

## **Encoding the Personal: Carol Ann Duffy's Use of Adopted Voices as a Veneer to Female Subjectivity**

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Each process of reading involves a process of writing or re-writing the original text. One of the major concerns in feminist theories and practices has been centered around exploring the possibilities of a rewriting of patriarchal norms. This study tries to analyze the use of dramatic monologue as a means to masquerade womanliness in the poems of Carol Ann Duffy. The attempt here is to identify and establish the extent to which the adopted voice in the personae of a given speaker in the poems of Carol Ann Duffy is in fact acting as a veneer to her subjectivity as a female and how this veneer is employed as a means to encode the self.

**Key Words:** masculinity, male gaze, dramatic monologue, femininity, sexism

Writings by women in the last few decades have been expressing a serious interest in the increased threats to femininity in a patriarchal social structure. Attempts at restoring and reaffirming female subjectivity has become a major concern of the woman writers, though sometimes they may not care whether they are designated as “feminists” or not. There are poets like Carol Ann Duffy who, while being openly feminist, try to legitimize women’s experience by bringing poetry to the mainstream of writing.

Born in Glasgow to Irish Catholic parents in 1955, Carol Ann Duffy grew up in Stafford and now lives in Manchester. She got graduated from Glasgow University and has ever since been writing poems that have received much popular acclaim. She started publishing in the year 1985. Her works include pamphlets like “Fresh Weather Cock”, “Beauty and the Beast”, “Fifth Last Song” and “Thrown Voices”. Duffy’s collections of poems include *Standing Female Nude*, *Selling Manhattan*, *The Other Country*, *Selected Poems*, *The Pamphlet and Mean Time*. She has tried a hand at writing plays in *Take my Husband*, *Loss and Little women*, *Big Boys*. Many prizes and awards came her way including C. Day Lewis Fellowship, First Prize in National Poetry Competition, Scottish Arts Council Book Award, Eric Gregory Award, Somerset Maugham Award, Dylan Thomas Award, Scottish Council Book Award, Cholmondeley Award and Lannan Literary Award. Her poetry collection *Mean Time* won prestigious awards like Scottish Arts Council Book Award, Whitbred Award for Poetry and Forward Prize.

Reading the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy poses challenges as the poems are highly metaphorical. She achieves her purpose of re-writing the norms through a dexterous employing of traditional poetic forms like the dramatic monologue aided by poetic techniques like juxtaposition and surrealism. Duffy converts the poetic form called dramatic monologue into a startlingly influential tool to expose and interrogate the contemporary abuse of power. Since the dramatic monologue as a poetic mode is employed to express the internal conflicts of a single speaker at a critical point in one’s life, Duffy can use this mode as a means to speak out without owning the responsibility. Thus, the dramatic monologue form which Duffy inherits from Robert Browning, T.S. Eliot, Jules Laforgue and W. S. Graham helps in masking presence while adapting itself to contemporary issues. Duffy successfully joins with the contemporary women poets like U.A. Fanthorpe, Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay who use this poetic mode to express themselves without being directly responsible as they can hide under the veneer of the adopted voice of the speaker of the monologue.

The dramatic monologue as a means of dislocating oneself from the subject position as a woman and a poet is well articulated in many of her poems. The speaking subject in many of her poems is a mask for her own subjectivity. In Duffy's view, womanliness itself is a mask to hide one's inherent masculinity and a means to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it. Deryn-Rees Jones writes:

Duffy does not want to write like a 'woman poet' (and I think it is important to emphasize that it is the term 'woman poet' and not woman which I use here). Might it be that in her use of dramatic monologue Duffy is necessarily very much interested in weaving as an act of self-preservation, in attempting to cover the 'shame' of her position as a woman poet- that she is, in fact, deeply implicated in the act of masking her femininity, having what is perceived as her 'lack' within the literary tradition. (Rees Jones 26)

Power and technique are usually associated with maleness in poetry so much so that poems by men are often seen as creating and controlling the projected images of women. In traditional male poetry where women are represented as objects they are assigned a subjectivity that is in tune with the gender norms prescribed to them. An interrogation into the maleness of tradition and that of the femaleness of the women writers of the breaking wave generation is what we see in the poems of Carol Ann Duffy, Selima Hill and Jo Shapcot. Questioning the maleness of the tradition is achieved to a great extent through a questioning of the rules and conventions developed by male poetry.

