

A Comparative Analysis of Femininity in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* and *Standing Female Nude*

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Abstract

The study in this paper concerns the theme of “femininity in the poems of Carol Ann Duffy” by examining these poems *The World's Wife* (1999) and *Standing Female Nude* (1985). Both poems depict how femininity is advancing to empowerment in contrast to the male-dominated traditions of poetic structure. The research seeks to illuminate how Duffy uses poetic means, diction, and other stylistic devices to enforce silenced voices of females and, in the process, becomes a feminist poetic voice to deconstruct male myths and guarantee female selfhood in art and literature. Through a qualitative analysis methodology based on the feminist literary theory of Beauvoir, Butler, and Showalter, this study analyses some common themes of voice, body, sexuality, and identity. This discussion demonstrates that Duffy's *Standing Female Nude* articulates the idea of class-conscious femininity and the commodification of the female body, whereas *The World's Wife* extends her arguments into a universal re-voicing of women who are being left out of cultural histories. The paper finds that Duffy's poetics of femininity is a revolutionary re-definition of languages and powers and makes poetry a place of gendered resistance and political activities.

Keywords

Femininity, Feminist, Identity, Poetics, Subversion, Voice

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1. Introduction

Carol Ann Duffy has used her poetry to recreate what we call femininity in a modern way, as she has done so by challenging the existing patriarchal language and narrative authority of society (Rees-Jones, 2010). This achievement is attributed to her position as the first female Poet Laureate of England, a role that has been widely interpreted as a public literary platform intensifying the political visibility and national engagement of her poetry (Öztürk, 2023). In this paper, the author compares Duffy's two poetry collections, "*Standing Female Nude*" (Duffy, 1985) and "*The World's Wife*" (Duffy, 1999). This comparison aims to demonstrate the changes that have taken place within Duffy's vision of female subjectivity over time. Moi's (1985) concept of "feminine textuality" helps to explain the findings of this

study, which reveals that the first of these collections presents a view of women's repression through socio-economic and artistic exploitation, while the second re-constructs myth and history through the eyes of women. Grounded in feminist theory, this study draws on Beauvoir's (2010) critique of the idea of femininity as a construct, Butler's (2016) concept of gender performativity, and Showalter's (1999) work concerning how women write. This study uses dramatic monologue, irony, and revisionist storytelling to help Duffy create a view of femininity that is continually evolving and that is authored by the woman herself. This study has divided Duffy's works into three general areas of analysis. The first area is voice, which includes the use of voice as a negative historical device or tool to control women; the second area is parody; and the third area is the interaction between language, body, and power.

The main Objectives of the study are

1. To investigate how Carol Ann Duffy develops and presents femininity through voice, diction, dramatic monologue, irony, and revisionist narrative techniques across socio-economic and mythic settings in *Standing Female Nude* (1985) and *The World's Wife* (1999).
2. To analyze Duffy's feminist poetics as it tries to reclaim silenced female voices and challenge patriarchal structures by reworking themes of body, class, identity, power, and cultural history, drawing on feminist theorists Beauvoir, Butler, and Showalter

1.1 Research works based on Duffy's poems - *Standing Female Nude* and *The World's Wife*

Duffy's poems, *Standing Female Nude* and *The World's Wife*, have become the subject of research on which studies are developed. The scholarly literature of Duffy's *Standing Female Nude* and *The World's Wife* has focused on feminist resistance, voice, and the re-visioning of patriarchal stories. The recent critique of *Standing Female Nude* emphasises its class-conscious feminist politics and critique of the male artistic gaze. Rees-Jones (2010) places the collection within Duffy's early embrace of democratic lyricism and the marginalised, while Sliti (2023) reads the poem *Standing Female Nude* as a meta-commentary on bodily fragmentation and commodification within patriarchal art practices. Scholarship also reads Duffy's political imagination through eco-poetic and "unnatural" strategies that complicate gender, voice, and ethics beyond purely mythic revision (Mhana et al., 2019). Emphasising Duffy's use of dramatic monologue to illustrate socio-economic exploitation and gendered power relations, Armstrong (2022) has highlighted this usage by Duffy. *The World's Wife* is assessed much for revising myths and feminist parody. Brown (2020) emphasizes Duffy's negotiation of artistic identity via ironic re-voicing, whereas Hamad (2023) and Mathew (2023) analyse the collection as a sustained feminist intervention, reclaiming silenced women from myth and history through irony, intertextuality, and performative resistance; More recent gynocritical readings like Samanta (2024) reinforce the collection's subversion of patriarchal authority through the inclusion of female subjectivity and narrative agency. These works provide a wealth of critical analysis and theoretical insight but often privilege feminist reinterpretation over formal analysis. This study responds to this gap by reframing stylistic features, silence, punctuation, and visual form, as more active strategies of

