

**Poetry**  
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**Lecture - 65**  
**Carol Ann Duffy**

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**Carol Ann Duffy (1955-)**



- Historical and Literary Context
- Carol Ann Duffy
- Duffy's Concept of Poetry
- "Text"
- "Valentine"
- "Syntax"
- Analysis



Hello friends. In this lecture, we are going to deal with the poems of Carol Ann Duffy, a very important contemporary British poet. She was born in 1955, and she is still alive and writing. First, we will see the historical and literary context, then we will move on to a brief history of her life, and then we will look at some of the concepts of poetry that she has. We have collected a few quotations from her writings, we will look at them, and then see three short poems 'Text,' 'Valentine,' and 'Syntax;' analyze them linguistically, rhetorically, poetically, and then conclude our presentation.

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## Historical and Literary Context



- Tony Blair's Government in 1999
- Vacancy of Poet Laureateship in England after the demise of Ted Hughes in 1998.
- Considered Carol Ann Duffy but finally appointed the non-controversial poet Andrew Motion
- This incident gave her wide publicity
- Discrimination against women in different levels
- Rise of lesbian and ethnic minority in Britain
- Growth of women poets during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century



When we come to the historical and literary context, we see that Tony Blair assumed the charge of the government in 1999. At that time, there was a vacancy for this poet laureateship after the demise of Ted Hughes in 1998. Initially, the Tony Blair government considered Carol Ann Duffy for this appointment but later on, changed its mind and appointed another poet Andrew Motion as the poet laureate of England.

This incident of bypassing Carol Ann Duffy gave her wide publicity and this led to some kind of discrimination against women in different levels. This became very obvious. At this time, we notice that lesbian and ethnic minority writing was increasing. We also notice the growth of women poets during the last decade of the 20th century and the early 21st century.

We notice a number of women coming into picture in anthologies with their own single volumes, and then, more importantly, recognition for them.

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## Duffy: People's Poet



- First Scottish poet laureate of England
- First woman poet laureate of England
- First Lesbian poet laureate of England
- EB Browning and C Rossetti missed it.
- Dedicated and generous to the cause of poetry
- Established the Ted Hughes Poetry Prize with the poet laureate stipend
- Conducted numerous poetry festivals, including Dorothy Wordsworth Festival
- Promoted poets and poetry like no other poet or personality did in English history



Let see the poet Duffy, who is called the People's Poet. She has some remarkable achievements. She is the first Scottish poet laureate of England in its 400 year history. Similarly, she is the first woman poet laureate of England, and most significantly, she is the first lesbian poet laureate of England.

Before her, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti missed this laureateship in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the case of Duffy, we find her, she was devoted and dedicated to the cause of poetry throughout her life. When she became the poet laureate, using the stipend from this poet laureateship, she established that Ted Hughes Poetry Prize and encouraged other poets.

Further, she conducted numerous poetry festivals and gave a name to one of them like Dorothy Wordsworth festival to recognize Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy Wordsworth. She also promoted poets and poetry like no other poet or personality did in English poetry or in English history till then.

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## The Poet of Our Times



- Editor and introducer of poetry
- Revisionary and revolutionary poet
- Voices of Mrs. Midas, Mrs. Tiresias, Mrs. Darwin, Mrs. Aesop, Mrs. Faust, Mrs. Lazarus, Mrs. Sisyphus, Mrs. Pilate, Mrs. Freud, Havisham, etc., in *The World's Wife* (1999)
- Voices of the common people
- **Where does poetry come from?**
- What could be Duffy's answer?



One of the ways in which she promoted poetry was to edit volumes of poems by various writers and introduce less recognized writers to the public. She also adopted this revisionary approach and she actually tended to become a revolutionary poet to think about social issues as well. When she revised certain perceptions of women, she chose to look at the women, the neglected women. We always talk about Midas touch but we never think about Mrs. Midas and similarly, Tiresias, the prophet we often think about but we do not think about his wife Mrs. Tiresias.