The reason why the dramatic monologue as a poetic form is highly appealing to the women writers may be its potential as a means to negotiate femininity. The women poets of the nineteenth century used this technique of the adopted female voices within the monologue as a strategy of circumventing masculine representations. Such a sense of artificiality in the construction of the person in the monologue is examined by Duffy in her poem "The Dummy". In this poem, Duffy gives the dummy a life and voice of its own rather than examine the person of the ventriloquist directly.

Balancing me with your hand up my back, listening  
to the voice you gave me croaking for truth, you keep  
me at it. Your lips don't move, but your eyes look  
desperate as hell. Ask me something difficult.  
May be we could sing together? Just teach me  
the right words, I learn fast. Don't stare like that.  
I will start where you leave off. I can't tell you  
anything if you don't throw me a cue line. We're dying.  
(Duffy 68)

What strikes the reader here is the irony implied in the poem for the reader to realize that Duffy is actually satirizing her own adoption of other imaginary voices. Here Duffy is weaving a reflexive loop running between the poet and the ventriloquist. The ventriloquist's dummy becomes a mirror which enacts and reflects selfhood.

Duffy is not a poet who adheres to the conventions associated with the form of dramatic monologue. Her attempt at using the form is an effort to employ it to flout the tradition. Artificiality may sometimes occur when the poet's voice is echoed through an adopted voice in the guise of the speaker. Such a possibility of artificiality in the construction of the speaking persona in a dramatic monologue is also brought into rumination by Duffy in the poem "The Dummy". Jane E. Thomas comments on Duffy's use of monologues:

[Any] one familiar with Freudian theories of the unconscious might see Duffy's dummy as a metaphor for the dark repository of repressions and socially taboo desires which constantly irrupts into our conscious existence in the form of dreams, fantasies and 'Freudian slips'. If we were to analyse the poem in the light of Lacan's re-interpretation of Freud it would appear to dramatize the split between the speaking subject (the Ventriloquist) and the subject position which allows it to articulate its experience of reality (the dummy) and which in doing so constructs that experience independently of the individual. (Thomas 79)

One of the major concerns in Duffy's poetry is centered around the way male poetry has constructed female roles. Duffy's conviction about the everyday artificiality that has crept into the construction of

women's role in mainstream literature prompts her to look into what the feminist critics have long been discussing about the male appropriations of the female body. Thus she makes some bold comments on the representation of female nudity in male art through her poem "Standing Female Nude". Such a colonization of the female body in male art has been recently in attention as art historians and feminists have been interrogating the gender imperialism implied in the visual art form of the nude. Male theorizing within the art tradition can only visualize the male artist as a talented translator of matter into art form where the female model is seen simply as an object to be transmogrified. Carol Ann Duffy challenges this "nude" tradition within the verbal tradition as Kenneth Clark did it in the visual/sculptural art tradition. The poem "Standing Female Nude" is a powerful rendering of an instance of deconstructing the traditional attributes associated with this issue.

"Standing Female Nude" is a four stanza, 28-line poem in the form of a dramatic monologue, albeit an internal one. The poem depicts the scene of a painting session where a model is posing completely nude in front of an artist. The poem expresses the feelings of the model as she poses- about the artist, his actions and his representations of her body.

Six hours like this for a few francs  
 Belly nipple arse in the window light,  
 he drains the color from me. Further to the right,  
 Madame, and do try to be still.  
 I shall be represented analytically and hung  
 in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo  
 at such an image of a river-whore. They call it art.  
 (Duffy 46)

Some of the characters like the "Psychopath" in her collection *Selling Manhattan* had already established her as a brilliant monologist as early as 1987. By naming the character as a psychopath Duffy exonerates herself from any kind of a moral judgement by the readers. The judgement has already been made when she states at the beginning that this is a monologue of a figure who is (or must be?) made. Yet this is a judgement which is both accusation and exonera-

tion. Duffy has stated in an interview:

You asked me about giving voice for others. Clearly on one level, that is the case but there is an initial, and often quite powerful, empathy or identification, which has to occur, does occur, before one would bother at all. I come from a working class background which, in many areas, was inarticulate. Not politically, but on those levels where one speaks of the personal, the feelings, the private inner life. What I mean is that language was often perceived as embarrassing or dangerous. The dramatic monologues I've written are, yes, objective; but closer to me as the writer than would appear. (Stabler 127)

