War Photographer

SUMMARY

The photographer is alone in his dark room, with all his photographic film from the war lined up in neat rows. A red light softly illuminates the dark room, making it feel as if it were church and as if the photographer were a priest getting ready to perform the Catholic Mass. In that Mass, the priest might list the names of war-torn cities. Everyone dies eventually, their bodies returning to earth.

The photographer must do his job. Even though his hands never shook while working the war zone, the photographer's hands seem to shake now while he develops his photographs. He is in rural England. Here at home once again in England, all suffering is minor and temporary, alleviated by the weather. Unlike in the war zone, rural England doesn't get bombed while children flee from horrific fires.

The photographs are starting to develop. A man's distorted face comes into view, bringing to mind a fading memory for the photographer. The photographer remembers the dying man's wife screaming, and he remembers silently asking to do what he had to do: to take the photograph of the dying man as that man bled out on the ground in a foreign country.

He has hundreds of black and white photographs that depict the horrors of war, but his editor will only use five or six in the Sunday edition of the newspaper. The readers will be momentarily emotional when they see the pictures in the paper, which they'll look at mid-morning—in the time between taking baths and having some drinks before lunch. The photographer looks blankly from the airplane at the war zone where he makes his money, a place that the readers do not care about.

THEMES

APATHY, EMPATHY, AND THE HORRORS OF WAR

"War Photographer" describes the titular photographer's experience of developing photos taken in war-torn lands. The poem centers on the tension between the all-encompassing sorrow and horror that the photographer experiences as he looks through the photographs and the casual, temporary sympathy with which he knows his viewers will engage with these images. The poem criticizes those viewers for their failure to grasp the enormity of war, but, at the same time, it also suggests that the photographer's empathy comes primarily from witnessing war first-hand. Through this contrast, the poem indicates that direct experience of atrocities like these may be the only remedy for such apathy.

The speaker establishes the contrast between the war-torn setting of the photographer's work and the peace and safety of rural England, where the photographer actually lives. In England, "ordinary pain" can simply be dispelled by the weather. In England, there will be no mass destruction of the natural world nor threats to the community's children. These details underscore the fact that the war photographer's images will be seen primarily by people whose lives are drastically different from those of the images' subjects—by people for whom the scale and horror of war are so far removed from their own experience that it is perhaps incomprehensible.

Meanwhile, the photographer's deep empathy with the subjects of his photographs clearly stems from the feelings of danger and terror that he experienced in that space of war. In the third stanza, for example, the photographer recalls the horror of seeing a man dying in front of his wife. The photographer's awareness of the wife's suffering in this moment—he can still hear her cries in the present—demonstrates that he has left his time in the war zone with an empathetic understanding of the experiences of the war's victims. The collection of photos that he will submit to his editor are a "hundred agonies in black and white," each representing a personal engagement with human suffering that still reverberates powerfully for the photographer.

The final stanza returns to the other figures who will engage with the photographs. First, the photographer's editor will "pick out five or six" images from these "hundred agonies." In other words, the editor will reduce the incomprehensible hugeness of war, a scale that the photographer has felt firsthand, to a size that the general public can comprehend. The editor's work distances the photographs' viewers from the overwhelming reality of war.

When the general public then encounters these five or six photos, the speaker predicts, the readers' "eyeballs [will] prick with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers." This reaction indicates a fleeting, surface-level compassion for the subjects of the images. In the moment of looking at the images, viewers will feel sympathy for the victims of these horrors, but they will not be moved to take action or even to remember what they have seen as they go about their days. The photographer knows that those baths and beers are a world apart from the daily lives and suffering of those people in the photographs. As the final line of the poem summarizes, bluntly, the viewers "do not care."

However, the poem suggests that these people "do not care" because they have no real way of understanding the depth and

breadth of the wars. The whole point of the photographer's job is to help them gain that understanding, but when it comes down to it, only *he* experiences the third stanza's flashbacks, which go far beyond what is depicted in the photos. Only he has felt first-hand the disparity between life in England and life at war.

And ultimately, it is the photographer, not the uncaring public, who "stares impassively" at the war zone: as powerful as the images are for him, he and his photos are nevertheless powerless to make his viewers share that empathy. In its conclusion, the poem questions whether anything but first-hand experience is enough to move people to action against atrocities. And even that first-hand experience, the final "impassive" stare suggests, may be so overwhelming that it leaves people like the war photographer hopeless—resigned to his inability to do anything to affect the situation he documents.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 6
- Lines 7-9
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 15-18
- Lines 19-24

TRAUMA AND MEMORY

"War Photographer" presents a humanizing portrait of the victims of the war as well as of the foreign survivors, like the photographer, who depart from their experiences in a war zone permanently changed. The war photographer's images become not just an archive of the conflict but a collection of triggers for deeper, multi-sensory flashbacks that take the photographer back to each photographic incident. Through the war photographer's experiences, the poem suggests that war's traumatic effects extend far beyond the actual sites of conflict.

Throughout the second stanza, the speaker slowly reveals glimpses of the photographer's fragility that suggest he cannot escape what he has witnessed. For instance, his hands now tremble as he does his work, despite being far from danger. The juxtapositions of the images of rural England and the photographer's memories, preserved in his images, further suggest the frequency of the photographer's flashbacks to these horrors. The thought of England's fields, for example, triggers a memory of the destruction of a landscape and of children under attack. In other words, the photographer carries the memories of war with him back to quiet England.

The third stanza seems to depict, with its opening, arresting sentence, "Something is happening," a more significant moment of post-traumatic flashback. The facial features of dying subject in one of the war photographer's images "faintly start to twist before his eyes." As the photograph comes into focus in the dark room solution, so too does the memory come into focus for the war photographer. The poem plays with this in-between space in which these images are part-memory, part-half-developed-photograph, "a half-formed ghost." Memories from the war are effectively haunting the photographer.

The third stanza then concludes with a series of details that the war photographer recalls from taking the photo that has triggered this sea of memories. These memories are at once aural (the cries of the dying man's wife), personal to his own intent in the remembered moment (seeking the wife's approval to take the photo), and visual (the man's blood on the ground). This cascade of memory stems from the development of the photograph, but none of these aspects of the memory—what it sounded like, what happened just outside the frame, and what the photographer did behind the camera—have been captured or can be shared. Each image, then, triggers a sensory overload that refreshes the photographer's visceral awareness of the aural, visual, and personal—maybe even moral—horror of the war. As far away from the site of conflict as the photographer may be, the traumatic impact of the war remains with him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-6
- Line 7
- Lines 7-9
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-18
- Line 19

THE ETHICS OF DOCUMENTING WAR

In addition to criticizing viewers who look at images of suffering and do nothing about it, the poem also raises the subtler moral issue of whether the photographer's work is moral in itself. Throughout the poem, the photographer attempts to justify the necessity and moral importance of his own work, even as he himself enjoys the safety and freedom of returning home to peaceful England. By posing these challenging questions, the poem pushes readers to confront whether, and under what conditions, the war photographer's work is ethical.

"War Photographer" most potently references the photographer's relationship to the victims of war in the third stanza. The photographer remembers "how he sought approval / without words to do what someone must" from the wife of a man who was bleeding out on the ground. Instead of seeking to aid the man, the photographer did what he believed "someone must": document this moment on camera. Tellingly, the

photographer does not suggest that he actually *got* approval from the man's wife to take this image, nor does he offer explicit justification for why this documentation *must* be done. At the time, the photographer simply took these photos with confidence—his hands "did not tremble then." But it seems that, in the safety of "Rural England," he has begun to question the ethical validity of his work, as his hands now "seem to" tremble.

The references to "running children in a nightmare heat" have also often led readers of "War Photographer" to connect Duffy's poem with "The Terror of War," a famous photograph of the Vietnam War by photographer Nick Ut that depicts a young girl fleeing naked from the raging fireballs of a napalm strike. In a section of the photograph that was initially cropped and unprinted, Ut captures a second photographer who studies his camera intently as the children run by him, helpless and terrified. In this wordless indictment of the photographer in the frame, Ut also draws attention to the dubious morality of his own work behind the camera: should he be helping the children instead of simply documenting their suffering? (Though notably, Ut did help the young girl in the photograph get medical treatment.) By alluding to this famous example of morally fraught war photography, the poem implies that the titular photographer's morality might be uncertain as well.

