

To what extent is Carol Ann Duffy a feminist poet? Case Study on 'The Devil's Wife', 'Little Red Cap' and 'Queen Kong' from 'The World's Wife'

A successful feminist poet should advocate equality between the sexes rather than widening the gap which is still present. Duffy is known for her feminist poetry and often writes about themes such as oppression and social inequality. 'The World's Wife' examines the stories of generations of previously marginalised women to show the ever-present patriarchal society. However, Duffy's justification of women's violent actions and her use of gender stereotypes in her poems seem outdated for a modern political climate.

The justification of women's violent actions is most prominent in 'The Devil's Wife'. Duffy writes from the perspective of Myra Hindley and often blames Brady for Hindley's actions. For example, 'He held my heart in his fist and he squeezed it dry'. The repetition of the male pronouns ('he' and 'his') demonstrates Brady's dominance over Hindley, and this shifts the blame onto him. Furthermore, the noun 'fist' and verb 'squeezed' shows Brady's strength over Hindley therefore painting her as weak. Another example is 'But what did I do to us all, to myself, when I was the Devil's Wife?' Duffy is questioning whether Hindley would've committed the crimes if she hadn't met Brady. Hindley is painted as a victim of circumstance however, victimising her doesn't justify her actions. Once again, Duffy almost refuses to let Hindley take the blame. Women should be held to the same standard as men and therefore shouldn't have excuses made for them, even in extreme circumstance such as the Moors Murders. The poem is exploring the abuse Hindley faced as she was seen to be turning on her maternity but in doing this, the blame is shifted onto Brady. Not only does this paint Hindley as weaker than Brady but also ignoring what she did, to promote a feminist message.

One of the most reinforced gender stereotypes in 'The World's Wife' is the 'madwoman in the attic'. The stereotype dictates that women act with their heart and resort to hysteria rather than using their brains. It appears quite often in Duffy's poetry. For example, in 'Little Red Cap', we see her go from enjoying her time with the wolf to becoming violent in search for my satisfaction. 'I took an axe to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon to see how it leapt.' The repetition and rhyme emphasise the repetition in her life. It also parallels the poem earlier as the once fun rhymes now become trapping in themselves. Similarly, in 'The Devil's Wife', Hindley goes crazy after being taken away from Brady and imprisoned. 'I said Not fair not right on not true not like that.' This section shows her madness as it is shown with the lack of punctuation and the incoherence of her phrases. This is reinforcing the gender stereotype. We would expect a feminist poet like Duffy to try to steer away from these harmful stereotypes.

However, it could be argued that Duffy creates female characters who are independent and ultimately make their own choices. For instance, 'Little Red Cap' makes the choice to pursue the 'wolf': 'I made quite sure he spotted me'. Even though, the relationship in the end is not what she wanted, she makes the initial decision. Furthermore, the use of 'quite' shows how confident she is in her decision, she isn't making it shyly or being forced to. Whilst also making the 'first move', she becomes more assertive in character. This is typically not a characteristic of female characters, so here there is a break in gender stereotypes, which is also seen in 'Queen Kong'. When she finds her lover, the poem says, 'I found him, of course.' This shows another assertive and confident woman, who is also capable and resourceful, and she is quite aware she has these characteristics, almost boastful. Repeatedly, these two

characters are shown to be independent and act on their own accord. This breaks down stereotypes, and Duffy is showing equality in that she gives female characters agency.

A common theme throughout the anthology is the idea of breaking free from this patriarchal society and breaking free from oppression. In 'The Devil's Wife', Hindley begins to show remorse once she is away from Brady. 'No not me I didn't I couldn't I wouldn't.'⁸ Here, she clearly has gone insane with guilt therefore, in a way, remorseful. But she can only begin to question these things once she is on her own. This demonstrates how women are confined to the general ideology of the patriarchal figures around them. This is also seen in 'Little Red Cap'. The 'Wolf' represents patriarchy, and only after killing him can Little Red Cap walk away. She leaves 'with my flowers, singing, all alone.'⁹ The flowers symbolise new growth and femininity, showing she has grown as a person yet remains feminine. She also has a voice which was previously on for the wolf ('reading his verse out loud') as she is 'singing' and she is independent as she is 'all alone'. She remains feminine but now she is free as well. This is also emphasised in the poem when she sees the 'virgin white of her grandmother's bones.'¹⁰ Symbolically this quote illustrates the consumption of women by a patriarchal society. Not only this but the use of 'virgin' makes her grandmother seem pure, showing us that virginity doesn't save you from patriarchy. Furthermore, the use of 'bones' shows they have been stripped bare, no identity except her body. One could see this as the stereotype of women being used only for their bodies. This is where Little Red Cap realises the oppression women have faced and decides to leave him, and in a small way end the cycle of patriarchy. Duffy shows here that even though a patriarchal society still exists women can rise above it, and they have the power to do so.

Despite this, Duffy's poems could be viewed as misandrist as she uses negative male stereotypes. The 'wolf' in 'Little Red Cap' is a predatory male. 'The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods, away from home'. He is leading her away from home and to somewhere hidden. Furthermore, he never stops to ask her if she wants to go here. Another example is 'my stockings ripped to shreds'. This is symbolism for her losing her virginity to him, yet there is something unsettling about 'ripped'. It seems as if he ripped them off her, which seems non-consensual. Adding to this, they never seem to do anything but have sex reinforcing the idea that men only want sex. Duffy comes across as misandrist in this way as it is just as demeaning to reduce a man to a singular trait. Similarly, in 'Queen Kong', the lover is marginalised and objectified and takes on the stereotype of 'prey'. He is referred to as 'my little man' throughout the poem which is marginalising as Duffy is reducing him to just a 'man' and equally reduced to just 'little'. Objectification is seen as well, as he is seen to be owned by Queen Kong because there is use of possessive pronouns. This could be ironic as women throughout history have been marginalised in much the same way however belittling one group doesn't mean another is less so. Duffy seems to be almost revengeful in the way she writes about men.

The title of the anthology 'The World's Wife' illustrates all women as wives and owned by the world itself inferring that the world is owned by men. This is shown further in the titles of the poems, as the intertextual nature of the poem relies on the reader to know and understand the male-centred stories. For example, 'Queen Kong' relies on you to understand who 'King Kong' is, the creates another dependency on men. Despite this, showing that both men and women can play these roles could be argued to be successfully feminist yet there are many poems titled the man's wife. 'The Devil's Wife' could be called Myra Hindley, but she is labelled as a 'wife', which is marginalising whilst also promoting

patriarchy. As expected, a feminist message in 1999 will not hold up to today's political climate. Duffy has shown she uses stereotypes, whilst they're meant to be comedic and subversive, they are harmful and promotes misandry. This once empowering point of view has now become a relic to the feminist past.