

The Poetics of ‘De-sanctification’ in Carol Ann Duffy’s Poetry

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Abstract: “Sanctity” conventionally denotes a condition of holiness, inviolability or exceptional value. The concept is not restricted to explicitly religious objects or practices. Émile Durkheim’s foundational distinction between the sacred and the profane demonstrates that societies organise experience through categories of value in which certain objects, persons, spaces and practices are set apart from ordinary life (Durkheim 1912). Mary Douglas subsequently demonstrated that ideas of purity, pollution and transgression are also embedded in systems through which societies classify and protect what they consider valuable (Douglas 1966). Sanctity can therefore be understood more broadly as a cultural and ethical attribution of special value to human life, identity, bodily integrity, intimate relationships, memory and communal belonging. This paper proposes ‘de-sanctification’ as an interpretive concept for examining the violation, erosion, commodification or symbolic stripping away of such forms of value. The term is used here not as the name of an established literary theory but as a critical category developed from scholarship on sacred/profane distinctions, profanation, objectification, cultural displacement and traumatic memory. De-sanctification occurs when persons, bodies, identities, relationships or memories that possess culturally or ethically attributed value are subjected to processes of reduction, humiliation, commodification, violence or erasure. The concept is particularly productive for reading Carol Ann Duffy, whose poetry repeatedly interrogates the relations among identity, gender, embodiment, violence, memory and power. The paper examines “Originally,” “Shooting Stars,” “Standing Female Nude” and “Valentine.” In “Originally,” de-sanctification operates through migration and linguistic-cultural displacement; in “Shooting Stars,” it becomes the systematic destruction of Jewish identity, bodily integrity, familial bonds and human life under genocidal violence; in “Standing Female Nude,” the female body is transformed into an aesthetic and economic object; and in “Valentine,” conventional idealisations of romantic love and marriage are destabilized. The poems are not treated as equivalent representations of violence. Rather, they reveal different mechanisms through which human value can be diminished or violated. At the same time, Duffy’s dramatic and testimonial voices counter such processes by making marginalised experience speakable. Poetry consequently becomes a site of remembrance, rearticulation and ethical attention

Keywords: Carol Ann Duffy; de-sanctification; sanctity; sacred and profane; identity; body; Holocaust; gender; objectification; memory

INTRODUCTION

Sanctity has historically been associated with the distinction between what is sacred and what is ordinary or profane. Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* remains foundational to this discussion because it conceptualises the sacred not merely as a synonym for “religious” but as a category of things “set apart and forbidden” within a collective system of meaning (Durkheim 1912). Mircea Eliade similarly argues that religious experience establishes distinctions between sacred and profane forms of space, time and existence (Eliade 1957). These approaches suggest that the sacred is produced through acts of distinction: something becomes sacred because it is separated from the ordinary and accorded exceptional value. In relation to literature, elements of sanctity or perhaps, the act of sanctification has emerged in the poems of writers like John Donne (“The Relic”), and John Bunyan (“Of Holiness of Life”).

Such distinctions also have a social and ethical dimension. Mary Douglas demonstrates that ideas of purity and pollution depend upon cultural systems of classification; what is treated as polluting is often that which violates established symbolic boundaries (Douglas 1966). Giorgio Agamben’s later discussion of “profanation” provides another useful point of departure. For Agamben, profanation involves returning to common use what has been separated into a sacred or restricted sphere (Agamben 2007). Although the present study does not adopt Agamben’s concept wholesale, his distinction is valuable because it demonstrates that the status of the sacred is dependent upon processes of separation, attribution and boundary-making.

It is from this conceptual field that this paper develops the term ‘de-sanctification’. The term does not imply the simple disappearance of religion or the sacred. Nor is it intended as a synonym for secularization. Instead, it describes a process through which something culturally, socially or ethically regarded as possessing exceptional value is violated, diminished, commodified, displaced or rendered vulnerable. The object of de-sanctification may be religious, but it may equally be a person’s identity, body, language, intimate relationship, cultural memory or claim to dignity.