The persona in the poem is having a double vision- she sees herself and also the painter who is seeing her. But the model sees herself as the other. By using the word "hung" at the end of the poem, the poet is suggesting the idea of art as a living death for the model. The model's the vision of the image of the future Queen of England gazing at her shape is a splendid contrast to the fragmentary vision of herself as non-representational of the painter's way of seeing:

...He is concerned with volume, space.  
I with the next meal. You are getting thin.  
Madame, this is not good. My breast hang  
Slightly low, the studio is cold. In the tea-leaves  
I can see the Queen of England gazing  
On my shape. Magnificent, she murmurs,  
Moving on. It makes me laugh. His name. (Duffy 46)

The final line of the poem, spoken by the model as she is leaving- "It does not look like me"- can be read as both redemptive and pitiful. It anticipates many of Duffy's later poems where we find her personae look at themselves in mirrors but fail to recognize themselves.

The notion of "male gaze" in feminist literary theory is subtly problematized through the representation of the female model. The question is whether or not the woman has been caught correctly by the male gaze or is it simply that the male gaze has misrepresented her leaving her unrecognizable to herself? Themes centered around the

failure of representation and self-recognition evident as in the last lines of the poem run unresolved throughout the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.

In the opinion of Danette Dimarco, “‘Standing Female Nude’ can be read as a challenging of the gender biases that inform Robert Browning’s defence of the Renaissance painter of nude in his poem ‘With Francis Furini’” (Dimarco 30) She views Browning’s poem as an example of a poem that epitomizes the traditionalist male theorizings about the female body. In contrast to Browning’s “defence of the artist” stance, Duffy’s poem focusses attention on the subject of art-the model. Whereas Browning attempts to expunge the gender and class difficulties, Duffy’s poem moves through what Linda Kinnahan calls a “process of self-destruction to reveal the model as situated within or mediated by social discourses” (Kinnahan 249). In doing so, as Jane E. Thomas notes, Duffy not only “recognizes the lineament of [her] foremothers- the women of the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s- but she has also taken the further step of reshaping ideas, of the self by focusing on the indeterminacy of boundaries and the ways in which a naturalized fixing of those margins can prove dangerous to those ‘permanently’ situated on the periphery” (Thomas 82).

*The World’s Wife* is another collection in which Duffy uses the dramatic monologue with much wit and energy. Duffy brings in a fusion of formal ingenuity and social concern through the medium of insightful and exuberant dramatic monologues to explore both contemporary and historical scenes. The poems in this collection offer surprising and unexpected viewpoints - from the perspective of the wives of famous and often infamous men (Mrs. Midas, Mrs. Aesop, Pilate’s Wife, Mrs. Faust, Mrs. Darwin and Queen Kong among others). Through this array of women characters Duffy showcases a skillful subversion of myth and history.

Duffy addresses the difficulties of knowing the self through otherness. Duffy’s fascination for representation can be seen in the key image of many of her poems- the self who looks in the mirror. In many of her poems we meet women who look at themselves only to realize that they don’t recognize themselves. “Standing Female Nude”

also presents a similar situation. The model looks at the picture drawn by the artist modelled on her and comments: “This doesn’t look like me” (Duffy 46). This preoccupation with the self who looks in the mirror and the reflected self who is the “other”, recalls Lacan’s theory of the *stade du miroir*. According to Lacan, the child’s entry into language depends on the moment of recognition of itself as both self and other.

Carol Ann Duffy has successfully brought in an extensive scale of influence on the contemporary poetry scene both in theme and treatment. Her success relies in part on the fact that while being a part of a tradition that is primarily male oriented she could effectively challenge and critique the same. Duffy’s has written boldly feminist poems in a poetic language which explore the patterns of everyday non-standard English. Her themes include issues ranging from sexism, racism, immigration and domestic violence to the contemporary complexities of love. Being a Scottish, a Catholic and a woman, she has all the disadvantages of being marginalized. Duffy explores the possibilities of this marginality in order to gain strength to go against all kinds of temporal and spatial limitations and power configurations, thus to etch in words what is otherwise unsayable while at the same time dexterously placing what is otherwise not easily placeable.

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