Similarly, we have many other neglected women starting from Mrs. Midas, Mrs. Tiresias, Mrs. Darwin, Mrs. Aesop, Mrs. Faust, Mrs. Lazarus, Mrs. Sisyphus, Mrs. Pilate, Mrs. Freud, and the well-known character in Charles Dickens novel *Great Expectations* 'Havisham.' She is presented as a demonized woman in that novel but when we look at it from Duffy's point of view, she is a beautiful woman. So all these characters and many others, she presented in a book called 'The World's Wife,' published in 1999. Naturally, she became the people's poet and the poet of our times. She thus gave expression to the voices of common people, neglected people, marginalized people.

We have one interesting question for us to think about, where does poetry come from? Does it come from heaven or hell or earth, where does it come from, what is the origin, what is its source? Interestingly, Duffy has an answer. In one of her writings, she says, the source of my poetry is my childhood. We can see the close connection between Duffy and Wordsworth in some way. For Wordsworth, all his writings have come out of his own childhood memories. The same way, we find Duffy thinking about childhood and writing lots of poems.

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## Poetic Qualities



- Voice, meter, rhyme, rhythm, metaphor, simile
- Repetition, refrain, wordplay
- Assonance, alliteration
- Internal rhyme, end rhyme
- Full rhyme, half rhyme,
- Enjambment
- Form, imagery
- Sonnet as a major form



We have to remember that Duffy was a feminist, a lesbian, and so, some kind of charges against her, how can a feminist poet be a great poet or how can a lesbian poem be a great poem? but then, we find that she has used number of poetic devices or she has used a number of poetic qualities in her poems. So we have a list of them here like voice, meter, rhyme, rhythm, metaphor, simile, repetition, refrain, wordplay, assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme, end rhyme, full rhyme, half-rhyme, caesura, enjambment, form, imagery, and also, she has used the conventional sonnet form as a major form in her poetry.

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**Duffy on Poetry**

- "Poets are at the heart of revolution because revolution is the heart of the poet."
- "Poetry is all about looking at the ordinary and transforming it – the Midas's touch."
- "A poem if you like is the attire of feeling: the literary form where words seem tailor-made for memory or desire .... **However fashionably we dress ourselves up, we are all, in our common humanity, the same under the skin.**"
- Poetry is "the music of being human."
- "Poetry is what love speaks in."



Now, we come to this section on Duffy's views on poetry. We have a few quotations here, each one will give an aspect of poetry. "Poets are at the heart of revolution because revolution is the heart of the poet." Poetry, poet, and revolution, social change, all these things are brought together in this one quotation.

"Poetry is all about looking at the ordinary and transforming it." She calls it the Midas touch. So there is an element of transformation from the ordinary to the extraordinary, which was a project of Wordsworth in his romantic period. And similarly, we find Duffy also adopting such a kind of approach to poetry.

Next quotation goes like this. "A poem if you like is the attire of feeling, the literary form where words seem tailor-made for memory of desire. However fashionably we dress ourselves up, we are all in our common humanity the same under the skin." I believe this is the beautiful wisdom that we can get from Duffy. This is what most writers, great writers including poets, great poets, try to convey to the world. They try to make us remember this idea we are all the same under the skin.

"Poetry is the music of being human." What more way to express the beauty of poetry. Then we have another interesting aspect of poetry that is, "Poetry is what love speaks in." Until human love lasts poetry will be there.

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**“Text”**

[A poem in six two line stanzas on texting through mobile phone]

I tend the mobile now  
like an injured bird


We text, text, text  
our significant words. 4

...[3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> couplets are omitted]

The codes we send  
arrive with a broken chord. 10

I try to picture your hands,  
their image is blurred.

□ A lyrical poem on the ordinary happening of texting through mobile revealing the inherent difficulties in communication.



Now, we move on to the poems that we wanted to discuss. Here first, we have “Text,” just for reading to give a taste of the contemporary scenario that Duffy discusses in her poetry. It is a poem in 6 2-line stanzas on texting through mobile phone, which is a common occurrence in our society today. Actually, we have quoted only some sections and we have omitted 2 stanzas from this poem for copyright reasons.