The concept becomes particularly relevant in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy because her work repeatedly examines the relationship between value and violation. Deryn Rees-Jones identifies gender, identity, dramatic monologue and the transformation of conventional poetic subjects as central concerns of Duffy’s writing (Rees-Jones 2010). Her poetry frequently constructs speakers whose experiences exist at the margins of dominant cultural narratives. Through the dramatic monologue, Duffy allows socially marginalised figures to speak from positions that conventional literary representation has often rendered silent or objectified. Garrett’s study of Duffy’s dramatic monologues similarly emphasises the relationship between feminist discourse, multiple voices and the interaction among speaker, implied audience and reader (Garrett 2003).

The present paper therefore argues that de-sanctification in Duffy is fundamentally a process of reduction. A person may be reduced to a racial category, a woman to a body, a migrant to an accent, a lover to an object of possession, or a victim of genocide to a marked and disposable body. The poems, however, frequently reverse this reduction by restoring voice and visibility to the subjects who have undergone it.

This argument requires an important qualification. The forms of devaluation represented in the poems cannot be placed on a single moral scale. The cultural displacement represented in “Originally” cannot be equated with the genocidal violence represented in “Shooting Stars,” nor can artistic objectification in “Standing Female Nude” simply be equated with either. What permits their comparison is not equivalence but structure: each poem examines a situation in which an aspect of human value is placed under pressure by an external social, cultural, aesthetic or political force.

DE-SANCTIFICATION OF IDENTITY

Identity constitutes one of the most significant dimensions of human belonging because it connects the individual to language, memory, culture and place. Contemporary approaches to identity increasingly understand it not as an entirely fixed possession but as something produced through social and historical relationships. Migration makes this instability especially visible because movement between geographical and cultural environments can alter one's relationship to language, memory and belonging. As a poet of the post-modern era, Carol Ann Duffy, has witnessed the brutalities which men are capable of inducing. Even though she experiments with the themes of love, identity, feminism and remembrance, certain aspects of her poem points to the degrading nature of our society. It is through these subjects that the concept of de-sanctification comes into play in Duffy's poems. This concept is analysed through her portrayal of identity, marriage, the human body and of innocence. An understanding as to how these aspects of man have lost their sacred values, is revealed through the poet's presentation in her poetic works (Al-Wattar, 2023; DiMarco, 1998; Nori, 2021).

Identity is an individual's mark where his history, ancestry and cultural roots placed a sacred value on it. Duffy's exploration of identity is evident through her assertion of it being considered as an indication of ‘originality’. Hence, the sanctity of one's identity can also be understood with the nature of being original and authentic. This aspect of authentic identity is highlighted in her poem “Originally” (Duffy, 2004). In the poem, the concept of de-sanctification is not of a brutal nature. It is subtle, because of the natural way in which her identity has been drained away from her. “[E]migration”, has forced the poet to change and adapt to the new place, thereby replacing her language and cultural identity. By masking herself with a “tongue”, not of her own, the sacral nature of her identity has been distorted through acculturation:

“I remember my tongue
Shedding its skin like a snake, my voice
In the classroom sounding just like the rest.” (Duffy, 2004)

Furthermore, because her identity has been de-sanctified from its originality, there exists a sense of confusion and hesitation when she is confronted by society about it:

“I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space
and the right place? Now, Where do you come from?
strangers ask. Originally. And I hesitate.” (Duffy, 2004)

Baştan's discussion of identity in transit and Bauman's liquid modernity provides a further scholarly context for reading Duffy's treatment of identity and displacement in “Originally” (Baştan, 2026).

In her “Shooting Stars” however, the terrorization against the identity of the Jewish people is presented in murderous violence. In the biblical context, the Jews considers themselves to be “the chosen ones”, or “God's own people”. Contextualizing this to their Jewish roots, it is inarguable that their identity is sanctified and deemed sacred (The Holy Bible, 2011; Lassner and Aarons, 2023). In “Shooting Stars”, the concept of de-sanctification is therefore surfaced through Duffy's narrative of the holocaust episode. The Nazis moved towards exterminating the Jewish identity through their genocidal acts. Under the Nazis, the Jews were voiceless, which suggests that the expression of their identity has been subverted: “I no longer speak” (Duffy, 1999)

In the poem, Jewish identity has also been alluded to ‘The Star of David’, which marks their cultural and religious history. Hence, the concept of de-sanctification also extends its parameters to religious grounds. The ‘Star’ became a symbol for the nazis to identify and assault the Jews in concentration camps (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.-a). Sanctity has been detached from their lives through “acts of torture” and brutal massacres. The stars which are supposed to be shining have been dimmed, and the sacredness of their Jewish roots has been suppressed by the genocidal guns:

“[...]stars on all our brows
beneath the gaze of men with guns.” (Duffy, 1999)

The poet also mourns of how antisemitism is still very much prevalent in the contemporary times, which in turn makes her feel “desolate and lost.”:

“Only a matter of days separate
this from acts of torture now.” (Duffy, 1999)

Sicher's discussion of Holocaust poetry and the representation of Holocaust experience provides a further context for understanding Duffy's treatment of violence, memory and Jewish identity in “Shooting Stars” (Sicher, 2020). Milanović similarly discusses the inscription of Holocaust violence upon the body and the relationship between dehumanization and Jewish identity (Milanović, 2017), an aspect which the poem explored and identified.

DE-SANCTIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY

The body constitutes another important site of cultural value. Although the present discussion does not assume that the female body is inherently sacred in a theological sense, many ethical and religious traditions associate bodily integrity with human dignity. Christian theology, for example, describes the body as a “temple” of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6.19–20). However, this sacred aspect of life has been devoid of its consecrated value, especially in modern times. The idea of the body being de-sanctified is generally

seen through objectification of the woman's body. Duffy, in her poem "Standing Female Nude" explores this issue of the body being degenerated to mere objects through the 'Male-gaze.' The poet's portrayal of the "river whore" signifies how male counterparts have become spectators of women's body to derive sexual pleasures from it. They however would conceal the truth of their sexual desires by labelling the portrait as "Art.":

"The bourgeoisie will coo

At such an image of a river whore. They call it Art.'" (Duffy, 1985)

The fact that the artist was unable to concentrate on his work further announces his inclination towards objectifying the woman's body. The sanctity of women is continuously humiliated by their objectification as sexual objects. These facts are highlighted by Duffy through the lines which contains sexual innuendos:

"There are times he does not concentrate

and stiffens for my warmth.

He possesses me on canvas as he dips his brush

repeatedly into the paint." (Duffy, 1985)

DiMarco's examination of Duffy's ekphrastic engagement with nude art and Sliti's analysis of "Standing Female Nude" provides further substantiation for reading the poem in relation to the representation and disassembly of the female body (DiMarco, 1998; Sliti, 2023). Al-Wattar likewise examines poetic authority and Duffy's treatment of gendered representation (Al-Wattar, 2023), where the body becomes central to power exercise.

A similar trait of this aspect, is highlighted by Duffy in "Shooting Stars", where the woman's body has been terrorized by sexual violence, abuse and rape. In times of the holocaust, Jewish women have become victims to sexual assaults under the oppressors.

"One saw I was alive. Loosened

his belt. My bowels opened in a ragged gape of fear." (Duffy, 1999)

The quoted lines display before the readers a horrific image of how the sacral nature of a woman's body has been inhumanly scrapped. The poet, therefore conveys, that in vulnerable situations, the sanctity of human life is further more disregarded and shamed.

Economic disparity is also one of the factors that have rendered women with financial constraints towards de-sanctifying their own body. Their situations have pushed them to the limits of engaging in prostitution, as a way to adapt to the financial demands of society. The transaction between the female model and the artist in "Standing Female Nude" can also be contextualised with prostitution and commercialization of sex:

"Six hours like this for a few francs.

Belly nipple arse in the window light,

he drains the colour from me." (Duffy, 1985)

[...]

"Both poor, we make our living how we can...

Twelve francs and I get my shawl." (Duffy, 1985)

Furthermore, these instances in the works of Duffy, seems to exemplify John Berger's observation about the male-gaze:

"You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her... and you called the painting 'Vanity', thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure." (Berger, 1972)

It is to be noted however, that it is not just the female body that has lost its sanctity, but, humanity in general. As depicted in "Shooting Stars", a horrendous mocking image of the Jewish people is portrayed through the mutilated bodies of the Jews. It can be noted that even their resting place have been neglected as non-sacral; "The soldiers laughed" at the "corpses" and the "young men" were seen to be "gossiping and smoking by the grave" (Duffy, 1999). The comparison of this depiction with "Standing Female Nude" should therefore be formulated structurally rather than equivalently. In the latter poem, the female body is commodified and represented; in "Shooting Stars," the female body is violently violated under genocidal conditions. The historical and ethical differences are enormous. What links them is the question of who controls the meaning and treatment of the body. In both poems, however, Duffy returns agency to the represented women through voice. The poetic subject therefore refuses to remain merely an object of another person's action.

