attained a great position in world poetry during the nineties. She is treated as a celebrity at poetry readings and by the media. She has been awarded many prizes since Anvil Poetry Press became her publisher. *Standing Female Nude* was published in 1985 followed by *Selling Manhattan* (1987) which gained her the Somerset Maugham Award and *The Other Country* (1990) which gained a Scottish Arts Council Book Award. These volumes contain some of her best-known poems: 'Education for Leisure' (SFN), which was to become notorious in 2008 when it was removed from a GCSE poetry anthology after complaints that it endorsed a culture of violence; 'Warming Her Pearls' (SM), a maidservant's erotic reflection on wearing her mistress' necklace; and the meditations on home and displacement - 'Originally' and 'The Way my Mother Speaks' (TOC). *Mean Time* (1993) scooped the prize pool, with an award from the Scottish Arts

²<https://literaryterms.net/sarcasm/>

³<https://literaryterms.net/sarcasm/>

Council, the Forward Prize and the Whitbread Prize for Poetry. (It was only the second year of the Forward prizes and the one for best first collection went to Don Paterson for *Nil Nil*.) 'Prayer' from this volume, a sonnet that concludes with the mantra of the BBC shipping forecast, has become one of her best-loved poems⁴.

Most poets do not enjoy such privileges for being a poet but to be a woman poet and a celebrity is very unusual. Neither Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Sylvia Plath or H.D enjoyed this level of fame in their lives. In fact they were stigmatized as weird and exotic women writing sad poems about unfulfilled love. Emily Dickinson shut herself from the world. She did not see people screening herself from her lover after she failed to reunite with him. In one of her poem she says:

So We must meet apart –
You there – I – here –
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are – and Prayer –
And that White Sustenance –
Despair – ⁵

Love, for classical poets, was treated with respect and dignity. Faithfulness was the major tone, and regret was the only feeling a woman can feel after her love is finished. The sole wish of Christina Rossetti is to be remembered by her lover. With unusual self-denial she wants him to be happy after her death, even if he forgets her:

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:
Only remember me; you understand ⁶

Love, for Christina Rossetti, is not selfishness or the wish for your lover to reunite with you after death but is a continuation of life with all its activities:

Better by far you should forget and smile

⁴<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/carol-ann-duffy>

⁵<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-cannot-live-you-640>

⁶<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45000/remember-56d224509b7ae>

Than that you should remember and be sad.⁷

Love-in the present time has a different meaning. Love is multiple, varied and non-traditional as Duffy has seen it. Writing about love was one of Duffy's preoccupations and it is one of her recurrent themes. She feels that love is the cornerstone of any relationships either between a man and a woman or among people in general. Her love poems are numerous and her treatment of love is extrinsic. She devotes complete books to talking about love. One of these is *The Bees*, an exhilarating harvest of 34 poems that reveals Duffy as a poet who covers the stormy waterfront of desire, devotion and despair. From distant yearning to wild new passion through absence, boredom and infidelity, to break-ups, grief and solitude, she commands every conjugation in "the syntax of love". Versatile, restless, moving as adroitly between verse-forms as she does between the stages of affection, and disaffection, Duffy shows us "what it is like in words".⁸

Duffy has treated love in an extraordinary way. In her poems, the personae she creates are not submissive and do not accept the role of being a scapegoat. She sounds, in her love poems, like a powerful woman using aggressive and violent imagery. Duffy received the T.S. Eliot Prize for *Rapture* (Picador, 2005), 52 poems charting a love affair, published after the break-up of her marriage.⁹ Maybe having a painful experience with her ex-partner influenced the themes and Duffy's attitude towards sentimentality in expressing love and her different look at sexuality and emotions among sexes. Ruth Padel states: "The three strong books that made her name in the Nineties blazed with voicings; with dramatic characters, a bomber, a psychopath, an American buying Manhattan." This voicing power emerged again in *The World's Wife*, along with the same sharp humour, social criticism and satire. But those collections ended in love poems and you feel that this, in the end, was what really drives Duffy's work. In *Rapture*, it comes to into its full element: ruthless, sensuous, tender; utterly modern, utterly classical."¹⁰

Her interest in presenting love and its sarcastic aspects gives her a popularity especially among feminists, especially those who have

⁷<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45000/remember-56d224509b7ae>

⁸<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/love-poems-by-carol-ann-duffy-5521594.html>

⁹<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/carol-ann-duffy>

¹⁰(*Independent*, 16 September 2005).