meaning-making in both poems as well as contributing to an underexplored aspect of Duffy scholarship.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literary approach to explore representations of femininity in Duffy's *Standing Female Nude* (1985) and *The World's Wife* (1999). This study employs a close reading approach to gain insight into the poet's writing style, the relationship between the poet's writing style and the development of the theme of femininity, and the various poetic forms and structures used throughout the two works. Additionally, this study focuses on how both works of poetry provide insight into how the authors have reconstructed, parodied, or resisted traditional conceptions.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Feminine Consciousness and the Reclamation of Voice

In *Standing Female Nude* (1985) and *The World's Wife* (1999), Duffy foregrounds the reclamation of women's voices that have long been marginalized, misinterpreted, or suppressed within patriarchal cultural frameworks. Feminist critics, notably Cixous (1976), foreground the role of feminine writing as a mode of resisting linguistic and cultural oppression. This view is supported by Raghavan (2025), who shows how silence and fragmentation function as tools for reclaiming marginalised voices. This theoretical stance is clear in Duffy's poetry, where language functions as a tool of reclamation, resistance, and self-expression.

In *Standing Female Nude*, Duffy exaggerates the voices of women whose identity has been influenced by outside factors, such as the prostitute, the model of the artist, the server, and working-class women. Duffy, in the titular poem "*Standing Female Nude*" (Duffy, 1985), presents her female subject as an object of the male gaze, as well as a narrator who disrupts that approach. The speaker mentions, such as six hours a few francs (p. 3), and speaks with a sardonic and tired tone, showing that her body is commodified in a male-dominated art world. She changes the direction of the gaze through her narration: 'belly nipple arse in the window light / he drains the colour from me' (Duffy, 1985, p. 3). This strategy aligns with modernist and postmodernist approaches in which memory, silence, and interiority function as modes of resistance against dominant representational structures (Sharme, 2023), positioning Duffy's work within a broader tradition of narrative self-assertion. In this case, Duffy empowers the model she watches, gives a name, and critiques the gaze of the painter.

3.2 Speaking as an Act of Resistance

This rediscovery of suppressed feminine voices echoes with the concept of "consciousness-raising," which Beauvoir (2010), with later additions by Friedan (2013), recognised as an essential tool in liberating women. Duffy (1985) presents different female voices in 'Girl Talking', and they express fragments of city life and emotional truths, creating solidarity together with their voices. This conversation is a confession and freeing; it shows contradictions that exist in the experiences of women

in the social and sexual structures

The “feminine consciousness” Duffy builds, therefore, is a twofold one: as she is aware of oppression, at the same time, she rebuilds language. The female identity evolves from being merely an object of history to becoming an active participant in narrating it. This reclaiming of agency through self-expression parallels broader discussions on women’s struggle for autonomy and self-definition within restrictive social structures (Mishra, 2024). In ‘Model,’ the speaker reflects on her expected fame stemming from being painted: ‘I shall be famous, I think, for being painted / by him, not for myself’ (Duffy, 1985, p. 14). But the poetic form used by Duffy works against this irony; the woman is “painted” by her words; she determines her own commodification by self-expression. Showalter (1999) claims that feminist art or literature tends to replicate this duality, the possibility to both engage in and criticise the patriarchal machismo.