The poem consistently positions the war photographer as a man doing his work: "He has a job to do," the reader is told. This is how he "earns his living." Yet so much of the work that the war photographer does is for naught: only five or six of every hundred images will appear in print. Why *must* someone record images of suffering that will never reach the general public? If the reason why "someone must" do this work is not to effect understanding and change in the viewers of the photograph, then what is it? And is it ethical for the photographer and his employer to profit from images of suffering if they're not doing anything to alleviate that suffering?

The poem raises the quandary of whether the viewers' ultimate apathy towards these images invalidates the morality that the war photographer sees in his work. If he is not making a difference with his photography, not inspiring widespread action that will actually help the subjects of the photos or people like them, then, perhaps, the photographs have no ethical reason to exist.

Taken a step further, can any documentation of war, photographic or otherwise, be ethical? Will a poet's description of scenes of war, depicted here by Duffy through the lens of a photographer's camera, inspire the change she might intend? Could there something morally questionable, an ethical gray area in using the stories, partially imagined, partially real, of victims of war in "War Photographer" itself?

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Line 7
- Lines 7-9
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 15-18
- Lines 19-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

In his dark ...
... in ordered rows.

In the opening lines of "War Photographer," the speaker conjures an image of the title figure working alone in his dark room to develop his pictures. Without the context provided by the title of the poem, a reader might struggle to understand who the man is and what he is doing. Throughout the poem, Duffy plays with the juxtaposing forces of order and chaos: the title, for example, is the poem's first organizing factor, lending readers a helping hand in understanding the poem's subject that the text itself might not provide.

The first line ends with a sense of the photographer's isolation ("he is finally alone"), but the enjambment allows for a slight surprise at the start of the next line: he is not alone all by himself, but, rather, he is alone*"with"* the photographs he has taken. The safety and security proffered in the opening line get snatched by the second line's conjunction "with." Much like being alone *with* a monster, being alone and being alone "with" are drastically different experiences.

The images and word choice of the opening lines also play with multiple meanings. "Dark room," of course, literally describes the photographer's work space, but the darkness also foreshadows the photographer's despair and sense of being lost, though back at home in England. The "ordered rows" (line 2) of photographic film also bring to mind the image of a cemetery, signaling how readily the photographer's thoughts return to the tragedy he has witnessed.

The most heightened words in these first lines are "spools of suffering" (line 2), the description of the cylinders of photographic film containing images of the war zone and the violence the photographer has documented. The sibilance (spools of suffering set out) emphasizes this image. The photographer cannot help but see suffering in his craft now. The very tools of his trade have become intertwined with the atrocities he has captured on film. It seems pertinent, too, that the word "spool," when used as a verb, can mean both "wind"*and* its antonym, "unwind." The real, live suffering of human beings has been bottled up by the photographer's lens into these small cylinders, but, seen through the

photographer's eyes, they unwind back into life-size memory, not just images but triggers for memories of the real people and real horror depicted.

Dissecting these lines on a formal level, lines 1-2 do not clearly capture the sturdiness of the iambic meter (da DUM) that will shape most of the poem's rhythms. Instead, the poem opens with an anapest (da da DUM) before a series of iambs, as if the photographer is tripping into the dark room before steadying himself:

> In his dark | room he | is fi- | nally | alone
> with spools | of suf- | fering | set out | in ord- | ered
> rows

This opening metrical moment immediately establishes the threat of unsteadiness—trauma, perhaps—that will permeate the entire poem.

LINES 3-5

> *The only light ...*
> *... intone a Mass.*

The second complete sentence of the poem introduces a simile: the image of the photographer as a priest delivering a Catholic Mass, with liturgical texts interspersed with the names of bombed cities. The conceit stems from a single image, the single light in the dark room (called a safelight) which is red, calling to the speaker's mind a similarly singular red light in a church (perhaps a sanctuary or altar light, which are often red). In this setting, transformed by the speaker into a church, the photographer becomes a "priest preparing to intone a Mass" (line 5).

If the dark room is a church and the photographer is a priest, then what exactly is the Mass? It seems that the photographer's preparations—the transfiguration of film into printed image—would correspond in some way with the priest's process of transforming the vastness of faith and scripture into language that a congregation can process and comprehend. There is a deep art (and maybe a deep spirituality, too) in the photographer's struggle to make these images understandable by viewers who have not experienced war first hand (just like a congregant may have not experienced a priest's deep faith). It is interesting, too, that the speaker imagines the priest *intoning* the Mass, a word that most often suggests a monotone or, perhaps, unemotional delivery. The photographer, as much emotion as he may feel preparing these images, has little opportunity, now that the pictures have been taken and he must hand them off to an editor and viewers, to inject the photographs with the depths of his experiences. Read alternatively, perhaps the photographer has become numb or jaded to this process, having already seen so much horror.

Lines 3-5 also introduce a central question raised by the poem about the voice of the speaker as a distinct entity from the voice of the photographer. Is it an omniscient speaker who sees the red light and imagines the church, or does the photographer have that idea himself? If it is the *speaker's* attitude channeled through the text in the first stanza, what does the *photographer* think about or imagine as he does his work during the action of the poem's opening lines? The poem's vagueness about which thoughts belong to the photographer and which to some omniscient observer alone helps to create the sense of disembodiment as the photographer begins to experience his flashbacks.

Metrically, lines 3-5 are in a strict iambic pentameter, echoing both the strict rhythms of the intoning of the Mass and the orderliness of the photographer's dark room work. Although he will soon experience traumatic flashbacks, when the poem begins he seems to find sturdy solace in knowing that "he has a job to do" (line 7). The jerky meter of line 1 has already demonstrated to the reader that the sense of calm in lines 3-5 may not last long. The use of alliteration in lines 4 and 5 ("though this"/"priest preparing") and consonance in line 3 ("only light"/"softly glows") helps to provide a sense of control and structure to the photographer's process.

Lines 3-5 (as well as line 6) also begin to establish the rhyme scheme that will remain consistent throughout the poem with line 3 containing an end-rhyme with line 2 (rows/glows). There is also a subtle internal rhyme between lines 3 and 4; the second syllable of each line is a long /o/ sound in the words "only" and "though." The rhyme scheme, including the internal rhyme, also contributes to the sense of structural steadiness that will be challenged by the meter and the photographer's trauma.

LINE 6

> *Belfast. Beirut. Phnom ... flesh is grass.*

The first stanza concludes with the words of an imagined recitation of a Catholic Mass. In the previous two lines, the speaker conjured up an image of the photographer in his dark room as a priest "preparing to intone a Mass." Here the reader hears the words that could be in such a Mass, spread out across four short sentences which roughly scan as iambic pentameter:

> Bel-fast. | Bei-rut. | Phnom Penh. | All flesh | is grass.

The non-iambic exception in that scansion is the opening foot ("Belfast") which scans as a trochee (DUM da). Like the opening line of the poem, line 6 jolts away from iambic pentameter before the meter steadies itself.

Each of the cities named—Belfast, Beirut, and Phnom Penh—were the sites of catastrophic civilian bombings during the 1970s and 1980s. Belfast was the location of "Bloody Friday," a series of bombings in 1972 by the Irish Republican Army that left nine people dead. The 1983 Beirut barracks bombings in Lebanon killed 307 people. During the Vietnam

War, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, suffered a devastating series of civilian bombings in 1975 after the city was taken over by Khmer Rouge, a regime supported by the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong. Although the poem does not cite a particular war zone from which the photographer has returned, nor does it specify whether the photographer has previously been to any of these war-torn cities, the experiences of civilians in each of these locations likely mirrored those of the people whose suffering the photographer has documented.

Each city is separated by a caesura in the form of period, rather than by commas or conjunctions. The short, sharp impact of each place name perhaps echoes the rhythms of the imagined Mass, and emphasizes that the list could go on and on: these are two syllables, each representing (like the photographer's film spools) tremendous suffering. The alliteration in the line (Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh.) may also contribute to that incantation-like quality.

The stanza ends with the Biblical allusion. "All flesh is grass," a quote from the Old Testament's Book of Isaiah, 40:6. The phrase is typically taken to mean that all human life—flesh—must eventually return to the earth through burial: death comes to everyone. If the line is usually meant as a reassurance used to quell fears or despair about mortality, here the words seem empty and powerless to offer comfort in the face of the overwhelming tragedy of each of the aforementioned war zones. It seems futile to attempt to sum up such massive sorrow in so few words. Moreover, can such a sentiment appropriately respond to the loss of life under such horrific, painful circumstances for the victims? Many bombing victims did *not* return to the grass through burial: their bodies were destroyed. The simplicity of the Bible quote seems to let down the photographer (and the imagined priest) here.