suffered problems with adaptation and acceptance from a conservative society especially women with different sexual identities and orientation. Her popularity stems from being aware of the value of love in the lives of her readers and its fragile nature in post-Thatcherite Britain. The first British female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was nick-named ‘the Iron Lady’ for her harsh attitude to building the British economy. Duffy wrote many love poems, investigating the nature and effects of love as well as its positives drawbacks. Duffy uses symbols and the archetypes in a different way, in other words she uses what Viktor Shklovsky calls ‘defamiliarization’, an artistic and a linguistic device which includes metaphors and similes that impart to her audience an unfamiliar sensation while reading her poetry. ‘Defamiliarization or *ostranenie* (осстранение) is the [artistic](#) technique of presenting to audiences common things in an unfamiliar or strange way in order to enhance perception of the familiar.’¹¹ Or in a more specific definition: “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”¹²

Duffy has many popular poems which are frequently recited for their wit and sharpness. The feelings she offers in her poetry, especially about love, surprise and shock readers by their originality and strangeness. One of the most poignant of the personal poems is ‘Valentine’ (*Mean Time*). Duffy often writes about love, with heartfelt feeling but never with sentimentality, and she explores its complex nature - its pain as well as its bliss. The personal is also combined with the philosophical. ‘Valentine’ is one of many poems in which Duffy investigates the way in which meaning is constructed through language, as the speaker tries to move beyond clichés and find a more authentic way of expressing feeling and experience:

Not a red rose or a satin heart.
I give you an onion.
It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.
It promises light
like the careful undressing of love.
[...] I am trying to be truthful.¹³

¹¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defamiliarization>

¹²Shklovsky, Viktor: *A Reader* (ed. by Alexandra Berlina). Bloomsbury 2017.

¹³ From *New Selected Poems 1984-2004* (Picador, 2004). Originally published in *Mean Time* (Anvil, 1993).

In 'Valentine' the poet -woman instead of giving her lover a red rose for Valentine's Day, gives an onion to suggest the many layers that can be peeled off before we begin to understand love. She is not romanticizing the issue as expected, on the contrary she deals with it in humorous way, accepting that love often brings weeping. Yet love makes you happy too, especially if you receive a gift from a lover like a rose but, unexpectedly here it is an onion. In 'Valentine', Duffy chooses to **challenge the conventional symbols of love**, namely the 'red rose' and the 'satin heart'." This rejection of classic love tokens is indicated through the **negative 'not'** in the first stanza. Instead Duffy introduces the reader to her own **symbol of love, the onion**, which is unusual because the onion is an unflattering, smelly, acidic and unromantic object. Duffy spends the rest of the poem proving to us how **the onion is more faithful and reflects the true nature of love**. The poem itself is an extended metaphor about how the unromantic properties of the onion fits the notion of love. Each stanza also shows the different phases of love, how it begins with all the best intentions yet gradually deteriorates into misunderstandings and violence.¹⁴

Love for the persona here is a source of tears, not a beautiful scent but the smell of an onion which will bring undesirable memories:

Take it.
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,
if you like.
Lethal.
Its scent will cling to your fingers,
cling to your knife.¹⁵

Duffy's most famous poems are justifiably beloved. The entwining of rhythm with evoked silence in 'Prayer' is sublime: "Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer/ utters itself... Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer -/ Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre." In 'Valentine', she says, "Not a red rose or a satin heart./ I give you an onion./ It is a moon wrapped in brown paper./ It promises light/ like the careful undressing of love." Here, again, Duffy sees love as not fairytale-perfect but sharp, sexual and terrible, and more desirable for that.¹⁶

¹⁴<https://smartenglishrevision.wordpress.com/2013/03/29/gcse-poetry-analysis-valentine-by-carol-ann-duffy/>

¹⁵<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/valentine>

¹⁶<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/carol-ann-duffy-and-the-laureates-curse/>

Not only her poem 'Valentine' philosophizes the idea of love in unexpected treatment but also goes deeper into minds of men and women revealing their clashes and sex wars which spring from disturbed emotional life. *Feminine Gospels* (2002), as the title suggests, is a concentration on the female point of view. It is a celebration of female experience, and it has a strong sense of magic and fairytale discourse. However, as in traditional fairytales, there is sometimes a sense of darkness as well as joy. Birth, death and the cycles and stages of life feature strongly, including menstruation, motherhood and aging. Duffy's beloved daughter Ella was born in 1995, and the poet's experience of motherhood has deeply influenced her poetry (as well as inspiring her to write other works for children). Poems such as 'The Cord' and 'The Light Gatherer' rejoice in new life, while 'Death and the Moon' mourns those who have passed on: '[...] I cannot say where you are. Unreachable / by prayer, even if poems are prayers. Unseeable / in the air, even if souls are stars'¹⁷

