The life and works of Carol Ann Duffy

Carol Ann Duffy was born on 23 December 1955 in Glasgow, Scotland, the daughter of Frank Duffy and Mary Black. Mary was Irish, as were Frank's grandparents, so Duffy is three-quarters Irish, born in Scotland and brought up predominantly in England, which may go some way to explaining her concern with identity.

Frank Duffy was an electrical fitter and lifelong Labour Party supporter; he stood unsuccessfully as a Labour Party candidate in the 1983 general election. When Carol Ann was 6 years old the family moved to Stafford in northwest England, where she was to spend the remainder of her childhood, attending a succession of local schools and ending up at Stafford High School for Girls. It is a reasonable assumption that much of her concern with childhood alienation derives from the experience of being uprooted and moved to a culture in which, with her Glasgow accent and urban background, she would have been seen, and no doubt treated, as an outsider.

Carol Ann was precocious in a number of ways. She sent her first collection of poems to a publisher when she was 15, and from the age of 16 she was having an affair with the celebrated poet Adrian Henri, who was 39 at the time. This lasted for several years, and led her to go to Liverpool University in 1974 in order to be near him. She studied philosophy and graduated in 1977.

Duffy worked in a variety of fields while she attempted to establish herself as a writer. Her first collection of poems, *Standing Female Nude*, was published in 1985, and she was then able to turn to writing full time. Despite her early liaison with Henri, she has for many years lived with a female partner, the poet Jackie Kay. Duffy has a daughter, born in 1995, but the father has not been involved in her upbringing.

Since 1996 Duffy has lectured at Manchester Metropolitan University. She rose to prominence in the media in 1999, when she was suggested as a possible candidate for the position of poet laureate following the death of Ted Hughes. It is not clear whether she would have accepted such a position in the establishment, and in any case Andrew Motion was eventually appointed after much discussion in the media as to the suitability for the post of a 'lesbian unmarried mother', as she was described.

In addition to her collections of poems for adults, Duffy has written two plays, two collections of poems for children, and has edited a number of other volumes of poetry.

*Standing Female Nude* (1985)

This was Duffy's first published collection of poetry for adults. Its title is taken from one of the poems based upon a work of art ('Oppenheim's Cup and Saucer' is another) and includes a number of political and 'issue' poems.
Selling Manhattan (1987)

The collection title is again taken from a keynote poem. Pursuing similar themes to Standing Female Nude, this collection is perhaps best known for hard-hitting poems such as ‘Psychopath’.

The Other Country (1990)

This is Duffy’s first collection for which the title is an ironic reference in its own right, rather than simply being the title of one of the constituent poems. It alludes to the celebrated quotation from L. P. Hartley’s The Go-Between: ‘The past is another country. They do things differently there.’ The phrase ‘another country’ was also the title of a widely-seen film about public school spies in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s. Duffy’s choice of title therefore economically calls to the reader’s attention two of her recurring themes: alienation and translocation, both literally and metaphorically, and the past.

Mean Time (1993)

Continuing the trend set by The Other Country, Mean Time is a resonant and thought-provoking title. It suggests at least three distinct interpretations: ‘in the meantime’, i.e. events happening while others are continuing, in the background or elsewhere; that time is itself mean, because of the awareness of what it takes away and will not give back; and, perhaps more distantly, the question of the meaning of time — what does time mean? — and how the poet is to respond to such a question. It is also perhaps an echo of Greenwich Mean Time, the universal measure of time, which hints that the themes of the poems have a universal relevance.

The World’s Wife (1999)

There is great subtlety in Duffy’s choice of title. Its primary reference is an echo of the familiar phrase, ‘the world and his wife’, meaning everybody. This is doubly offensive to a feminist such as Duffy; first, the suggestion is that only men matter, and constitute the world; second, it implies that women have a purpose and a role only as the appendages and property of men. The aim of this collection is not merely to challenge these assumptions, but to turn them on their head. This is most succinctly done in ‘Mrs Darwin’: far from being an adjunct, Darwin’s wife, Duffy is suggesting, may actually have had the idea which was to make him famous. Using the wives (or, in some cases, female counterparts) of celebrated men as a structure is ironic and mischievous, and allows Duffy to write some of her most stinging and overtly feminist poetry.