It is telling that religion is never again mentioned in the poem. After trying on this conceit, the speaker abandons the image and the language of the church. Faith, or whatever level of spiritual belief he had, has failed the photographer abroad. Though the most direct reference to the content of the imagined Mass, "All flesh is grass" strikes a blow to the simile itself: the photographer cannot be a priest because faith can no longer be for him an instrument of comfort in the wake of such atrocities. The poem will continue to explore whether the photographer's own images can have a positive power themselves.

LINES 7-9

He has a ...
... seem to now.

The second stanza begins to reveal that the photographer still experiences some sort of trauma despite now being away from the war zone. First, though, Line 7 establishes the sturdiness of the photographer's sense of purpose with a sentence in three steady iambs: "He has a job to do." This is followed by a caesura in the form of a full stop, adding potency to the statement: this job is definite, final. The rest of lines 7-9 undermine that sense of security and clarity, however, by suggesting that the photographer's hands, once steady, "seem to now" tremble.

The most curious aspect of lines 8-9 is the implication that the photographer felt most purposeful, most steady, back in the war zone. It is only in the assured safety of rural England that the photographer begins to tremble. This is the poem's first clear indication that the photographer may be experiencing the symptoms of trauma that he did not feel while he was completing his assigned tasks in the war zone.

As in the previous stanza, alliteration and meter seem to serve as indicators of either sturdiness or instability. Line 7 and line 8 are both fully iambic, but line 7 is in iambic hexameter (six iambs per line) while line 8 is in iambic pentameter (five iambs per line):

> He has | a job | to do. | Solu- | tions slop | in trays
> beneath | his hands, | which did | not trem- | ble then

The solid rhythms provide a sense of stability—reflecting the safety of the photographer's home—which is then undercut by the photographer's trembling and the abrupt end of the sentence in the middle of line 9. It is as if the possibility of the photographer's weakness, his trembling in the face of such clear security, forces the photographer, or the speaker, to cut off the thought before it reaches the end of the line. The imbalance in feet between lines 7 and 8 also adds a sense of disorientation that matches the sliding, slopping quality of the solutions used to develop the images.

The alliteration in line 7, too ("solutions slop"/"his hands") lend the words, the description of the photographer's work, a sense of unity and pattern: the photographer knows exactly what it is he has to do. The sibilant opening to the sentence finds an echo in line 9's "seem to now." The word "seem," describing the photographer's anxious trembling, calls into question whether the photographer really *is* trembling. Is that the speaker losing a degree of omniscience, wondering whether the photographer's hands actually tremble or only *seem* to tremble? Or is that the photographer, in disbelief that here in England he could suddenly feel so unsafe, challenging his own understanding of his body, insisting that his trembling must be an illusion? The word "seem," with its alliterative callback to "solutions slop," helps to restore a little bit of the sense of security: there is a rise of tension, but the suggestion that the photographer's trauma is only imagined brings the sentence and the thought to a swift end.

LINES 9-10

Rural England. Home ...
... weather can dispel,

The conclusion of line 9 and line 10 depict the sanctity of the

photographer's English home, an attempt to restore the balance upset by the photographer's trembling hands at the start of the stanza. To that end, the language used in lines 9-10 to describe rural England is at first avoidant of any explicit reference to the suffering with which this comfort contrasts.

For the photographer, England represents "ordinary pain" (line 10). It is clear to the reader, of course, that the photographer's thoughts may stray to the unfathomable pain endured by the victims of atrocities of war. The language, though, focuses only on the easily fixable aches and complaints of English rural life, those "which simple weather can dispel" (line 10). The emphasis here seems to land on the photographer's own "ordinary" pains: why focus on the minor suffering of others when that suffering can so easily be eased by the passage of time? This photographer's ability to center his thoughts on his own well-being and health will quickly shift away in the coming lines as this "ordinary pain" gives way to the vision of "running children" burning, a truly extraordinary pain, and "simple weather" transforms into "nightmare heat."

What immediately stands out about these lines metrically are the trochees (stressed-unstressed) that interrupt line 9's iambic rhythms:

though seem | to now. | Rural | England.

In reading the poem aloud, it seems necessary to take a breath between the two accented syllables in the middle of line 9 ("now" / "Ru-"); this breath is further supported by the caesura after "now." These sudden trochees in this sentence fragment in the middle of a line feels like a major readjustment, as the photographer recovers from experiencing a symptom of trauma and tries to remind himself that he is now safe. The rest of the stanza returns to a solidly iambic meter, but line 10 is in iambic *hepta*meter (seven feet—two more than the more common iambic *penta*meter), as if the photographer or speaker is overcompensating, working hard to provide reassurance that England is as safe as it seems to be.

LINES 11-12

to fields which ...
... a nightmare heat.

The end of the second stanza shows the photographer confronting memories of his time in the war zone. Despite the attempt of the photographer (or, at least, the speaker) to focus on the present safety of rural England for much of this stanza, his thoughts instead turn to violent images of children fleeing a burning field in the wake of a bomb. This image will then propel the photographer into the even more visceral flashback of the third stanza (when the photographer recalls taking a photo of a dying man while that man's wife cried).

In lines 11-12, the speaker presents an alternative vision of rural England than the one offered in the previous two lines. Rather than focusing on what England *does* have ("ordinary pain," "simple weather"), lines 11-12 emphasize what England lacks: the fields here in rural England are nothing like the detonating fields of the war zone. The instant transition between the image of England's calm fields and the horrors of the fields of war indicates how easily the photographer's trauma can be triggered.

Lines 11-12 form a precise rhyming iambic pentameter couplet, a compactness which contrasts with the chaos of the violence described within the lines. The couplet also features a series of repeating hard sounds in line 11, including the alliterative "fields"/"feet" and the consonant "don't"/"explode," which pop like the small explosions referenced here.

Lines 11-12 also seem to call up memories of a specific historical image: Nick Ut's 1972 "The Terror of War," a photograph taken during the Vietnam War of children, front and center the naked "Napalm Girl" (as she came to be known), fleeing an explosion and fires behind them. By alluding to this particular image, one familiar to many readers, "War Photographer" invites readers more rapidly into the memories of the title character.

LINES 13-15

Something is happening. ...
... a half-formed ghost.

The third stanza opens with a bold yet vague sentence: "Something is happening." This sentence ends with a full stop midline—creating a caesura and powerful pause. It is unclear from those words, however, what exactly that *something* is or whether multiple somethings are happening at once.

First, there is the "something" of the present day: the photographer is in the process of developing a photograph in the solution and the image of the "stranger's features faintly" twisting may literally refer to the photograph coming into focus as it develops. At the same time, the "something" may refer to the flashback that the photographer experiences, to taking pictures of a dying man with the man's wife standing by. In that context, the stranger's twisting features may be the memory itself returning to the photographer's consciousness. Finally, the "something" happening may be the event depicted in the flashback: a man dies before the photographer's eyes, his face perhaps distorting from the impact of a bomb or deadly chemicals as he perishes.

In each case, these events happen for the photographer "before his eyes" (line 14): the developing photograph, the searing flashback, the shocking death. The perception of the dying man as "a half-formed ghost" similarly transcends each of the three interpretations. Whether he is half-developed or half-remembered or half-alive, the man exists for the photographer as something not fully human.

The power of these lines is that all three of these scenarios

function in tandem as, most likely, the development of the photograph of the dying man triggers the photographer's memory of that moment. The photographer experiences his present work in the dark room, the overwhelming sensation of experiencing the flashback, and the past scene of the death itself all at once. This merging of timelines and experiences emphasizes the invasive and all-encompassing nature of trauma and overpowering memory.

Metrically, this stanza opens with a jolting shift to dactyls (a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables):

> Something is | happening.

Meanwhile, the internal rhyme between lines 13 and 14 ("a stranger's features / faintly") twists around the enjambment between these lines just like the distorted face itself. The rhyme is the wrong place, like a part of a face severely damaged by a bomb.

LINES 15-18

He remembers the ...
... into foreign dust.

The second half of the poem's third stanza dives more deeply into the war photographer's flashback as he remembers, with multiple senses, the experience of watching a man die as he photographed him.

There are three separate aspects of the memory conveyed in lines 15-18: the dying man's wife crying out; the photographer's silent request for permission to take the man's photograph; and the man's blood seeping into the ground. The first aspect is an auditory memory, the second involves the photographer recalling his own actions and emotions, and the third is a visual memory. This scattering of memory across the senses indicates the full-bodied experience of flashback. It is not just that the photographer has a memory while looking at an image he photographed, but that image carries with it the trigger for the photographer to experience the feelings and sensations of the moment itself.