“I tend the mobile now  
like an injured bird

We text, text, text  
our significant words. 4

...[3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> couplets are omitted]

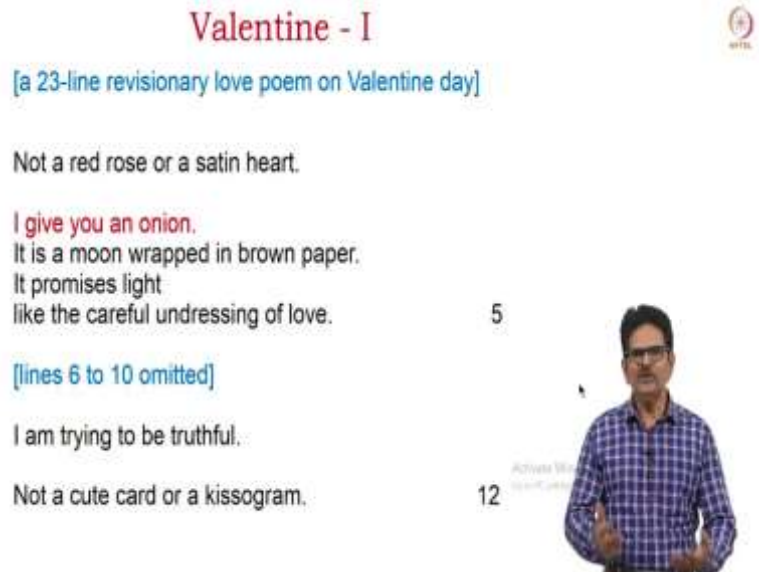
The codes we send  
arrive with a broken chord. 10

I try to picture your hands,  
their image is blurred.”

It is a lyrical poem on the ordinary happening of texting through our mobile, revealing the inherent difficulties we have in communication. With technology, without technology, with language, without language, we always have difficulties in communicating our own feelings, thoughts with others. Whether we are nearby or far away in whatever context we are in, we

have difficulties. We have to acknowledge it and appreciate the difficulties we face in communicating our thoughts, the innermost feelings that we have for each other.

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We are moving on to the next poem that we have “Valentine.” This poem and the next one , we will analyze in more detail. Again we have quoted only some parts of this poem. All these three poems can be found in some of the chapters, some of the articles that we find on Carol Ann Duffy. These are not listed in our text, these are not also found on Poetry Foundation webpage. Just a little effort, we can find them.

This is a 23-line revisionary love poem on Valentine Day. This Valentine Day is celebrated throughout the world and we have a different perspective on this from Duffy.

“Not a red rose or satin heart.

**I give you an onion.**

It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.

It promises light

like the careful undressing of love.” 5

Some lines we have omitted.

“I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute god or a kissogram.” 12



We are familiar with telegram and here, we have kissogram. It appears that in English culture, kiss also can be sent through somebody like we do in the case of sending postcards or Valentine Day cards.

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**Valentine - II**

I give you an onion. [lines 14-19 omitted]

Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring,  
if you like. 20

Lethal.

Its scent will cling to your fingers,  
Cling to your knife. 23



Next, again we have omitted some lines.

**“I give you an onion.**

Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring,

if you like. 20

Lethal.

Its scent will cling to your fingers,

Cling to your knife.” 23

What is beautiful about this onion is that the scent will stay with the person who receive it.

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## Thematic Contrast



- Head and Heart
- Give and Get
- Light and Dark
- Love and Hate
- Tears and Laughter
- Grief and Joy
- Truth and Untruth
- Lethal and Life-saving
- Violence and Harmony
- The theme of love is presented differently by Duffy.



We have a thematic contrast between head and heart, give and get, light and dark, love and hate, tears and laughter. When the onion is peeled, we have tears; perhaps, this also can bring about tears of laughter.

We have grief on the one hand, and joy on the other hand; truth, untruth; lethal and life-saving moments, or devices, or tablets, medicines, relationships; violence and harmony. In this poem, Duffy explores the theme of love in a different way, particularly with reference to this context cultural practice called Valentine Day. What kind of gifts we give to our beloveds or lovers.

