Carol Ann Duffy: Analysis Of Prayer, War Photographer, Havisham And Valentine

Carol Ann Duffy is well known Scottish poet and playwright and is considered one of the most representative, contemporary, widely read and loved poets of her time. She began writing poetry in 1970 and her first adult collection of poetry was published in 1985, and since has written over 46 works. She has won multitudes of awards for her work, such as the Scottish Arts Council Prize in 1993 and the Costa Book Award in 2011. Due to her tremendous list of awards, she has been appointed the Dame Commander of the Order of Empire. Duffy is known for her long monologues that amplify the consuming relationships of human interaction. Her common themes include representation of reality, the construction of personality, contemporary cultures, oppression, and social inequality.

In Duffy's poetry, the central speaker either has reliability on their spirituality, or on a relationship. The concept of reliability is the quality of being trustworthy and consistently performing well. It is often used in scientific experiments when referring to your set of results, however; in this case, reliability is having the hope that either spirituality or a relationship has the ability to be your rock in a tough situation. Relationships are "the way in which two or more people or things are connected". It relates to the way in which two or more people or groups regard and behave towards each other. In contrast, spirituality is a "having sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves". This varies dramatically for everyone. For some, it is having spirituality in God or for others, a spirituality in something higher. Both spirituality and relationships conceptualize the ability to be connected to something that isn't yourself, yet they both hold different levels of dependency. From researching Carol Ann Duffy, the concept of spirituality has been a constant since she was 15, which is when she declared she was an atheist. But throughout her life, she has come to the understanding that "poetry and pray are very similar", which has clearly shaped her works. However, she has had many conflicts regarding her relationships, as she has been with both men and women which is been a large contributing factor to the style of her poetry.

To compare the reliability of spirituality versus the reliability of relationships, I have chosen four of her poems to analyse, to fully gauge an understanding of just how dependable spirituality and relationships can be. In regard to spirituality, I have chosen Prayer from the "Mean Time Collection", and War Photographer from her collection titled "Standing Female Nude." To encapsulate the reliability of relationships, I have chosen Havisham from the "Mean Time Collection" and Valentine also from the "Mean Time Collection". Through analysing these four poems, we will be able to indicate the accuracy of spirituality and relationships.

Prayer by Carol Ann Duffy was published in 1993 as part of the "Mean Time Collection". It is one of Duffy's most popular and discussed poems and is presented in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet about the various reminders of prayer that we receive in our everyday life. In Prayer, the speaker alternates in every stanza, and all these speakers are in a time of trouble. Throughout the poem, Duffy uses words and phrases as sound devices that tug on our auditory imagery such as; the rhythm of a train, the sound of piano scales, or the familiar routine of the radio shipping forecast. Duffy has chosen this specific rhyme scheme in an effort to imitate the song like nature of an actual prayer. Within Prayer, every stanza has a different

element of rhythm and varied musical elements. The poem includes lines such as “the minims sung by a tree” or “the distant Latin chanting of a train” which again appeals to our auditory senses. The “radio’s prayer” mentioned in the second last line is referring to a BBC radio shipping forecast, which continually happens every morning, showing a further sense of reliability just as a prayer should have. Furthermore, the tone in the pome shows the speaker’s reaction to the given event that may be happening. Their reactions speak greatly to the reliability of humanity, as throughout the poem many references to prayer are made. Why is it that people with little to no faith still call out for God in times of need? If they are trying to invoke an external force, why do they not call on their belief of choice? Even for Duffy to write a poem of spirituality being an atheist herself, it questions what typical humanity relies on.

