

# Salome by carol ann duffy



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The poem 'Salome', by Carol Ann Duffy, is written in the first person, seemingly from the perspective of a woman given indicators such as the fact that the person has been involved intimately with a man; 'the reddish beard'. The first three lines of the poem, all of which uses enjambment, only come to make sense as the poem is read, meaningless on their own. Carol Ann Duffy then immediately establishes an ominous ambience to the poem with the line 'woke up..

. head... beside me'.

The odd singularity of the head being mentioned by itself, as opposed to a body or person suggests that perhaps the head is indeed detached from its body, a suggestion that is later confirmed. The first stanza focuses upon the apparent victim and the speaker's reaction and opinion of him. Lines such as 'What did it matter?' and 'What was his name?' create a flippant nonchalance to the speaker in a chilling manner as, far from feeling remorse for these appalling and condemnable actions, she clearly feels very little, appearing indifferent. Words used such as 'colder' and 'dry' further establish a menacing atmosphere, and Carol Ann Duffy introduces very contemporary ideas and slang to the poem, such as cigarettes, and expressions such as 'turf out', 'booze' and 'ain't life a bitch'.

There are internal rhymes throughout the stanzas, all with words with the suffix '-er'; for example, 'butter', 'clatter', 'clutter', 'patter' and 'batter' – all words that appear in the second stanza. Along with the general tone of the speaker, these rhymes create a black humour to the poem. The line, 'Lamb to the slaughter', reminds the reader of the cold, sadistic nature of the

speaker, implying that the victim had had no chance of escaping his fate when he had gone ‘ to Salome’s bed’. Interestingly, as with ‘ Education For Leisure’, another of the poet’s poems, the adjective ‘ glitter’ is used to create an immensely disturbing atmosphere.

It contrasts so starkly from the rest of the poem excluding perhaps the first stanza, where the adjective ‘ beautiful’ is used that it immediately grabs hold of the reader’s attention once more, especially as it is used to describe the speaker’s eyes. The word ‘ glittered’ is not generally used in relation to describing a person’s eyes, unless it is the expression, ‘ glittered with malice’; this in regards to eyes. The following imagery in the final stanza, ‘ sticky red sheets’ and ‘ his head on a platter’ is decidedly gruesome and unpleasant, ultimately confirming the unbalanced, psychotic state of the speaker’s mind. This also relates to the film ‘ The Godfather’ where a man wakes up to find the head of his horse on the pillow beside him, also a decidedly unpleasant scene, an idea which perhaps Carol Ann Duffy has used within her own poem to help create a menacing atmosphere. Those bastards in their mansions’, a poem from Simon Armitage’s ‘ Book of Matches’, also creates a menacing atmosphere, but in a different manner. The storyline is about the speaker, some kind of revolutionary and his crusade against the wealthy and the properties they own; ‘ mansions’, ‘ palaces and castles’ are mentioned, though this is potential hyperbole.

However, it could be accurate as clues such as ‘ cuffs and shackles’ indicate that the poem is set in a past time. It is a very violent poem, spoken in first person, like ‘ Salome’, and begins with the words, ‘ Those bastards’, which immediately sets an offensive, angry tone. The anger then turns menacing

with the line, ' I'd poisoned the dogs', a seemingly pointless and malicious act, done for the purpose of intimidation. Words such as ' forced', ' poisoned' and ' shadows', used throughout the poem create a dark ambience, mirroring the mindset of the speaker, paralleling to the words used by the speaker in ' Salome' who uses words such as ' colder'. The speaker talks of turning the constraints that enslave people into weapons, and then juxtaposes this with the imagery of the ' lords.

.. castles' with their ' beagles'. Eagles are mentioned as well, building up the idea that the speaker believes that his apparent social superiors do not place enough importance upon him to hurt him themselves. Fire and sun imagery add further to confirm and depict the anger of the speaker. A rhyme scheme was evident with regards to the words ' ditches' and ' britches' at the end of lines; internal rhyming was also evident with ' porches' and ' torches' as well as ' beagles' and ' eagles'.