Unlike this narcissist approach in *Standing Female Nude*, *The World's Wife* extends the feminine awareness to wider mythological and historical spheres. This is a collection that reinvokes contemporary female characters such as wives, lovers, and mythical characters that have been marginalised in conventional narratives. Duffy creates a chorus of revisionist viewpoints through dramatic monologues that include: “Mrs. Midas”, “Mrs. Sisyphus”, “Eurydice”, “Delilah”, and “Medusa”, and through which she challenges the male myth-making traditions of literary history: the “anxiety of authorship (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000).

The poem “*Eurydice*” (Duffy, 1999) most clearly exemplifies this reappropriation of feminine narrative authority. Conventionally suppressed by death and artistic arrogance of Orpheus about their mythology, Duffy, in her *Eurydice*, speaks up: ‘Girls, I was dead and down in the Underworld... But the one thing I did not have/was voice’ (p. 60). When she gets the power to speak once more, she teases the egocentric nature of Orpheus: ‘He’d been told that he could make me return/by singing a song.’ This reversal of traditional dynamics of power, Eurydice employs language to oppose his melody instead of surrendering to it; this kind of subversive humour fits well in what Butler termed (2016) performative resistance: redefining subjectivity via parody. Through re-enacting these characters, Duffy does what Rich calls “re-vision” (1995), ‘the act of looking back with fresh insights.’ Her speakers rewrite myths of patriarchy not simply to assert once again female independence, but also to show how they are used as ways to control genders. This re-voicing is cultural restitution.

The transformation of *Standing Female Nude* to *The World's Wife* can be seen to be the transformation of the feminine consciousness as a collective consciousness, a collective consciousness rather than as a single voice, historical voices in harmony to a unified voice. The concept of voice, in both sets, is used as a central metaphor of subjectivity- a representation never limited to the language but extending to the ethics as well- this means consciousness and brings about presence. The findings described by Rees-Jones (2010) underline the role of Duffy in poetry, where she reclaims the suppressed voices of the marginalised history.

This is also a voicing process that is significant in identity formation. The speakers in Duffy

engage in concepts of weakness and strength; they are working between being seen and being observed. Her colloquial language, inner focus, irony, etc., contribute to what could be called ‘democratic lyricism’, that which has been experienced by ordinary women. By so doing, femininity will become something different, not a genetic aspect, but rather a self-identified one.

Therefore, in *Standing Female Nude* as well as in *The World's Wife*, Duffy transforms silence into speech. Her feminine consciousness is not a screech of protest but an aggressive articulation, the statement of her right to speak, story tells and makes her own reality.

3.3. Rewriting Patriarchy: Feminist Resistance in *The World's Wife*

The World's Wife of Carol Ann Duffy (1999) is a prominent example of feminist intervention in contemporary British poetry. The anthology is a set of dramatic monologues delivered by women in diverse fields such as mythology, history, and fiction, and is an effective way of busting patriarchal ideas at their roots. In reinterpreting the old myths through a feminine lens, Duffy practices what Luce Irigaray calls mimetic subversion, an imitation strategic process of the patriarchal discourse that reveals its own contradictions and challenges them.

Duffy, in her works, gives her female characters the authority to narrate the stories themselves, thereby reclaiming a narrative space that had always been dominated by men. The title *The World's Wife* suggests a generalised feminine counter to ‘great men’ who are glorified in history and legend. Anonymous, as Duffy once said in an interview on this project: "For most of history, anonymous was a woman. Every poem serves as an addendum and a re-creation of a female experience in cultural memory.

One such prominent instance is the story of a character called ‘Mrs Midas’, which takes another spin on the popular story of King Midas, whose golden touch brings him into trouble. In the ‘Metamorphoses’ by the author Ovid, though Midas is punished due to his greediness, his wife is not named but only silent, but in the version translated by Duffy (1999), Mrs Midas can express her grief with a sense of humour and fragility: ‘It was late September. I’d just poured a glass of wine / begun / to unwind.’ Combining the traditional household imagery with the conversational tone, she alters mythological components with the reality of normal life, the supernatural with the personal trauma, and godly vengeance with personal trauma. Her witnessing opens the emotional price of the male arrogance against women: ‘I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved out.’ Eventually, moving lines like ‘what gets me now is not the idiocy or the greed / but lack of thought for me’ summarise the feelings of mutual disappointment shared by most women of this world whose lives remain overshadowed by masculine success.