Love has different meanings but one of its general meanings is unification, friendship and caring. Duffy as a poetess carried the responsibility as one of the leading world poetic voice to explain the different meaning of in her books. One of her famous poetry books is *Rapture*, which is a collection of love poems is to explain the meaning of love from her own perspective, helps to give meaning to the restless and tortured souls of lovers. *Rapture* is a winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize and both a form of book-length love-poem and a moving act of personal testimony—but what sets these poems apart from other treatments of the subject is Duffy's refusal to simplify the contradictions of love, and read its transformations—infatuation, longing, passion, commitment, rancor, separation, and grief—as either redemptive or destructive. This is a map of real love, in all its churning complexity, simultaneously direct and subtle, showing us that a song can be made of even the most painful episodes in our lives. With poems that will find deep resonance in the experience of most readers, it is a collection that can and does speak for us all.¹⁸

In 'Warming Her Pearls', Duffy introduces us to a very different form of love which is the love of a maid for her mistress. The maid cares

¹⁷<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/carol-ann-duffy>

¹⁸[https://www. https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/carol-ann-duffyamazon.com/Rapture-Carol-Ann-Duffy/dp/0330433911/ref=pd_sim_14_3?encoding=UTF8&pd_rd_i=0330433911&pd_rd_r=9RSG3X1CP0Y1CPCJ2R07&pd_rd_w=GrqrH&pd_rd_wg=XMWfG&psc=1&refRID=9RSG3X1CP0Y1CPCJ2R07](https://www.amazon.com/Rapture-Carol-Ann-Duffy/dp/0330433911/ref=pd_sim_14_3?encoding=UTF8&pd_rd_i=0330433911&pd_rd_r=9RSG3X1CP0Y1CPCJ2R07&pd_rd_w=GrqrH&pd_rd_wg=XMWfG&psc=1&refRID=9RSG3X1CP0Y1CPCJ2R07)

so much for her princess' health and comfort that she warms the pearl necklace of her mistress by keeping it on her breast, fearing that if the pearls are cold they will be uncomfortable. The poem asserts the love and identification of the two ladies in front of masculine power:

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them
round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,
resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk
or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself
whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering
each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

The identification between the maid: the speaker and the princess is from one side. The maid is obsessed with her mistress and she attends her, waiting for her. She even spends the night waiting for her. Although the relationship is not equal (it is a kind of master-servant relationship) the maid is preoccupied by her mistress and very jealous about her going to parties and dancing with tall men. The description of her mistress is intensely physical and almost erotic. This raises the question of homoerotic poetry and its aesthetic function within contemporary poetry:

She's beautiful. I dream about her
in my attic bed; picture her dancing
with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent
beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
watch the soft blush seep through her skin
like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass
my red lips part as though I want to speak.

Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see
her every movement in my head.... Undressing,
taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching
for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way

she always does.... And I lie here awake,
knowing the pearls are cooling even now
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night

I feel their absence and I burn.¹⁹

In 'Warming Her Pearls' Duffy is showing that she is a very innovative poet who works hard to revive and employ dramatic monologue like Robert Browning and T.S Eliot before her. This dramatic monologue suits the ironic voice she adopts in her poems, revealing the deeper, more psychological conflict within the minds and souls of her personae.

Jealousy is one symptom of love, but it is harmful and destructive as well because it creates a feeling of suspicion and disturbs the calm sea of love (to quote Matthew Arnold in 'Dover Beach') and the serene life of the intimate couple. Carol Ann Duffy, in one of her famous poems, 'Medusa,' uses this motif to reflect sarcastically on the theme of jealousy:

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy
grew in my mind,
which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes,
as though my thoughts
hissed and spat on my scalp.

Suspicion transforms beauty into ugliness, it changes innocence and purity into monsters and terrifying figures. The beautiful face of the lady becomes fearful like Medusa. This is the conceit of the poem, it is like a metaphysical conceit which likens a thing with a different object and this perplexes the mind of the reader. Here Duffy's poem calls to the mind John Donne's poems 'The Good Morrow' and 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' where the simile is difficult to understand but after reflection, the reader can access the meaning easily. Donne says in his poem:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.²⁰

In this seventeenth century poem, 'The Good Morrow', love is innocent and it appears in the face and in the eyes of lovers; whereas in

¹⁹Carol Ann Duffy, "Warming Her Pearls" from *Selling Manhattan* Anvil Press Poetry Ltd., 1987)

