

Carol Ann Duffy

by Peter Cash



English Association Bookmarks

No. 58

Carol Ann Duffy

by
Peter Cash

Scope of Topic

The blurb on the back-cover of *Mean Time* (1993) states rather vaguely that in this collection of poems Carol Ann Duffy 'reflects on time, change and loss'. It could have been more precise . . . In these poems, Duffy demonstrates how the movement of 'time' is responsible for radical 'change': since 'change' in her suburban world is never for the better, it inevitably involves 'loss'. It is only against this background of loss that a reader can make sense of those 'moments of consolation' for which Cole reserves her ultimate praise.

This Bookmark aims to show that Carol Ann Duffy owes both her stature as a modern poet and her deserved popularity to her repeatedly tender treatment of the theme of loss. Behind her major poems seems to lie a conviction that human life promises little and delivers less; from her early years, she has concluded that the length of a human life is likely to be a bitter experience: in short, a 'mean time'. Consistently, Duffy presents both herself (in her lyric poems) and her personae (in her dramatic monologues) as disappointed figures in need of comfort in a dark and potentially comfortless world.

BOOKS TO READ

Carol Ann Duffy: *Selected Poems* (Penguin 1994)

Carol Ann Duffy: *The World's Wife* (Picador 1999)

FURTHER READING

Michael J. Woods : *Carol Ann Duffy* (York Notes)

Penguin Modern Poets Volume 2

ed. Judith Baxter : *Four Women Poets* (CUP)

NOTES

Since 1985, Carol Ann Duffy has become ubiquitous. She has both won and judged poetry competitions, given readings both in schools and at literary festivals, tutored courses and contributed to seminars, been heard on radio and on television, appeared regularly in poetry magazines and in poetry anthologies and - perhaps most importantly, given the size of the captive audience involved - been prescribed for study at both A-Level (*Mean Time*, *Penguin Modern Poets 2*, *Four Women Poets*) and GCSE Level (*Head of English*, *In Mrs Tilscher's Class* and *Valentine*). I've not yet heard anyone complain. In May 2001, Carol Ann (brought up in Stafford) read at this Centre for the second time: when word got out, we had inquiries from both parents and teachers at other schools who wanted to know if they could gate-crash. So much for prophets being without honour in their own lands.

This Bookmark wants to show that Carol Ann Duffy owes this popularity to her capacity to explore a recognisable theme in an accessible style; her stature she owes to the universal significance of this theme and the originality of her style. Michael J. Woods' thorough book (recommended here) looks at selected poems both on their own terms and in their socio-political context; its patient exegeses are valuable for these reasons. This Bookmark will in the main look at Carol Ann's *Selected Poems* (Penguin 1994) and emphasise her all-embracing compassion for the 'infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing' (TS Eliot) with whom

she shares the business of existence. The common denominator among her major poems - some of the most memorable poems of the past half-century - is a feeling of pity. Particularly by their cultural allusions, these poems inspire in readers a sense of pathos for the losses which her protagonists (usually women) have incurred in the difficult courses of their lives.

Big Sue and Now, Voyager - even by its distinctive title - typifies Duffy's concerns and methods. Big Sue ('Alone' in her 'little flat in Tooting') measures out her life in Mars Bar wrappers and consoles herself for the lack of a love-life with repeat-viewings of her favourite video. Significantly, this is *Now, Voyager* (1942) in which Bette Davis plays Charlotte Vale, a young woman despised even by her own mother for her unglamorous looks. 'Most evenings Big Sue is Bette Davis' because she can readily identify with a plain-looking single woman whose story supplies her with an attainable fantasy. The point of Charlotte's relationship with Jerry D. Durrance (Paul Henreid) is that, because he remains married to his estranged wife, it remains celibate and platonic and so becomes a perfect model of the best kind of relationship for which Big Sue (in her out-size skirts and shirts) can hope. Her 'favourite scene' is the famous final scene in which Henreid 'lights two cigarettes' (the emblem of their togetherness) and regrets that their relationship cannot be consummated; at this point, Big Sue - 'drawing deeply on a chocolate stick' - can settle gladly for second best and still achieve stardom: "Why wish for the moon? We have the stars." Instructively, Big Sue's forlorn longing for 'perfection', her gentle nature and her dysmorphophobia ('Great cow') - not to mention the pity she evokes - anticipate Mrs Quasimodo eight years later.