Additionally, War Photographer was published in the 1985 collection titled “Standing Female Nude” and Duffy describes the experience of a photographer who witnesses the terrible crimes against humanity, and who brings them back for us to see. This poem raises many vital questions about the reliability of humanity such as ‘how should we react to terrible suffering in other countries’ or ‘why does a feeling of sadness not provoke a sense of action?’ Although War Photographer raises these important questions, it does not answer them in any way, shape or form. Throughout the poem, there are subtle links to spirituality as a juxtaposition to the traumatic events he saw. Duffy uses symbolic associations of ordinary words such as “darkroom” and “only light is red” which describes the developing of photographs but also describes church tabernacle lights and paints a blood red image. Duffy alludes to the fact that this photographer perhaps did have faith previous to viewing the atrocities of war yet has been turned away due to the unfairness of warfare. There are many biblical suggestions in this poem as well such as “all the flesh is grass” and “blood-stained into foreign dust”. This theological imagery is effective in not only projecting the adherence the photographer feels towards his occupation but also because, like a priest, he too is often exposed to demise and torment. It is clear that the photographer in this poem had a large role in publicizing the atrocities of war, and he has become numb from this experience due to the fact that “they do not care” and no one has made a change.

In contrast, Havisham was published in 1993 as part of the “Mean Time Collection”. This poem tells the story of Miss Havisham from Charles Dicken’s novel “Great Expectations”. It explores Miss Havisham’s mental and physical state after being left at the altar by her lover decades before. This piece shows the repercussions of having a reliability on a relationship, as the passionate tone shows that the devastation of love has stayed with her. In the poem, many oxymorons are used such as “beloved sweetheart bastard” and “love’s hate” which portrays the uncertainty and restlessness of the speaker. By using beloved and bastard as alliteration, it further shows the conflict she entails. Duffy juxtaposes the idea of love with many violent themes in this poem, as Havisham’s bitter rage is still with her. There are many illusions to the anger that she holds; such as “dark green pebbles” showing jealousy and hardening emotions. Also, “curses that are sounds, not words” suggests she is so angry she has become inarticulate and no longer has the ability to recover. The angry emotion towards her failed relationship is again shown by “a male corpse” suggesting she would rather see him dead than have him reject her all over again. Havisham shows the unreliability of relationships as we witness a woman who seems utterly broken by an act of misfortune.

Furthermore, Duffy wrote Valentine in 1993 and it offers a bizarre and unconventional approach to the traditional yet commercially driven idea of Valentine’s Day. This poem expresses affection and tenderness through the unorthodox persona of an onion. This poem challenges

the convention of a variety of levels, as Duffy writes a love poem that completely avoids any language even somewhat associated with love poetry. This poem takes a new stance on the reliability of relationships as it describes love as “a moon wrapped in brown paper” which is a metaphor that connotates hope, light, and innocence whilst depicting control of the currents of love. The single lines and one-word responses such as “take it”, “lethal”, “here” and “like a lover” allow the reader to pause and think about the repercussions of love. The poem is written as a lonely confession full of daring promises and considerable statements such as “for as long as we are” or “its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring.” Both these portray the sense that perhaps their love won’t last or diminish to a dangerous, impermanent promise with nothing left to lose. Duffy has created a pivotal transition between conventions of love, yet still shows the beauty in having a relationship to rely on.

Through analysing Prayer, War Photographer, Havisham and Valentine it is clear that the basis of Duffy’s poetry does centralize around the reliability of spirituality or the reliability of relationships. After contrasting the nature of these works, one work has fallen in favour of each concept. Prayer depicted the elements of spirituality that fall into our natural responses in troubled times. However, War Photographer showed just how unreliable spirituality can be as the atrocities of humanity such as warfare still occur. Havisham shows just how reliable humans can become on a relationship, and how this often falls through leaving you alone. And Valentine shows the pulling nature of love and the beauty behind having a relationship. After comparing both spirituality and relationships, having a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves seems more compelling than a connection between two people. I came to this conclusion due to the fact that humans have more of a tendency to be unreliable, and therefore holding strength and trust in something other than human interaction forms a more dependable conclusion. For most people, having a connection extending the reliability of human interactions seems to prove more sustainable in the long run; which directly connects with Duffy’s feelings towards the matter.

Through exploring Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry and comparing the reliability of spirituality verse the reliability of relationships, the long monologues that amplify consuming human interaction fall in favour of spirituality. Throughout her 46-odd works, direct human interaction has a tendency to fall short of being the constant that the speaker needs to depend on. To quote Duffy… “She stood upon a continent of ice, which sparkled between sea and sky, endless and dazzling, as though the world kept all its treasure there; a scale which balanced the strength of poetry and prayer.”