²⁰<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44104/the-good-morrow>

Medusa, jealousy turns the face of the woman into an icon of fear and deformation. In the past she was beautiful and attractive, like other beautiful ladies but ironically her lover's deceit and the venom of jealousy metamorphoses her into Medusa. Up until now, this has all been about her and about a love "gone bad"; but now she changes tack and irony and sarcasm, often called the "lowest form of wit," are used to great effect. "And here you come," she says, "with a shield for a heart and a sword for a tongue and your girls, your girls." She is signalling to the person at the heart of this break up who has caused her pain, and her use of ironic comment is meant purposely here. There is a literary argument that goes something like this: when you write something, do you know from the beginning what you are going to write? If you do, then your writing is "intentional." The literary theory of the "intentional fallacy" opposes that idea, as does the theory of the "unintentional fallacy," whereby one can say that when you begin creating something, you cannot guarantee that every word is what you intended. Here, Duffy intends, in my opinion, to be sarcastic, to show and share the anger, the bitterness between her and her lover.²¹

In this poem, the poetess does not sentimentalize the beauty of the woman. On the contrary, she strips her of sacredness and dignity. She profanes beauty and satirizes it. The face of the jealous woman becomes as ugly as a Medusa and anyone who looks at it will be turned into a stone. Maybe this gives us an indication why some gothic houses hang Medusa's face on their entrance to deter any beautiful women or men from entering the owner's house.

By adopting a sarcastic attitude towards the theme of love, Duffy appeals to feminists who believe that love does not mean submission or resignation of women to men, especially in marriage relationship as is socially acceptable. Duffy says in bitterness:

Be terrified.
It's you I love,
perfect man, Greek God, my own;
but I know you'll go, betray me, stray
from home.
So better by far for me if you were stone.

²¹<https://gcseenglishteacher.com/2014/12/19/medusa-carol-ann-duffy/>

Related to this topic of treating love in a sarcastic way are Duffy's themes which include language and the representation of reality; the construction of the self; gender issues; contemporary culture; and many different forms of alienation, oppression and social inequality. She writes in everyday, conversational language, making her poems appear deceptively simple. With this demotic style she creates contemporary versions of traditional poetic forms - she makes frequent use of the dramatic monologue in her exploration of different voices and different identities, and she also uses the sonnet form. Duffy is both serious and humorous, often writing in a mischievous, playful style - in particular, she plays with words as she explores the way in which meaning and reality are constructed through language. In this, her work has been linked to postmodernism and poststructuralism, but this is a thematic influence rather than a stylistic one: consequently, there is an interesting contrast between the postmodern content and the conservative forms.²²

Rapturing Love:

One of most significant poems, in which Duffy discusses the theme of love using obscene, melodramatic, erotic and sarcastic language, is a poem in her book *Rapture* called 'You.' This collection consists mainly of love poems which is far from surprising given the title of the collection. 'You' is filled with passionate metaphors and uses very provocative language. It is highly sexualized and may well be more about lust rather than love. The narrator addresses the reader as if they are the object of the narrator's affection. The title of the Poem: 'You' gives the poem an intimate feel, as if the poem is dedicated to just one person.²³

In 'You', Duffy defines love and her relationship to her lover admitting that:

Falling in love
is glamorous hell; the crouched, parched heart
like a tiger ready to kill; a flame's fierce licks under the skin.
Into my life, larger than life, beautiful, you strolled in.
I hid in my ordinary days, in the long grass of routine,
in my camouflage rooms. You sprawled in my gaze,
staring back from anyone's face, from the shape of a cloud,
from the pining, earth-struck moon which gapes at me.

²²<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/carol-ann-duffy>

²³<https://poemanalysis.com/you-by-carol-ann-duffy-poem-analysis/>

Duffy, in the tongue of the persona, describes love as a 'glamorous hell', 'a parched heart', like 'a tiger ready to kill'. Love here is likened to hell but why 'glamorous'? This literary device is an oxymoron where two words contrast with each other. The simile of a tiger ready to kill indicates how Duffy perceives love and satirizes it and express her sarcasm concerning its nature and effect. The image of a tiger, ready to kill is particularly striking. The narrator uses a powerful words to convey a dark undertone to the poem. In this third line you can see the words "kill", "flame" and "fierce" none of these would be readily associated with love, but have a stronger association with lust and desire. The stanza is rounded off by the narrator talking about how their loved one entered their life. How they strolled in. This, at least for me, created an image of somebody with a nonchalant and arrogant attitude.²⁴