Prayer takes the form of a Shakespearean sonnet. This formality extends to the syntactical parallels of the language ('Some days, although we' / 'Some nights, although we') which Duffy puts into the mouths of isolated individuals, each offering a 'prayer' of thanks for a 'moment of consolation' (Cole) in a dull, provincial life. In the first quatrain, 'a woman' lifts her despondent head out of her hands and stares with 'joy' at 'a tree, a sudden gift' of Nature; in the second quatrain, 'a man' is reminded of the happiest days of his life by 'the distant Latin chanting of a train'. These are representative figures, unnamed people who - momentary cause for optimism - have sought and found consolation for the particular losses in their lives. In the third quatrain, the location is characteristic: 'a Midlands town' at 'dusk' [= Stafford after the clocks have gone back]. The penultimate image of the poem -

someone calls
a child's name as though they named their loss

- is of a voice in the 'darkness outside', calling in the spiritual void to a loved one whom she has lost. The ultimate image is of another lonely individual seeking salvation from the harsh world outside by listening to the poetic names ('Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre') of the Shipping Forecast on the BBC Home Service. It is ironic that these impersonal names should constitute the modern 'prayer' for deliverance from a comfortless world: after all, 'Finisterre' ['finis' = end/ 'terre' = land] means literally that the end of the world is nigh.

Mean Time is the poem which gives that collection its complex title because it has three meanings, each of which has a bearing on Duffy's theme. First, it means Greenwich Mean Time: although GMT (as calculated at the Greenwich Observatory) is the standard time by which clocks are set all over the world, its effect in England is to reduce the hours of daylight and so create the gloominess in which Duffy is spending her time. Second, it means 'in the meantime'; it refers to the time between significant events in which every person spends most of his/her life. Third, it means a 'mean time': taken literally, the adjective can suggest the hard time which a person can experience at any period of his/her life, even throughout life itself.

Accordingly, the poem is set on the first night after the clocks went back by one hour and 'stole light from my life'; perhaps predictably, the occasion for the poem is the end of a love-affair which until that dark night had brought her consolation (metaphorical 'light') for her otherwise-uneventful life. Now that the clocks have reverted to Greenwich Mean Time, she is

having a mean time; she is walking through 'the bleak streets' of North London and 'mourning' her loss. Under 'the darkening sky', Duffy's final reflection ('But we will be dead, as we know') is suitably sombre. Her reference to the late-October time of year -

These are the shortened days
and the endless nights

- is an allusion not merely to the long and lonely nights which she must now spend without her lost love; more significantly, it is also an apt acknowledgement that the shortening of the day is a metaphor for the shortening (by each successive day) of her life itself.

If not for *Mean Time*, then it will be for *The World's Wife* (1999) that posterity will recall Carol Ann Duffy's work. For its inspiration, this collection of dramatic monologues relies upon a single stroke of genius. Duffy calls up a parade of historical and mythological characters and retells their stories from their wives' perspectives; not surprisingly, what comes out of these wives' mouths are nothing less than alternative histories of the world. As such, *The World's Wife* (on which sixth-formers at this Centre have written their A-Level course work essays) does much to encourage Woods' view that Duffy - in view of her personal background - is a radical feminist. It is true that these poems belong to an era in which the balance of power between the sexes is under long-overdue review; perhaps, they do capture the spirit of an age, a moment of social transition. Emphasis ought, however, to rest upon the human values which these satires promote, for they make as sane and sensitive a plea for mutual respect as can be heard anywhere in modern literature.

In *Mrs Midas*, Duffy's imagined speaker is the wife of Midas, King of Phrygia to whom Dionysus granted his hamartic wish that everything he touched should turn to gold. Duffy's strategy is to chart the stages by which it dawns on Midas' wife first that her husband possesses this golden touch and second that it has potentially fatal consequences: 'It was then that I started to scream.' King Midas' fatal flaw is his masculine sense of priorities according to which material satisfaction appears more important than emotional/spiritual fulfilment; her dramatic realisation of his folly Mrs Midas records by her exercise of a grim wit at her husband's expense. In the situation, she discovers that metaphorical expressions ('near petrified'/ 'when it comes to the crunch'/ 'heart of gold') have recovered their literal meanings. The best of these verbal gags she saves for the final verse-paragraph:

What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed
but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness.

The poem is a criticism of male selfishness: if it is 'pure selfishness', then in the particular circumstances it is 24-carat selfishness. Mrs Midas, however, is not misanthropic; her tone is of regret that she has lost the man she loves and her final sentiment is a wistful longing to have him again:

I miss most
even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch.

The ultimate irony is that Midas possessed a magic touch all along: namely, the physical touch which had the power to transform her into a loving wife.