Duffy is not just revisionist in her reinterpretative work; but is rewriting history. Julia Kristeva believes that female texts tend to practice intertextual transgression - the capacity to change collective memory as such, and this notion finds a much deeper echo in poems such as “Medusa”. Here, another standard character archetype is presented with his grotesque look, thanks to his serpentine hair that can be seen as a symbol of the fear that society holds of an independent woman; however, in contrast to the

traditional images of Medusa, where the creature is composed of nothing but pure grotesque that lacks the depth of the character. Instead, she comes out of her shell as she contemplates the issue of betrayal through confessional sounding: "A suspicion... grew... which turned my hairs... to filthy snakes". This metamorphosis has more underlying themes of relationship dynamics as opposed to mere villainy. Her voice revitalises humanity that has been lost in an atmosphere of desolation through a broken love.

On the same note, the 'Delilah' plays with the biblical seduction, not necessarily making Delilah a whore, but emphasising independence bought with sexuality rather. Her ending is very strong as she purposely shaves off the locks of Samson: 'then with deliberate passion/I cut every lock'... and here she symbolises the sensual power against the demands of society that femininity is decided only by manipulative behaviour.

The other interesting example is the case of Eurydice, who has traditionally been represented as waiting in silence under the shadow of Orpheus. The confidence and irreverence Duffy conveys in her character add to it: "Girls, I was dead down there." She condemns the egoism of Orpheus as she rejects the poetry of immortality that he tries to give her. Her cynical statement on gifted dead people fails heroic narrative and plunges it into strata of irony that precisely follows the ideas of Butler (2016) about gender performativity, where Eurydice is no longer subjected but decides to resist, therefore redefining her identity.

Throughout these works, humour is a crucial aspect that supports the feminism that is present there. Linda Hutcheon believes that parodies are a kind of authorised trespass through which homage can be brought together with scorn for the sources. Duffy, through comic techniques used in readings, equips the reader to be able to undermine structures that claim authority to be the proper place to comment; ridiculous scientific ideas of the century's past are briefly pointed out in a humorous manner in couplets in the example of her interaction in 'The World's Wife' with chimpanzee at zoo (7 April 1852. Went to Zoo. / said Him- something reminds you), as an example of how deflationary humour makes females more powerful, as it reminds people of silenced histories.

Moreover, this mythic reframing also extends further to discuss those intersectionalities in relation to various ways of oppression, which include class conflicts and racial relations together with sexual politics, which today is being discussed (Brown, 2026; Hamad, 2023). In the case of 'Queen Herod', as an illustration, biblical slaughter is manifested as maternal defence to desperate decisions made by mothers to maintain daughters of violence by male power, saying that 'no man ever became God without a woman's body', a reconfiguration of theological authority by the female perspectives. Thus, narrative manipulation is the main feature of the whole set drama utilised not contrary to the patriarchy of Browning but, instead, its complete opposite. The articulated voices challenge partners in a way that directly disarms the norms that prevail in transforming self-reflection inwardly with the creation of empathy and attractiveness to historical exclusions that have been experienced.

Deconstructed as markedly feminist work that rebirths the foundational symbols reinstated, ultimately as legitimisation of agency as those so marginalised were being provided with other focus control mechanisms reversed universally active repairing processes having cut across literary traditions

being constructed in new forms, the hardline constructs of femininity being duly imparted to the figure of the new subjects replacing the old representations being imposed everywhere.

The lines of irony and effectual compassion intertwine with radical claims owning their own lines being played out in front of us- the pointer that retellings are political, that reworking memories breathes life back into forgotten worlds, that illuminating the dark, necessitates giving voice voiceless is redefining very essence knowledge that is rooted in segregated identities that has been freed before us to proceed where it can find greater possibility flourish expanded horizons still to be discovered!