This poem recalls the violent images of Andrew Marvell's poem to 'His Coy Mistress', (1621–1678) where the poet incites his beloved to submit physically to him before they die and there will be no pleasure or joy for both of them only what awaits them a vast place of eternity:

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.²⁵

The knight or (the cavalier poet) concludes by giving a dark truth concerning her conservatism and hesitation warning her of the ugly end awaiting her
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song: then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust:
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.²⁶

Duffy's love poetry recalls in a postmodern sense the tradition of writing love poetry either in its classical sense like the sonnets of William Shakespeare or *carpe diem* poets and Romantic poets such as Keats, Shelley and Byron. The sonnets of William Shakespeare deal with love in

²⁴<https://poemanalysis.com/you-by-carol-ann-duffy-poem-analysis/>

²⁵*The Oxford Authors Authors Andrew Marvell. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990.*

²⁶<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/his-coy-mistress>

its different aspect in all its normal and abnormal faces and conditions. Friendship, platonic and physical love are represented in the sonnets where even the figures of speech are intended to be fresh and shocking to the readers. A sonnet like 'Shall I Compare Thee' (sonnet 18) is the best example to refer to , John Keats: 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and Byron 'When We Too Parted' or Ted Hughes 'Birthday Letters' addressed to his dead wife Sylvia Plath and many other poems of love which are landmarks in English poetry.

Duffy is interested in dealing with whatever represents her as a woman. She cares also about being the voice of women in general representing their suffering and their dilemma in facing a patriarchal system. It is true from a sociological perspective that modern western women have gained many rights but the private relationship among men and women is still vague. Some women expect so much from men but what they receive is so little. Duffy, as a scholar of philosophy, has witnessed this and tried in her poetry to represent that kind of relationship.

One of the poems in which Duffy satirizes the idea of love and faithfulness of a woman towards her husband is 'Mrs. Lazarus'. This poem was included in Duffy's collection of poems entitled *The World's Wife*, first published in 1999, which presents stories, myths, fairy tales and characters in Western culture from the point of view of women. Much of literature through the ages and even today is patriarchal, presenting the world from a male perspective. These poems were intended by Carol Ann Duffy to rectify that, to highlight the fact that women have long been ignored or silenced. The poems in the collection are witty, satirical, playful and complex.²⁷

Sylvia Plath before Duffy wrote a poem having Lady Lazarus as persona in her poem as well but Plath's Lady Lazarus only desires to frighten her love by the horrible figure she presents before she died. Her only solace is that she has spiritual power and her only skill is that she eats men as she breathes air. Plath warns us saying:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair

²⁷<https://genius.com/Carol-ann-duffy-mrs-lazarus-annotated>

And I eat men like air.²⁸

Duffy's title 'Mrs Lazarus' implies that the speaker is only known through her association with Lazarus. In a patriarchal society, hinted to later on in the poem, she's not known as anything other than the wife of Lazarus²⁹.

Mrs. Lazarus is written in form of a dramatic monologue where she narrates her story of losing her beloved husband. She tells us her experience in an agonizing way describing her moments of loneliness after the death of her husband whom she feels his presence in everything around her and recalls her experience with him since she was a fresh bride till he went to his grave." She goes through the formal stages of frenzied grief — a patriarchal expectation — until she becomes accustomed to life without him. After she has found a new man and new contentment, Lazarus is raised from the dead. Unlike the biblical version of the tale, the revived Lazarus is unwanted. He brings his former wife unhappiness and embarrassment.³⁰

The poem is considered as an elegy where the wife mourns the death of her husband who left her to suffer alone in this cruel world. The grief is intensified by being alone in her house, missing him in the cold night, here love is at its peak:

I had grieved.

I had wept for a night and a day
over my loss, ripped the cloth I was married in
from my breasts, howled, shrieked, clawed
at the burial stones until my hands bled, retched
his name over and over again, dead, dead.³¹

But with the passing of time, she starts to date another man – the strong and sexy school teacher with whom she has an affair. "Her choice is interesting. He is 'the schoolteacher', implying respectability and status. Mrs Lazarus, after the pain of grief, chooses wisely and carefully. Yet, there is also implied eroticism in 'the shock of a man's strength under the sleeve of his coat', as if she is sexually aroused by him.³² But

²⁸<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49000/lady-lazarus>

²⁹<https://genius.com/Carol-ann-duffy-mrs-lazarus-annotated>

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²<https://genius.com/Carol-ann-duffy-mrs-lazarus-annotated>

her husband returns again from the dead or probably he was not dead literally, perhaps he was travelling and finally and unexpectedly came back. The sarcastic and humorous attitude of Duffy appears in this incident, the loving wife forgets her husband and loves a new man and suddenly the husband comes back from the world of oblivion:

[He lived](#) I saw the horror on his face.
I heard his mother's crazy song.
I breathed his stench; my bridegroom in his rotting shroud,
moist and dishevelled from the grave's slack chew,
[croaking his cuckold name, disinherited, out of his time](#)³³

In this poem Carol Ann Duffy gives her feminist interpretation to the story of Lazarus who left a widow behind him: should the wife kill herself and die if her husband dies or should she survive and continue living? Duffy is realistic and sarcastic of the traditional people who believe widows should not marry if their husbands die. In her poem, Mrs. Lazarus marries and goes on with her life regardless of what society will say. The reference to 'legend, language' could be Mrs. Lazarus' premonition of what her dead husband might become; a bible story told and retold for two thousand years and beyond. The person left behind, his wife, has been insignificant until Carol Ann Duffy re-interpreted the story in her terms. Predicting that she will be ignored by posterity, Mrs. Lazarus can't, therefore, be criticized for looking for another man.³⁴

This poem was included in one of Duffy's most celebrated book of poems - *The World's Wife*, which received high acclaim from critics. In what *Antioch Review* contributor Jane Satterfield called "masterful subversions of myth and history," the poems in this collection are all told from the points of view of the women behind famous male figures, both real and fictional, including the wives and lovers of Aesop, Pontius Pilate, Faust, Tiresius, Herod, Quasimodo, Lazarus, Sisyphus, Freud, Darwin, and even King Kong. Not all the women are wives, however. For example, one poem is told from Medusa's point of view as she expresses her feelings before being slain by Perseus; "Little Red-Cap" takes the story of Little Red Riding Hood to a new level as a teenage girl is seduced by a "wolf-poet." These fresh perspectives allow Duffy to indulge in a great deal of humor and wit as, for example, Mrs. Aesop grows tired of her husband's constant moralizing, Mrs. Freud complains

³³ibid;

³⁴ibid

about the great psychologist's obsession with organs, Sisyphus's bride is stuck with a workaholic, and Mrs. Lazarus, after finding a new husband, has her life ruined by the return of her formerly dead husband. There are conflicting emotions as well in such poems as 'Mrs. Midas,' in which the narrator is disgusted by her husband's greed, but, at the same time, longs for something she can never have: his physical touch.³⁵ In *The World's Wife*, Duffy tries to reflect her point of view about the wives of famous men in history whom the world did not know or hear their voices before. In one of the distinguished poem in this poem collection is Penelope the wife of Odysseus who was waiting for her husband for many years doing nothing except waiting faithfully for him. The poet in the first stanza describe Penelope's loneliness and her anxiety waiting for Odysseus:

At first, I looked along the road

hoping to see him saunter home
among the olive trees,
a whistle for the dog
who mourned him with his warm head on my knees.

Six months of this
and then I noticed that whole days had passed
without my noticing.

I sorted cloth and scissors, needle, thread,³⁶

Duffy satirizes the idea of a woman waiting for her man, she is doing nothing except expecting his arrival, love here in the traditional myth rotates around the idea of faithfulness and being honest and chaste until her husband comes; but in this poem, Duffy finds an exit and a logical development for woman's wasted life it is work, labour as effort, not giving birth. Here in this poem, the modern Penelope works and earns her living: she can work as artist as sewing and knitting is an art. Here, waiting is useless. It becomes superfluous to a profit and gain concept. Women can survive without men if absence is prolonged and she is an independent and earning her own money. Carol Ann Duffy's aim, here, is to subvert the traditional interpretation by suggesting that Odysseus' return was 'far-too-late' and that Penelope was perfectly 'absorbed' and 'content' without him. The poem is a first person narrative in five nine-line free-verse stanzas. It is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker,

³⁵<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>

³⁶<https://genius.com/Carol-ann-duffy-penelope-annotated>

Penelope, gradually reveals her story and the reader pieces together the deeper implications. The lines are of uneven length to reflect the meaning. The first stanza describes Penelope's sense of loss at the absence of Odysseus until she becomes accustomed to being without him; the second and third stanzas describe her growing interest in sewing, starting with a desire to 'amuse' herself, but then the interest develops until she 'lost herself completely'. Other suitors are an intrusion, until, in the final stanza, her husband's return is 'far-too-late'³⁷.

pursued my needle's leaping fish
to form a river that would never reach the sea.
I tried it. I was picking out
the smile of a woman at the centre
of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content,
most certainly not waiting,
[when I heard a far-too-late familiar tread outside the door.](#)
[I licked my scarlet thread](#)
[and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle's eye once more](#)³⁸.