Feminine Gospels (2002)

This is Duffy’s most recent collection of poetry for adults. It returns to the subjects and styles of her earlier work, except that, in keeping with the title, all the poems have female voices. One poem, ‘The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High’, is very long (it makes up a third of the entire collection) and brings her back, again, to her schooldays. In the concluding poem, ‘Death and the Moon’, she revealingly suggests that ‘poems are prayers’.
The 1960s

The 1960s was a significant decade in British history. The period of ‘austerity’ which began during the Second World War did not end until the early 1950s (rationing of food and other items continued until 1954). During the later 1950s a number of changes occurred: pop music, explicitly aimed at teenagers, began to emerge; film became an important influence on young people; televisions and telephones were installed in many British homes. Together, these led to the revolution of mass media and mass communications.

Postcolonial Britain

Britain was a major Imperial power until the Second World War: the British Empire was the largest in the world and spanned the globe. After the war it became clear that the era of empire was over, and the granting of independence to India, Pakistan and Ceylon as early as 1947 was a precursor to the process of wholesale decolonisation which began in the late 1950s. This led to two major and important changes in British society. The first was the mass immigration of non-European people from former colonies that, in time, turned Britain into a multiracial society. This was controversial; racism became an important part of British life, and was whipped up by right-wing nationalist political leaders. The second change was more subtle: from being a major world power, Britain slowly became a small country in Europe, and many people had difficulty in coming to terms with Britain’s loss of importance and influence on the world stage.

Politics and culture

Britain had been a democracy since the nineteenth century, but a combination of factors had led to the right-wing Conservative Party dominating British politics for much of the twentieth century. Conservatism is based on pragmatism, maintaining the traditional institutions of society, free enterprise and law and order. The left-wing Labour Party (not really socialist, but concerned with the rights of ordinary people) came to power in 1964, after 13 years of Conservative rule, and the new government seemed to usher in a period of renewed intellectual and cultural life in the country. It was the era of The Beatles, the most successful pop group ever, of ‘Swinging Britain’, with its outrageous fashion and personal liberation. The widespread introduction of the contraceptive pill meant that women could have sex without fear of the consequences, and by the end of the 1960s the ‘sexual revolution’ had swept away centuries of taboos — the poet Philip Larkin wrote that ‘Sexual intercourse began in nineteen sixty three’ (‘Annus Mirabilis’, 1974). ‘Free love’ became popular and male homosexuality became legal for the first time. The hippy movement of the late 1960s seemed to promise an alternative lifestyle that was unconventional, anti-materialist and free-thinking. All these changes broke the stranglehold of conventional morality and class stereotyping that for some had made life in the 1950s and early 1960s stifling (see ‘Litany’).
Education

A significant contribution to these changes came with the introduction of comprehensive schools by the Labour government. Since 1944, British state schools had been divided into grammar schools (see ‘The Captain of the 1964 Top of the Form Team’), which gave an academic education to those children, predominantly middle class, who passed the ‘11-plus’ examination, and secondary modern schools, which prepared children who failed, predominantly from the working class, for lives as unqualified workers. The new comprehensive schools would educate all children together (see ‘Comprehensive’), and aimed to end the socioeducational divide. They were hailed as a great piece of social engineering that would finally remove the class divisions from British society. Although this goal was not achieved, comprehensive schools did offer a serious academic education to any child who chose to take advantage of the opportunities on offer. ‘Education for Leisure’ is a wry comment on the aspiration that all workers in the future would enjoy increased leisure time and needed to be educated to use the time constructively.

Social change

The many social changes of the 1960s affected young people and women in particular. This was the era of pop art, mini-skirts, beat music, long hair and hallucinogenic drugs. Many young people went to pop festivals and love-ins, and joined the peace movement (which grew out of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament).

The feminist movement began to challenge the limitations placed upon women, and there was a feeling among educated young women that everything was possible. Grammar schools offered a route to university for lower middle-class women who would previously never have considered going to university, such as Margaret Thatcher, who became prime minister. The development of labour-saving domestic appliances, such as washing machines, liberated women from domestic drudgery; the introduction of synthetic materials, such as nylon, reduced the burden of doing the laundry and made cheap and brightly coloured clothes available. Increasingly women challenged the traditional view that their place was in the home and chose to make careers for themselves.

The sexual revolution meant that women were able to take the initiative in affairs of the heart once they were in control of their fertility. For the generation of Carol Ann Duffy, growing up during the 1960s, there seemed to be no limit to what might be achieved if women worked together, kept their nerve and tackled the discrimination that faced them, especially in the workplace.
Feminism

For centuries, women in European societies have enjoyed significantly fewer human rights than men. Responsibility for this lies principally with the medieval Christian Church, which decided to blame Eve, the archetypal woman, for the Fall of mankind. This scapegoating allowed men to seize control of the Church and political power in the Middle Ages. As a wife, a woman was the property of her husband. When societies began to move towards democracy in the nineteenth century, only men were given the vote. There were a number of respects in which women were discriminated against by the law, especially in regard to property rights, whereby only men were permitted to inherit. Women were not allowed to take university degrees in Britain until early in the twentieth century.

