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The First Female British Poet Laureate,

Carol Ann Duffy

—a Biographical Sketch and Interpretation of her Poem

‘The Thames, London 2012’

Hiroko Tomida

Introduction

Although the name of Carol Ann Duffy has been known to the British public since she was appointed Britain’s Poet Laureate in May 2009, she remains an obscure figure outside Britain, especially in Japan.¹ Her radio and television interviews are accessible, and the collections of her poems are easily obtainable. However, there are only a few books, exploring her poetry from a wide range of literary and theoretical perspectives.² The rest of the publications are short articles, which appeared mostly in literary magazines and newspapers.³ Indeed her biographical sketches and analyses of her poems, especially the recent ones, are very limited in number. Therefore the main objectives of this article are to introduce her biography and to analyse one of her recent poems relating to British history.

This article will be divided into two sections. In the first part, Duffy’s upbringing, and family and educational backgrounds, and her careers as a poet, playwright, literary critic and an academic will be examined. The activities involved in her role as Poet Laureate and her other literary achievements will be assessed. The article will discuss her contributions to poetry teaching and her devotion to the writing and appreciation of poems. In the second part I will focus on one of her most complicated and most recent poems entitled ‘The Thames, London 2012’, which she composed to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II’s Diamond Jubilee. This article will discuss key features of the poem, investigate her ideas in it, explore her inspiration, and then evaluate it.

Part 1: Carol Ann Duffy’s Biography

The British Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy has a very humble family background.

In 1955 she was born into a Roman Catholic family as the first child of Scottish Frank Duffy and Irish Mary Black in the Gorbals, a deprived area of Glasgow. They had four sons and one daughter, and were typically working class in lacking higher formal education. Her father worked as an electrical fitter, and was a leftist, being a trade unionist and a strong supporter of the Labour Party. She has inherited his left-wing political interest, and has always supported the Labour Party.

When she was 6 years old, her family moved from Scotland to Stafford in the West Midlands where she grew up. She received a Catholic education, attending Saint Austin's Roman Catholic Primary School, St. Joseph's Convent School, and Stafford Girls' High School. Her upbringing was very much working class, and there was little literature around the house, which she later recalled.⁴ However, from an early age she was a prodigious reader and developed a passionate interest in English literature. She produced poems from the age of 11 and wished to become a writer. To satisfy her voracious appetite for books, she collected her four brothers' library cards, so that she could take out as many books as possible from her local public library.⁵

She was inspired by several English schoolteachers, two of whom discovered her literary talent and encouraged her to pursue her interest. June Scriven, an English teacher at St. Joseph's Convent School was particularly helpful, sending Duffy's poems to *Outposts*, a publisher of pamphlets.⁶ The poems caught the eye of the maverick poetry bookseller and publisher Bernard Stone who published some of them. As a result, her career as a poet was launched at the age of 15. Stone later became her good friend and published several of her poetry pamphlets over the years.⁷

When she was 16 years old, she met Adrian Henri at one of his band's gigs in Stafford.⁸ Henri, a British poet, painter and musician, who had been based in Liverpool, was then 39 years old and known as one of the three poets in the best-selling anthology *The Mersey Sound* as well as the founder of the poetry-rock group, the Liverpool Scene.⁹ He first came to prominence as a poet in the 1960s, and pioneered the idea that poetry could open itself to working-class language and landscapes, which many people found genuinely liberating.¹⁰ After about one year of friendship with him, she began to live with him. Her meeting with him was certainly an eye-opening experience for Duffy who had lived in a confined little market town until then, which she described as follows:

Adrian [Henri] was a very charismatic presence and a very generous man. He came from this other world which was very different to my quiet little market

town. I was used to going to church, working in a hairdresser's on Saturday and writing my poems.¹¹

She and Henri were together for about 12 years until 1982. She decided to go to Liverpool University to be near him, and was accepted to study philosophy there. No doubt she was highly inspired and influenced by him. As she has said elsewhere, 'He gave me confidence. He was great. It was all poetry and sex, very heady and he was never faithful. He thought poets had a duty to be unfaithful.'¹² Her poem 'Little Red Cap' which was later published in the collections of her poems entitled *The World's Wife* (1999) is commonly believed to be about their relationship. The poem in question now follows:

Little Red-Cap

At childhood's end, the houses petered out
into playing fields, the factory, allotments
kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men,
the silent railway line, the hermit's caravan,
till you came at last to the edge of the woods.
It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf.

He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud,
in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,
red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears
he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!
In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me,
sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink.

my first. You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry.
The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods,
away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place
lit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake,
my stockings ripped to shreds,
scraps of red from my blazer
snagged on twig and branch, murder clues.¹³

Duffy cast herself as Little Red Riding Hood and Henri as the Wolf. 'Little Red-Cap'

takes the story of Little Red Riding Hood to a new level as a teenage girl who is seduced by a 'wolf-poet'. 'Little Red Cap' implies that she set her cap at him for both personal and professional reasons. Henri said of Duffy that she 'seemed to arrive fully formed'. She was obviously talented, and was always going to make it as soon as she found the right direction.¹⁴ He introduced her to surrealism and performance poetry.¹⁵

According to Duffy, she had always wanted many children from a young age, but Henri, who was much older, didn't,¹⁶ so instead she focused on her literary activities. Liverpool made a deep impression on her. While at university, two of her plays were performed at the Liverpool Playhouse. She also wrote a pamphlet entitled *Fifth Last Song*. At the age of 19 she published her first poetry collection *Fleshweathercock* in 1974.