This flashback also calls into question the photographer's own morality for the first time in the poem. Was it right for the photographer to document the image of a dying man while the victim's wife suffered beside him? Could the silent "approval" of the wife, or any onlooker, really give sufficient permission for such a moment to be captured? The speaker here describes the photographer as doing "what someone must," but, by positioning that assertion in between the images of the wife's suffering and the dying man's pouring blood, that moral certainty seems weakened.

The following stanza will pursue more deeply the question of the photographer's *value*: did his passive role as a witness to a man's painful death ultimately serve a greater purpose in preventing the suffering of future victims? (Nick Ut's "The Terror of War," likely alluded to in the previous stanza, depicts, by the side of the road, another photographer who adjusts his camera as the terrorized children run by. Although Ut himself participated in rescuing children after he had taken his famous photograph, this image amplifies the ethical questions raised around photography in a war zone.)

Metrically, lines 15-18 are the most chaotic of the poem. Line 15 closes with two anapests (unstressed-unstressed-stressed) and the iambic rhythms of line 16 are again interrupted by an anapest in its third foot:

> ... He remem- | bers the cries
> of this | man's wife, | how he sought | approval

Line 17 then opens with another anapest before returning to iambic sturdiness. Line 18 is then clean iambic pentameter, the steady meter in sharp contrast to the devastating disorder of the bloody image depicted in the line:

> without words | to do | what some- | one must
> and how | the blood | stained in- | to for- | eign dust.

The disordered meter of this section of the poem overall seems to suggest a mind at war with itself. The photographer's past and present fight against each other as if he is caught in a tug of war between meters and memories; the photographer wants to stay calm and collected, but the breaks in the meter suggest he is not—that his wartime trauma is breaking through his composure.

The imagery of "blood stained into foreign dust," the final words of the third stanza, also recalls the final words of the first stanza: "All flesh is grass." Here readers see that early aphorism expanded into a real-world scenario: the dying man's flesh literally returning to the ground. Yet instead of being a peaceful scene reflecting the inevitability of mortality, the violence of the third stanza challenges the reassurances of faith (that is, of biblical teachings like "All flesh is grass"), suggesting these cannot be reconciled with the random violence of wartime.

LINES 19-21

A hundred agonies ...
... for Sunday's supplement.

As the fourth stanza begins, the speaker zooms out from the photographer's flashback to the "hundred agonies in black and white," the images that the photographer will share with his editor for consideration for publication. The final stanza of the poem is also the most bitter: the ire of lines 19-21 is directed at the editor who will reduce the magnitude of war down to "five or six" photographs. The speaker specifies that the images will appear in "Sunday's supplement" as if to stress that coverage of this war, wherever it is (readers know it took place on "foreign dust") does not usually merit inclusion, according to the editor,

in the daily news sections. These photos will be displayed as some sort of special edition, not as essential viewing for a broad audience.

The reference to the images themselves as "agonies" extends the poem's intermixing of the photographs as works of art and as objects of memory. For the photographer, since the images trigger flashbacks to the agony he witnessed in the war zone, each photograph carries the same weight as actually living the experience in which the photograph was taken. This objective examination of the photographer's relationship to his images seems to come from an omniscient speaker rather than from the photographer's thoughts himself, although the awareness of how the editor will process the images probably comes from photographer and speaker alike.

While only one color is explicitly mentioned in the first stanzas of the poem, many of the images throughout evoke different colors: the red light of the dark room is reflected in the dying man's blood and the image of flesh, much as the words "grass"and "fields" bring the color green to mind. In the final stanza, color—a sense of realness, perhaps—gets sucked out of the photographer's images as they will be printed in "black and white."

The fourth stanza returns to a sturdy sense of pentameter for lines 19-22. While line 19 is in pure iambic pentameter, an additional foot appears in line 20:

from which | his ed- | itor | will pick | out five | or six

It is as if after the fifth foot (the words "out five"), the editor's reconsideration of the number of photos to be included expands the line to an additional sixth foot (the words "or six"). The line's actual foot count coalesces here with the casually efficient thoughts of the editor, at least as imagined by the speaker and photographer. The suggestion of the editor's slick professionalism, devoid of much emotion, may also be reflected in the sibilance of "six"/"Sunday's"/"supplement" in lines 20-21.

LINES 21-22

The reader's eyeballs ...
... and pre-lunch beers.

The second sentence of the final stanza shifts the camera lens and moves the timeline forward, imagining how the readers will react to viewing the photographs that the editor has selected. The readers, the speaker implies, will momentarily express sadness, crying lightly before they get on with their day. Their consideration of the catastrophes abroad will only last a few hours ("between the bath and pre-lunch beers"). The speaker evidently imagines relatively wealthy readers (who might have more luxurious Sunday reading time, with baths and an extended lunch time)—readers who could actually raise awareness of, or support for, the victims of war if they chose to do so.

While the editor's process is in future tense ("will pick out five or six"), the reader's experience appears in present tense: "the reader's eyeballs prick with tears" (lines 21-22). At this point in the poem, the initial scene of the photographer's dark room appears to be abandoned entirely and the poem will not explicitly return there.

Lines 21-22 are distinctive, too, for the assault of hard initial consonants (prick, bath, between, pre-lunch, beers) as well as a series of final /z/ sounds (reader's, eyeballs, tears, beers). The crunchy, harsh sonic space of these lines suggests the increasing frustration and bitterness of the speaker and photographer as it becomes clear that the viewers of the images will not fully understand their significance.

The sentence that begins halfway through line 21 and concludes in line 22 is spread across two lines via enjambment. But when taken in isolation—without the pre-caesura phrase "for Sunday's supplement" in line 21—this sentence becomes an independent couplet of rhyming iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line), as below:

The rea- | der's eye- | balls prick | with tears
Be-tween | the bath | and pre- | lunch beers.

The "tears"/"beers" rhyme is an internal rhyme in the poem's *actual* layout (both sounds appear in line 22), but the sentence clearly scans with this sing-song quality when read independently of the rest of the stanza. This effectively juxtaposes the callous casualness with which most viewers encounter the photographs (expressed in the tetrameter chant) with the complex, churning uncertainty of the greater metrical structure of the stanza. It is as if the cheerful meter of the blissfully ignorant public is packed into the more complicated structure around it, like an imagined window into the rhythms of less agonizing minds.

LINES 23-24

From the aeroplane ...
... do not care.

The final lines of "War Photographer" are also its most perplexing. Lines 23-24 describe the photographer staring "from the aeroplane ... at where he earns his living and they do not care." It is clear that the uncared-for place where the photographer works is the war zone itself. Where, then, and more importantly, when, is the aeroplane? At the start of the stanza, the war photographer appeared to be in his dark room in England, *after* his time in the war zone, developing his photos.

As with the three possible timelines for "Something is happening" in line 13, there are three options for *when* these final lines are taking place.

1. The first possibility is that the speaker moves the reader and the photographer back in time to the

photographer's journey either to or from the war zone, depicting him looking at the terrain out the window.
2. The second possibility is that the final lines capture him in a moment of traumatic flashback: perhaps he took a photograph from an airplane, which triggers his memory of that moment. He still stands, physically, in his dark room, but he feels as if he has returned to that moment on the plane.
3. The third possibility follows the timeline of the fourth stanza—from the editor's desk, to the reader's table, and, finally, to the photographer *returning* to the war zone on an airplane after understanding the limited way that his photos will be received in England. A return to the war zone would indicate, perhaps, that the photographer has decided to continue his work despite its dubious ethics.

The most likely scenario, however, might be some combination of the first two options: the airplane is both the scene of his initial journey to the war zone *and* the focus of his present-day flashback. This may be indicated, in part, by the use of the word "impassively" in line 23: if the photographer's emotional connection to the war zone is meant to contrast with the general public's apathy, why would his gaze out the window be described as impassive? It is possible that, on his *first* journey to the war zone, the photographer shared the public's impassivity, not anticipating the horrors that he would experience. With that interpretation, the final lines would then return the reader to the photographer's initial apathy and show how much his experience had changed him. The use of present-tense for these final lines also suggests that, if this, like the entirety of the third stanza, is a flashback, it feels real and immediate for the photographer, whom the poem leaves in this traumatized state. He is stuck in the war zone even if his compatriots barely comprehend the enormity of the catastrophe.

