



## **AN UNMASKING OF CAROL ANN DUFFY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*As Carol's husky voice mumbles the finale "If poetry could truly tell it backwards, it would" in the video of her poem "Last Post" in sync with the British martial music it leaves a draining effect in the listener on the scores of veterans lost and still being lost in the Wars. The poem was a tribute to the two war veterans of World War I – Henry Allingham and Harry Patch who lived long enough and relatively in obscurity to carry the tales in their memory. Henry was in the seaplane aboard the Royal HMT Kingfisher, a naval trawler patrolling the high seas to ward off the German fleet during World War I. Patch was injured in the groin during the battle in France in 1917 while three other soldiers died in the shelling. Both died in the space of a week in July 2009, earning the sobriquet of the 13th and 14th oldest war veterans in Europe.*

Carol Ann Duffy, British poet laureate, travels back into time to remember the thousands dead in the defining War to whom combination of events denied the chance of a "million possible lives" they could have enjoyed. Henry and Harry were just fortunate to survive and decades later reminisce on the experience over BBC.

Yes, the two calamitous wars may be a distant memory to the generations born in the 50s and virtually an ungracious chapter in history to the ones born much later. Since then wars have been fought for a number of questionable causes leaving a trail of blood that had congealed on the psyche as well.

Creative talents

What the poem rues is the fact that creative talents of those thousands could have been distilled in so many spheres but for the War. As I listened to Carol's measured tones the message was as simple as the emotion – what could have been. In those days of turbulence any one driving a car or walking in the lane listening to war news would have felt the same nagging query. May be it applies to conflict zones anywhere, even now.

These lines illustrate the scene vividly.

*“You lean against a wall,  
your several million lives still possible and  
crammed with love, work, children, talent, English beer, good food.  
You see the poet tuck away his pocket-book and smile.”*

No less venerable

After 340 years Britain woke up to the chilling reminder that there are women poets who could warm the Laureate's seat as well, if not better than men. Carol of course was not much moon-struck the day the venerable seat was offered to her and commented rather disarmingly “I don't have to write about anything I don't want to. I would only write poems that are truthful....”

Carol Ann Duffy takes raw material from real life to give it poetic form which invariably bristles with verve and meaning. Don McCullin, a reputed photographer of the 70s who covered war front, was a friend of Carol and the poem “War Photographer” was no doubt grounded on his experiences. The poem's message – war is apathetic though the nations engaged in it have their distinct political agenda – has been built in a triangular framework – a sensitive photographer, the reader only distantly sympathetic to the suffering and inbuilt futility of it all.

As a professional earning his bread, the photographer has a job to do but the horror of it unfolds only in the dark room when he brings the snaps to life. “Solutions slop in trays beneath his hands which did not tremble then though seem to now...” Then the all-

pervasive peace and beauty of the English countryside emerges in contrast to the ceaseless sound of bombing so far away.

Then the angle shifts to the editor who would obviously pick only one or two telling pictures for print, meanders to the reader whose eyeballs “prick with tears between bath and pre-lunch beers.” Carol draws a tell-tale line between a photographer who had seen it all and the reader only marginally aware.

What perhaps would mark her poetry out is direct emotion and simplicity though the flashbacks may not come alive at first glance. She has no great fascination for symmetry and the aforesaid poems may fail by that yardstick. Their innate grace is undeniable. “I like to use simple words, in a complicated way” she told *The Observer* once. “Like sand and oyster it is a creative irritant. In each poem I’m trying to reveal a truth, so it cannot have a fictional beginning.”

What a thief thinks

“Stealing”, a poem set in the scenario of labour unrest, unemployment and a struggling economy under Margaret Thatcher, has a macabre, dry humour. A confession by a petty thief who too wants to be part of a civil, orderly society with constructive dreams. But whatever creative urge surging inside him is nipped by his innate daftness and he is confronted with his own inadequacy, boredom. “Boredom. Mostly I am so bored that I could eat myself.”