Following her graduation, she first worked as a game show and joke writer for Granada Television. After she moved to London, she held a C. Day-Lewis Fellowship from 1982 to 1984, becoming a writer-in-residence in schools in the East End of London.¹⁷ Her rise to literary celebrity began with her winning the Poetry Society's National Poetry Competition with 'Whoever She Was' in 1983, and she finally became a full-time writer in 1985.

Duffy was highly productive in the 1980s and early 1990s, publishing many collections of her poems, including *Standing Female Nude* (1985), *Selling Manhattan* (1987), *The Other Country* (1990), *William and the Ex-Prime Minister* (1992), *Mean Time* (1993) and *Selected Poems* (1994). She took residencies in East End schools in London, gave readings, and from 1988 to 1989 she worked as a poetry critic for *The Guardian*, the liberal to left-wing broadsheet in Britain read by many upper-middle class Labour Party supporters.¹⁸ She also became the editor of the quarterly literary magazine, *Ambit* which was founded in 1959 by Dr Martin Box and which published poetry, fiction and art.

After 15 years on the London poetry scene, in 1995 she decided to become pregnant.¹⁹ At the age of nearly 40 she had a daughter Ella with Peter Benson although they never lived together. He is an English writer who has published several novels and short stories and written screenplays and radio plays.²⁰ She stated that she did take a very conscious decision to try and have a child, and talked about the birth of her daughter as follows:

The minute I had Ella it was like walking into this wonderful new world. Everything changed. My previous life just floated away like an empty ship. Having her was better than anything, certainly better than writing poetry, but

then I think any parent would say that.²¹

She decided to raise her child without any involvement from Peter Benson. In 1996 she moved to Manchester to embark on her academic career, taking up a lectureship in poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University, where she is currently a professor of contemporary poetry.²² Although she was heterosexual to begin with, she later realized that she was attracted to both men and women. She developed a lesbian relationship with Jackie Kay, an award-winning Scottish writer of fiction, poetry and plays, who was born to a Scottish mother and Nigerian father, and adopted by a white Scottish couple.²³

Duffy and Kay met on an Arvon creative writing course, perhaps the poetry world's premier inspirational space, run by the Arvon Foundation, a charity that seeks to develop the perfect environment for creativity and creative writing to thrive.²⁴ Christina Patterson, the director of the Poetry Society, who knew them well, described their relationship as follows:

They are both exceptional. As a partnership it seems a very enviable one: it's a household bursting with intense literary activity, happiness, and pleasure of all kinds; they're both exceptionally warm and kind and natural people.²⁵

Duffy and Kay brought up Ella together in a house they shared in West Didsbury. Although Duffy was in a relationship with Kay for many years, their relationship finally came to an end. Duffy is now single and describes herself as a single mother.²⁶

Duffy continued to publish collections of her poems such as *The Pamphlet* (1998), *The World's Wife: Poems* (1999), *Feminine Gospels* (2002), *New Selected Poems* (2004), *Rapture* (2005) and *Love Poems* (2009). She also edited several poetry anthologies including *Hand in Hand: An Anthology of Love Poems* (2001), *Out of Fashion: An Anthology of Poems* (2004), *Overheard on a Saltmarsh: Poets' Favourite Poems* (2004) and *Answering Back* (2007).

After the birth of her daughter, she began to produce plays, poetry and books designed for children. These books included *The Oldest Girl in the World* (1999), *Underwater Farmyard* (2002), *Collected Grimm Tales* with Tim Supple (2003), *The Good Child's Guide to Rock'N' Roll* (2003), *Doris the Giant* (2004), *Moon Zoo* (2005), *The Lost Happy Endings* (2006), *The Tear Thief* (2007) and *The Princess's Blankets* (2009). She was awarded the Signal Children's Poetry Prize in 1999.

Duffy is said to be one of the best-liked poets in Britain, gaining popularity with

a wide range of people, especially young students. This is partly because she has been trying very hard to make her poetry more accessible to students. She has been one of the Poetry Society's Poets in Schools, encouraged younger poets on the Arvon Foundation courses, and took part in GCSE Poetry Live at the Poetry Society with Simon Armitage in 2004.²⁷ She has visited many schools and universities to give poetry readings and lectures on poetry.