Alternatively, if these final lines are meant to represent the photographer's *return* to the war zone after the earlier events of the poem, they have a very different connotation. If the photographer now looks down at war impassively, this suggests that he has become jaded or grown numb to its horror. Alternatively, maybe he has grown hopeless, realizing that his photos will make no difference to the victims in his images. Maybe, in light of this powerlessness, he views his work as just that—work, a means to earn a living—rather than some grand moral endeavor.

The final lines feature a startling acceleration of internal rhyme: in line 23, there are three rhymes ("aeroplane"/"stares"/"where"), with the final word of line 24 concluding the "where"/"care" end rhyme. The density of these rhymes lends a new, almost chant-like quality to the poem's conclusion, perhaps channeling the priest's intoned Mass referenced in the first stanza. The repeated rhymes also signal a sort of increased desperation, as it becomes more and more clear that the viewers of the photographs will never understand their importance.

The meter of line 23 mimics the rhythm of the poem's opening line with its jolting anapest to begin, followed by iambs (the very last line is in clean iambic pentameter):

> From the ae- | roplane | he stares | impass- | ively | at where
> he earns | his liv- | ing and | they do | not care.

What is most stable at the end is the speaker's certainty—and the photographer's, too—that the viewers will never understand the weight of war and that the photographer's identity is inextricably linked with his experiences in the war zone.

SYMBOLS

PHOTOGRAPHS

The present-day action of "War Photographer" finds the title character of the poem developing photographs he has taken during his time in a war zone. In the second stanza, the poem describes his process briefly, referencing how the "solutions slop in trays beneath his hands" (lines 7-8). Over the course of the poem, it begins to become clear that the development of photographs both symbolizes and literally triggers the traumatic flashbacks that the photographer experiences. Throughout the poem, then, the photographer's art comes to represent the experience of traumatic memory.

In lines 13-15, the "stranger's features" twisting "before his eyes, / a half-formed ghost" simultaneously depict the developing photograph coming into focus and the photographer's memory of the events that led to the creation of that image. Although it is the actual development of the photograph that leads the photographer to recall the violent memory, the process of developing a photograph also stands in for the process of drawing a memory to mind through a flashback: a photograph, like a memory, begins stored away. It swirls and blurs as it comes into greater focus, and, ultimately, becomes entirely visible and clear.Throughout the poem, then, the photographer's art comes to represent the experience, one not exclusive to photographers, of traumatic memory.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows"
- **Line 7:** "Solutions slop in trays"
- **Lines 13-15:** "A stranger's features / faintly start to twist

before his eyes, / a half-formed ghost"
- **Line 19:** "A hundred agonies in black and white"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The use of alliteration in "War Photographer" is particularly prevalent in the opening stanza. Note, for instance, the "spools of suffering set out in ordered rows" (line 2) and the alliterative list of cities affected by bombing atrocities: "Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh" (line 6). There is a chant-like quality to the density of alliteration in the opening lines of the poem, sounds repeating again and again. The use of alliteration in the opening stanza also lends the lines rhetorical power when read aloud. This, in turn, strengthens the image of a "priest preparing" an effective sermon (line 5).

While alliteration is less prevalent as the poem continues, the final stanza also gains intensity through the sibilance of the editor selecting from the photographer's images "five or six for Sunday's supplement" (line 21), and the rough /b/ sounds of "between the bath and pre-lunch beers" (line 22). In the first example, the trio of /s/ sounds convey the editor's snake-like slickness in selecting the images; there is little emotion there, little care for the "agonies" that the photos portray. In the second example, the barrage of /b/ sounds seem to emphasize the bitterness of the speaker and photographer in reflecting upon the apathy of the viewers. They add a bouncy, sing-song quality to the phrase that suggests how frivolous and fleeting the viewers' sympathy is.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "th," "th"
- **Line 5:** "pr," "pr"
- **Line 6:** "B," "B," "P," "P"
- **Line 7:** "H," "h," "S," "s"
- **Line 8:** "h," "h," "th"
- **Line 9:** "th"
- **Line 13:** "S," "s," "t," "f"
- **Line 14:** "f," "s," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 16:** "h," "h"
- **Line 17:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 20:** "s"
- **Line 21:** "S," "s"
- **Line 22:** "b," "b," "b"

ALLUSION

The explicit allusions in "War Photographer" come as a collection at the end of the first stanza, the imagined text of a Catholic Mass that assembles a historical set of war atrocities: "Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass" (line 6). Belfast, Beirut, and Phnom Penh are each sites of devastating bombings that took place in the 1970s and 1980s.

The phrase that follows, "All flesh is grass," is a line from the Old Testament's book of Isaiah, a quote that might appear in a real Catholic Mass. The phrase would be used in a Mass to remind the participants of the inevitability of their own mortality and the ubiquity of death—all humans are united by their eventual return to the earth. By partnering the biblical line with the names of these cities of atrocity, the speaker offers ironic comfort for these devastating moments in history: death may be inevitable and necessary, but the unfathomable suffering of the victims of those attacks is neither.

Since "War Photographer" was published in 1985, these historical allusions would likely have been instantly recognizable to most readers since they occurred within the last 15 years. However, it seems significant that two of the three cities are non-Western. Part of the apathy of the viewers and newsreaders, as described in the final stanza, seems to emerge from the sense that these horrors are happening far away from their own European lives. The photographer has a far greater awareness of the scope of global suffering than most residents of his "rural England" home. To understand the poem requires readers to expand their empathy beyond their own borders.

The other possible allusion in "War Photographer" arrives in lines 11-12 in which the photographer recalls the fields that "explode beneath the feet/of running children in a nightmare heat." These lines appear to reference Nick Ut's 1973 Pulitzer-Prize winning photo, "The Terror of War," which depicts just that: naked children fleeing from a napalm bomb that struck a civilian village in Vietnam with dense clouds of smoke in the background of the image. That photo, which also features another photographer inspecting his camera as the children run by, seems to play a significant role in shaping the poem's traumatic imagery and the thematic questions related to the photographer's ethical responsibility in war zones.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass."
- **Lines 11-12:** "to fields which don't explode beneath the feet / of running children in a nightmare heat."

APHORISM

The use of aphorism in "War Photographer" is limited to the biblical phrase, "All flesh is grass," which closes the first stanza (line 6). The quote from the Old Testament's Book of Isaiah emerges as the speaker compares the photographer to a priest preparing to deliver a Mass (in which these words might well be spoken). The words "All flesh is grass" are usually taken to mean

that all humans must die and their bodies will return to the earth; mortality is inevitable.

Used in the context of the first stanza, "All flesh is grass" seems to carry an ironic weight in its selection as the sole biblical line to be quoted in this imagined Mass. Following a list of names of cities that have seen catastrophic loss of life from bombings ("Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh."), the phrase seems to be positioned to offer a dark comfort that minimizes the horror of those histories: everyone has to die some time.

It is clear from the poem, though, that the photographer finds no such comfort in such liturgical reassurances, having seen firsthand the suffering within the war zone. For the photographer and speaker, it seems clear that religion, at least as depicted briefly here, is insufficient to explain or justify the existence of such wide-spread atrocity. The imagined Mass serves to play down the overwhelming violence, allowing people, like those apathetic viewers described in the final stanza, to go about their lives, finding solace in the inevitability of all humanity's mortality.

Where Aphorism appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "All flesh is grass."

ASSONANCE

The use of assonance provided a sense of sturdiness, stability, and familiarity throughout the poem. These help to establish contrast between the photographer's supremely safe setting ("Rural England") and the constant peril of the war zones he imagines. In the second stanza, for example, repeated short syllables seem to steady the photographer as the poem describes the differences between England and the war zone. Phrases like "which did not tremble then" (line 8) and "which simple weather can dispel" (line 10) create a comfortable sound world which favor the simplicity of England, even as the slightly harsher long-voweled assonance of "don't explode beneath the feet" threatens to take over.

In the following stanza, those long vowels remain prevalent as the photographer fully revisits a traumatic memory in which the "stranger's features faintly" (lines 13-14) twist and the "cries of this man's wife" (lines 15-16) haunt him. It is perhaps the certainty that, by taking that man's photograph, the photographer overcame his powerlessness to do "what someone must" (line 17), that allows the speaker to return to those softer sounds.