3.4 The Female Voice of the Standing Female Nude of the Working Class

As *The World's Wife* generalised the experience of being a woman into myth, *Standing Female Nude* (1985) imposed it on more familiar conditions of class, sexuality, and economic survival. Duffy's first large volume showed her early commitment to giving voice not only to the marginalized members of society by virtue of gender, but also by social hierarchy. With working-class diction, realism, and irony, Duffy's female speakers occupy spaces of invisibility- prostitution, modelling, domestic service, and emotional labor. Such representations are expressions of a kind of 'structure of feeling', as Williams (2009) has called them, of working-class life: a subtext of lived experience that cannot be stated in the high culture. The title poem, *Standing Female Nude*, brings a speaker whose body is a target of the male gaze as well as a resident in her own commodified condition. 'Six hours like this for a few francs./ Belly nipple arse in the window light' (Duffy, 1985, p. 3). The language is wearily imitating exhaustion; the cut rhythm contributes to the exchangeability of her existence. But objectification is objectified through her narrative. She scorns the male artist: He drains the colour from me,' not merely the physical movement of the artist, but the culture sucking the power out of women (Duffy, 1985, p. 3). She reclaims agency with voice, which is ironic defiance. Feminist critics such as Mulvey (1975) have suggested that the forms of patriarchal culture define vision: it is the male gaze that lets us perceive women and our images of them.

Duffy's poem takes on this theory head-on. The model, once an unvoiced figure on a canvas, speaks out of the painting. Her words deconstruct painting as an act of domination. 'I shall be represented analytically and hung / in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo / at such an image of a river-whore' (Duffy, 1985, p. 3). The ridicule of 'coo' makes aesthetic admiration into voyeurism, revealing the hypocrisy of cultural consumption. In *Standing Female Nude*, Duffy spreads this reclamation of working-class female voice to other professions and identities. 'Comprehensive' (1985) dramatizes the speech of varied students in a heterogeneous classroom. By weaving together disparate voices, Pakistani, Jamaican, and British working-class, Duffy can depict the interplay of gender and ethnicity in contemporary Britain.

The poem's collage pattern anticipates her later pluralism in *The World's Wife*, in which numerous female voices challenge monolithic narratives. 'Girl Talking' and 'Warming Her Pearls' address the emotional economies of class and desire even more. In 'Warming Her Pearls,' a maid speaks to her absentee mistress with erotic desire: 'Next to my own skin, her pearls. / My mistress/bids me

wear them, warm them' (Duffy, 1985, p. 17). The servant's speech is a mix of servitude and passion and illustrates what Eagleton (1996) has called 'the contradictions of ideology,' or the way in which power structures are accepted and taken on by their oppressors. The pearls represent material disparity and sexual bonding, the maid's physical intimacy with her mistress's jewellery a covert act of rebellion and an underground theft of power. These working-class women, like the mythic wives of Duffy's later collection, come from the fringes of power. But their tone is not so. In *Standing Female Nude*, irony is a bitter, not a playful, thing; the humour hides pain. The language is meagre, simple, and even crude, and this reflects the socioeconomic status of the speakers. Duffy's reality is created through compassion and not observation; she writes as though she were part of her body of working-class womanhood'. This empathy produces what can be referred to as a 'poetics of survival', feminist aesthetics grounded on survival, as opposed to elusiveness.

There is another central poem, which is called 'Education for Leisure', which displays the suppressed and alienated anger of the unemployed. Though this speaker is not explicitly male or female, it is argued by critics that this voice is an extension of the issue that Duffy has with marginalised consciousness (Armstrong, 2022). The first line of the poem, which is very disturbing, goes as: 'today I am going to kill something', expresses that social neglect can be a killer (Duffy, 1985, p. 34). The isolation of the speaker is quite similar to that of the model in *Standing Female Nude*- both are the result of the neglect of the system. Introducing voices in such a way into poetry, Duffy breaks the definitions of poetic appropriateness and democratises the lyric form. In a way that *The World's Wife* of the World brings most of domesticity home and romanticises it, *Standing Female Nude* brings heroism to the ordinary. Voice does not want to be invisible, and therefore, the act of speaking is revolutionary. The narrator of 'Stealing' says, The weirdest thing I ever stole? A snowman (Duffy, 1985, p. 45). In the background of humour, there is existential despair: stealing in allegory of deprivation. The poem ends in an ambiguity, 'Better off dead,' which reflects the dulled desperation of Thatcher Britain, especially to the working poor and the women whose work was still undermined. To understand the implications of *Standing Female Nude*, a feminist would say that women are aware of their objectification, and at the same time, they have the audacity to tell the truth. They are not victims in silence, but they see the oppression that befalls them. This dovetails with B. Hook's (1984/2015), who argues that the importance of 'speaking as 'resistance' is crucial towards turning the oppressed into historical agents. The women of Duffy do not need salvation; they are surviving by their speech. With this kind of aesthetic fashion, Duffy carries out this by writing equally in lyrics and the dramatic monologue to create what critics refer to as the 'democratic voice' (Rees-Jones, 2010). Her speakers are personal as well as group, a manifestation of life in a stratified society. The tone of these voices, which is emotionally sincere, foreshadows the ironic re-voicings of *The World's Wife*, suggesting that the feminism of Duffy is not radicalised here and there but unfolding. The labour and body connection that is central to *Standing Female Nude* also foreshadows the sexuality and power exploration that Duffy will continue to explore in the future. The body of these early poems is exchangeable: a product, a work, a point of contact. Yet it is a way of expression, as well. Women are forced to 'write the body'

