



War Photographer KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

Context – *War Photographer* was written by Carlo Ann Duffy, and was published in 1985.

Carol Ann Duffy – Carol Ann Duffy (1955-present) is a Scottish author and poet. She is Professor of Poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University, and has been the Poet Laureate since 2009. She is the first woman, Scot, and LGBT poet to hold the position. Duffy wrote the poem due to her friendship with a war photographer. She was intrigued with a particular challenge that war photographers faced – recording horrific events without being able to do anything to help the subjects.



War Photographers – War photography involves photographing armed conflict and the effect of this on people and places. War photographers often have to place themselves in harms way, and are sometimes injured or killed themselves attempting to capture the required images/ getting images out of the war arena. Photojournalistic tradition (and other factors, e.g. differing cultures, etc.) suggests that war photographers should not influence what is being captured.



Conflicts mentioned in the Poem – ‘Belfast’ seemingly refers to ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland in the late 20th Century, in which more than 3,500 people were killed. ‘Beirut’ may be referring The Siege of Beirut, which resulted from a breakdown of cease-fire in the 1982 Lebanon War. ‘Phnom Penh’ refers to the Cambodian capital, which was heavily affected in the Cambodian genocide between 1975 and 1979, which killed approximately 1.3 to 3 million Cambodians.



Dangers for War Photographers – In the modern day, journalists and war photographers are protected by the international conventions of armed warfare, yet are still often considered targets by opposing groups. Sometimes this is the case in order for a group to show their hatred of the other, whilst in other cases photographers are targetted to prevent the facts from being widely shared. For example, in the Iraqi War between 2003 and 2009, 36 photographers were abducted or killed.



Language/Structural Devices

Religious Analogy – Duffy creates an analogy between the photographer developing his images and a priest conducting a sermon – fuelling the analogy with a number of vocabulary choices related to the semantic field of religion – e.g. ‘ordered rows’, ‘mass’, ‘priest’, ‘church’, ‘red light’ and ‘ghost.’ The analogy is apt as both the war photographer and the priest have to deal with death and suffering on a frequent basis, and in a sensitive manner. Furthermore, the church and the darkroom both function as a ‘sanctuary.’

Varied Verbs– Varied verbs are used to support Duffy’s understated imagery throughout the poem. These verbs inform the reader of the manner in which actions take place. Whilst Duffy does not directly describe the victims of war, the use of varied verbs to describe the subjects’ actions (and the actions of those close to them) influences the reader towards forming their own images. Some key examples of this are the ‘running’ children, the ‘twist’ of the half-formed ghost and the ‘cries’ of the man’s wife.

Quote: “as though this were a church and he a priest preparing to intone a Mass.”

Quote: “A stranger’s features faintly start to twist before his eyes.”

Double Meanings and Metaphors – Duffy uses a number of words and phrases that contain both surface level and deeper level meanings. This helps to show the pain buried beneath the surface of the war photographer’s consciousness. An example is the ‘ordered rows’ to describe the spools – on a deeper level this gives the reader an image of the rows of coffins of dead soldiers being lined up neatly.

Alliteration and Sibilance – Duffy uses these techniques to recreate the horrific sounds of war, creating an undertone of violence even in the calmer moments of the poem. For example, the alliteration of the harsh ‘B’ sound in ‘Belfast. Beirut’, in addition to the repeated ‘S’ sound through ‘spools’, ‘suffering’, and ‘set’ in line 2 serve to emphasise the intensity and the pain of war.

Quote: “with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.”

Quote: “Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.”

Form/Structure – The poem has a consistent, regular form throughout. There are 4 stanzas, each containing 6 lines of similar length. There is also a consistent rhyme scheme (ABBCDD) in each stanza. This regular structure represents the war photographer’s attempts to find some sense of order in amongst the chaos of war – e.g. ordering the photos.

Pronouns – Third person pronouns are used throughout the poem to describe the war photographer, for example ‘he,’ and ‘his.’ ‘He’ is not named. This is representative of the fact that the war photographer must hold a certain detachment from his work. The use of ‘they’ to describe the people of Rural England, shows how distant he feels from them.