In the last stanza, the wife does not run towards the door to meet her husband but she is submerged in her work and unwilling to leave it. Here work becomes equal to being independent and satisfied. The irony here is created through the final end and the reaction of the wife. She is no longer anxious to see him or to give him a warm welcome. Duffy negates ironically and sarcastically the proverb which says absence makes heart grows fonder, she breaks the horizon of expectations. For male readers this ending can be a kind of a shock. Sometimes men cannot understand women and women cannot see what a man is doing to her. Alexander Pope has understood that great fire can come from small sparks. Arabella Fermor or 'Belinda' does not understand that love can be harmful if you do not treat your lover well. Pope says 'What dire offence from amorous causes springs/What mighty contests rise from trivial things.'³⁹ Prince Peter is in love with Belinda but she treats him arrogantly, so instead of approaching her softly he cuts a lock from her hair and this is the story of Alexander Pope's epic poem 'The Rape of the Lock'. Hurting women is not only restricted to the raping of her body but also the rape of her emotions and femininity, as embodied in her hair.

³⁷ibid.

³⁸<https://genius.com/Carol-ann-duffy-penelope-annotated>

³⁹<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/pope/alexander/rape/canto1.html#image1>

This trend of writing poetry which shocks the readers is one of the features of the postmodernism tradition where the author tries to give his readers what is unexpected. As a feminist and a liberal artist Duffy always tends to admit that her cause is the fight for women to gain their rights. It is true that she does it artistically but at the same time in straightforward manner. Women have been oppressed until now. Feminists studies say this, and gender studies try very hard to prove that role playing is more important than biological differences among sexes. This is what post-modern poetry also says regarding the relationship between men and women; and this is what Carol Ann Duffy tries to say in her love poems, especially *The World's Wife*. Many readers were not happy when Seamus Heaney dedicated some poems to his wife and Ted Hughes is, in some feminists perspectives, a murderer who killed his wife Sylvia Plath by oppressing her creative talent, putting restrictions on her, and severely editing her poems to his own taste. Carol Ann Duffy is aware of this and she does not submit in life or in poetry to man's authority but writes about love and man-woman's relationship from her own personal point of view, not paying attention to what men will say. Even when she became the Poet Laureate, she did not restrict herself to the 'white gloves' society. As it appears in her poems, especially those from *The World's Wife*, she remains faithful to the case and cause of women as lovers and mothers.

Duffy builds on the tradition of love poetry which is well known among poets in the world of poetry but, as one who tries to elaborate her craft, she works on adding to this tradition with her freshness and feminine power. She manages the rare feat of building on the traditions of forebears with allusions to Shakespeare, Verlaine or, in the new poems, Yeats, while stirring and shaking the emotions with muscular, unpretentious force. Pop and Hollywood clichés are stood on their heads as an antidote to future folly in poems such as 'To the Unknown Lover' and 'Here's not looking at you, kid'. A collage of famous lines, from Wyatt and Sidney to Donne, forms something fresh and strange in 'The Love Poem'; and Duffy's alertness to the erotic moods of place and period adds an extra charge, for example, in the covert Victorian mistress-maid yearnings of 'Warming her Pearls' or the deft evocation of modern affairs in 'Text': "I tend the mobile now/ Like an injured bird".⁴⁰

⁴⁰<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/love-poems-by-carol-ann-duffy-5521594.html>

Women ,Love and Gender:

Throughout her career Carol Ann Duffy has been interested in depicting women in all their conditions. She cares about women and her poetic voice is very clear. She echoes the Greek female poet Sappho who was a pioneer, giving marginalized Greek women a voice to be heard. Sappho is not only one of the few women poets we know of from antiquity, but also is one of the greatest lyric poets from any age. Most of her poems were meant to be sung by one person to the accompaniment of the lyre (hence the name, "lyric" poetry). Rather than addressing the gods or recounting epic narratives such as those of Homer, Sappho's verses speak from one individual to another. They speak simply and directly to the 'bittersweet' difficulties of love. Many critics and readers alike have responded to the personal tone and urgency of her verses, and an abundance of translations of her fragments are available today.⁴¹