Women’s suffrage

By the early nineteenth century this situation was beginning to be seen as unfair by some women, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, and the feminist movement slowly emerged. But it was not until the early twentieth century that the struggle for equal rights for women was forced onto the political agenda by the suffragette movement, which campaigned for women to be given the vote. The important role played by women in the First World War led to women over the age of 30 (and some younger ones) being given the vote in 1918, although it was 1928 before all women had the vote on an equal footing with men. (There are still parts of Switzerland that deny women the vote in some elections.)

Women’s liberation

The women’s movement received a new impetus in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the feminist movement in the USA and elsewhere, and the writings of Germaine Greer (especially The Female Eunuch, published in 1970) and others began to have an impact. The magazine Spare Rib (the title is an ironic reference to the Bible story that Eve, the first woman, was created out of a spare rib from Adam, the first man) spread feminist ideas broadly, and irresistible political pressure began to be exerted by women, who, after all, represented more than half of the electorate. A series of legislative changes swept away some of the legal discrimination against women, but at the same time more radical feminists mounted a more fundamental challenge against the patriarchal structure and attitudes of society. Why, they argued, should a woman adopt her husband’s surname on marriage? Why should she change her title from ‘Miss’ to ‘Mrs’ to denote ownership, when a man did not? Feminists adopted the title ‘Ms’ to apply to all women regardless of their marital status. Some even argued that men were unnecessary (a position adopted by a number of personas in Duffy’s The World’s Wife), arguing instead for lesbian households. Less radically, some questioned why women should be expected to present themselves as sex objects for men. Many women cut their hair short, symbolically burned their bras, stopped shaving their legs, refused to wear make up and dressed the way they wanted to, which often meant in trousers.
Another line of attack was against prejudice embedded in linguistic usage: why should the head of a committee be a chairman? The campaign to promote gender-free language was ridiculed by some men as political correctness, but it drew attention to a hitherto-neglected form of discrimination. Although it is now customary to refer to all those in the acting profession as ‘actors’, for example, job descriptions such as ‘actress’, ‘poetess’ and ‘lady-doctor’ drew attention to the female gender of their holder. It is an irony that these ‘marked forms’ actually referred to the majority, as 51% of the population is female.

Reclaiming history

An important part of the feminist critique of society involved examining the roots of established prejudices. The Bible, classical mythology and fairy stories were all found to have deeply embedded anti-female prejudices, and some feminists worked to develop alternative mythologies. Lilith, the feisty first wife of Adam, was identified as an alternative to Eve; Angela Carter rewrote traditional fairy stories from a feminist perspective; Duffy herself has contributed to this process by revisiting a number of biblical and mythological stories in *The World’s Wife*. Duffy refers in passing to the male domination of publishing (see ‘Eurydice’), and in 1973 Virago Press was set up by a group of women with the aim of publishing women’s writing; this was an important step towards equality of opportunity for women writers. Prior to this, many women had chosen to use their initials (A. S. Byatt and U. A. Fanthorpe for example) to disguise the fact that they were female. In the nineteenth century, women authors such as Mary Ann Evans (writing as George Eliot) and Charlotte Brontë (writing as Currer Bell) had to adopt male names in order to be published. The writings of women even began to complement the traditional works of ‘DWEMs’ (Dead White European Males) on examination syllabuses, although there is still some way to go before equality is achieved.

Sexism today

Although most of the legal discrimination against women has been removed, a significant number of contexts remain in which women are, in reality, far from equal. The continuing high level of violence against women committed by men, especially rape, indicates how much still needs to be done; for example, the continuing domination of the judiciary by men makes it difficult to secure convictions of rapists. Many women, especially in professions and business, find that there is still a ‘glass ceiling’ above which women cannot rise, and instances of discrimination and abuse in the workplace remain common.

The celebrated poet Sylvia Plath, who lived one generation before Duffy, found the pressure of balancing the roles of wife, mother and poet intolerable in the oppressive social milieu of the early 1960s, and consequently committed suicide. Duffy has succeeded in combining a slightly different set of roles, as partner, mother, poet and academic, and has in the process become one of the best-known, most distinctive and most respected poets in UK literary circles; yet she cannot, and does not, expect to receive any public accolades for exposing the hypocrisies and inadequacies of the UK establishment with its patriarchal attitudes, vested interests and ‘old boy’ networks.