Assonance is also important in the final stanza. The short /i/ sounds of "from which his editor will pick out five or six" add a clipped quality to the line, subtly suggesting the editor's quick pace and lack of thoughtfulness being paid toward the "agonies" depicted by these images. The many long /e/ sounds of line 22—"tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers"—create an easy-going, sing-song quality. Combined with the popping /b/ alliteration, the line suggests a certain sense of frivolity; these readers lead easy, happy lives and will not be forever changed by seeing the photographer's images.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I," "i"
- **Line 2:** "o"
- **Line 3:** "o," "o"
- **Line 4:** "ou," "e," "u," "e"
- **Line 5:** "ie," "a"
- **Line 6:** "e," "a," "e," "e," "a"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i," "i," "e," "e"
- **Line 10:** "i," "i," "ea," "e"
- **Line 11:** "ie," "o," "o," "ea," "ee"
- **Line 13:** "i," "i," "i," "a," "e," "u"
- **Line 14:** "ai"
- **Line 15:** "ie"
- **Line 16:** "i"
- **Line 17:** "o," "o," "a," "o," "o," "u"
- **Line 18:** "oo," "u"
- **Line 19:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 20:** "i," "i," "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 21:** "u," "u," "i"
- **Line 22:** "i," "ea," "ee," "e," "ee"
- **Line 23:** "a," "a," "a," "e"
- **Line 24:** "i," "i"

CAESURA

Caesura appears frequently in "War Photographer." This can be seen at the end of the first stanza, for example, when the speaker lists cities in which bombing atrocities have historically transpired, followed by a biblical phrase: "Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass." The brevity of each sentence has the impact of the click of a camera, a series of still-life memories of the horror of war.

In the second stanza, caesura seems somewhat like a stabilizing force—the pauses it creates granting the photographer moments to regain his composure, to keep his bearings even as he develops images of horror. For instance, there are two sentences that take up less than a line ("He has a job to do." in line 7 and "Rural England." in line 9), and each seems to function as a moment of comforting reassurance for the photographer: he has a safe task to complete and a safe place in which to complete it.

Later, however, the use of caesura destabilizes the photographer's ordered life in rural England and suggests the ongoing power of trauma to jolt the photographer into a painful flashback. This is most potently rendered at the start of the third stanza which begins with the abrupt half-line, "Something is happening" (line 13). The fright of that short sentence feels particularly strong because the previous uses of caesura have appeared to be stabilizing rather than shocking. By line 13,

however, the purpose of the caesura has shifted. There is a bold full stop here, making the assertion that "Something is happening" feel certain and inescapable. The images of wartime horror are coming into view, and the speaker cannot escape the rush of traumatic memories that will ensue any more than he can stop war from happening in the first place.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All"
- **Line 7:** "do. Solutions"
- **Line 8:** "hands, which"
- **Line 9:** "now. Rural England. Home"
- **Line 13:** "happening. A"
- **Line 15:** "ghost. He"
- **Line 16:** "wife, how"
- **Line 21:** "supplement. The"

CONSONANCE

"War Photographer" is a memorable poem in part because of how much it relies on the repetition of sound—achieved through alliteration, assonance, and consonance. The density of shared sound grants the poem a heightened feel, making it feel rather literary and epic even as the actual language it uses is quite simple and straightforward. Broadly, this might reflect the importance of the subject at hand.

A particularly interesting pattern of consonance that emerges throughout "War Photographer" is the inversion of a pair of consonant sounds across two words. For example, in the first line of the poem, the phrase "finally alone" reverses the /n/ and /l/ sounds in the first word. The same thing occurs in lines 10-11 with the words "can dispel, / to fields." The /d/ sound followed by the /l/ sound meet their mirror image two syllables later.

This sense of consonant equilibrium, which tends to occur, as above, in lines that describe the comfort and safety of the photographer's rural English home, gets overthrown by a barrage of rough /d/ and /st/ sounds in lines 17-18: "without words to do what someone must ... the blood stained into foreign dust." Throughout these lines, the photographer recalls the violent suffering of the man in the photograph, who is the subject of the photographer's work. The series of repeated harsh sounds could also represent the perpetual clicking of the camera, the photographer taking shot after shot while the subject of the photograph perishes in front of him.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "r," "r," "n," "ll," "l," "n"
- **Line 2:** "s," "l," "s," "s," "t," "t," "r," "d," "r," "d," "r"
- **Line 3:** "l," "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 5:** "pr," "pr," "p," "r," "t," "t," "ss"
- **Line 6:** "B," "s," "t," "B," "t," "P," "n," "P," "n," "ll," "l"
- **Line 7:** "H," "h," "S," "l," "sl"
- **Line 8:** "h," "s," "h," "s," "t," "t," "th"
- **Line 9:** "th," "R," "r," "g," "g," "n"
- **Line 10:** "n," "p," "n," "w," "p," "l," "w," "d," "p," "l"
- **Line 11:** "l," "d," "d," "pl," "d," "th," "th"
- **Line 12:** "n," "n"
- **Line 13:** "S," "str," "r," "s," "t," "r," "s"
- **Line 14:** "f," "t," "st," "t," "t," "t," "st"
- **Line 15:** "f," "f"
- **Line 16:** "w," "h," "w," "h"
- **Line 17:** "w," "w," "d," "d," "w," "eo"
- **Line 18:** "d," "st," "d," "d," "st"
- **Line 21:** "S," "s," "s," "s," "r"
- **Line 22:** "t," "rs," "b," "tw," "th," "b," "th," "r," "b," "rs"
- **Line 23:** "s," "r," "ss," "r"
- **Line 24:** "r," "s," "s"

END-STOPPED LINE

Only 10 of the 24 lines of "War Photographer" are end-stopped, the speaker more likely to lean on the weaving enjambment of extended thoughts. Four of those end-stopped lines are the final lines of each stanza. The four stanzas, then—the introduction to the photographer's work, the contrast between rural England and the war zone, the flashback to a specific moment in the photographer's war, and the reflection on how the photographs will be viewed—each conclude with a completed thought. There are actually more sentences (or uses of periods) that conclude *within* a line than sentences that *end* lines. In other words, Duffy's sentence structure does not seem to follow the lines themselves, consistently, with the exception of the conclusions of each stanza.

An evocative end-stop also appears in line 22, which concludes with a full stop:

> with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.

This makes the readers' apathy feel definitive; however momentarily moved they may be by the photographer's images, they will ultimately return to their carefree lives.

Three of the end-stopped lines conclude with commas, and these seem particularly significant because of what follows the commas: in each case, the sentence *could* be complete at the comma, but what comes afterwards shifts or contrasts with the independent clause up that precedes it. For example, the second stanza stanza features the stand-alone clause,

> ... Home again
> to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel,

A period after "dispel" would contain the self-sufficient thought: the photographer is now safe and probably happy to be home and returned to this "ordinary pain." But the next lines twist the knife, suggesting that the photographer's security is not so simple:

> to fields which don't explode beneath the feet
> of running children in a nightmare heat.

Read aloud, line 10 sounds like it *should* mark the end of the sentence with a note of comfort and safety. Instead, the very thought of stability triggers the photographer's most traumatic memories of the war. Linked with the memory, there is an emotional turn as well: alongside the possible gratitude for the "ordinary pain," there is also guilt, it seems, that the photographer has fled home to rural England and that the subjects of his photos are still fleeing those exploding fields.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "rows."
- **Line 3:** "glows,"
- **Line 5:** "Mass."
- **Line 6:** "grass."
- **Line 10:** "dispel,"
- **Line 12:** "heat."
- **Line 14:** "eyes,"
- **Line 18:** "dust."
- **Line 22:** "beers."
- **Line 24:** "care."

ENJAMBMENT

Duffy relies heavily on enjambment throughout "War Photographer." Fourteen of the poem's 24 lines conclude without punctuation, the thought continuing onward to the next line. This helps to provide the sense that the photographer, despite the safety and stability of rural England where he has now returned, cannot constrain or confine the troubled thoughts of his tortured mind. The photographer is plagued by flashbacks and traumatic memories which come to him unbidden, and the constant spilling over of one line into the next seems to echo the way that the photographer's memories seep into unexpected moments. There is no real security, even with the end-stopped conclusion of each stanza, when anything can happen, structurally speaking, inside those stanzas.

At the same time, in terms of rhyme scheme, meter, and stanza form, "War Photographer" feels quite consistent and ordered. The contrast between those formal elements and the unpredictable enjambment seems to demonstrate the difficulty with which the photographer tries to keep it together.