Her readings have inspired not only students but also the parents, as can be seen in this comment by Mrs Lenten who accompanied her son to Duffy's poetry reading at Leicester University in November 2012. Mrs Lenten recalled the literary event as follows:

Both I and my son who is studying A level English at school attended Duffy's poetry event held at Leicester University. Her poetry reading was most powerful and moving and captured the audience's imagination and heart. After the reading, she began to talk about her poems in a most eloquent and confident manner, which was followed by a question and answer session. We thoroughly enjoyed the event, which had such a great impact on my son that he decided to study creative writing at university. Even myself, who had hardly read poems before, developed much interest in reading poems.²⁸

As this episode demonstrates, Duffy was successful in promoting enjoyment in reading and composing poems through her public activities. Indeed collections of her poems such as *Mean Time* and *Feminine Gospels*, have been included in the curricula and have been studied at British schools at GCSE and A level. Just as J. K. Rowling re-vitalised many children's interest in reading fiction, it is often claimed that Duffy's poetry readings in schools assisted in a revival of poetry reading and writing among teenagers. She also wanted to convey her significant messages that 'the power of poems is undeniable and universal, and poetry writing is the closest we can get to expressing the essence of the soul, and it's a therapeutic way of bringing our deepest thoughts and feelings forward into consciousness'.²⁹

Moreover much of her poetry directly addresses her readers, which greatly helps to draw their attention. Her poetry often uses 'the language of everyday speech in the service of plain speaking', which enables even ordinary people who hardly read poems before to understand and appreciate her poems, as seen in Mrs Lenten's case. Her use of dramatic monologue shows 'her ability to create identities through subtle shifts of irony'.³⁰ Duffy's poems appeal especially to women since 'her poetry reminds us that the lives of women are full of emotion, significance and fun'.³¹ It is

also significant to note that the poetry world in Britain had been a very male-dominated circle and female poets in Britain were still being described rather condescendingly as 'poetesses' in the early 1980s. However, the Poetry Society's National Poetry Competition which Duffy won in 1983 changed not only Duffy's life and career as a poet but also the poetry world itself. Her work broke new ground in the field of poetry, and 'helped open up possibilities for generations of female writers following on'. Feminist insights are now clichés to all young women growing up and 'men's perceptions of women' are as integral to English GCSE and A level as the poems of Duffy.³² The solution of the breaking-wave generation (represented by Duffy) was to make questioning of the maleness of the tradition, and her own femaleness in relation to it, central to her work.³³

Furthermore Duffy is a poet of extraordinary versatility in terms of the topics of her poetry and her styles. As Fiona Sampson points out, Duffy modernises both the tone and register of her poems, writing in so many different registers, from the sardonic to the sexy.³⁴ Most of her poems are 'sophisticatedly funny, feminist, wryly lyrical', and have an earthy intelligence.³⁵ They sometimes reveal emotional and cultural insight. Eavan Boland described Duffy as 'being one of the freshest and bravest talents to emerge in British poetry for years'. Duffy addressed public issues of importance. She stated that 'I like to think that I'm a sort of poet for our times. My shout. Know what I mean?'³⁶ She stuck to her own principle and has been tackling contemporary topics such as oppression, gender, racial issues, abuses of power and violence which interest the general public in her poems. Regarding gender, *The World's Wife* (1999), a collection of poems, is thematic and notable for having every poem written in the voice of a wife of a great man in history, fiction or mythology, looking at history through the eyes of women. It caught the imagination of readers and caused a sensation. It sold more than 35,000 copies, making Duffy one of poetry's biggest sellers.³⁷ She fully established her reputation as a poet who could speak to the wider general public. *Standing Female Nude* brought together 'an anti-established voice', and can be taken as a symbolic reference to her status as a poet at the time, in that she was laying her soul bare by standing up for feminism in a male-dominated world. Talking about racial issues, she composed a poem 'Stephen Lawrence' dedicated to Stephen who was murdered in a racial attack in April 1993. She also wrote a poem entitled 'Virgil's Bees' in response to the 2009 climate change conference in Copenhagen.

Among her many poems, her love poems with a pure, Yeatsian lilt are the most popular. Duffy pointed out that the love poems have formed a considerable part of her own work and many of them are highly autobiographical.³⁸ For example, her

collection of love poems *Rapture*, the ecstatic sequence of love poems about the rise and fall of a lesbian love affair is supposed to be based on Duffy's lesbian relationship with Jackie Kay.³⁹

Because of her popularity and contributions to promoting poetry, she has received many awards. She won a Scottish Arts Council Award in 1986 for *Standing Female Nude*, the Somerset Maugham Award in 1988 for *Selling Manhattan*, the Whitbread Poetry Award in 1993 for *Mean Time*, the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2005 for *Rapture* (2005) and the Costa Book Award in 2011 for *The Bees* (2011).⁴⁰ These are some of the most prestigious awards given to a poet.