In her Book *Feminine Gospels* 2005, Carol Ann Duffy explores "the myriad components of women's lives and loves through the crystallizing prism of poetry. Sometimes erotic and personal, sometimes historical and grand, sometimes witty and full of surprises, the poems in *Feminine Gospels* are all beautifully crafted works that are as varied in style as the poems in Duffy's earlier acclaimed volume *The World's Wife*. Together, they challenge and entertain as they explore the fullness of the female condition through their author's unique poetic voice."⁴²

In most of her poems, Duffy tries to control her emotions avoiding being a confessional poet who uses her personal life to write a confessional poetry like Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton did before her, leading them to be anatomized and stripped in front of their readers and scholars. She tries to strike a balance between the private and the public. In one of her poems 'Warming her Pearls' the maid tries to hide her love for her mistress by creating a psychological barrier between themselves. She has tried to avoid criticism from one of the Movement Fathers Philip Larkin who did not approve of confessional poetry. Adam O'Riordan, in a review in the *Telegraph* of *Love Poems* by Duffy, observes that " Larkin once dismissed the confessional poets - such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, who emphasized and dramatized the often messy details of their personal lives – telling an interviewer that it was 'the big, sane boys' who won the medals. Duffy seems to have taken up the challenge of bridging the two; combining the charge and intensity of

⁴¹<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/sappho>

⁴²<https://www.amazon.com/Feminine-Gospels-Carol-Ann-Duffy>

confessional poetry with the directness and lyricism embodied in Larkin's tradition.⁴³

Sarcasm reaches a peak in some of Duffy's poems especially in her short poem 'Mrs. Darwin'; when the wife likens her husband to a lower creature which is the chimpanzee. She humiliates him equating him to an animal, maybe she is being ironic about history trying to assert his theory of evolution which claims that man originated and developed from lower species,

7 April 1852
Went to the Zoo.
Isaid to Him—
Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of you.

She ironically turns her husband's theories against him, by likening him to one of the chimpanzees in the Zoo. Her remark is dry and understated. Note also that all the nouns are capitalised, implying that his theories are important and revolutionary — yet at the same time ridiculous. She not only deflates the importance of mankind, but also indicates the self-importance of Mr. Darwin.⁴⁴

Love, for Duffy, is not platonic. She goes deeper into the erotic arena between man and woman satirizing the man-woman relationship in bed by referring to the sexual organs and how men envy women and women envy men for what they do not have. In her poem 'Frau Freud' Duffy reaches the peak of sarcasm towards such the famous male psychologist whose theory of libido has transformed the relationship between sexes and the theory of love.

It has been noticed that Carol Ann Duffy represents love in a sarcastic way. She doesn't do that because she despises love but she tries to be realistic about the nature of love and lovers. For her, the idea of love is not restricted to feelings - it is more than that or one sex only. Men can ignore women, believing that men have more genius than women, but what is true is that women understand how their men and lovers behave. For example, in her book *The World's Wife*, she gives a voice to famous men's wives of whom we did not know so much about, revealing insubtle language and ironic remarks the sharpness of these wives. The best

⁴³<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7206178/Love-Poems-by-Carol-Ann-Duffy-review.html>

⁴⁴<https://genius.com/10422985>

example is Mrs. Darwin who believes that her husband is no different from a chimpanzee.

Moreover most of Duffy's love poems represent a queer idea about love which does not meet the expectations of her readers. This is due to her belief that relationships between sexes should be on an equal footing. 'Valentine' is a good example of insulting love; Medusa is a new concept of a woman's beauty after she has been deformed by jealousy and neglect by her lover. The love poetry of Carol Ann Duffy is located within the postmodern where everything is deconstructed and reevaluated in a different sense. Parallel to this issue, there is a preoccupation and obsession with the role of woman and how society perceives them. For Carol Ann Duffy, women, from a gender viewpoint, are not restricted by being biologically different but by to the role they choose to play and how they narrate themselves within a vast reality, controlled by prejudice and lack of recognition.

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Like Philip Larkin in his day, Duffy is both a poet respected by many academics and teachers and widely read and enjoyed by children and adults. This collection of essays on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy approaches and explores her work from a variety of literary theoretical perspectives, including feminism, masculinity, national identity and post-structuralism. This anthology situates Duffy's poems in relation to debates about the state, value and social relevance of contemporary British poetry. Issues addressed include: why Duffy's poetry is so popular; the importance of national identity to her writing; whether Duffy's work is part of a feminist tradition of writing; and whether her work is anathema to men. Comprehensive, engaging and accessible, this text should be of value to scholars, teachers and students in the fields on contemporary poetry and critical studies. (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Choosing-Tough-Words-Poetry-Carol/dp/0719063019>)

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