Many of the enjambed lines *could* end without continuing. "In his dark room he is finally alone" (line 1), "solutions slop in trays" (line 7), and "he remembers the cries" (line 15) are each independent clauses which a period could contain. In each of those cases, though, what follows the enjambment darkens and deepens what came before it. For example, the photographer is *not* really alone, as the first line would have it, because, as we learn from the conclusion of the enjambed line, he is surrounded by "spools of suffering" (line 2). Enjambment, throughout the poem, transforms the ordered elements of the photographer's life, injecting them with flashes of the pain and chaos experienced in the war zone.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "alone / with"
- **Lines 4-5:** "he / a"
- **Lines 7-8:** "trays / beneath"
- **Lines 8-9:** "then / though"
- **Lines 9-10:** "again / to"
- **Lines 11-12:** "feet / of"
- **Lines 13-14:** "features / faintly"
- **Lines 15-16:** "cries / of"
- **Lines 16-17:** "approval / without"
- **Lines 17-18:** "must / and"
- **Lines 19-20:** "white / from"
- **Lines 20-21:** "six / for"
- **Lines 21-22:** "prick / with"
- **Lines 23-24:** "where / he"

METAPHOR

The most explicit use of metaphor in the poem comes from the Old Testament's Book of Isaiah, quoted in the opening stanza: "All flesh is grass" (line 6). The phrase suggests that all humans—flesh, in contrast with the spirit—must die and return to the earth (become the grass).

The image of flesh will resonate potently in the third stanza when the photographer appears to remember the melting flesh of a dying man: "a stranger's features faintly start to twist before his eyes" (lines 13-14). This victim's flesh returns to the earth as well, his "blood stained into foreign dust" (line 18). The question raised by the use of the metaphor is whether the idea that "All flesh is grass" can be a comforting statement in the face of such overwhelming horror. Does this biblical imagery stand up to the suffering that the war photographer has experienced? That the sentiment "All flesh is grass" appears two stanzas above the image of the dying man returning to "dust" and then does not reappear in any form would suggest that the photographer and speaker reject the reassurance that the phrase offers. It is unjust, the poem seems to say with the use of this phrase, even if all humans must eventually die, for some to have to suffer such torment in the moment of their passing.

Other metaphors include the "spools of suffering" in line 2 and the "hundred agonies in black and white" in line 19, at the top of the final stanza. These both refer to the photographer's

photographs, and underscore the horror that his images have captured. These images are not art, but rather documentation of pain.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "spools of suffering"
- **Line 6:** "All flesh is grass"
- **Line 19:** "A hundred agonies in black and white"

PARALLELISM

The two instances of parallelism in "War Photographer" help to establish the central contrast between the stability of the photographer's career and rural English home, and the chaos of the war zone in which he has worked. In the first example of parallelism, two phrases describe what it means for the photographer to be "home again":

> to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel,
> to fields which don't explode beneath the feet

The gap between these two parallel clauses seems vast. The first establishes the comfort and sturdiness of rural England: no suffering there is permanent. That is what home means at first. The second clause, however, emphasizes what home is *not*: the place of terror and destruction that the war photographer has experienced. No matter how calm his life in England, that very calmness will always trigger memories for the war photographer of what this safe life is *not*. The safety of England is now inextricable from the perils of the war.

The second case of parallelism functions somewhat similarly. The war photographer remembers

> ... how he sought approval
> without words to do what someone must
> and how the blood stained into foreign dust.

In the first triggered remembrance, the photographer emphasizes his own actions and his own sense of purpose in his job: someone *must* document the tragedy. In the second clause, however, the photographer recalls the graphic detail of his subject's death—what was only just moments ago a memory of the photographer's professional fortitude now becomes a searingly traumatic memory of suffering. This memory, too, may indict and counteract the first clause: as the man's "blood stained" the ground, was it really a necessity that "someone must" record this moment for prosperity?

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel, / to fields which don't explode beneath the feet"
- **Lines 16-18:** "how he sought approval / without words to do what someone must / and how the blood stained into foreign dust."

SIMILE

The one use of simile in "War Photographer" occurs in the first stanza when the dark room is compared to a church because of its dimly lit ambience and the photographer is compared to a priest preparing to lead a Mass. Who is the congregation in this church, then? The photographer is "finally alone" except for his many spools of film, described in "ordered rows" like graves in a churchyard cemetery. The words imagined for this Mass add to that body count, too: Belfast, Beirut, and Phnom Penh, listed in line 6, are each sites of mass death as a result of wartime bombing. It is as if the priest-photographer is imagined to be giving a Mass for the assembled dead.

Curiously, after this simile is expanded to take up almost the entire first stanza, no references to church or the Mass or religion occur again. The poem, like the photographer perhaps, appears to abandon religion. If the Biblical phrase, "All flesh is grass," which is quoted as part of the imagined Mass in line 6, is meant as a comforting reminder of all humanity's mortality, the outsize suffering in the photographer's memory seems to overwhelm that supposedly reassuring sentiment. Religion or faith has seemed to fail the victims of these wars, innocent civilians who have experienced so much violent terror.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "as though this were a church and he / a priest preparing to intone a Mass."

VOCABULARY

Dark room (Line 1) - A photographer's dark room is the space in which prints can be developed from photographic film. In "War Photographer," the phrase "dark room" is literally the photographer's work space but also suggests the layers of metaphorical darkness and isolation surrounding the photographer's work.

Spools (Line 2) - In photography, spools are plastic cylindrical pieces around which film is wound. The spools in the photographer's dark room hold the film of the photographs the photographer has taken in the war zone.

Mass (Line 5) - A mass is a liturgical service in Christianity. The poem's reference to a priest suggests that the mass imagined is a Catholic mass, led by a priest and featuring the ritual of Communion.

Belfast (Line 6) - Belfast is a city in Northern Island. The poem seems to reference Belfast as the site of "Bloody Friday," a

series of bombings in Belfast in 1972 by the Irish Republican Army that left nine people dead. Each location named in the first stanza connects to a war atrocity, the photographer imagining the conflict he has seen as part of that long line of "spools of suffering."

Beirut (Line 6) - Beirut is a city in Lebanon. The poem appears to reference Beirut because it was the site of the 1983 Beirut barracks bombings which killed 307 people. Each of the cities named in the first stanza is the location of a major war atrocity.

Phnom Penh (Line 6) - Phnom Penh is a city in Cambodia. During the Vietnam War, Phnom Penh suffered a devastating series of civilian bombings in 1975 after the city was taken over by Khmer Rouge, a regime supported by the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong in opposition to the United States. Each of the cities mentioned in the first stanza of the poem is the site of war atrocities.

"All flesh is grass" (Line 6) - "All flesh is grass" is a quote from the Old Testament's book of Isaiah. It might be used in the Mass that the poet imagines. The phrase suggests that all humans will return to the earth and all life must end. The poet ties this idea to the list of cities that have suffered unthinkable atrocities of war. The phrase serves as a reminder in the poem of the ubiquity of mortality.

Solutions (Line 7) - As part of the photographic process, the print is typically placed in a liquid solution of acetic acid or citric acid. The double meaning of "solutions" may be present here, too: there are literal solutions in the photographer's dark room, while he struggles to define his artwork as possibly participating in any solution for the atrocity he has experienced.

Dispel (Line 10) - The word "dispel" here means " make disappear." The "ordinary pain" experienced in rural England comes and goes with the weather, in contrast to the permanent suffering that will never vanish from the sites of war that the photographer has visited.

Sunday's supplement (Line 21) - Many daily newspapers feature a special section, a "supplement," as part of the Sunday paper. The poem suggests that the photographer's images will be used as part of a special feature to be released as part of that supplementary section.

Impassively (Line 23) - The word "impassively" here means "without feeling or showing emotion." The photographer appears not to show emotion as he surveys the land, or perhaps the images of land, overtaken by war, but it is clear from the rest of the poem that he experiences strong emotions as he reflects upon what he has seen.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Formally, "War Photographer" is comprised of four six-line stanzas with a consistent rhyme scheme. There is no variation from this basic structure across the poem. Within each stanza, though, Duffy plays surprisingly with meter, internal rhyme, sentence structure, and enjambment, but these sometimes jolting shifts never interfere with the larger stanza-level shape of the poem. It is as if, from the outside, the photographer's life in rural England looks normal: he goes about his day and "he has a job to do" (line 7). Inside, however, at the level of the thought, the moment, the memory, the photographer is suffering from tremendous psychic trauma.