In *Mrs Aesop*, Duffy's speaker does more than regret a loss; this time, her tone is resentful that the man she married has turned out to be an 'Asshole'. *Mrs Aesop* relies on the reader's foreground knowledge that Aesop (a Greek slave) was a literary genius responsible for inventing the allegorical mode; this is the world's preconceived view of him. By contrast, his wife's starting-point is that, no matter how entertaining and instructive Aesop's fables are, the man himself is a bore - and, what's more, boring ('Tedious') because, if he isn't busy researching his next tale, then he's talking at her in the didactic language of the last one. The racy, vernacular rhythms of Duffy's free verse -

And that's another thing, the sex
was diabolical

- are ideally suited to express both her rhetorical indignation at his pious lecturing and her deeper frustration at his inadequacies; to illustrate his sexual impotence, she concocts her own fable 'about a little cock that wouldn't crow'. The colloquial accents of an intemperate voice can also be heard both in *Mrs Icarus* (where the ambitious husband is dismissed as 'a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock') and in *Eurydice* where the circumstances of the myth restore literal point to the woman's claim that she would 'rather be dead' than live again with a vain man: 'Big O' - not Roy Orbison, but Orpheus. In these cases, Duffy's wit seeks to debunk the myths which have grown up around such male show-offs; in response to the world-wide praises of these heroes, their long-suffering wives can be imagined retorting, "But you don't have to live with him!" What's more, Mrs Aesop's last sentence ('I laughed last, longest') suggests - by the glee with which she turns her husband's own proverbial wisdom against him - that her motto must be "Don't get mad, get even".

This, too, would be the motto of Duffy's speaker in *Mrs Quasimodo* - except that in this poem (first published in 1995 as *Mrs Quasimodo's Divorce*) Mrs Quasimodo first gets mad and then gets even; her tone is of anger at the loss of the trust which she had placed in her man. For this poem, Duffy relies upon the reader's foreground knowledge of two texts: Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) and the film of this story (1939) in which Charles Laughton gives the definitive presentation of Quasimodo, the bell-ringer. Further to express her view of male vanity, Duffy invents for Quasimodo a wife in his own 'ugly' image. Mrs Quasimodo (of whom Big Sue is an unmistakable ancestor) is a repository of female virtues: stoical, 'sweet-tempered, good at needlework', but condemned by her misshapen appearance to dwell in a squalid isolation; once 'wed' to Quasimodo, she even proves herself compliant both in bedroom ('And did I kiss each part of him ...?') and in kitchen (his supper 'on a tray beneath a cloth'). It is against this background that Duffy (returning to the script) imagines Quasimodo's obsession with Esmeralda, 'the pin-up gypsy' who seeks sanctuary within the Cathedral grounds. Given physical self-confidence, Quasimodo shows himself to be literally capable of monster ingratitude. By turning his attention to Esmeralda, played in the black-and-white film by the red-haired Maureen O'Hara, he inspires his wife to rhetorical cadences which anatomise the reasons for her lost faith in men:

Because it's better, isn't it, to be well-formed.
Better to be slim, be slight,
your slender neck quoted between two thumbs,
and beautiful, with creamy skin,
and tumbling auburn hair

Nothing is too obvious for a man. She confronts the brutal reality that in his eyes nothing - not a dutiful nature, not even a sensitive appreciation of bell-music - is going to compensate a woman for an unprepossessing appearance; she realises (to coin a phrase) that no one is ever going to ring a bell for her. With this recognition, reinforced by her pre-existing awareness of her 'heavy dugs', 'thighs of lard' and 'wobbling gut, Mrs Quasimodo embarks upon a dysmorphophobic rant:

*You pig. You stupid cow. You fucking buffalo.
Abortion. Cripple. Spastic. Mongol. Ape.*

The stream of vituperative epithets conveys the complete collapse of her self-esteem and its replacement by a remorseless, unforgiving self-loathing; it amplifies an anger which can be satisfied only by a suitable act of 'revenge', a poetic justice. So it transpires that Quasimodo meets his nemesis when his scorned wife takes her tool-kit to his beloved bells ('The bells. The bells') and - in an operation which seems to simulate castration - hacks them to pieces. In the end, Mrs Quasimodo reverts to type and is once more to be pitied; if she - like some of

Duffy's other heroines - is disfigured, then it is not so much by Nature as by having to live her life without love.

© Peter Cash and the English Association, December 2002.

Carol Ann Duffy by Peter Cash is Number 3 in the Shakespeare Bookmark series, published by

The English Association
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
UK

Tel: 0116 252 3982
Fax: 0116 252 2301
Email: engassoc@le.ac.uk

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

Series Editor
Victor Hext

Shakespeare Bookmarks
Kerri Corcoran-Martin

Primary Bookmarks
Louise Ellis-Barrett

Secondary Bookmarks
Ian Brinton