

Higher  
English

The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy  
Annotated Poems



◆ EDINBURGH ◆  
THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

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Higher English

**This booklet is a set of poems which have been digitally annotated to be used as a teaching aid.**

**Clicking on the speech bubble will show the notes associated with the highlighted quote.**

**The poems can be printed with the annotations displayed, if necessary, to support learners.**

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'Valentine' [JN1]

**Carol Ann Duffy**

Not a red rose or a satin heart [JN2].

I [JN3]give you [JN4] an onion. [JN5]  
It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.  
It promises light  
like the careful undressing of love.

Here.  
It will blind you with tears  
like a lover. [JN6]  
It will make your reflection  
a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute card or a kissogram.

I give you an onion. [JN7]  
Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,  
possessive and faithful  
as we are,  
for as long as we are [JN8].

Take it. [JN9]  
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring,  
if you like.

Lethal.  
Its scent will cling to your fingers,  
cling to your knife. [JN10]

## Anne Hathaway

[JN11]

'Item I gyve unto my wife my second best bed [JN12]...'  
(from Shakespeare's will)[JN13]

The bed[JN14] we loved in was a spinning world  
[JN15]of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas  
where we would dive for pearls[JN16][JN17]. My lover's words  
were shooting stars [JN18]which fell to earth as kisses[JN19][JN20]  
[JN21]on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme  
[JN22]to his, now echo, assonance[JN23]; his touch  
a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.[JN24][JN25]  
Some nights, I dreamed he'd written me, the bed |  
[JN26]a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance  
and drama played by touch, by scent[JN27], by taste[JN28][JN29].  
In the other bed[JN30], the best, our guests dozed on,  
dribbling their prose[JN31]. My living laughing love [JN32]-[JN33] |  
[JN34][JN35]I hold him in the casket[JN36] of my widow's head  
as he held me upon that next best bed. [JN37]

*The poem is written as a 14 line sonnet which is a form often associated with Shakespeare. However it does not follow the rhyming structure Shakespeare would employ (abab cdcd efef gg). It does however end with the expected rhyming couplet. Meter is only roughly iambic pentameter.*

*Entire poem is a metaphor comparing the couple's love making to the process of artistic and poetic creativity.*

## Originally

We came from our own country<sup>[CEC38]</sup> in a red room<sup>[CEC39]</sup>  
which fell through the fields, our mother singing<sup>[CEC40]</sup>,  
our father's name <sup>[CEC41]</sup>to the turn of the wheels.  
My brothers cried, one of them bawling<sup>[CEC42]</sup>, *Home*,<sup>[CEC43]</sup>  
*Home*<sup>[CEC44]</sup>, as the miles rushed back to the city<sup>[CEC45]</sup>,  
the street, the house, the vacant rooms<sup>[CEC46]</sup>  
where we didn't<sup>[CEC47]</sup> live any more. I stared  
at the eyes of a blind toy, holding its paw<sup>[CEC48]</sup>.

All childhood is an emigration<sup>[CEC49]</sup>. Some are slow,  
leaving you standing, resigned, up an avenue  
where no one you know stays<sup>[JN50].</sup><sup>[CEC51]</sup> Others are sudden<sup>[CEC52]</sup>.  
Your accent wrong<sup>[CEC53]</sup>. Corners, which seem familiar,  
leading to unimagined pebble-dashed <sup>[CEC54]</sup>estates, big boys  
eating worms and shouting words you don't understand<sup>[CEC55].</sup><sup>[CEC56]</sup>  
My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose tooth  
In my head<sup>[CEC57]</sup>. *I want our own country*<sup>[CEC58]</sup>, I said.

But then you forget, or don't recall, or change,  
And, seeing your brother swallow a slug, feel only  
A skelf<sup>[CEC59]</sup> of shame. I remember my tongue  
Shedding its skin like a snake<sup>[CEC60]</sup>, my voice  
In the classroom sounding just like the rest. Do I only think  
I lost a river<sup>[CEC61]</sup>, culture, speech, sense of first space  
And the right place<sup>[JN62]</sup>? Now, *Where do you come from?*  
Strangers ask. *Originally?* And I hesitate

## War Photographer [JN63]

In his darkroom he is finally [JN64] alone  
with spools of suffering set [JN65] out in ordered [JN66] rows.  
The only light is red and softly glows [JN67],  
[JN68] as though this were a church and he  
a priest preparing [JN69] to intone a Mass.  
Belfast [JN70]. Beirut [JN71]. Phnom Penh [JN72] [JN73]. All flesh is grass [JN74] [JN75]

He has a job to do [JN76]. Solutions slop [JN77] in trays  
beneath his hands which did not tremble then  
though seem to now. [JN78] Rural England [JN79]. Home again  
to ordinary pain [JN80] which simple weather can dispel,  
to fields which don't explode beneath the feet  
of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening [JN81]. A stranger's features  
faintly start to twist [JN82] before his eyes,  
a half-formed ghost [JN83]. He remembers the cries  
of this man's wife, how he sought approval  
without words to do what someone must  
[JN84] and how the blood stained into foreign dust [JN85].

