

# War Photographer

A war photographer is describing developing images, from which will be chosen an image for the Sunday supplement. Carol Ann Duffy examines why someone would do this job and how they cope with having to choose between taking photos and helping. There are several viewpoints in this very powerful poem: the photographer's, by implication the poet's and, more briefly, the editor's and the Sunday supplement readers'.

**Reactions to war:** In the first verse, the poet observes the photographer as he prints his images of the war zone from which he has just returned. In a rather disturbing image she sees the darkroom with its infra red light as a church lit by stained glass windows with the photographer as the priest preparing to say Mass, the place names of the war zones replacing the words of the service. This comparison suggests the poet's feeling of moral discomfort with the photographer's role which here is seen as sacrilegious. This feeling is heightened by the biblical echoes of the line where she comments on the transience – and by implication, the insignificance – of life: '**All flesh is grass**'. The first verse, therefore, makes it clear that we are to be presented with a subject which is going to push us into the realm of moral or ethical judgements, perhaps 'break the windows of perception' as Robert Nye suggested.

**Images of war:** The photographer himself is disturbed by the images he is developing. Back in the safety of England where fields and innocent civilians are not torched, he trembles (with fear? with shame? with horror?) in a way he did not when he was actually there. He is haunted by the '**half-formed ghost**' of the distraught wife whose dead husband he photographed, having inaudibly sought her permission. He did '**what someone must**'. Perhaps now he questions that right and feels ashamed.

The editor will '**pick out**' five or six pictures, a casual phrase suggesting the selection of an appetising dish from a menu or an item of clothing from a rail. His emotional divorce from the '**agonies**' he is looking at is clear. Is this callousness, or a necessity for the job of editor? Is suffering, the poet is asking, an appropriate subject for photography and Sunday supplements? The readers' views are also apparently uncaring: '**they do not care**'. Their eyes will '**prick with tears**', but only briefly as they lazily scan the Sunday supplement. Their real concerns are their selfish Sunday ritual of a morning bath and '**pre-lunch beers**'.

**Mood and tone:** Protest and anger are always more effective when expressed in a controlled and economical way. Carol Ann Duffy's control has the same kind of effectiveness, and the poem's structure and rhyme scheme contribute to its power. The 6-line stanzas are, with one exception, made up of 10 to 12 syllable lines and have a regular abbcdd scheme. This orderliness, reflecting the '**ordered rows**' of prints in the darkroom, is accentuated by the final rhyming couplet to each stanza. It reflects Duffy's emotional control which gives her message greater strength. Generally speaking, aren't people more likely to listen to you if you keep your temper rather than lose it?