She was also awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 1995 and a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in 2002 for her services to poetry.⁴¹ In 1999 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the 'senior literary organisation in Britain'. In May 2009 she was appointed Britain's Poet Laureate, and the post will be held for a fixed ten-year period. She was nominated as one of the 100 most powerful women in the United Kingdom in 2013 by 'Woman's Hour', a popular BBC Radio 4 programme.⁴² Among all her literary achievements her position as Poet Laureate is the most significant and prominent one.⁴³ The post's previous holders include the greatest poets in the English language such as William Wordsworth, Alfred Tennyson, John Betjeman and Ted Hughes. The great majority of them were graduates from Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The first woman to be considered for the laureateship was said to be Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1850 when William Wordsworth died, but the vacant position was filled by Tennyson.⁴⁴

Why was Duffy chosen to be Poet Laureate? There was a general feeling that it was time for a woman to be appointed. She is one of the most prominent female poets currently working in Britain. Indeed her work is popular even among young people because her poetry is accessible and has a rhythmic, spoken quality that readers enjoy. She has enhanced the writing and reading of poetry. Moreover she has been an ardent supporter of the Labour Party since her childhood under her father's influence. When she was chosen to be Poet Laureate, the Labour Party was in power. Duffy, the Scottish-born single mother, raising a child with her lesbian partner and from a working-class background with parents who were radical Labour supporters, was an ideal choice for a Labour Party keen to promote party policy of creating a more egalitarian society, with no discrimination against women, immigrants, lesbians and gays.

On her appointment in May 2009, Gordon Brown, then Prime Minister, congratulated her on being the first woman to hold the post, and gave the following speech to explain why she deserved the position.

Poetry as an art form has inspired, excited and comforted people of all ages and backgrounds for so many centuries and Carol Ann follows in a tradition set by some of the most distinguished writers in the English language. She is a truly brilliant modern poet who has stretched our imaginations by putting the whole range of human experiences into lines that capture the emotions perfectly and I wish her well for her ten-year term.⁴⁵

In 'Woman's Hour' on BBC Radio 4 Duffy stated that she had thought 'long and hard' about accepting the offer of the post.⁴⁶ She continued, 'The decision to take it came purely because they hadn't had a woman. I look on it as recognition of the great women poets we now have writing, like Alice Oswald'.⁴⁷ She also said that she hoped to use the position 'to contribute to people's understanding of what poetry can do, and where it can be found'.⁴⁸

Her first official work as Poet Laureate was the poem entitled 'Politics' which commented on the corrosiveness of the MPs' expenses scandal.⁴⁹ Since then she has written 'Last Post', commemorating the deaths of Henry Allingham and Harry Patch, two of the last surviving British veterans to fight in the First World War, and 'Achilles', commenting on the popular British football player David Beckham's injured foot.⁵⁰ In December 2009 she wrote 'The Twelve Days of Christmas', a reworking of the traditional carol of the same name, which included attacks on bankers and politicians. The poem also deals with the war in Afghanistan and society's obsession with celebrity.⁵¹

In the past, Poet Laureates were glorified courtiers, and had a duty to write flattering odes to mark not only significant royal occasions such as coronations, weddings, funerals and the Sovereign's birthdays, but also banal, common occurrences in the royal family.⁵² However, nowadays the position is purely honorary and entails no specific duties. It is up to the individual Poet Laureate to decide whether or not to write verse for significant national occasions or royal events although there is still an expectation for the holder to do so. Indeed previous holders of the post of Poet Laureate have maintained the tradition of delivering official verse for major royal events, including weddings, birthdays, christenings, and funerals.

Duffy's predecessor Andrew Motion, who admitted that he found it 'very difficult' to write royal poems, nevertheless did so to commemorate the 100th birthday of the Queen Mother in 2000, her death in 2002, Prince William's 21st birthday in 2003, Prince Charles's marriage to Camilla Parker-Bowles in 2005 and the Queen's 80th birthday in 2006.⁵³

Prior to her appointment in 1999 Duffy said, 'I will not write a poem for Prince

Edward and Sophie' (the Queen's third son and his wife). 'No self-respecting poet should have to'.⁵⁴ On her appointment as Poet Laureate in May 2009, Duffy stated that she would 'ignore' writing official verse for a royal event if she was not moved by it.⁵⁵ She stuck to her principle and did not write a poem to mark the engagement of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in 2010. Afterwards however, Duffy's attitude towards the Royal Family seemed to soften and she said that there are 'echoes to be found between poetry and monarchy, in that both have the ability to transform the ordinary into the magical'.⁵⁶ When Prince William married Catherine Middleton in April 2011, Duffy wrote a 46 line poem *Rings* for their wedding, although the poem celebrates the rings found in nature and does not specifically mention the couple's names.⁵⁷ When their first child George (born on 24 July 2013) and their second child Charlotte Elizabeth Diana (born on 2 May 2015) were born, Duffy did not write an ode to celebrate their birth and christening, despite the general public's expectations.⁵⁸

Although Duffy is not a royalist, she feels warmth towards the Queen, for whom she is happy to compose poems.⁵⁹ In 2012 she composed three poems closely related to the Queen to celebrate two national events which were of great importance to British history and culture. When the London Olympics were held in summer 2012, Duffy wrote an inspiring poem entitled 'Translating the British, 2012' to mark the Olympics, referring to the Queen's formal contribution to opening the Games and paying tribute to Britain's new sporting heroes and heroines.⁶⁰

In 2012 Britain also celebrated the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, the 60th anniversary of the coronation of Elizabeth II. The Diamond Jubilee weekend in early June was a national celebration. There was a Service of Thanksgiving at St Paul's Cathedral and a carriage procession through the streets to Buckingham Palace. One of the main events was the Thames River Pageant. The Queen's Diamond Jubilee was such an important royal event that Duffy wrote two poems, 'The Crown' and 'The Thames, London 2012', to mark this major historical occasion.⁶¹