And whether this love is between a man and a woman or between a man and a man or a woman and woman as in the case of Duffy, we do not know the exact context but then, we understand relationship is built by giving gifts and what kind of gift we give to different kinds of relationships is a question on the cultural practice.

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## Poetic Devices

- **Negation:** Not a red rose or a satin or a satin heart
- **Refrain:** I give you an onion (2, 13)
- **Metaphor:** [a moon and promise of light] (2-3 lines)
- **Simile:** like the careful undressing of love (5)
- **Simile:** like a lover (8)
- **Metaphor:** a wobbling photo of grief (10)
- **Negation:** Not a cute card or kissogram (12)
- **Metaphor:** onion kiss, lipstick
- **Metaphor:** onion wedding ring
- **Tone:** casual tone "if you like" (20)



We have some poetic devices. As you mentioned earlier, feminist poetry cannot be dismissed simply because they have an agenda to promote feminist ideas. They also have certain beautiful poetic qualities. We find many of them in Duffy's poems.

First, we have this negation, not a red rose or a satin or a satin heart. We have a refrain, I give you an onion. This is repeated twice in line number 2 and 13. We have a metaphor in, a moon and the promise of light, in line number 2 and 3. We have similes in line number 5 and 8 like, like the careful undressing of love, like a lover.

And then we have metaphor in, a wobbling photo of grief; a picture of grief, photograph of grief, in line number 10. Then again, we have this negation as we have in line number 1, not a cute card or kissogram, in line number 12. Then we have metaphors in onion kiss or onion lipstick. Then we have this onion wedding ring. That entire tone of the poem is casual as this is indicated through if you like.

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## Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** a free verse poem without end rhymes
- **Rhythm:** iamb and trochee, variation from 1 syllable to 11 syllables
- **Meter:** trimeter looks dominant.
- **Caesura:** not used
- **Enjambment and End-Stopped Line:**

I give| you an| onion,  
its fierce| kiss will| stay on| your lips,  
posse|ssive and| faithful  
as we| are,  
for as| long as| we are.



Let us now discuss rhyme, rhythm, and meter here in this poem. This is a free-verse poem and so, we do not have much end rhyming. We have some rhythm that is, iamb and trochee. They are alternating in this poem and we have some variation from one syllable line to eleven-syllable line in this poem.

Then, in general, we have trimeter in this poem. This looks dominant. Caesura is not used in this poem, that means, we have to ask this question why is caesura absent. That means, there is no break-in thought process or communication; actually, the emotions flow straight. We have some enjambment and end-stopped line in this poem.

We have some extract here.

“I give you an onion,  
its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,  
possessive and faithful  
as we are, for as long as we are.

This enjambment, we can see, after faithful as we are, and full stop at the end of this last line.

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## Overall Impression

- This is an unconventional postmodern and postfeminist love poem from a woman to a man on Valentine day.
- The speaker does not offer a red rose, a velvet heart, a cute card, nor a kissogram. Instead, she gifts a tear-bringing onion to make a picture of grief of the lover.
- The onion will stay with the lover like the wedding ring of the onion peels.
- When the lover cuts the onion with a knife, its smell will stay with his fingers and also the knife.
- The negative syntax and the images of the onion gift create a current of love in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- The unconventional images and the free verse form ensure the voice of the autonomous feminist self.



Let us see the overall impression we have of this poem. This is an unconventional postmodern and post-feminist love poem from a woman to a man on a Valentine Day. The speaker does not offer a red rose, a velvet heart, a cute card, nor a kissogram. Instead, she gives a tear bringing onion to make a picture of grief of the lover.

The onion will stay with the lover like the wedding ring of the onion peels. When the lover cuts onion with a knife, its smell will stay with his fingers and also, the knife. The negative syntax and the images of the onion gift create a current of love in the 21st century. The unconventional images and the free verse form ensure the voice of the autonomous feminist self in this poem.

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## A Visual Reading of "Valentine"



We have attempted an interesting visual reading of Valentine. Not a red rose, not a satin but I give you a gift of onion. A moon wrapped in a brown paper. A wobbling photo of grief and a wedding ring. If you look at these pictures, we form an impression of this poem visually. That is why we have put all these pictures together.