DESANCTIFYING LOVE AND MARRIAGE

While the focus of Duffy's poems on the aspects of identity and the human body is very much immediate and evident, there are some other reverential elements of life which the poet has woven in her verses. Intimate relationships constitute another sphere to which societies frequently attach exceptional value. Marriage, in particular, has historically been treated as a socially and symbolically significant institution. Duffy's "Valentine" does not simply reject love, but rather, it challenges the conventional symbolic language through which romantic love is represented. The poem begins:

"Not a red rose or a satin heart." (Duffy 1993)

Instead of the conventional rose, the speaker offers an onion, which is a choice that immediately unsettles romantic convention. The onion is associated with tears, smell, layers and physicality rather than idealised beauty. The speaker however explains,

"I am trying to be truthful." (Duffy 1993)

The poem therefore replaces sentimental representation with a more ambivalent model of intimacy. Love is presented as capable of tenderness and possession, intimacy and pain. The final transformation however, is particularly significant:

"Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,

if you like.

Lethal." (Duffy 1993)

The wedding ring traditionally signifies permanence and commitment, but Duffy's adjective "lethal" destabilizes that conventional association. The ring can signify intimacy while simultaneously suggesting possession, danger or the possibility of injury. Duffy's love poetry therefore repeatedly reworks conventional representations of love, desire and intimacy rather than simply reproducing inherited romantic forms. Duffy's own later reflections on *Mean Time* likewise associate the collection with love, loss,

divorce, memory and the renewal of language (Rees-Jones 2010). “Valentine” therefore does not necessarily depict the de-sanctification of marriage as an institution. A more precise argument is that it de-sanctifies the conventional representation of romantic love by refusing to preserve its sentimental symbols from contradiction.

The image of a “ring” resurfaces in Duffy’s other poem, “Shooting Stars”. The sainted image of marriage is presented by the poem through outside interferences. The opening lines of the poem display a gruesome image as to how the sanctity of love and marriage between a Jewish couple is being dishonoured by the Nazis:

“After I no longer speak they break our fingers
to salvage my wedding ring.” (Duffy, 1999)

This act of breaking the fingers to salvage the ring signifies the gruesome nature of how the speaker’s marriage has been broken and disregarded by violent force. The idea of marriage and love being disregarded from its sacral nature, has therefore been portrayed by the poet in ways where their conventional representations are being questioned, and their private spaces being interfered.

DESANCTIFICATION OF THE INNOCENCE

The destruction of the innocence becomes especially significant in Duffy’s “Shooting Stars.” In the poem, the poet brings in the image of a child who represents the innocence, and the angelic nature of children. The child’s innocence can be read as a symbolic presentation of human sanctity which is being surrounded by the corrupted “corpses” and violence. The lines, “Between the gap of corpses I could see a child”, hints at the fragile sanctity of innocence which is surrounded by the dimensions of a de-sanctified violent world (Duffy, 1999). The juxtaposition of “child” and “corpses” produces an extreme collision between vulnerability and violence. Childhood is conventionally associated with dependence, innocence and the future. The child among the corpses therefore represents not merely another victim but the destruction of the expectation that vulnerable life should be protected.

Moreover, the poet also demonstrates the child being mocked by the adult men:

“The soldiers laughed....
... They shot her in the eye.” (Duffy, 1999)

Here, the concept of de-sanctification is very much evident, where the mocking and murdering of the child is carried out without considering the sanctity of a child’s life. By forcefully erasing the child’s existence, they have also taken away humanity’s innocence and thereby its sanctity. The “eye” also introduces a motif of seeing and witnessing that extends beyond the immediate violence. Hence, the poem repeatedly invites the readers to understand what it means to see suffering and to remember what has been seen. This motif can be placed productively alongside “Originally,” where the speaker recalls, “I stared at the eyes of a blind toy.” (Duffy 1990). From the two poems, it can be argued that sight therefore functions as a motif of perception, witnessing and vulnerability. The blind eye of the toy and the wounded eye of the murdered child consequently raise related questions on what is visible, what has been hidden and what demands remembrance, thereby turning perception into an ethical responsibility.