Since her appointment as Poet Laureate, apart from writing official poems for royal events, Duffy has continued to work tirelessly, producing many poems dealing with a wide range of themes including gender issues, contemporary culture, social inequality and current issues, in order to 'increase the public profile of poetry'. Collections of her poems such as *The Bees* (2011), *The Christmas Truce* (2011) and *Wenceslas: A Christmas Poem* (2012) have been published. In 2014 the Scottish-born Duffy wrote 'September 2014' for *The Guardian* on the morning after the Scottish independence referendum.⁶² Her latest collection *Ritual Lighting* (2014) was published 'to mark the halfway point of her laureateship', and contains 16 poems on

diverse subjects including the Icelandic volcanic ash-cloud of 2010, her father's death in 2011 and the riots in August 2011.⁶³

Moreover, Duffy is on the move throughout the year, giving her readings and public lectures at numerous literary and poetry festivals, British universities and schools in Britain. She has been involved in new projects to promote poetry. For example, in 2010 she approached The Wordsworth Trust and recommended a literary weekend dedicated to women's poems, which started The Dorothy Wordsworth Festival of Women's Poetry.⁶⁴ This annual festival, which includes poetry readings, talks, workshops and conversations, has been successfully held for the past three years. Duffy herself has participated in it, giving poetry readings. She has responded to many such public events over the six years of her tenure as Poet Laureate.⁶⁵

Through her educational activities, she hopes to recruit poets of the next generation, and has been helping to generate commissions for poets. She has already created new prizes. In 2009 she assisted in setting up The Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry. The £5,000 prize is personally donated by Duffy, from the annual honorarium the Poet Laureate traditionally receives from the Queen.⁶⁶ She also spearheaded a new poetry competition for schools, named *Anthologies*, which is administered by the Poetry Book Society in 2011. Her commitment to the encouragement of reading and writing poetry deserves wide public attention, and her achievements as the first British female Poet Laureate are remarkable.

Part 2: Interpretation and Analysis of Duffy's Poem 'The Thames, London 2012'

In addition to her work helping to promote the role of poetry amongst the general public, Duffy has continued to produce a wide range of poems for the past three decades. Whereas the majority of these poems have been interpreted and analysed by academics and literary critics, little has been written about her more recent poems. Among them, 'The Thames, London 2012', written to commemorate the Thames River Pageant, a historical event of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, is perhaps the most significant because the poem demonstrates her versatile poetical skills and her extensive understanding of both British history and earlier poetry.

When it was first published, British newspapers commented only briefly on it. So far, there seems to be no comprehensive assessment, possibly because it is a complete poem which requires interpretation of its meaning and depth of analysis. This allows us to examine the literary qualities that she displays, her terms of reference, her sense of history, and the ways these are conjoined in her writing.

The poem appeared in *Jubilee Lines: 60 Poets for 60 Years* which was edited by Duffy.⁶⁷ The book offers a noteworthy portrayal of Britain and the times in which British people have lived since 1953 when the Queen's coronation service took place in Westminster Abbey. It was a collection of sixty poems composed by 60 contemporary poets who wrote about each of the sixty years of her Majesty's reign between 1953 and 2012. The editor Duffy did an excellent job, bringing together an impressively wide range of sixty poets. Acclaimed poets such as Simon Armitage, Duffy's ex-partner Jackie Kay, and former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion are included together with some younger, talented poets. They wrote related, short poems which were chronologically ordered.⁶⁸ Duffy's Diamond Jubilee poem 'The Thames, London 2012' was the last in the collection. The poem now follows:

The Thames, London 2012

History as water, I lie back, remember it all.
You could say I drink to recall; run softly
till you end your song. I reflect. There was a whale
in me; a King's daughter livid in a boat
A severed head

fell from its spike, splashed.

There was *Fire* –
birds flailed in me with burning wings –
Ice – a whole ox roasting where I froze, frost fair –
Fog – four months sunless, moonless, spooked by ships –
Flood – I flowed into Westminster Hall
where lawyers rowed in wherries, worried –
Blitz – the sky was war; I filmed it. Cut.
I held the *Marchioness*.

My salmon fed apprentices
until I choked on sewage; my foul breath
shut Parliament.

There was lament
at every stroke of every oar
which dragged the virgin's barge downstream.
Always bells; their times sound somewhen,
in my tamed tides, deep.
Caesar named me.

I taste the drowned.
A Queen sails now into the sun, flotilla
a thousand proud;
my dazzled surface gargling the crown.⁶⁹

Living in palaces close to the Thames, the Royal Family has had close associations with the river for many centuries. Queen's Elizabeth's II's predecessors had lavish barges to sail upon or cross the river and also held magnificent waterborne royal pageants. The poem is a public one written in the tradition of the celebratory odes of, for example, Dryden and Tennyson. However, Duffy is a modern poet and does not wish to draw on or use the formal and public language that poets used in the past. Therefore this poem is written in free verse, and she makes the poem 'personal'. 'I' refers to the Thames, and the River Thames is personified in rather informal language to show that it has absorbed English history through events which have happened either in or around the river. The river delivers a soliloquy, and lists a series of events, actions and feelings.