As in ' Salome', the technique of enjambment is present. The final line itself is the most menacing and that which gives the poem its threatening atmosphere; ' Me...

arry a gun. ' It makes the reader think that the speaker could be anyone or anywhere, once again paralleling to ' Salome' with regards to the line, ' Lamb to the slaughter', which implied that the victims of the speaker had little chance of escaping her clutches, making the reader feel uncomfortably helpless. Notable differences between the way in which the two poets, Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy, build up tension is the way Carol Ann Duffy builds up unease first, leaving ambiguous hints making the reader suspicious

before laying out the true nature of the speaker clearly at the end. Simon Armitage showed the angry, unbalanced mind of his speaker in the first words of the poem, leaving the reader in no doubt as to the stability of the speaker.

Robert Browning's 'The Last Duchess' is a one sided conversation, in the first person as with the other poems, between the unnamed Duke of Ferrara and the servant of his potential father-in-law. His wife, and her portrait, who the reader eventually learns is deceased, is the subject about which the Duke speaks. The reader does not suspect anything remotely threatening nor menacing about the speech until the tenth line, 'The curtain...

or you', which shows a strange possessiveness by the Duke. Bitter remarks, disguised, filter into the conversation, "twas not... presence only', and the jealousy of the speaker begins to become more evident as he begins to fault the seeming virtues of his wife, and it is here that the reader begins to distance themselves from the character of the Duke. The duke refuses to point his wife's misdemeanours to her because this would be a loss of dignity; he expresses this through the words 'some stooping', and he chooses "never to stoop".

He then 'gave commands', and though the reader is not told what these commands are, they can be inferred from the statements, 'All smiles stopped together,' and 'As if alive', which is what the Duke uses to describe the portrait. This, along with the context of the situation, a meeting with the servant of a prospective father-in-law, indicates that the Duke has his wife killed, which instantly changes the whole tone of the poem. The fact that this

man can talk so lightly and courteously about a heinous and deplorable act makes the poem, and its speaker, exude a malicious quality. On the surface the poem is a negotiation between members of the upper class, beneath it, it is a cold, ruthless tale of power. The way in which the Duke so quickly changes the subject towards the end of the poem, from the murder of his wife to greeting his guests, as if snapping out of a reverie is also chilling, and this is the very event that makes the whole poem both threatening and menacing.

Unlike the two previous speakers in the other poems, the Duke appears less deranged or unbalanced and can obviously hide the darker sides of his personality more easily. The fact that he apparently doesn't regard himself in having done anything wrong parallels to the flippancy shown by the speaker in 'Salome'; both do not seem to realise the gravity of their actions, showing no trace of guilt or remorse, and so make the whole tone of the poems that much darker. 'My Last Duchess' contrasts to the previous two poems because of its more conventional structure in the use of iambic pentameter, as well as the use of rhyming couplets at the end of each two sentences, which is an extraordinarily hard task to accomplish. However, it does make use of enjambment like the other poems. 'The Laboratory', also by Robert Browning is similar to 'The Last Duchess' in subject because it is about the murder of a person close to the speaker, and like the other poems is a monologue in the first person, spoken to a silent listener who prepares the poisons which will kill the murderers targets.

The time set, 'Ancien Regime' indicates that the poem is set in a past age. Clues such as 'an earring', 'a filigree basket' indicates that the speaker is a

woman, and speaks of “ her” – this could be a rival, though it is unclear. The speaker initiates with the plot of one murder but her daring grows as she watches poisons being created and fantasises of killing more victims. The fact that the speaker is so obviously deranged in a way that does not match the previous speakers makes the poem less threatening when compared to, for example, ‘ Salome’.

The speaker in ‘ The Laboratory’ is much more visibly unbalanced, entering into a ‘ black humour’ category along with ‘ Salome’ because of its rhyming scheme. The poem’s rhyming scheme further backs this idea; the rhythm of the poem, ‘ they know... hat they do’ creates a lighter effect. This indicates that Browning intended to the poem to be more comic than horrific as it so outrageous, especially in comparison to the quite, subdued ruthlessness of the speaker in ‘ My Last Duchess’ and ‘ Salome’.

The poem creates a vaguely menacing atmosphere in its topic, premeditated murder, but the way in it is written makes it very different from the other three, which are much darker and far more threatening in the atmosphere they create for the reader.