THE POETIC COUNTER SPACE

It can be further noted that major pattern emerges across the poems. De-sanctification does not simply occur at the level of content, but is also connected to representation. Subjects become de-sanctified when they are transformed into objects, categories, stereotypes, marked bodies or silenced victims. Duffy’s response is formally significant where her dramatic monologue allows the represented subject to speak from within the structures that constrain her. Rees-Jones identifies the dramatic monologue as one of the defining features of Duffy’s poetic practice, while Garrett demonstrates how Duffy’s manipulation of the form creates complex relations among speaker, audience and reader (Rees-Jones 2010; Garrett 2003). This means that the poem frequently performs two contradictory movements at once. At the level of represented experience, the subject is diminished, while at the level of poetic form, the subject acquires speech.

“Standing Female Nude” provides perhaps the clearest example. The model is transformed into a visual object by the painter, yet she becomes the speaking subject of the poem. “Shooting Stars” intensifies this paradox: the speaker is dead and therefore literally unable to speak, yet the poem constructs a voice through which the dead witness addresses the living. “Originally” presents an identity disrupted by migration, yet the adult speaker reconstructs the experience through memory and language.

Poetry consequently becomes a counter-space to the recurring act of de-sanctification. While it cannot undo the historical violence represented in “Shooting Stars,” nor restore the childhood world lost in “Originally,” it can resist disappearance and erasure. The poem preserves traces, voices and memories that processes of displacement, objectification or violence might otherwise erase.

CONCLUSION

The selected poems of Carol Ann Duffy demonstrate that forms of human value can be diminished through radically different processes. “Originally” represents the destabilisation of cultural identity through migration, linguistic adaptation and displacement. “Shooting Stars” represents the systematic destruction of Jewish identity, bodily integrity, family bonds and human life under genocidal violence. “Standing Female Nude” exposes the transformation of the female body into an aesthetic and economic object. “Valentine” challenges sentimental representations of love by exposing the tensions among intimacy, possession, commitment and pain.

The concept of ‘de-sanctification’ provides a connecting analytical framework for these poems, provided that it is understood neither as an established literary theory nor as a claim that all forms of violation are equivalent. Rather, it names a process through which something regarded as possessing exceptional cultural, ethical or human value is reduced, violated, commodified, displaced or rendered vulnerable. This conceptualization develops the sacred/profane distinction beyond explicitly religious objects. Durkheim’s account of the sacred establishes the importance of social processes of separation and value; Douglas demonstrates the relationship between symbolic boundaries and violation; and Agamben’s discussion of profanation draws attention to the changing status of things designated as sacred (Durkheim 1912; Douglas 1966; Agamben 2007). In Duffy’s poetry, these questions become

secularized and embodied, where identity, language, the body, memory, love and human life become sites in which value is constructed and threatened.

The poems also reveal that de-sanctification is frequently connected to 'reduction'. The migrant is reduced to an uncertain accent or origin, the Jewish victim is reduced to a marked racial identity, the female model risks reduction to an aesthetic object, and romantic love risks reduction to sentimental symbols or possessive conventions. What is violated is therefore not merely an external object but the complexity of the human subject.

Yet Duffy's poetry does not leave the subject at the point of violation. Its formal structures repeatedly create opportunities for rearticulation. For instance, the woman in "Standing Female Nude" speaks from within the artistic representation that objectifies her, and the dead woman in "Shooting Stars" speaks from beyond the silence imposed by genocide. The significance of Duffy's poetry therefore lies in its capacity to expose the mechanisms through which value is withdrawn while simultaneously resisting that withdrawal. De-sanctification may produce silence, objectification, displacement or erasure, but poetic representation can create a counter-movement through the act of naming, remembering, speaking and witnessing.

The poem thus becomes not a restoration of an untouched sacred condition but a space of ethical revaluation. It makes visible what has been diminished and gives language to what has been silenced. In this sense, Duffy's poetry demonstrates that even where sanctity has been violated, the human subject need not disappear from representation. Poetry becomes an act of attention through which damaged identities, violated bodies and threatened memories can once again become objects of ethical recognition.

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