Analysis: War Photographer (Carol Ann Duffy)

Through her poem ‘War Photographer’, Carol Ann Duffy casts a harsh light on the destruction and bloodshed which results from war and how apathetic and uncaring the rest of the world, who is not directly affected by it, is.

The poem starts with a description of the war photographer standing alone in his dark room. All the photos that he had taken of the war are contained within the rolls which are organized into neat rows, making him feel like a priest who is about to lead a mass funeral. He thinks of all the places he has been to, places which had been torn apart by war, and remembering all the bloodshed he has witnessed he feels that everything has to in the end die and return to the earth. He then carries on with his works, but the ironical fact is that he who wasn’t afraid while amidst gunfire and death, now trembles in the safety and sanctuary of his home in Rural England, where the most troubling thing is the constantly changing weather and where he does not have to worry about the ground blowing up beneath his feet.

The third stanza starts off mysteriously, and the half developed photograph is described. The vague features of the man seem to the photographer, like the spirit of the soldier and he remembers the moment when he took that picture. He remembers the hopeless wailing of the soldier’s wife as he had silently sought her permission to take her dying husband’s photograph and he remembers clearly how the blood from his wound had seeped into the earth.

The final stanza takes on a detached tone, as the photographer thinks of how from the hundred photos that he has taken, each telling its own chilling tale of agony and pain, his editor will randomly select a handful to print in the newspaper. He knows that people back at home would glance at these, in the afternoons and feel sorrow for a minute before moving on with their lives. By the end of the poem, even he shrugs off all feelings towards his work and looks upon the war torn land from his high altitude in the plane, where such suffering happens on a day to day basis and the world doesn’t care.

Duffy has used a number of literary devices to describe the horror and agony of war. The phrase ‘spools of suffering’ is a metaphor, along with containing alliteration, as it isn’t the spools which are suffering but the people pictured in the photographs they carry that are doing so. Also there is a paradox in how he has organized suffering, the chaos of pain and war, into neat ordered rows. Again ‘ordered rows’ could act as a metaphor, comparing the rolls to the coffins of the dead soldiers which are neatly organized neatly into rows. The red light is symbolic of the bloodshed that the photographer has witnessed, and also reminds him of a church, making him feel like a priest preparing for a mass funeral. The imagery of ‘blood stained into foreign dust’ compliments Duffy’s previous statement that ‘all flesh is grass.’ Also ambiguity has been used in a couple of places to portray more than one idea to the reader. In the third stanza the half-developed picture is described as a ‘half formed ghost’. This either implies that the image is vague and faint, or the fact that the photograph shows a dead man, whose spirit is somehow evoked by the developing photograph. The fourth stanza describes the photographs to be in ‘black and white.’ This could mean both the fact that the pictures are monochrome, without color; or the contrast between good and evil.

Duffy’s ‘War Photographer’ is an effective comment on society which shows both the agonies of war, as well as the apathy of mankind towards it. The persona of the war photographer is most apt as he is between these two realities: on one side he experiences a world which is torn apart by war, where innocent children die because of mine fields; and on the other side there is the rest of the world, which is full of people who do not have time in their busy lives to care about matters which do not directly affect them. He is therefore in such a state to compare these two worlds and he at first feels disgust towards the uncaring world, and guilt at being the one to exploit the suffering of the dying soldiers, but then he too assumes an impassive attitude, knowing that no matter how he feels, he cannot change the world, nor stop the war or bloodshed from happening. All he can do is his job: which he does. He can make them see what he sees by capturing the pain in photos, but he cannot make them feel what he feels, for there is no way he can show them his memories.

I found ‘War Photographer’ to be a chilling and disturbing poem, which evokes many conflicting feelings, a feat which is accomplished widely by Duffy’s use of strong yet simple words to say complex things.