Quote: “From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where he earns his living and they do not care.”

Quote: “He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays beneath his hands.”

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Remembering Victims – The war photographer feels increasingly separated from those in his home country, who are indifferent to the pain and suffering of the subjects that his images present. Unlike them, he has the suffering of the victims etched into his memory. To those reading from afar, the victims become mere statistics.



The Horror of War – Duffy’s skillful imagery helps to depict the terrible pain and suffering of those in conflict. Unlike the graphic images that we are considered to have become desensitised to, Duffy often leaves the reader of the poem to create their own images of horror – for example with the dying man, the only clues that the reader is given are the ‘twisted’ features and the ‘cries’ of his wife.



Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	In his dark room 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.	The poem opens in the photographer’s darkroom, which is a quiet and sombre place. The opening stanza is filled with religious imagery (e.g. ‘as though this were a church’, ‘priest’, ‘mass’, ‘ordered rows’) The religious imagery demonstrates how, like a priest, the photographer too often deals with death and suffering. The reader is given the impression that the darkroom is a sanctuary for the photographer – just as the church is for a religious person. It is clear that the photographs are of horrific events (the cities mentioned are associated with atrocities) and the line ‘all flesh is grass’ emphasises the fragility of human life.
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2	7	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.	The opening line ‘he has a job to do’ is suggestive of the idea that revisiting these images is something that he is forced to face for work, rather than doing so for pleasure. ‘Solutions slop in trays’ takes on a double meaning – not only the onomatopoeia of the chemicals being used, but also the hope that these photographs may aid the resolution of the conflicts that they depict. ‘Did not tremble then’ suggests that the photographer is forced to distance himself from the subject of his photographs whilst working – he can let his guard down only when he has returned to ‘Rural England.’ The remainder of the stanza is devoted to juxtaposing the ‘pain’ felt in Rural England and in warzones. It is implied that pain in the former can often be appeased by sunny weather, and yet in the latter children have the danger of landmines when they play. ‘Running children in nightmare heat’ evokes memories of notorious war photos from the Vietnam War of children running with napalm burns.
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3	13	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.	The opening line of the stanza creates drama and suspense – the photographer is no longer in control of the photograph developing. The use of the interesting verb ‘twist’ give the reader an image of pain and suffering, whilst the idea of a ‘half formed ghost’ once again creates a dual meaning – on one level the photograph is only have formed and so still faint, and another it implies that the subject of the photograph was somebody who was dying. The photographer remembers how the wife was crying, and although he could not speak the same language of her, sought approval through looks. The analogy with a priest is once again utilised here, as the photographer is forced to deal with people and their families sensitively in their dying moments. The interesting verb ‘stained’ suggests that the blood has formed a mark that will be difficult to remove, both physically from the ground and psychologically from his memory.
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4	19	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.	The ‘hundred agonies’ that the photographer has witnessed contrasts with the ‘five or six’ that the editor will pick out – demonstrating that the suffering of war dwarfs what is heard/seen in the media at home. ‘Five or six’ also suggests nonchalance from the editor – suggestive of the lack of compassion that society has for the subjects of these photographs. This idea is expanded as the reader is considered – they may feel some short-lived emotions when confronted with the pictures, but it will not significantly alter the course of their day – which is made to seem relatively trivial and luxurious. As the photographer departs again, the use of ‘they’ shows his sense of separateness from his countrymen – his pictures will make little difference.
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Poems for Comparison

Charge of the Light Brigade/ Poppies	<i>War Photographer</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>remembering victims</u> .
Exposure/ Out of the Blue	<i>War Photographer</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the theme of the <u>horror of war/conflict</u> .

Words from the Poet

“Poetry isn’t something outside of life; it is at the centre of life. We turn to poetry to help us to understand or cope with our most intense experiences...Poetry has changed since the days of Larkin – he’s a good poet, but poetry has changed for the better. It’s not a bunch of similarly educated men – it’s many voices, many styles. The edge has become the centre...Poetry can’t lie... The poem tells the truth but it is not a documentary” Interview in *The Times* (2009)

