

Duffy's perspective on religion in "confession" and "prayer"



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The poet Carol Anne Duffy presents two different attitudes towards religion in her poems "Prayer" and "Confession." In "Prayer," Duffy contemplates how, in the absence of organised religion, comfort can instead be found in ordinary, prosaic occurrences. These usually insignificant experiences instead become a source of consolation for the unknown people discussed in the poem. These works also hinge on the poet's recollection of her childhood experience of the Catholic practice of Confession. Apparent, Duffy found this form of devotion a frightening, repressive experience.

"Prayer" is a secular version of the conventional religious prayer, written in the form of a sonnet. In it, the poet seeks to convey the idea that people without a religious faith can find solace in ordinary, everyday experiences. Duffy speaks for the secular community, and represents this group through the unknown people in the poem: 'a woman, a man, the lodger.' Moreover, Duffy includes herself in this group, as we can see by the use of the pronouns 'we' and 'us,' showing that this work was written in the poet's own voice. An absence of religion is mentioned in this poem through the phrases 'although we cannot pray' and 'although we are faithless.' Despite not being able to turn to religion for consolation in difficult times, people can find comfort through memories and through appreciation of the small things in life. There are references to these moments of consolation throughout the poem. A woman is alleviated from her despair, and 'lifts her head from the sieve of her hands,' upon seeing the beauty in nature, 'staring at the minims sung by a tree.' Realisation of the simple joy of being is given to her like a 'sudden gift.' This sequence has connotations of taking the woman to a better place, of providing relief in a time when she needed consolation. Duffy writes

of a man who ' hears his youth in the distant Latin chanting of a train.'

Prompted by sounds, he is cheered by memories of his earlier life, perhaps taking him back to a happier, more grounded time. The poet writes of a lodger who is consoled by ' Grade 1 piano scales,' perhaps played by their child learning the piano. Solace is offered through this small everyday event.

Duffy makes reference to the importance of these instances when she writes of ' that familiar pain,' the acknowledgment of uncomfortable truths, that can come to us ' some nights' when we are more vulnerable to our thoughts. The use of the anaphoric phrases ' some days, some nights' conveys a sense of normality and of the inevitability of this pain and fear; such a state is something that we all experience at some time in our lives. This fear and discomfort is reflected further in the poem when Duffy talks of the ' darkness outside.' This ' darkness' could be interpreted as a metaphor for the ' darker' aspects of life, the harsh realities. She creates a contrast in the next line with the more comforting ' radio's prayer' inside. The safety and familiarity of the ' radio inside' suggest that familiar regularities and comforts like these help to keep us protected from the ' darkness' of the world outside. The poem ends in a rhyming couplet with an extract from the shipping forecast, ' Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.' This phrasing again conveys a sense of comfort. The shipping forecast helps to guide sailors home in the dark, another possible reference to how small, familiar things can anchor us and help us avoid being lost.

" Confession" presents a different attitude towards religion. Here, Duffy talks of her personal experience of conventional religion, and of her experience of going to confession as a child. In Catholicism, Catholics will attend the <https://assignbuster.com/duffys-perspective-on-religion-in-confession-and-prayer/>

Sacrament of Penance, under which they confess their sins in order to obtain absolution. Duffy was raised Catholic yet became an atheist as a teenager. In sharp contrast to “ Prayer,” which suggests that having faith can be a source of consolation, this poem presents religion as being frightening and repressive. After all, Duffy describes a ‘ dark cell’ and how it smelt ‘ like a coffin.’ These adjectives have connotations of death and imprisonment, while ‘ tell’ suggests interrogation. In ‘ Prayer,’ darkness is used in a non-threatening way, to accentuate the comfort of inside; however, in this poem darkness is used in an almost menacing manner – ‘ musty gloom,’ ‘ dark cell.’ Duffy gives the impression that Penance is a repressive, controlling experience. This very sentiment is evident in the simile ‘ works your conscience like a glove puppet,’ and in the phrase ‘ merely to think of a wrong’s as evil as doing it.’

Indeed, “ Confession” could be interpreted as Duffy’s expression of the opinion that the confines of religion do not always bring reassurance and comfort, but instead generate a feeling of fear and discomfort. Her poem indicate that in striving for ‘ Jesus’ love’ you must inhibit your thoughts and act in ‘ the manner approved.’ This theme is approached with a sense of irony throughout the poem, as Duffy as a child would have little understanding of ‘ the light on the other side of the door’ and how to attain it. In contrast, in “ Prayer” Duffy reflects on how no constraints are needed; an appreciation of nature, among other simple things in life, can provide solace.