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**Syntax**


[It is a sonnet with 14 lines]

I want to call you **thou**, the **sound**  
of the shape of the start  
of a kiss – like this, thou –

[Lines 4-9 omitted: The speaker wants to say I love thee  
and not I love you, though the context of love is  
indeterminate ]

and to know in my lips                      10  
the **syntax of love** resides,  
and to gaze in thine eyes.

Love's language starts, stops, starts;  
the right words flowing or clothing in the heart



Now, let us move on to the next poem “Syntax.” It is a sonnet with 14 lines. As usual, we have omitted some lines for copyright reasons. Now, let us read the poem.

“I want to call you **thou**, the **sound**  
of the shape of the start  
of a kiss - like this, thou-“

In lines 4 to 9, the speaker wants to say, I love thee and not I love you, though the context of love is indeterminate. Let us continue.

“and to know in my lips                      10  
the **syntax of love** resides,  
and to gaze in thine eyes.  
Love’s language starts, stops, starts;  
the right words flowing or clothing in the heart.”

It is a short poem, it is a beautiful sonnet in 14 lines expressing the unconventional love in modern times.

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## Thematic Contrast



- Shape and shapelessness
- Love and Hate
- You and Thee
- **Sound and Sense/Gesture**
- Syntax and Phonology
- Speech and Silence
- Right Words and Wrong Words
- The poem examines the theme, "syntax of love," poetically.



Let us see the thematic contrast between shape and shapelessness, love and hate, you and thee that is thou. Sound on the one hand, and sense along with gesture or gesture alone separately. Then we have syntax and phonology, that means, grammar and sound of this love; the expression of love. Speech, silence; right words, and wrong words.

In this kind of thematic contrast and in this poem, we find that the poet examines the theme called syntax of love poetically.

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## Poetic Devices



- **Assonance:** I want to call you **thou**, the **sound** (1)
- **Onomatopoeia:** I love **thou**
- **Metaphor:** syntax of love resides
- **Alliteration:** starts, stops, starts (11)
- **Metaphor:** right words flowing
- **Metaphor:** clothing in the heart
- **Pun:** syntax; sin tax
- **Diction:** common monosyllable words
- **Archaic:** thou

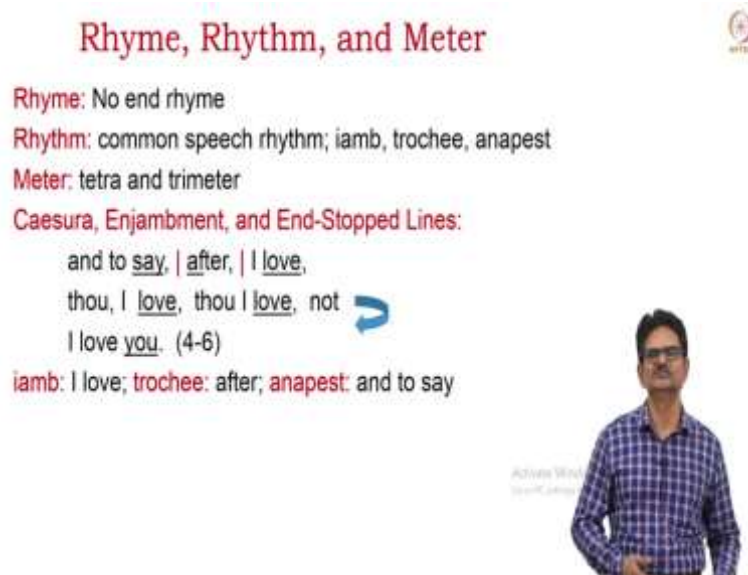


Again, we have a number of poetic devices in this poem starting with assonance. I want to call you thou; the sound, thou, the sound we have the assonance. We have this onomatopoeia attempt in I love thou. You can try saying this yourself I love you or I love thou, and see the difference in terms of emotional expression.

We have metaphor in, syntax of love resides. Love is one, syntax of love is another. And then, this love or syntax of love resides in someplace that is in the lips. Then we have alliteration in starts, stops, and starts. Then we have metaphors in right words flowing and clothing in the heart.