A hundred agonies in black-and-white  
[JN86] from which his editor will pick out five or six  
for Sunday's supplement [JN87]. The reader's eyeballs prick  
with tears [JN88] between bath and pre-lunch beers.  
From aeroplane he stares impassively [JN89] at where  
he earns a living and they do not care [JN90].

## Mrs. Midas<sup>[JN91]</sup>

It was late September. I'd just poured a glass of wine, begun to unwind, while the vegetables cooked<sup>[JN92]</sup>. The kitchen filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath gently blanching the windows. <sup>[JN93]</sup>So I opened one, then with my fingers wiped the other's glass like a brow. He was standing under the pear tree snapping a twig.

Now the garden was long and the visibility poor, the way the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky, but that twig in his hand was gold. And then he plucked a pear from a branch - we grew Fondante d'Automne <sup>[JN94]</sup>- and it sat in his palm like a light bulb<sup>[JN95]</sup>. On<sup>[JN96]</sup>. I thought to myself, Is he putting fairy lights in the tree?<sup>[JN97]</sup>

He came into the house. The doorknobs gleamed. He drew the blinds. You know the mind; I thought of the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready<sup>[JN98]</sup>. He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne. The look on his face was strange, wild, vain. I said, What in the name of God is going on? <sup>[JN99]</sup>He started to laugh.

I served up the meal. <sup>[JN100]</sup>For starters, corn on the cob. Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich<sup>[JN101]</sup>. He toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives, the forks. He asked where was the wine. I poured with shaking hand<sup>[JN102]</sup>, a fragrant, bone-dry white from Italy, then watched as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden<sup>[JN103]</sup> chalice, drank.

It was then that I started to scream<sup>[JN104]</sup>. He sank to his knees. After we had both calmed down, I finished the wine on my own, hearing him out. I made him sit on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself.<sup>[JN105]</sup> I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone. The toilet I didn't mind. I couldn't believe my ears:

how he'd had a wish.<sup>[JN106]</sup> Look, we all have wishes; granted. <sup>[JN107]</sup>But who has wishes granted<sup>[JN108]</sup>? Him. Do you know about gold? It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes no thirst. He tried to light a cigarette; I gazed, entranced, as the blue flame played on its luteous stem. At least, I said, you'll be able to give up smoking for good.

Separate beds<sup>[JN109]</sup>. In fact, I put a chair against my door, near petrified. He was below, turning the spare room into the tomb of Tutankhamun<sup>[JN110]</sup>. You see, we were passionate then, in those halcyon<sup>[JN111]</sup> days; unwrapping each other, rapidly, like presents, fast food. But now I feared his honeyed embrace, the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.

And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live  
with a heart of gold? [JN112] That night, I dreamt I bore  
his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue  
like a precious latch, its amber eyes [JN113]  
holding their pupils like flies [JN114]. My dream-milk  
burned in my breasts. I woke to the streaming sun.

So he had to move out [JN115]. We'd a caravan  
in the wilds, in a glade of its own. I drove him up  
under cover of dark. He sat in the back.  
And then I came home, the women who married the fool  
who wished for gold. At first I visited, odd times,  
parking the car a good way off, then walking.

You knew you were getting close. Golden trout  
on the grass. One day, a hare hung from a larch,  
a beautiful lemon mistake. And then his footprints,  
glistening next to the river's path. He was thin,  
delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan [JN116]  
from the woods. Listen. That was the last straw.

What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed [JN117]  
but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness. I sold  
the contents of the house and came down here.  
I think of him in certain lights, dawn, late afternoon,  
and once a bowl of apples [JN118] stopped me dead. I miss most,  
even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch. [JN119]

*Made up of eleven stanzas of irregular line length, ranging from 6 to 10 lines to  
reflect how unpredictable and chaotic life has become for this couple.*

## Havisham

Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then  
I haven't wished him dead. <sup>JN121</sup>Prayed for it  
so hard I've dark green pebbles for eyes,  
ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.

Spinster. I stink and remember. Whole days  
in bed cawing Nooooo at the wall; the dress  
yellowing, trembling if I open the wardrobe;  
the slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this

to me? <sup>JN129</sup>Puce curses that are sounds not words.  
Some nights better, the lost body over me,  
my fluent tongue in its mouth in its ear  
then down till I suddenly bite awake. Love's

hate <sup>JN133</sup>behind a white veil; a red balloon bursting  
in my face. Bang. I stabbed at a wedding-cake.  
Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.  
Don't think it's only the heart that b-b-b-breaks <sup>JN137</sup>.