



SCOTTISH SET TEXT GUIDE

National 5 and
Higher English

Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy


- ▼ Understand, analyse and evaluate the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy
- ▼ Examine and compare the themes and techniques in the poems
- ▼ Pick up grade-boosting tips for the Critical Reading paper

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Getting the most from this guide

This guide will help you study the poems of Carol Ann Duffy by developing your knowledge and skills in analysis, to enable you to achieve your best in your exam. The guide has been written specifically with the Scottish exam system in mind, so it is all relevant to your study needs. Duffy's poetry features in both the SQA English National 5 and Higher Critical Reading exams. Whichever exam you are sitting, the guide will provide vital help and support. It will also enable you to gain a richer understanding of the poems, so that you can enjoy them even more. The text used in preparing these materials is *New Selected Poems* by Carol Ann Duffy, Picador (2004), ISBN: 978-0-330-43394-5.

What is in this guide?

The guide contains:

- a detailed review of each poem, focusing on understanding and analysis
- a section which draws together the key themes and techniques shared by the poems
- advice on how to approach the Scottish text questions, including the important final question
- advice on how to plan and write your critical essay
- key quotations, and specific questions to help you direct your thinking.

Watch out for the following features used throughout this guide, which will help you focus your understanding of the poems.

Glossary

This box will highlight and define difficult words in the poems, or technical terms; for example techniques used by Duffy.

Target your thinking

This feature appears at the start of every chapter. It will help you focus on key ideas which will be important in the chapter.

Exam tip

Top tips to help you maximise your chances of success in the exam.

Key quotation

The key quotations will help you focus on important aspects of the texts.

Build critical skills

You will see this feature at various points in each chapter. The questions in this box will encourage you to think deeply, analyse and explore the texts more fully.

REVIEW YOUR LEARNING

This feature appears at the end of each chapter. It will help you reinforce your learning by reminding you of key elements of the texts and/or how to approach the exam.

1 Introduction



Introducing the Critical Reading paper

Whether you are sitting National 5 or Higher English, your Critical Reading exam will follow the same format. It is worth 40 marks (40%) of your overall mark and is made up of two sections:

- **Section 1: Scottish text:** also known as Scottish textual analysis or set text. This is marked out of 20 and is worth 20% of your total mark.
- **Section 2: Critical essay:** this is also marked out of 20 and is worth 20% of your total mark.

Exam tip

In the Critical Reading exam, you must cover **two genres**. This means you can only answer on Duffy in either the Scottish text question or the critical essay question of this paper. You cannot answer on any other poem in the essay section if you answer on Duffy for Scottish text question. Be careful to follow this important rule.

Section 1: Scottish Text Question

For this section of the exam you will study one Scottish text or writer from the SQA list. The poetry of Carol Ann Duffy is on the list for both National 5 and Higher levels and covers six poems: 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class', 'Originally', 'Valentine', 'War Photographer', 'The Way My Mother Speaks' and 'Mrs Midas'. One of these six poems is chosen every year to be included in the exam. In Section 1, there are a number of shorter questions on the chosen exam poem. There is also a longer final question which offers you the chance to show your wider knowledge of Duffy's poems by referring to one or more than one of the other five poems. In National 5, the marks on the chosen poem total 12 marks, with 8 marks on the final question. In Higher, the division is 10 and 10.

What can you expect in the Scottish text section?

The shorter questions will ask you to focus closely on specific lines of the poem and to demonstrate your knowledge and skills in analysis by selecting examples of language or other poetic techniques and commenting on them. The final question will ask you something about the chosen poem and other(s): it is likely to concentrate on an aspect of content, such as theme or characters in the poems, or on a technique, such as use of imagery or contrast. You should spend 45 minutes in total completing all of Section 1.

Exam tip

You have 1 hour 30 minutes to complete the Critical Reading paper:

- approximately 45 minutes to complete Section 1: Scottish Text
- another 45 minutes to complete your answers for Section 2: Critical essay.

There will be more details on how to tackle these questions in Chapter 4 of this guide.

Section 2: Critical essay

The critical essay paper is divided into genre sections (for example, Duffy falls into the poetry genre). For each genre, National 5 will have two essay questions and Higher will have three essay questions.

What can you expect in the critical essay section?

You should answer **one** question. Remember, you can only choose from the poetry genre if you have answered on a different genre in Section 1: the Scottish Text. If you choose to answer on Duffy for your essay, you should pick one of the two or three poetry questions. You will have approximately 45 minutes to write your essay.

There is more information on how to plan and write your essay in Chapter 4.

Exam tip

If you are writing your essay on poetry, you must pick one of the questions from the poetry section. Picking an essay question from any other genre section may lose you marks.

2 Context



Target your thinking

- What is context?
- Why is Carol Ann Duffy so important?
- When did she start writing?
- How has society changed in the time Duffy has been writing?
- Why is her work so popular?

Glossary

Poet Laureate:

a role in which a poet is engaged, by royal appointment, to write on key national events.

Carol Ann Duffy is an inspiration. Through her life, her work, her encouragement of other writers, her stance on issues personal, social and political, she has engaged audiences around the world and close to home. Throughout her career she has been a trailblazer, from her publications as a teenager to becoming the first woman **Poet Laureate** in 2009. Her poetry is both hugely popular and critically recognised by the literary world.

The poems in this guide are just a very small sample of her work – perhaps you will go on from this to enjoy some of her many other publications.

Glossary

Context: the background or circumstances in which an event, situation or object exists or takes place.

What is context?

