

Feminine Gospels by Carol Ann Duffy – Knowledge Organiser

Poem Summaries

The Long Queen – This is the first poem in the collection and therefore important when considering ‘Feminine Gospels’ structurally as a whole. The poem characterises lives of women through history, appearing to present Elizabeth I as the female protagonist who solely dedicates her reign to bringing up generations of females despite not having children of her own. Uses conventions from the fairy-tale genre, as well as feminine imagery.

The Map-Woman – This poem uses the extended metaphor of a map to explore notions of identity and the position of women in the world. Duffy uses a range of poetic techniques to convey the journey through life and how society, and particularly male expectations, have a bearing on women’s lives.

Beautiful – Duffy uses four famous females to structure this poem, which is part of the ‘Women and History’ theme. The poem starts with a description of Helen of Troy and then progresses chronologically onto Cleopatra, Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana to explore how women have been judged by physical appearance and gender stereotypes throughout history.

The Diet – Duffy explores the societal pressures on women to be as small as possible and how many women feel that size defines female identity. The poem emphasises the dangerous power of dieting and issues surrounding addiction and obsessive behaviours. Ultimately, Duffy is trying to restore power to the individual and encourage women to accept their true selves.

The Woman Who Shopped – This poem can be linked to ‘The Diet’ as it deals with similar themes of obsession, addiction and female societal pressures. However, in this poem, the main character is obsessed with reinventing herself through shopping. Duffy uses the female body as a symbol of capitalism to show how women sacrifice their identity by trying to conform to stereotypes/ social norms.

Work – In this poem, Duffy considers the changing roles and pressures on women in society and how women now face increasing pressures to work as well as juggle traditionally female roles such as motherhood and the household. The structure of the poem allows Duffy to provide a tour of female identity through time. Like ‘The Woman Who Shopped’, this poem also emphasises Duffy’s dislike of global capitalism.

Tall – Duffy constructs a world in which an enormously tall woman becomes a deity of sorts. The world she inhabits is bleak and she becomes increasingly isolated. When the woman reaches the stars, she realises that there is no heaven or God. Her final gesture is to try to rescue humanity.

Loud – This is the sister poem to *Tall*. The poem represents female power through a woman who achieves the superhuman quality of a loud voice, and who attains some kind of metamorphosis (albeit one that isolates her) for the good of society. By the end of the poem, her loud voice loses impact; the woman ultimately loses power in her attempt at dominance.

History - The poem begins by describing the cruel neglect of an elderly woman in modern society but can also be seen as a reaction to feminist historians who argued that the history of the female has been forgotten. The point of the poem seems to be that society disregards history (and maybe women, as well, or women’s experience of history), and that history might as well be dead or non-existent.

Sub – The first-person narrative plays with gender roles and how fields of achievement are distorted in favour of male participation in patriarchal society. The reference to sports, music and scientific discovery all relate to male achievements in history, whilst Duffy uses an ironic tone to create a paradox between masculine and maternal/ feminine imagery to show how women are hindered by gender stereotypes.

The Virgin’s Memo – An imagined list from the Virgin Mary to Jesus, addressing him in his role as co-creator (with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit). The poem seems to be suggesting that a woman’s creation of the universe would be vastly better; but, powerless, all she can do is suggest.

Anon – This poem discusses woman’s non-recognition throughout history. The woman is called ‘Anon’ humorously: anonymity is her name. The poem presents the idea that there is a long tradition of female creativity which has been suppressed or ignored.
The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High – The poem tells the story of a mysterious bout of giggling that takes over a girls’ grammar school. This results in the girls rebelling and the teachers redefining their lives.
A Dreaming Week – This poem is an anti-parallel to creation, occurring at night-time (the time of romance and fantasy, rather than daytime) over a week, and insisting on the power of fantasy over reality.
White Writing - A poem about modern women and the struggles women still face. The poem possibly explores two females and the vows they make to each other (the white writing making this secretive).
The Light Gatherer – Part of the ‘Motherhood and Children’ theme, this poem details the experience of being a mother and how children brighten up life and add a magical quality to living. Duffy uses a reflective tone to consider the mixed emotions of parents as children grow up.
The Cord – Also part of the ‘Motherhood and Children’ theme, Duffy chooses to dedicate this poem to her daughter Ella. Duffy uses conventions of the fairy-tale genre to explore concepts of femininity and the maternal, which is a common feature of her collection. As well as portraying the role of the mother as mentor and teacher, the poem also looks at the difficulty of having to let children go as they grow up.
Wish - This poem explores ideas of resurrection. In a wider sense, Duffy is mirroring the difficulties women face and wondering ‘what if’ women could climb out of their own metaphorical grave of patriarchal oppression.
North-West - By returning to the place of her upbringing, Duffy is mourning a period of her personal history and the un-lived life that might have occurred there. The unnamed companion could be a former lover such as Adrian Henri.
Death and the Moon – This poem is about the death of Duffy’s friend Adrian Henri, and her experience of loss and mourning.