Duffy begins this verse with 'History as water, I lie back, remember it all'. The poem is written as if spoken by the Thames looking back on its history. The river is personified as 'lying back' in an informal way, and remembering it all. The history of England is linked with water.

'I drink to recall' in line 2 means that the river drinks in all that happened to create memories. Humans sit at a bar drinking to recall and regurgitate memories of past events. The river reflects literally like a mirror and like a human thinks. 'Run softly till you end your song' (lines 2 and 3) is a reference to the history of English literature, to classic English poetry stretching from Edmund Spenser to T.S. Eliot. The personal pronoun 'you' perhaps refers to the British people who end their song of praise and thanks to the Queen on her Jubilee. When Duffy writes 'run softly till you end your song', she is echoing Edmund Spenser's, 'Sweete Themmes! Runne softly, till I end my song' (*Prothalamion* 1596),⁷⁰ showing her admiration and respect of Edmund Spenser who was also Poet Laureate, and T.S. Eliot's, 'Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song' (*The Waste Land* 1922).

'There was a whale in me' (lines 3 and 4) alludes to the bottled-nosed whale that swam up the Thames in 2006. This section is perhaps a reversal of the story from the Bible of Jonah and the whale carrying everything up inside itself.

'A King's daughter livid in a boat' (line 4), was Elizabeth I who was furious when taken to the Tower of London and imprisoned there by her half-sister Mary for nearly a year on suspicion of supporting Protestant rebels. In contrast to this red-faced

anger, Elizabeth was later famous for her white-painted face. This poem often evokes images of Queen Elizabeth I and the age of the Tudors. 'A severed head fell from its spike, splashed' (lines 5 and 6) refers to Traitors' Gate at the Tower of London beside the Thames, where the heads of executed prisoners were displayed on spikes until they rotted and fell into the water. Most notably among the decapitated heads exhibited there were those of Sir Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell, executed on the command of Elizabeth's father Henry VIII.

From line 7 to line 14 Duffy has captured the history of the Thames succinctly in the *Ice*, *Fog*, *Flood* and *Blitz* references. She evokes the elements of air, water and fire, conjuring up iconic images of the River Thames such as the Frost Fair, the Blitz and the fog. 'Fire' in line 7 refers to the Great Fire of London in 1666. 'Birds flailed in me with burning wings' in line 8 touches on Samuel Pepys' Diary and his section on the Great Fire. He wrote that pigeons wouldn't leave the houses and were burned to death.

'Ice- a whole ox roasting where I froze, frost fair-' in line 9 makes reference to the mini-ice age which lasted centuries, in which time the Thames froze regularly. The winter between 1683 and 1684 was so cold that the Thames froze enough for people to walk on it, and the Great Frost Fair, selling food and playing games, was held. Even oxen were roasted on the ice.

London was famous for fog and mists in the 19th century, especially by the river. 'Fog – four months sunless, moonless, spooked by ships-' (line 10) is a reference to the deadly 'pea-souper' (the great smog) which lasted from December 1952 to March 1953. As the smog was thick and green, it was known as a 'pea-souper', which was a lethal combination of winter fog and smoke and industrial pollution. People young and old died from its effects. Ships coming into the docks of London suddenly loomed out of the fog, their sound muffled.

'Flood – I flowed into Westminster Hall where lawyers rowed in wherries, worried' (lines 11 and 12) probably talks about the flood of the Thames in 1928 when 14 people drowned and many were made homeless. The Tate Gallery, the underground, Westminster Hall and the House of Commons were all flooded. The Thames embankment and Chelsea embankment both collapsed. This event was a factor in the eventual building of the Thames barrier (for protection against floods) in the 1970s. Wherries were the rowed 'water taxis' of London. There is alliteration on 'w' (those lawyers in their wherries worried). Duffy is wittily chiming 'wherry' with 'worry' and her 'row' has double meanings; either the act of rowing a boat, or a serious disagreement between people. Lawyers love arguing. Duffy is enjoying the absurdity of an imagined scene and delighting in the word sounds.

'Blitz – the sky was war; I filmed it. Cut' (line 13) mentions air raids on London. Especially between 7 September 1940 and 16 May 1941 there were major raids on London. The river takes on the persona of a film director who always shouts 'Cut', and maybe it does not want to remember the horrors of the Blitz. Hence 'Cut' means, 'that's enough', the river's saying. The filming is the reflection in the moving water. The river reflects images of fire and explosions.

'I held the *Marchioness*' in line 14 refers to the *Marchioness* pleasure boat that sank in August 1989 on its way up the Thames. There were 131 people on board, and 51 of them drowned.

'My salmon fed apprentices' in line 15 refers to the young (mostly) men who flocked to London, a centre of trade and industry from medieval times, to become apprentices. The Thames was traditionally a reservoir of fish, including salmon, lobsters and sea trout, until the middle of the 19th century when the population of London expanded so much that the water became too polluted for fish to survive. 'Until I choked on sewage' in line 16 refers to this. The Victorians eventually set about constructing a proper sewage system. 'My foul breath shut Parliament' in line 17 refers to the 'Great Stink' of 1858 when foul smells from the Thames made MPs leave the Houses of Parliament.

