**WAR PHOTOGRPAHER REVISION NOTES**

**OVERVIEW**

Duffy was inspired to write this poem by her friendship with a war photographer. 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.

Duffy perhaps shares an affinity with these photojournalists - while they use the medium of photography to convey certain truths about the human condition, she uses words and language to do the same job. 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.

**Form and structure**

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.

This organisation mirrors the actions of the photographer, who lays out his films in "ordered rows", as though in doing so he can in some way help to restore order to this chaotic world. The poem moves through a series of observations in the first three stanzas to a conclusion of sorts in the fourth.

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. Unlike the readers of the newspaper he works for, this sense of distance is a necessary requirement for the photographer.

Unsurprisingly, in a poem that is so focused on images of human suffering, Duffy concentrates on the sense of sight throughout the poem and the final image is almost like a photograph itself, depicting the journalist surveying the landscape and its inhabitants below impassively as he travels to his next assignment.

**Stanza one**

The poem opens in the intimate, tranquil setting of the photographer's darkroom. He is compared to a priest and there is a definite sense of ritual in the way he develops his film. He sets out the film: spools of suffering, in ordered rows, perhaps in an attempt to restore order to the chaotic images contained within them.

He handles them with the same respect with which a priest would prepare for communion and there is a definite spirituality to this process.

This religious imagery is effective in not only conveying the dedication the photographer feels towards his occupation but also because, like a priest, he too is often exposed to death and suffering.

The red light of the darkroom has connotations of the light that burns continuously in Catholic churches to symbolise the presence of Christ and also of blood– a sight that the photographer must be all too familiar with.

Aside from the function of the light to help process the films and protect the images he has taken, there is more than a suggestion that the darkroom is a place of sanctuary for the photographer, just as a religious or spiritual person may look for the same kind of solace in a church had they been confronted with the same horrors that the photographer must endure.

However, instead of preparing for mass, the photographer is developing images of war– evidence of inhuman behaviour which only serves to contradict the fundamental teachings of the Church.

The final line of the stanza ends in a list of the places where he has recorded images of conflict. Duffy's deliberate use of full stops here helps to “fix” the images – the final part of the printing process - into the mind of the reader. The stanza ends with the quotation all flesh is grass, which comes from the New Testament and reinforces the religious imagery as well as emphasising the fragility of life.

**Stanza two**

This stanza breaks the reverie and calm of the dark room with the line He has a job to do. The phrase solutions slop in trays has a dual meaning, referring both directly to the onomatopoeic sound of the chemicals he is using to develop but also the hope that in some way these photographs may help to contribute to the resolution of the conflicts they depict.

Significantly, the photographer’s hands are shaking though they did not tremble when taking the photo.

The implication is that in order to function and do his job properly in the field, the photographer must be able to distance himself from the subjects of his photographs. However, he is able to let down his guard in the privacy of the darkroom as he finally allows himself to react to the terrible suffering he was forced to witness and record.

He considers the contrast between Rural England and the war zones that he visits, noting how our ordinary problems can be dispelled by the simplicity of clement weather. The injustice of the situation is exemplified when he notes how our children don’t have to be fearful of landmines when they are at play.

One of the most iconic images of war photography is deliberately evoked in the final line of stanza two: of running children in a nightmare heat. This photograph, of children fleeing a napalm attack in Vietnam directly helped to end this conflict and emphasises just how indifferent we have become today when similar images fail to resonate with us.

**Stanza three**

The opening line something is happening injects drama and suspense into the poem and suggests the photographer is not wholly in control of the development process. Duffy allows us to “see” the horrific photograph develop before our eyes.

In it, the photographer has captured the image of a man in his dying moments and he is described as a half formed ghost. This description is dually effective since it both describes the way the figure is gradually appearing on the paper, while also alluding to the fact that since he no longer exists he has effectively become a ghost.

The photographer recalls how, unable to speak the same language, he sought approval through the unspoken exchange of looks with the victim’s wife. Again the analogy to a priest is effective here as they, like this photographer, must tend to people in their final moments. The impact of this memory on the photographer and his sensitivity in seeking permission to capture such an intimate moment on film is clear.

Just like a priest, he feels his job is a vocation - a calling rather than a career as he asserts he does what someone must. Although he is aware of the intrusiveness of his occupation, he conducts himself with the utmost compassion and sensitivity.

**Stanza four**

As the poet begins to reach her conclusion, she makes a comment on the way these images are received by the people they are produced for: both the newspaper editors who commission the work and us, the readers of these publications.

The hundred agonies that the photographer has selected for his editor contrasts immediately with the phrase will pick out five or six in the next line. The careless indifference in the way the editor selects the images reinforces how little regard we have for the subjects in the pictures.

Duffy extends this disingenuous response to us, the readers of the newspapers, using bathos when describing how our eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.

The poem ends with the photographer departing once more for a new job as the cycle begins again. His sense of separateness from his countrymen is evident as he refers to us as they, emphasising how little he identifies with our lives and values

As he surveys the landscape of rural England from the aeroplane, there is a growing acceptance that, despite his best efforts, his photographs will ultimately make no real difference.

**Themes**

The poem focuses on two main themes:

* the horror of war
* our increasing indifference to the victims of conflict

These themes are revealed not only through Duffy’s word choice and imagery, but also through the central paradox that while the imagery of war is more widespread and prevalent than at any other time in history, its impact upon those of us exposed to it is rapidly declining.

**The horror of war**

Duffy’s skilful yet understated imagery helps to convey the terrible personal stories that lie behind every conflict. Perhaps almost in an attempt to counter the graphic imagery that we have become so used to seeing, her depictions are subtle and understated and she often leaves the reader to compose their own images.

For example, in the line to fields which don’t explode beneath the feet /of running children, she takes an image that we would usually associate with something innocent and happy and subverts it into something much more sinister.

Similarly, her description of the dying man contains almost no visual imagery and instead focuses on the sense of sound through the word choice cries and the unspoken communication between the photographer and the victim’s wife

By focusing on just one image rather than the countless others that were taken, Duffy forces us to confront the personal cost of war. In doing so, Duffy again exposes another paradox inherent in the coverage of modern conflict, implying that we have lost the capacity to view the subjects of war as real human beings, each with unique, individual stories and tragedies.

**Our increasing indifference to the victims of conflict**

Throughout the poem, Duffy conveys the increasing separateness and isolation the photographer feels both towards his own country and the newspaper he works for.

Unlike us and his editor, he is unable to protect himself from the horror of the subjects he photographs and there is a sense of growing bitterness as he continues to feed the voracious need for news in the knowledge that we are increasingly unmoved and unaffected by the images. Our disingenuous response is recorded most clearly in the line The reader’s eyeballs prick/with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.

His contempt for his editor is revealed in the careless, thoughtless way he notes how he chooses photographs for the paper, picking out five or six/for Sunday’s supplement.

Ironically, in an almost parallel response to our desensitisation, the photographer too feels increasingly indifferent towards his homeland and fellow countrymen as he stares impassively at where/he earns his living and they do not care.