He steals Snowman, a kid’s toy, for the uncivil pleasure of seeing them in tears. Then he tries his hand at the guitar to see whether his personality could translate into a creative exercise. He comes out a cropper in both, and in bewilderment at his existence cries out “ You don’t understand a word of what I say, do you?”

The last line, a clincher, leaves the poem wholesome as the couplet in Shakespearean sonnets are famed to do. Carol’s sensitivity runs through the effort to understand the life of the disowned. There is no pretentious attempt to sound political and she is

firmed by healthy secularism. That is why perhaps her poetry is eminently readable because it tilts at the grassroots too.

#### Gender sensitivity

There is another facet to Carol – gender sensitivity which brings her close to some of the feminist poets in Indian English literature. She should find a kindred spirit in them though she looks at gender relations with a subtle, macabre humour. One has to only go through her poem on Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare’s wife which is done with a certain tacky witticism that makes you burst.

Nothing much has been known about Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare’s wife any more than the Dark Lady on whom sonnets have been wrapped around like a garland. The dramatist himself left little of his persona to hundreds of researchers who kept wondering at the enormity of brilliance that unraveled the finest emotions and human conflicts in a casket of remarkable plays. Some even wondered that Shakespeare was just a stage hand who ran around behind the scenes and turned out to be a pseudonym for Christopher Marlowe, the brilliant playwright, who unfortunately fell out with the law then. Anyway questions that have remained so over 500 years cannot find any undressing of mystery now.

What matters however is what made Carol Ann Duffy suddenly turn to his wife for the grist of a poem. This much is patent – Anne Hathaway has been looked at from the standpoint of a woman and not as she is because little is known about her. And the springboard for it is the “best bed” the dramatist gifted to her in his Will. How would the wife of the greatest dramatist of all time feel when she looked at the gift? A trip into the days when her husband was a lover, a caring companion and also one who was too busy with his well-etched timeless characters and also a shrewd, profound observer of human behaviour in general and also of his time.

Carol must have imagined her as reflecting on this as is proved by the splice of humour and romance in the poem. It appears as if Anne Hathaway is awed by the towering reputation of her husband and also proud of it.

*“ The bed we loved in was a spinning world  
of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas  
where we would dive for pearls. My lover's words  
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses on these lips”*

She likes to imagine (every woman likes to think by the adage that she is the force behind her man's success though it may not be true in many cases) that she is the stuff of his inspiration, “a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.” She almost feels, an overarching feeling of course, that the bed is the page beneath the writer's hands. What amuses the reader is the sharp contrast she draws with the other bed “where the guests dozed on, dribbling their prose” - a divide between mundane and starlit worlds. The final couplet encapsulates the woman's innocent, unblemished admiration and love for the dramatist -

*hold him in the casket of my widow's head  
as he held me upon that next best bed.*

If Anne Hathaway is only a simple, unquestioning woman who would treat every word of her husband as a pearl dropping from a fine thinker then Carol has brought her alive. If you start reading into whether Anne was really such an adoring picture of simplicity then you are stuck in a dead end.

Be that as it may, Carol's own view of a woman's presence in life does not seem to be that simple. She obviously sees a larger role for the gender as one would deduce from reading her “Rapture” or World's Wife or other reams of poetry and plays.

But just place this poem on Anne along with what she has written about Mrs. Darwin and the contrast makes you burst. There is a sardonic touch to the humour which may



not amount to doing any justice to the biologist who brought Science to a new peak with his Origin of Species.

Went to the Zoo.

I said to Him—

Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of you.

Darwin's explorations into the origin were perhaps as distant as the man himself from his Mrs. But it does show that she had no grasp of the magnitude of the discovery or its implications on the Church. It was also an illustration of the gender discord between the scientist and his wife. It was as alien as the animals she saw on the zoo. Only she was sharp enough to see the resemblance. One can only wish that she did not say that loud.