'There was lament at every stroke of every oar which dragged the virgin's barge downstream' (in lines 18, 19 and 20) alludes to Elizabeth I's death. She was known as 'the Virgin Queen' and habitually travelled along the Thames by barge, especially down to Hampton Court, the palace on the banks of the Thames owned by her father Henry VIII. She died at Richmond Palace on 24 March 1603, and her body was carried by rowed barge to the Palace of Whitehall down the Thames.

'Always bells' (in line 21) highlights the fact that there are many churches around the Thames, so we can hear church bells ringing. Bells are rung to mark time on board ships. Bells are also rung for the drowned dead. There are tales of the ringing of bells of villages drowned by floods before tides were tamed so some degree by the London Barrier. 'Somewhen' is Duffy's own coinage, which is the contraction of place and time. In lines 21 and 22 ('Their timed sound somewhen, in my tamed tides, deep') there is a Joycean usage – 'somewhen' – that recalls the Anna Livia Plurabelle soliloquy that ends *Finnegans Wake*.⁷¹ The bells sounding deep in the river recall the legends of lost villages – villages under the sea or a lake whose bells can be heard. The bells appeal to the senses and sound that are also linked to the motion of the water. The water is swallowing the sound.

Then Duffy goes back to the naming of the river by the Romans in line 23 ('Caesar named me'). This line refers to the historical fact that Julius Caesar crossed

the Thames when he invaded Britain in 55 BC. According to the writer Peter Ackroyd, the Thames was known to the Celts as 'Tamesa' or 'Tamesis'.⁷² The Romans, in the shape of the conqueror Caesar, translated it as 'Thamesis'. The reference to Caesar seems to be designed to suggest that Queen Elizabeth II is a modern Caesar, and also to place the whole poem in the context of long written history, from Caesar to the present.

'I taste the drowned' in line 24 talks about the fact that many people drowned in the Thames. *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) by Charles Dickens starts with a scene of a man and his daughter in a boat out looking for corpses to pull from the water.⁷³

In lines 25 and 26 ('A Queen sails now into the sun, flotilla A thousand proud'), Duffy links the past to the present and Queen Elizabeth II and the Diamond Jubilee – the flotilla. 'Flotilla A thousand proud' refers to the 1000 strong flotilla that accompanied Elizabeth II on a pageant day to celebrate her Diamond Jubilee. The river tastes the drowned yet it reflects the crown. The Queen is creating new history.

The last line 'My dazzled surface gargling the crown' means that the surface of water is shining with sunlight and the ripples of the water reflect the glory of the crown. 'Gargling' is a sound word for the liquid 'glugging' of waves hitting boats, but it gives the image of the reflection broken up into tiny parts. The word 'gargling' imparts combination of sight and sound. 'Gargling the crown' – this combines the sound of the waves, wakes and faceted ripples with the way they break and change reflections of the crown. 'Gargling the crown' may be a reference to the troubled surface of the river which makes the reflection of the Queen's crown uneven: the Jubilee river Pageant day was very windy and rainy, so one thinks of a river surface breaking up reflections when rain falls on it.

The two short and simple sentences 'Caesar named me' and 'I taste the drowned' act as a foil for the final more complex sentence. The rough rhyme of 'drowned' and 'crown' (together with the 'ow's in between – 'a thousand proud') helps to establish a sense of closure. 'I taste the drowned' is put just before, in order to enhance the final image of the Queen's triumphant flotilla – with a witty reversal so that the surface of the river, instead of being 'dazzling' because of the sun is dazzled by the spectacle.

Duffy encapsulates the history of London in one short poem – spoken by the river as a monologue or soliloquy. The references are associated with the London Thames. Like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which Duffy is partly parodying, 'The Thames' reflects the history of itself, including Queen Elizabeth I, and more violent times. Death is a theme. The poem swings to and fro (like the tide) across history.

Duffy probably found ideas for this poem from Peter Ackroyd's *Thames: Sacred River*. He gave details of the life of the Thames - from mammoths to the Dome, and

many historical events relating to the Thames also feature in his book.⁷⁴ Perhaps then her poem lacks originality; to apply Ezra Pound's words, 'She doesn't make it new'. Even so the Jubilee was a tremendously popular event, and Duffy composed a most appropriate poem to celebrate it, weaving past and present together in a way that is not simply flattery of the monarch.

Conclusion

Having examined Duffy's biography and major achievements, it is clear to see that her accomplishments are indeed most impressive. Her most notable feat, however, is that she became the first female Poet Laureate in Britain, which has inspired many other female poets and given them confidence. She has changed the world of poetry which was previously more male-dominated. As many of her poems were written in everyday, conversational language, which makes her poems appear deceptively 'simple', they are read not only by critics and academics, but also by lay readers of all ages. She has tried to meet the British public's expectations by celebrating public events. In 'The Thames, London 2012' she highlighted the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, and demonstrated her understanding of history and earlier poems composed by eminent poets. She has established close links between history and literature. Duffy is independent as a poet, and her historical sense allows her to reflect on public events without sycophancy, which would have been a betrayal of the class origins and sexual politics which make her distinctive as a Poet Laureate of considerable versatility. She has achieved that 'rare feat of both critical and commercial success and is regarded as one of Britain's most well-loved and successful contemporary poets'. She still has more years left to serve out her term as Poet Laureate, a period that promises much innovation and poetical inspiration.