We have some kind of pun in syntax, sin tax; what kind of pun is intended depends on the readers own interpolation of meaning. Then we have something to do with the diction. Most of the words are common mono-syllable words and the poet has attempted to use his archaic form of thou. That is not used now, but she is revising it or bringing it back to use in her poem.

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**Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter**

- Rhyme:** No end rhyme
- Rhythm:** common speech rhythm; iamb, trochee, anapest
- Meter:** tetra and trimeter
- Caesura, Enjambment, and End-Stopped Lines:**
  - and to say, | after, | I love,
  - thou, I love, thou I love, not >
  - I love you. (4-6)
- iamb:** I love; **trochee:** after; **anapest:** and to say

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Now, let us see the rhyme, rhythm, and meter in this poem. We do not have end rhyme in this poem, although it is a sonnet. What we find in this poem is common speech rhythm and of course, we have some iambic, trochaic, and anapestic rhythmic qualities in this poem.

We also notice tetra and trimeter in this poem. We have caesura, enjambment, and end-stopped lines as we have given in the example.



“and to say, after, I love,  
thou, I love, thou I love, not  
I love you.”

For the iamb, we have this example of I love; for trochee, we have this example of after, and then for anapest, we have this example of and to say.

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**Overall Impression**

- The poet picturizes the “syntax of love” sonorously.
- She wants to revise the use of “thou” to make a statement of love: “I love thou” which comes close to motion of mouth.
- She also desires to say “I adore thee” to know and feel the syntax of love in her lips.
- Thus, she examines the problem of communicating the personal emotion of love in a suitable gesture.
- She enables the flow of right words in her heart with the right expression of her right love for the right person.
- The poet reduces the several caesuras of the first two stanzas in the couplet to discover the “syntax of love” in her lips and her beloved’s eyes.
- Use of the archaic “thou,” alliteration, assonance, repetition, and metaphor help her poetically.



Let us see the overall impression now. The poet picturizes the syntax of love sonorously, that is, beautiful sounds put together. She wants to revise the use of thou to make a statement of love. I love thou, which comes close to the motion of the mouth. She also desires to say I adore thee to know and feel the syntax of love in her lips. Thus, she examines the problem of communicating the personal emotion of love in a suitable gesture.

She enables the flow of right words in her heart with the right expression of her right love for the right person. The poet reduces the several caesuras of the first two stanzas in the couplet to discover the syntax of love in her lips and her beloved’s eyes. She uses archaic thou and also alliteration, assonance, repetition, and metaphor which help her poetically to express her own thoughts and ideas beautifully in this poem.

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**Summary**

- Historical and Literary Context
- Carol Ann Duffy
- Duffy's Concept of Poetry
- "Text"
- "Valentine"
- "Syntax"
- Analysis

• "Without poetry to reinvigorate our language, we will in the end find ourselves in a kind of linguistic hell."  
- Carol Ann Duffy



To summarize our discussion, we have seen the historical and literary context in which Carol Ann Duffy wrote her poems. She was born in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, she came across these political events like Tony Blair rejecting her poet laureateship and then becoming the poet laureate later on. And reviving poetry, enabling people to read poetry by conducting festivals and also by publishing volumes of poetry to help others.

She also has wonderful views on poetry. The best part of her views what we noticed is this, that is, all humanity, all of us are the same under our skin. That is a very important statement that we have to think about when it comes to Duffy's poetry. We read "Text" and then analyzed "Valentine" and "Syntax" to see how Duffy has been attempting to express personal emotions of love in open form, and also in a sonnet form very clearly in her poetry.

We have one more quotation here. Without poetry to reinvigorate our language, we will in the end find ourselves in a kind of linguistic hell. Poets attempt to use language in different ways by renewing the language. Renewal of language is important function of poetry and she has done it well and she has done it distinctly well.

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## References



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Here are some references. You can find the poems in the references here, particularly Dowson's book "Carol Ann Duffy: Poet of Our Times," you can find some of the poems, they are quoted there. Thank you.