

# The map as a metaphor



In the poem 'The Map Woman', Carol Ann Duffy uses the extended metaphor of a map being printed on a woman's body to explore ideas surrounding hometowns, childhood and nostalgia. This is immediately introduced in the first line where the reader learns that 'A woman's skin was the map of the town where she'd grown from a child.' In an attempt to hide her hometown from the world, the character covers herself as much as possible due to shame she feels. This climaxes in her shedding her skin in the second to last stanza. With such a metaphor, certain imagery is created in the mind of the reader, such as that of a snake or of the human body. This could ultimately be narrowed down into three main concepts; location, permanence and identity.

The extended metaphor used in the poem allows Duffy to show how the woman's body and the map are one in the same. The figurative language in stanza two links the anatomy of her body with location of different features of her hometown, such as her statement that 'her veins [are] like shadows below the lines of the map, the river an artery'. The language used suggests that like an 'artery' and a 'vein', the character needs this map and the features of her town in order to survive. This idea that the character relies on the map is continued later in the same stanza, where she instructs that 'if you crossed the bridge at her nipple, took a left and a right, you would come to the graves.' The syntax of this sentence along with the use of the terms 'left' and 'right', can be interpreted by the reader as the character giving directions. This effect is further emphasized by the poet, through the direct address used in words like 'you.' This may be done in order for the reader to feel as though they are in this town and therefore can more closely relate to

the main character. The poet not only suggests to the reader that she needs the map for guidance, but also appears as if the character is advertising her hometown to them. Such ideas surrounding reliance however, contrast with the tone throughout the novel; which implies that she wishes to forget about this town as much as possible. However, the reader questions this after the character is able to remember many areas and streets in her hometown, such as ‘ Nelson’, ‘ Churchill’, ‘ Kipling’ and ‘ Milton.’ Such memory of all these different locations alludes to the fact that the main character is actually homesick. The extended metaphor of the map on her skin reveals the character’s inner reliance and yearning for her hometown. When compared to the tone, the metaphor is also able to reveal the inner conflict she feels in regards to the attitudes she has towards her home.

This inner conflict comes to be expressed through themes surrounding permanence and change; which are continually referenced throughout the poem. These themes are introduced in the first stanza where the map is defined as a ‘ birthmark, tattoo’. Both of these are marks on the skin that are permanent however, the difference is in the cause. Birthmarks are natural and from birth, while people choose to have tattoos later in life. With this in mind, the reader may be able to understand the cause of this map in different way. If it is interpreted as a ‘ birthmark’, the character may be trying to say how being born in this town automatically and indefinitely left its mark on her. However if it is interpreted as a ‘ tattoo’, the character may be trying to state that the map was gained through all of the experiences she has had in her life. Although it is impossible to tell which one is the correct origin, both are equally efficient at showing the inability the women

has to detach herself from her town. This effect is further exaggerated through the use of sibilance and list of three to describe her attempts to rid herself of these permanent marks; she ‘sponged, soaped, scrubbed’ at the map. Additionally, this increases the pace of the poem and divulges the characters desperation to clear herself of this map. Although there are ideas surrounding permanence, there are also ideas surrounding change throughout the poem but generally towards the end. Change depicted towards the beginning of the poem is usually perceived just as badly as permanence, as suggested by the ninth line which states that the map grew ‘broad if she binged, thin when she slimmed.’ Even though the character changes, it shows that she is powerless to the impact that her hometown has on her. However by the end of the poem, she states that her ‘new skin barely showed a mark.’ The tone in this part of the poem is one of freedom and individuality, as reflected by the idea of a ‘new skin.’ This shows how the poet uses the extended metaphor to explore and contrast the themes of permanence and change to reflect the relationship the character has with her hometown.

The change represented through the extended metaphor is heavily applicable to the rediscovery and change of identity in the main character. This change is foreshadowed throughout the entire poem and is portrayed in the form of imagery related to serpents. In the beginning of the poem, the character describes how a river is ‘snaking north’ and the ‘s’ sound created through multiple examples of sibilance; such as ‘Showered’, ‘skin’, ‘street’ and ‘stand’, ‘strangers’, ‘steam’ all refer to snakes. Ideas about cyclicity, through words such as ‘looped’ and ‘repeatedly’ in the seventh stanza, as

well a phrase in stanza one stating ‘ a precis of where to end or go back or begin’ have connotations with snakes. This is because the poet may be alluding to a famous ancient symbol representing “ eternal return” called the ‘ Ouroboros.’ The symbol depicts a snake eating its own tail to represent the cycle of life, death and rebirth. This cyclical structure is related to the women as it shows her repetition of her life, emotions and experiences. This also links with the escapist dreams she has to get away from her town. The form of the poem also shows this shift in identity. Rather than maintaining the ten line stanzas, in the fourth last stanza the poet changes it to a two line stanza. After this stanza, the women begins to shed her skin. The character question’s ‘ What was she looking for?’ in the final stanza. The poet uses the rhetorical question in the final stanza to show the reader that although the map has changed, the women still hasn’t. The question almost invites the reader to see that although a person may change their environment, their identity will never change. This links back with the imagery created by the snake.

Overall, it is clear to the reader that like the map, the extended metaphor is used to further reveal the qualities and conflicts within the main character. The locations throughout the poem are used to help place the reader in the position of the character, in order to garner sympathy for the difficulties she has to face. The contrast between the permanence and change of the map and of her identity are used to show the inability to escape the effects of the past. The extended metaphor also allowed the poet to explore her own feelings regarding the life she has had and the shame or fear she feels

towards her own town. This makes the reader undoubtedly sure that the extended metaphor is used to reveal hidden emotions.