Notes

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- 3 Linda A. Kinnahan, 'Now I Am Alien: Immigration and the Discourse of Nation in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy', in Alison Mark & Deryn Rees-Jones (eds), *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, London: Macmillan Press, 2000; Brian Caraher, 'Carol Ann Duffy, Medbh McGuckian and *Rapture* in the Lines of Communication', in Jane Dowson (ed.), *Twentieth-Century British and Irish*

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4 John Preston, 'Carol Ann Duffy Interview', *The Telegraph*, 11 May, 2010.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Peter Forbes, 'Winning Lines', *The Guardian*, 31 August, 2001.

8 Ibid.

9 On Adrian Henri, see Mike Evans, 'Obituary: Adrian Henri', *The Guardian*, 22 December, 2000.

10 Ibid.

11 Preston, 'Carol Ann Duffy Interview'.

12 Ibid.

13 Deryn Rees-Jones, *Modern Women Poets*, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005, p. 328.

14 Forbes, 'Winning Lines'.

15 Rees-Jones, *Modern Women Poets*, p. 324.

16 Preston, 'Carol Ann Duffy Interview'.

17 See <http://www.slideshare.net/asiyat1975/carol-duffy>.

18 See <http://www.slideshare.net/asiyat1975/carol-duffy>; <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/carol-ann-duffy>.

19 Forbes, 'Winning Lines'.

20 On Peter Benson, see <http://www.foyles.co.uk/peter-benson>.

21 Preston, 'Carol Ann Duffy Interview'.

22 See the website of Manchester Metropolitan University.

23 On Jackie Kay, see Rees-Jones, *Modern Women Poets*, p. 361; Forbes, 'Winning Lines'; Joanne Winning, 'Curious Rarities? The Work of Kathleen Jamie and Jackie Kay', in Dowson (ed.), *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*.

24 See Arvon Foundation's website which is <http://www.arvonfoundation.org/>.

25 Forbes, 'Winning Lines'.

26 Ibid.

27 The Poetry Society, 'Carol Ann Duffy is the New Poet Laureate', <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/duffy09/>.

28 Personal interview with Mrs Lenten, 30 August 2014.

29 Peter Cash, 'Carol Ann Duffy', *English Association Bookmarks*, Number 58, December 2002, pp. 2-6.

30 Rees-Jones, *Modern Women Poets*, p. 361.

31 See <http://londongrip.co.uk/2012/07/an-interview-wit>.

32 Ruth Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem: A Poem for Every Week of the Year*, London: Vintage Books, 2004, pp. 41-42.

33 Ibid.

34 See Judith Palmer, The Poetry Society, 'Poet Laureate 2009', <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/duffy09/>.

35 Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem*, p. 21.

36 Glen Levy, 'Carol Ann Duffy', *The Times*, 1 May, 2009.

- 37 'Profile: Carol Ann Duffy', *The Guardian*, 31 August, 2002.
- 38 'Carol Ann Duffy on her Collection *Love Poems*', *The Guardian*, 8 February, 2013.
- 39 On *Rapture*, see Margaret Reynolds, 'The End of the Affair, Review: *Rapture* by Carol Ann Duffy', *The Guardian*, 7 January, 2006.
- 40 Sameer Rahim, 'Carol Ann Duffy Wins Pen Pinter Prize', *The Telegraph*, 13 July, 2012.
- 41 'Carol Ann Duffy Becomes First Female Poet Laureate', *The Guardian*, 1 May, 2009; William Langley, 'Carol Ann Duffy: The Rhyme and Reason for Our First Female Laureate', *The Telegraph*, 2 May, 2009.
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- 45 Cited in Matthew Moore, 'Carol Ann Duffy Is First Woman Poet Laureate', *The Telegraph*, 1 May, 2009.
- 46 Carol Ann Duffy's interview which was broadcast in 'Women's Hour' on BBC Radio 4 on 1 May 2009.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 'The Poet Laureate Isn't Inspired by MPs Expenses', *The Guardian*, 19 May, 2009.
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- 51 Nikkhah, 'Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy Signals There Will Be No Engagement Poem', *The Telegraph*, 21 November, 2010.
- 52 Sarah Lyall, 'After 341 Years, British Poet Laureate Is a Woman', *The New York Times*, 2 May, 2009.
- 53 Roya Nikkhah, 'Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy Signals There Will Be No Engagement Poem'.
- 54 Lyall, 'After 341 Years, British Poet Laureate Is a Woman'.
- 55 Duffy's BBC interview in 'Women's Hour'.
- 56 Lyall, 'After 341 Years, British Poet Laureate Is a Woman'.
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71 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 1939, Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2012.

72 See Peter Ackroyd, *Thames: Sacred River*, London: Vintage, 2008.

73 Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 1864-1865, London: Penguin, 1985.

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