Key words: feminine, gospels, patriarchy, oppression, identity, preface, transformation, conceit, outcast, zeitgeist, parody, identity, herstory, degradation, irony, literary canon, bathos, purity, vows, allegory, mock-epic poem, rebellion, elegy, mourning, symbolism, autobiographical, ambiguity, transience, mythology, rebirth, empowerment.

Context

Background: Carol Ann Duffy (born December 23, 1955, Glasgow, Scotland) is a British poet whose well-known and well-liked poetry engaged such topics as gender and oppression, expressing them in familiar, conversational language that made her work accessible to a variety of readers. In 2009–19 she served as the first woman poet laureate of Great Britain. She studied Philosophy at Liverpool University. She expresses Left-wing, feminist views. The dedication of *Death and the Moon* (her last poem in the collection) indicates that this poem is about the death of Duffy’s friend Adrian Henri, and her experience of loss and mourning.

Influences:

John Donne - Approaches ordinary objects in original and surprising ways.

Robert Browning - Writing monologues from the point of view of disturbed characters.

Dylan Thomas - Elements of Surrealism.

Beat poets – Rejection of standard narrative values, rejection of materialism, explicit portrayals of the human condition, sexual liberation.

Liverpool poets - Adrian Henri was part of the group. Directness of expression, simplicity of language, suitability for live performance, concern for temporary subjects and references, human experience and emotion.

Feminine Gospels:

Feminine Gospels (2002), as the title suggests, is a concentration on the female point of view. It is a celebration of female experience, and it has a strong sense of magic and fairy tale discourse. However, as in traditional fairy tales, there is sometimes a sense of darkness as well as joy. Birth, death and the cycles and stages of life feature strongly, including menstruation, motherhood and aging. Duffy’s daughter Ella was born in 1995, and her experience of motherhood has deeply influenced her poetry (as well as inspiring her to write other works for children). Poems such as 'The Cord' and 'The Light Gatherer' rejoice in new life, while 'Death and the Moon' mourns those who have passed on.

Themes

Duffy’s themes include language and the representation of reality; the construction of the self; gender issues; contemporary culture; and many different forms of alienation, oppression and social inequality.

<u>Women’s bodies</u> The Diet The Woman who Shopped The Map-Woman	<u>Women and History</u> The Long Queen Beautiful Sub History	<u>Exploitation, Degradation and Mistreatment</u> Loud Tall History
<u>The Non-Existent Voice</u> The Virgin’s Memo Anon White Writing Loud	<u>Motherhood and Children</u> The Light Gatherer The Cord Work	<u>The Herstory of Feminism</u> The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High
<u>Poems about Writing Poetry</u> The Gambler	<u>Elegies</u> Death and the Moon North-West Wish	<u>Suffering</u> Loud History Tall

Poetic Style

Duffy writes in everyday, conversational language, making her poems appear deceptively simple. With this demotic style she creates contemporary versions of traditional poetic forms - she makes frequent use of the dramatic monologue in her exploration of different voices and different identities, and she also uses the sonnet form. Duffy is both serious and humorous, often writing in a mischievous, playful style - in particular, she plays with words as she explores the way in which meaning and reality are constructed through language.

Critical Perspective

Feminist critics are interested in the representation of women in literature. They highlight, criticise and resist the patriarchal assumptions and gendered stereotypes in a text. There are different waves of Feminism as ideas have changed and adapted over time.

'A strong feminist edge'. (Poetry Foundation)

'Moves beyond 'a straightforward feminist poetry' and shows 'the difficulty that patriarchy presents to both men and women'. (Deryn Rees-Jones)

'Challenges and alters power relationships by making women both the subject and object of love poems'. (Eavan Boland).