METER

The meter of "War Photographer" is predominantly iambic (meaning its poetic feet have two syllables in an unstressed-stressed pattern). Several lines are in perfect iambic pentameter (meaning there are five iambs—da DUM units—per line), like line 3:

> The on- | ly light | is red | and soft- | ly glows

Other iambic lines take on other numbers of feet like line 4 (iambic tetrameter, meaning there are four iambs per line), line 7 (iambic hexameter, meaning there are six iambs), and line 10 (iambic heptameter, which has an impressive seven iambs!). While the number of feet is not consistent, the iambic *rhythm* usually is, suggesting, perhaps, that the photographer is doing the best he can to keep putting one foot in front of the other, so to speak, in his newly secure life.

The use of two trochaic feet (feet with a stressed-unstressed syllable pattern) in the middle of line 9 on the words "Rural England" feels like a long inhalation, an attempt of the photographer to persuade himself that he is okay:

> though seem | to now. | Rural | England.

The meter is thrown off entirely, though, by the invasion of two dactyls (a three-syllable foot with a stressed-unstressed-unstressed pattern) at the start of line 13, when the photographer's flashback fully kicks in:

> Something is | happening. | A stran- | ger's fea- | tures.

Although the line recovers its meter here (ending with an extra unstressed syllable), the rest of the third stanza struggles to maintain its iambic sturdiness, with each line veering away from iambs slightly, until righting themselves at line 18:

and how | the blood | stained in- | to for- | eign dust.

The general aura of iambic straightforwardness with stomach-churning turns away from that steady meter capture the poem's overall depiction of the unexpected and jolting nature of trauma.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of each stanza in "War Photographer" is:

ABBCDD

This pattern remains consistent throughout all four stanzas, and the rhymes are almost all perfect. What is variable, however, is the use of internal rhyme within the stanzas. Internal rhyme appears first in the opening stanza with the rhyme "were a church" (line 4), followed by the second syllable of Belfast (line 6) echoing with the end rhyme between "Mass" and "grass."

Rhyme within the lines pick up steam in the final stanza with the end rhyme of "six" and "prick" (lines 20-21) mirrored in the word "pick" in line 20. Line 22's last word, "beers," which is unrhymed as per the rhyme scheme still has a rhyme within the line with "tears": "tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers." The final couplet, "where"/"care" (lines 23-24), finds a third rhyme in the first syllable of "aeroplane" in line 23.

How to account for this accelerated rhyme? It seems significant that these internal and extra rhymes bubble up in the first and last stanzas, the stanzas least overcome by the photographer's trauma and flashbacks. While the overall rhyme scheme remains sturdy—an overarching normalcy, like the general stanza structure—internal rhyme seems strongest when the photographer's calmer mind matches his exterior. Those internal rhymes indicate a sort of internal logic, an ability for the photographer to think more clearly—and often more bitterly—about his experiences and how his images will be received.

SPEAKER

In "War Photographer," the speaker is closely aligned with the photographer whose story is being told—a man from rural England who makes his money selling photos of war to a newspaper or magazine. Although the photographer is referred to in third-person, much of the text appears to get inside the photographer's head, sharing his memories and thoughts. Sometimes the distance between the seemingly omniscient speaker and the photographer is unclear: at the end of the first stanza, for example, does the photographer imagine the Mass himself, supplying the sarcastic text ("Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.")? Or does the speaker make the comparison completely separately from the photographer, just as an observer looking in?

What is certain, though, is that the images of the war zone, the photographer's past, are accessible in the poem *only* through the memories of the photographer. In the third stanza, for example, the image of the dying man and the surrounding sensory details come through the framework of the photographer's flashback ("He remembers the cries...").

What is also clear is that the photographer seems, at times, to believe that his work is moral and meaningful; his hands remain calm while working in the war zone, and he believes he is doing what "must" be done by photographing the dying man in the third stanza. The poem's speaker, if considered a separate observer, seems perhaps less convinced of the value of the photographer's work. At other times, however, the poem creates the sense that the photographer himself doubts the efficacy and ethics of his images (suggesting that perhaps the speaker's doubt is simply meant to be a reflection of the photographer's own, rather than an external judgment). His hands "tremble" as he develops his photographs back home in England, betraying a sense of lasting trauma from all the horror he as witnessed. And he seems bitterly aware that most people seeing his photographs will be moved only momentarily.

SETTING

"War Photographer" is set primarily in a photographer's dark room in rural England. The speaker describes the dark room's contents with its spools of photographic film in "ordered rows" (line 2) and its dimly glowing red light.

The photographer's memories, however, transport the reader away from the dark room to the war zone from which the photographer has flown home. Although few details or specifics of this particular war are given (it is presumably post-1983, the date of the Beirut bombing references in line 6), the photographer has vivid flashbacks to the fields exploding "beneath the feet of running children in a nightmare heat" (lines 11-12) and to the blood-stained "foreign dust" (line 18).

The poem then briefly imagines other settings in loose sketch—the editor's office and the homes of the readers—before ending with an image of the photographer staring at the war zone from an airplane. Those final two lines are the poem's most startling: how did the photographer get to the airplane overlooking the war zone when he was in his dark room in rural England stanzas earlier? There are two possibilities to explain this surprising final setting: the first, most likely, is that the photographer recalls his return flight to England, looking at the war-torn land as he leaves it. The memory is visceral enough that it returns in present-tense, carrying the reader fully into that moment. (The poem then does the work that the photographs cannot, at least according to the photographer.) Alternately, there is the more remote possibility that the final lines signal that the war photographer

is *returning* to the war zone, unable to maintain his new normal in rural England.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy, the first female poet laureate of the United Kingdom, has written much of her work through a feminist and/or queer lens. In that regard, "War Photographer" deviates from Duffy's major texts, like the anthologies *Standing Female Nude* and *The World's Wife*.

Duffy has often been compared to the poet Phillip Larkin ("An Arundel Tomb"), who died the year that "War Photographer" was published. Larkin, who wrote in early years under a female pseudonym, shares Duffy's simple language and comfort working within formal metrical, rhyme, and structural constraints. However, Duffy has asserted that, "I have little in common with Larkin, who was tall, taciturn and thin-on-top." The poet whom Duffy has most frequently cited as a guiding influence over the development of her craft has been the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

Duffy's success, like Larkin's, has been described as both critical and commercial. Her poems, "War Photographer" included, are often included in high school curriculum in the UK because of the combined effect of their accessibility and depth.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although "War Photographer" does not indicate the particular conflict that the title character has documented, the poem was published in the mid-1980s, a time rife with global conflict (the Iran-Iraq War, the Guatemalan and Sri Lankan Civil Wars, etc.), and explicitly references conflicts of the past decade, including in Ireland and Lebanon.

The Vietnam War, however, looms largest, not only in the reference to Phnom Penh, the Cambodian city which was a critical location during the war, but in the strong ties between the imagery in the poem and in "The Terrors of War," a 1972 Vietnam War photograph by Nick Ut. The fields exploding "beneath the feet / of running children in a nightmare heat" (lines 11-12) would seem to be a direct reference to the photograph of children fleeing a napalm bomb explosion, including the naked girl who would come to be known as "Napalm Girl." That photo also depicts a photographer standing at the side of his road, adjusting his camera as the children run by him, and there seems to be a direct line between the moral questions posed in "The Terrors of War" about the role of the photographer in wartime and those tackled within the poem.

Despite the historical vagueness of the poem, it is clear that the poem aims to pay tribute to the victims of all global conflicts which are often overlooked by the general public: line 6 refers explicitly to three of those conflicts. In that way, "War Photographer" is both ahistorical and deeply dedicated to the power of recognizing history and learning from it.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "War Photographer" Read Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sL5mX1YN9xQ)
- Trailer for the Documentary "War Photographer" — Watch the trailer for the 2011 documentary War Photographer, which explores the responsibilities of photographers in war zones, focusing on photographer James Nachtwey. (https://vimeo.com/ondemand/warphotographer2)
- "The Terror of War" — Explore Nick Ut's image from the Vietnam War, "The Terror of War." This famous photograph may have inspired "War Photographer." Note the second photographer at the right of the image examining his camera as children run by him, burnt and naked. (http://100photos.time.com/photos/nick-ut-terror-war)
- Carol Ann Duffy Biography — Learn more about Carol Ann Duffy, Britain's first female Poet Laureate, on Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/carol-ann-duffy)
- Interview with War Photographer Nick Ut — Watch this NBC interview with Vietnam War photographer Nick Ut about taking his famous photo depicting the naked "Napalm Girl" and the responsibility of photographers in war zones. Ut's comments intersect potently with the themes explored in "War Photographer." (https://www.nbcnews.com/video/how-nick-ut-s-photo-napalm-girl-changed-the-vietnam-war-908256835749)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls

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