



The poet – Contextual information about the poet relevant to the poem (AO3)

- Carol Ann Duffy was born in Glasgow in 1955. She is of Scottish and Irish descent and moved to England as a child.
- She is considered one of the most important and widely read poets in Britain today.
- Duffy had been inspired to write the poem as a result of her friendships with the war photographers Don McCullin and Phillip Jones Griffiths (who photographed the Vietnam war).
- She was interested in how war photographers had to record horrifying events without being able to help the people involved.

Connections and contrasts (AO3)

This list is not exhaustive and other comparisons are valid. 'War Photographer' could be compared and/or contrasted with these poems from the Anthology:

- 'Drummer Hodge' by Thomas Hardy
Both poems are about war and death and the dehumanisation of the victims.
- 'Disabled' by Wilfred Owen
Both poems deal with aspects of war, conflict and memories.
- 'Decomposition' by Zulfikar Ghose
Both poems explore ideas about identity and dehumanisation.
- 'Kamikaze' by Beatrice Garland
Both poems consider ideas about war, conflict and the expectations of society to do a job. Ideas about guilt, trauma and memories are also covered in both poems.
- 'Remains' by Simon Armitage
Both poems focus on war, conflicting feelings, trauma, guilt, memories and desensitivity.
- 'Catrin' by Gillian Clarke
Both poems deal with different types of conflict.

The poem

Content (AO1)

Stanza 1 describes the photographer developing his photographs in his dark room as he remembers the different locations he has visited to photograph wars. Stanza 2 shows the contrast between 'rural England' and normal life with the atrocities he has seen. In stanza 3, as the picture develops and features begin to form, he remembers the suffering of the man in the picture. Stanza 4 describes how readers will only respond to pictures of suffering for a split second before returning to their daily lives.

The poem is really about the horrors of war and how people often become desensitised by what they see in newspapers or on television. The poem also shows the true horror of war and the suffering of innocent victims. It deals with the trauma of those who see such suffering and are unable to help.

Context (AO3)

The poem was published in 1985 in the collection of poems titled *Standing Female Nude*. War photographers are civilians, not soldiers, who risk their lives to take photographs of armed conflicts and their consequences, so people at home can be made aware of these situations. War photographers have often been injured and sometimes killed while doing their job.

The poem refers to real-life conflicts. 'Belfast' refers to the Northern Ireland Troubles towards the end of the 20th century. 'Beirut' is a reference to The Siege of Beirut, which was caused by a breakdown of ceasefire in the Lebanon War in 1982. 'Phnom Penh' is the capital of Cambodia, where a genocide occurred between 1975 and 1979, which killed almost 3 million Cambodians.

Structure and form (AO2)

The poem is written in third person to reflect the detachment a war photographer must feel when doing the job. There are four stanzas with six lines each, suggesting regularity and the routine nature of his job. Each stanza has a similar and consistent rhyme scheme (ABBCDD), which again creates a feeling of structure and routine to his work. Each stanza focuses on a different aspect of the war photographer's job. The strict, controlled structure contrasts the chaos, confusion and lack of structure in war.



GCSE

English Literature

'War Photographer' (Carol Ann Duffy)

Language and imagery (AO2)

The 'dark room' could have both a literal and metaphorical meaning. He is literally developing his photographs in a darkened room, without any light. However, the 'dark room' could also be a metaphor for his heart, which is 'dark' because of the brutality, suffering and death that he has witnessed. It suggests the trauma he experiences.

Duffy uses religious imagery comparing the photographer developing his photographs to a priest delivering a sermon. Words like 'ordered rows', 'Mass' and 'church' add to this semantic field of religion. The imagery is appropriate as a war photographer and a priest witness death, pain and suffering regularly and have to respond sensitively to what they see.

The plosive alliteration of the harsh 'B' sound is used in 'Belfast. Beirut' suggests the pain and brutality of war.

The pronouns 'he' and 'his' are used to refer to the war photographer, instead of him being identified by an actual name. This creates a distancing effect and suggests how he has to feel a detachment from his work and the photographs he takes.

Key quotations (AO1)

- 'In his dark room he is finally alone'
- 'spools of suffering set out in ordered rows'
- 'as though this were a church and he / a priest'
- 'He has a job to do.'
- 'the feet / of running children in a nightmare heat'
- 'He remembers the cries / of this man's wife'
- 'A hundred agonies in black and white / from which his editor will pick five or six'
- 'The reader's eyeballs prick / with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers'
- 'he stares impassively at where / he earns his living'
- 'and they do not care'

Key questions to ask about 'War Photographer'

1. Why does Duffy use the title 'War Photographer'? (AO1)
2. What are the two possible meanings of 'his dark room'? (AO1)
3. What is the significance of the 'priest' and 'Mass' metaphor in stanza 1? (AO2)
4. Why does Duffy list the locations using full stops in the line 'Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh.'? (AO2)
5. How does Duffy contrast what the photographer witnesses through his job with his normal life at home in stanza 2? (AO1)
6. What are the possible meanings of a 'nightmare heat'? (AO2)
7. Do you think the poem depicts the profession of a war photographer as an exciting one? Justify your answer. (AO1/AO2)
8. What do the words 'prick with tears' suggest about the attitude of the general public? (AO2)
9. What does the adverb 'impassively' suggest about the feelings of the war photographer? (AO1/AO2)
10. Has this poem changed the way you think about news reports and photographs from current conflict zones? (AO3)

Links for further research

[Interview with Nick Ut, a war photographer in the Vietnam war](#)