Context: Carol Ann Duffy and ‘Hour’

Carol Ann Duffy (1955–)

Carol Ann Duffy was born in Glasgow on 23 December 1955 to a Scottish father and Irish mother. Raised Catholic, she spent her childhood in Staffordshire with her sister and four brothers. Her mother would often invent fairytales for her, a common theme in Duffy’s writing (which often explores and manipulates feminine archetypes). Always an avid reader, Duffy recalls reading Alice in Wonderland aged seven and writing a poem to continue the story as she was sad that it had ended. From an early age she knew she wanted to be a writer and found encouragement from an inspirational teacher at her convent school.

She established her name with the collection Standing Female Nude in 1985 and since then has become one of the nation’s best-known poets. Her poems have a wide appeal and frequently appear in ‘The Nation’s Favourite…’ collections as well as on the National Curriculum. One of her best-known poems, ‘Education for Leisure’, was withdrawn from AQA’s previous GCSE anthology when it was feared that it might be seen as insensitive to victims of knife crime. Duffy is the author of many books for adults and children and is also an acclaimed playwright and editor. She was awarded an OBE in 1995, a CBE in 2001 and became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1999.

After being considered and passed over for the role under Tony Blair’s government, Duffy succeeded Andrew Motion as the UK’s twentieth Poet Laureate on 1 May 2009, and is the first woman to hold the post.

Duffy writes in everyday language, which gives her poems an outward accessibility that hides the intricate technicalities and manipulation of language. Traditional poetic forms, such as the dramatic monologue and sonnet form, are often transformed into modern, contemporary poems. She is known for playing with words to explore the ways in which meaning and reality are constructed through language. She writes of life and is not afraid to tackle the sadness or suffering that accompanies it, exploring themes such as gender, contemporary culture, alienation and social inequality.

‘Hour’

The poem ‘Quickdraw’ is part of Duffy’s collection of love poems, Rapture, for which she was awarded the T.S. Eliot prize in 2005. The collection spans the highs and lows of a romantic relationship and is personal, emotional and elegiac.

‘Hour’ is loosely based on the sonnet, a traditional form for love poetry. In the poem Duffy plays with the notion of time, bending it at will to reflect the lovers’ absorption in the affair. While at first glance the references to myth and fairytale appear to support the notion of a fairytale romance, the underlying themes of these stories suggest something else entirely.
Bibliography

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