to recover their identity, as Cixous (1975) puts it clearly. That is exactly what Duffy does: she transforms bodily experience into poetic form, making economic exploitation artistic. *Standing Female Nude*, therefore, is the foundation of feminist poetics that Duffy has made, an investment in the real female voice of material and emotional reality. Where the feminine in *The World's Wife* is mythic, the *Standing Female Nude* makes it human. Both, nevertheless, stress the same: that to talk is to live, and to live is to rebel.

3.5 Comparison of Key Feminist and Stylistic Features Across the Two Collections

Table 1

Category	Standing Female Nude (1985)	The World's Wife (1999)
Central focus	Working-class female experiences; socioeconomic struggle; objectification in daily life.	Mythological, historical, and biblical women revoiced to challenge patriarchal narratives.
Female voice	Individual, realist voices of marginalised women (model, prostitute, maid, students).	Collective, revisionist voices of iconic women such as Mrs. Midas, Eurydice, and Medusa.
Tone and style	Bitter irony, socio-realist tone, subtle humour masking exploitation.	Playful, witty, and parodic tone exposing male-centered myths.
Feminist strategy	Unmasking objectification and reclaiming agency from the male gaze.	Rewriting canonical narratives through female perspectives.
Themes of femininity	Body as labour; class oppression; emotional survival; commodification.	Female autonomy; resistance to patriarchal myth-making; cultural re-voicing.
Dramatic monologue	Reveals vulnerability, labour, and psychological strain.	Parodies and subverts patriarchal authority and heroic male narratives.
Representation of the body	The body as a site of economic exploitation and survival.	The body as symbolic and mythic, reshaping cultural perceptions of femininity.
Political undertone	Thatcher-era critiques of class, gender, and social inequality.	Postmodern feminist revisionism and critique of historical androcentrism.
Overall feminist aim	Humanising marginalised women by foregrounding their lives realities.	Restoring agency to culturally silenced women through narrative re-vision.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through both *Standing Female Nude* and *The World's Wife*, Duffy creates a new definition of femininity as an active political practice. The characters, through their use of voice, irony, and narrative reclamation, transform their silences into agency. In *Standing Female Nude*, femininity is defined through class/working conditions and the expectations of men upon women; while in *The World's Wife*, Duffy re-interprets mythology/history through the lens of feminism, creating a counter-memory to the patriarchal history.

Duffy's development of femininity suggests a movement of feminist theory from second-wave critiques of women's subordination to postmodern notions of multiplicity/performativity, which are similar to Butler (2016), in that the women Duffy creates build their identities through the repetition of speech acts and re-interpretations. Through her work, Duffy embodies and enacts Rich's (1995) concept of "re-vision," that is, re-narrating female experiences to reconstruct the agency of women. Through the development of her feminist poetics, Duffy proves that by creating and narrating one's own history, one can exert power and change a previously silent "wife of the world" into an author and witness of her own history.

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Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest about the publication of this article.

AI Declaration

The author declares no part of this manuscript involves plagiarism or fabrication of data, and all ethical guidelines for educational research have been strictly adhered to during the conduct of the study. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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