

"War Photographer"

by Carol Ann Duffy

Context

Duffy's poem "War Photographer" takes the perspective of a war photographer (someone employed to document and take pictures of war zones). Duffy was inspired to write this poem by her friendship with a war photographer, specifically Don McCullin. She was especially intrigued by the peculiar challenge faced by these people whose job requires them to record terrible, horrific events without being able to directly help their subjects.

Throughout the poem, Duffy provokes us to consider our own response when confronted with the photographs that we regularly see in our newspaper supplements, and why so many of us have become desensitised to these images. By viewing this issue from the perspective of the photographer, she also reveals the difficulties of such an occupation. By the end of the poem, it is clear her subject straddles two vastly different worlds yet increasingly feels he belongs to neither.

The poem is laid out in four regular six-line stanzas, with each stanza ending in a rhyming couplet. This structure is interesting since its very rigid order contrasts with the chaotic, disturbing images described in the poem. The style is almost clinical and matter of fact, perhaps to imitate the clinical approach required by people in this line of work to allow them to do their jobs under extreme pressure. The rigidity of the structure might characterise the speaker as someone who wants control over the chaos, even if they cannot. Moreover, the tight structure does juxtapose the chaotic themes of war within the poem which could draw attention to the relationship between the photographer and the ways he has to distance himself, emotionally, from the violence. The poem also has a cyclical structure where, in the beginning, the speaker has returned from war; but, in the final stanza, he returns. Why do you think this is? How could you interpret this cyclical structure?

To complete an Explode a Stanza activity, click [here](#).

Read and highlight the poem below	Use this column to write annotations and notes
In his dark room he is finally alone with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.	<p>The poem introduces the subject: a war photographer at home in his "dark room" with a red light (for developing film). Whilst this is literal, could the darkness or the red colour have any figurative meaning? What connotations do these colours have?</p> <p>Does the sibilance of this line have any impact? Do you read it as a softer /s/ which juxtaposes what is on the film or a harsher, more sinister /s/ which emphasises the</p>

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. [\(click\)](#)

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.

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.

horror on film?

This metaphor describes the film with images of war in rows. What effect does this imagery have though? Do you see any relationship between the impacts of war, such as the deaths of soldiers or civilians, and ordered rows? Moreover, what effect does the juxtaposition have between suffering and order?

Again, really consider the role of juxtaposition in this poem: how does the sinister red in the darkness softly glowing add to other contrasting ideas in the poem, and can you link this to the theme or context?

What do you think is implied by this simile? What connotations might this religious imagery have, and how does the idea of a church, priest, and Mass juxtapose the darker, scarier room?

These are all war zones. They are broken via a period, which is an example of caesura as the metrical line is broken. Why do you think this was done? What effect does this have?

What do you think is meant by this final metaphor?

What effect does the diction of "job" have here? Consider the horror of this man's work, yet using a term like this.

How might this be an example of double entendre, where the word "solutions" could have two meanings? Does the onomatopoeia add to this line? What connotations might one have with "slop"?

What does the visual imagery of the photographer's hands trembling now he is home and developing the film suggest about him?

Here, "Rural England" is removed from the rest of the line via caesura. What do you think this could imply or emphasize?

What effect does the parallel structure have?

Moreover, consider the choice of weather in relation to English people as being a problem.

In addition, consider the juxtaposition between weather in England and "nightmare heat" in war zones.

What impact does this imagery have?

A period breaks the meter in this line, which is known as caesura. What effect do you think this has in the context of the photographer suddenly remembering something?

Here, enjambment is used; what effect does this have in contrast?

Does the alliteration of the /f/ sound have any significance?

What effect does this imagery have? How might "twist[ing]" features evoke more horrifying images?

How might you interpret this metaphor? What could the memory of this man being a "half-formed ghost" imply? Could it be interpreted more than one way?

Again, consider the role of enjambment here. Does the auditory imagery evoke anything?

What effect does this final line have? Think of the connotations of a stain. Moreover, what impact does the diction of "foreign dust" have? Why "dust" instead of ground or dirt?

In describing the photos, what effect does this metaphor

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.

have? Could it be interpreted any other way? What does "in black and white" sometimes mean?

What is implied from just picking out five or six from hundreds? What does this suggest?

Is there any importance to the more clinical diction of "eyeballs"? What about the diction of "prick"

What is the importance of the juxtaposition, in relation to the themes, between what is in the images and what the public are doing?

What could you say about the internal rhyme in this line? How does it speed up the stanza, and what could this imply?

It is revealed that the war photographer is back on a plane, travelling away from England and back to a war zone. What might you say about the cyclical nature of the poem? In the beginning, he returns, and at the end, he leaves again.

Who do you think it meant by "they"?