

A Commentary on “Standing Female Nude”

The poem “Standing Female Nude” by Carol Ann Duffy deals is written from the view of a nude female model who is having a painting drawn of her, and the model’s rationale for why she is there and how she feels towards the whole event. The main themes which appear in the poem are that of the narrator’s character which is goes into quite some detail during the poem, and that of the distance the narrator feels towards the artistic world.

The narrator’s character is by far the most important part of the poem as it is written in the first person. From the poem it is clear that the poem is set in France, due to the constant use of French words such as “Madame” or “bourgeoisie”. The modelling seems to be taking place next to a river as the narrator calls herself in the painting a “river-whore”. This setting next to a river is most certainly in an urban most likely run down part of a city, as firstly the painting would take place in the artists studio and that they are “both poor”. The physical descriptions of the narrator are unmistakably quite scathing, the narrator says how her “breasts hang slightly low” showing that she is not as young as she used to be, although I would not like to put an exact age on that. The narrator also says how she is also less voluptuous than she used to be, “You’re getting thin Madame, this is not good.” At the beginning of the poem the narrator also describes herself as “Belly nipple arse in the window light”. Through this lack of punctuation it is as though the narrator knows that those are the things which the painter has desired, as though he does not care that she is a person, but merely an object for his to paint.

Despite this, the narrator points out how the artist “stiffens for my warmth”. This idea of how the narrator can still attract men, brings out another side of the narrator’s character which is slightly ambiguous, as to whether the narrator is actually a prostitute. At the start of the poem the narrator says “Six hours like this for a few francs” showing that the first and most important thing to her is that she will get some money for what she is doing. At the end the narrator points out how when it is over “I say twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me.” So even though the narrator notices that the painting looks nothing like her, she does not even care enough to tell the man, but just wants to get her money. The description of a “river-whore” is very odd, as it would have been presumed that the artist is merely doing a still life of her, so to describe oneself as a “river-whore” would lead you to believe that she is a whore of sorts. The narrator adds a lot of innuendo in her train of thought, saying about the artist “little man, you’ve not the money for the arts I sell.” In the second stanza the narrator shows her boredom through the fact that her mind wanders onto the tea leaves “In the tea-leaves I can see the Queen of England”. To the model the tea leaves are directly associated with England, therefore following on to the quintessential image of England, the Queen. This reference to the queen may give a clue as to what period the poem is placed in, as it could mean Queen Victoria, although this is only a guess.

The other main issue in the poem is that of the difference between the narrator and the whole artistic movement. From the start of the poem is it clear that the narrator really does not care what the artist is doing, as she is very snide about why

this painting should be of any interest “The bourgeoisie will coo at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art.” Then the narrator goes on to point out that the artist has no idea about what are important in life “He is concerned with volume, space. I with the next meal.” This also shows how very poor the model/narrator must be as she does not even know where the next meal is coming from. The narrator also uses a very generalised “they” whenever she is talking about people who are in the artistic circles “They tell me he is a genius” and “They call it Art.” These all show the narrators narrow-mindedness towards the whole artistic movement. She also confirms to herself how even though she is involved in “Art” by being a model she is completely different “These artists take themselves too seriously. At night I fill myself with wine and dance around the bars.” Although at the end of the third stanza she concedes to the fact that “Both poor, we make our living how we can.” And that even though the narrator does not associate herself with the artist, they are like symbiotic being which cannot live without the other, so are therefore inseparable.

The poem does not contain many stylistic techniques as it seems to be a time-lapse view into the narrators feelings as she stands there whilst being painted. This method of writing means that there is not going to be a lot of linguistic devices as this is just her train of thought rather than a well crafted piece of writing. There are some stylistic devices such as the list of three “belly nipple arse”. There is also a lot of enjambment but that is to keep the movement of the piece flowing so that it seems more like a steady stream of consciousness.

In conclusion it is clear that the narrator does not care much about how she is perceived and how other people view her and is a very independent woman, as she does not care what the painting looks like “It does not look like me”. Also the way she describes how she shall be viewed “analytically” and how “the bourgeoisie will coo”. On the whole the narrator is very scathing towards the type of life that the artist lives, and being involved in artistic circles. When in fact the model/narrator is as dependent on the artist as he is on her, and without each other they would both have nothing “Both poor, we make our living how we can”.