Creating meaning in the poem

‘War Photographer’ by Carol Ann Duffy

Answer the following questions to explore the way Duffy uses literary techniques to convey meaning in the poem.

1. What is the effect of the metaphor and sibilance in line two?

2. What is the effect of the setting of this poem (consider light, darkness and isolation) and why might the darkroom be a sanctuary?

3. Why might he draw a parallel between himself and a priest?

4. This use of parataxis in line six is key because it creates quite a blunt tone - what is significant about this list? What does the metaphor at the end mean?

5. What is the effect of the monosyllabic first line in the second stanza?

6. There is a double meaning of ‘solutions’. In what ways might these photographs act as solutions?

7. What is the effect of the enjambment in the first three lines of the second stanza?

   What does the line ‘which did not tremble then though seem to now’ mean? What is the significance of the gentle, poignant verb ‘tremble’?

8. What does he mean by ‘ordinary pain’?

9. We have a moment of sustained enjambment in the third stanza, as a painful memory is experienced. He is photographing a dying man - how does Duffy portray the photographer as being sensitive and respectful here?

10. What point is Duffy making when she describes the eyes of readers and uses internal rhyme to link it to ‘beers’?

11. At the end, the photographer sets off on another expedition. How is language used to convey his sense of detachment from England?

12. What is the significance of the final line and what does it suggest about the theme of increasing indifference to the victims of conflict?

Form and structure

How is the poem laid out? What might be the effect of this?

Analytical paragraphs

a. How is the horror of war conveyed in this poem? Select three quotations and analyse these in detail.

b. How is the photographer presented in this poem? Make three points about his character and his role.
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Teacher’s answer sheet

1. The metaphor of the ‘spool’ representing his memories allows us to understand the permanence of the photographer’s experiences. The sibilant sounds indicate how the photographer cannot escape these cruel memories.

2. The ‘darkroom’ is a loaded word – this place is his sanctuary.

3. In taking the photos and sharing these, he is ‘preaching’ to the world and making others aware of the atrocities; there is an ironic contrast in the messages they preach though, between mankind’s virtue and mankind’s sin.

4. The photographs create single, transient images of warzones and the full stops fix the images. Just their names are enough, without explanation - much like the photographs. The metaphor at the end moves the poem from the secular to the religious: ‘All flesh is grass’ from the Old Testament, Isaiah 40:6. In the New Testament the phrase reoccurs in the First Epistle of Peter (see 1 Peter 1:24). In both cases the phrase is interpreted to mean that human life is transitory.

5. The phrase echoes the meaning of the previous line, in that by stating ‘He has a job to do’ there is the suggestion that one life is a small price to pay for the greater good (one lost life for the sake of many more). However, the tone is harsh and indicates either the disapproval of this view and an invitation to the reader to reconsider this, or it indicates the need to distance himself by calling it a ‘job’ and seeing it in simplistic terms in order to justify it.

6. The word ‘solutions’ is ambiguous: it could relate to the literal photographic solutions to process the images, the blood shed or the photographs acting as ‘answers’ so that people who haven’t experienced war have some understanding.

7. It blends the experiences of the places together: within the photographs.

8. The photographer reflects on his experiences, and is experiencing some degree of PTSD - the word ‘tremble’ infers the fragility of both the emotional experience and the photographs.

9. As opposed to psychological pain.

10. We are able to watch the photograph develop in front of our very eyes, but she is angry that their lives carry on regardless.

11. Using the contrasting ‘he’ and ‘they’, the poet shows the separateness of the two.

12. There is a sense of despair and hopelessness that the images he takes will not make a difference to anything actually being done.

Form and structure

Prompt students to consider the desire to order chaotic images or memories.