When we talk about the **context** of an event, situation or object we are referring to the background or circumstances in which it exists or takes place. Works of literature are created in a context which includes literary influences as well as aspects of the social and political world of their time.

Duffy's context: social influences

Carol Ann Duffy's major works span over 40 years. In that time, the world we live in has changed immensely. In 1985, when she published 'Standing Female Nude', Nelson Mandela was still a prisoner in South Africa, the Berlin Wall still stood, dividing eastern and western Europe, there was no such thing as social media, and work had only recently begun on what was to become the internet. In terms of attitudes and social progress, the world was just as unrecognisable: sexism, racism and homophobia were commonplace. LGBT+ rights, positive acceptance of disability and the voice of young people were not supported in the same way they are today. In this context, Duffy's strong voice on issues such as attitudes to women, difference, love, violence and our treatment of fellow humans around the world has been hugely significant. She has taken an honest and engaging stance on important and sometimes controversial topics.

Duffy: her life and work

Duffy was born on 23 December 1955 in Glasgow. Her parents, May and Frank, were Scots of Irish heritage. They lived in the Gorbals, an area of some social deprivation, until they moved to Stafford in England when Duffy was six. By this time, she had four younger brothers. In Stafford, Duffy attended primary school and then Stafford Girls' High. She loved reading and writing, realising at the age of fourteen that she wanted to become a poet. She was encouraged in her writing by her teachers, one of whom sent some of her poems to a publisher when Duffy was fifteen.

Duffy published her first poetry collection, 'Fleshweathercock and Other Poems', in 1974, followed by a collaboration with the poet Adrian Henri in 'Beauty and the Beast', in 1977. That year she also graduated from the University of Liverpool with a degree in Philosophy. A third publication, 'Fifth Last Song', followed in 1982 and a year later she won the National Poetry Competition.

Duffy's major works include 'Standing Female Nude' (1985), 'Selling Manhattan' (1987), 'The Other Country' (1990), 'Mean Time' (1993), 'The World's Wife' (1999), 'Feminine Gospels' (2002) and 'Rapture' (2005). Many of these collections have won prestigious critical awards. She has also written well-loved children's books, such as 'Queen Munch and Queen Nibble', 'The Princess' Blankets' and 'New and Collected Poems for Children', as well as selecting the works included in 'A Laureate's Choice: 101 poems for Children'. Although best known for her poetry, Duffy has also written plays, including 'Casanova' (2007) and 'Everyman' (2015). She has used her position to encourage other writers, through teaching and editing anthology work, as well as involving others in creative projects when Poet Laureate.

Duffy has one daughter, Ella, born in 1995 to her and her then partner, Jackie Kay, poet and current Makar in Scotland. In 1996, Duffy became lecturer in poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University, later becoming Creative Director. She has received several awards and honours, such as doctorates from universities including Dundee, St Andrews and Cambridge, and has been awarded an OBE, CBE and DBE (Order, Commander and Dame of the British Empire). And, of course, she became the first female Poet Laureate in over 400 years of laureates, as well as the first openly bisexual person to hold that role.



The importance of Duffy's work

Why is Duffy's work so popular and so important to readers today? She seems to speak directly to us, as well as for us. Her work is immensely complex – but also accessible. She writes about things that matter to us all – or should. She opens people's eyes – making us face unflinchingly subjects we might rather avoid – but her work is also full of poignancy and humour. There really is no one else quite like her writing today.

3 Study and revision



3.1 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class'

Target your thinking

- What is the central subject of the poem?
- What impression does Duffy give us of learning in Mrs Tilscher's class?
- How do things change when the speaker begins to grow older?
- How does the speaker feel at the end of the poem?

Overview of 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class'

Knowledge and understanding

Glossary

Persona/speaker: a character created by a writer to 'speak' the words of their work, for example a poem or short story. The persona uses first-person narrative, but that does not mean that he/she is the same person as the writer (even if the work is partly autobiographical).

This poem is a highly effective evocation of the transition from childhood towards adolescence and growing up. The **speaker** (or **persona**) of the poem explores this change by remembering her life at primary school, when she was a student in Mrs Tilscher's class, leading up to when she left the class and moved on.

The poem is set in the 1960s, shown by the traditional elements of the classroom and by the references to the notorious **Moors murderers**, Brady and Hindley. We can see the movement from the security, wonder and innocent excitement of childhood to the uncertainty, uncontrollable emotion and volatility of adolescence. Stanzas 1 and 2 deal with childhood; stanzas 3 and 4 look towards adolescence.

By focusing first on the joys of childhood, Duffy emphasises what is lost by the transition towards adulthood, not what is gained. There is a sense of the inevitability of this change: childhood cannot last forever and its activities, feelings and 'answers' will not satisfy as the speaker grows older. This is represented by the reference to the question about sex and the sense of urgency which the speaker describes in the closing lines.

One feature of Duffy's poetry which you will become familiar with is her use of journeys: she often uses this motif to make a comment about a significant life issue. In this poem, the journey is in time, as spent in a primary classroom. She uses this apparently simple idea to explore the changes occurring in human beings as we grow towards adulthood.

Although this poem may well be autobiographical, we should take care not to assume that it is all factually accurate and that the speaker of the poem is describing Duffy's own childhood. Even when describing events in our own lives, we tend to create a 'version' of ourselves, based on our memories and perception. Note, also, that the speaker uses **you** throughout the poem rather than **I**. This serves to universalise the experiences and feelings described.

Stanza 1

Knowledge and understanding

Stanza 1 is full of happy memories of learning in Mrs Tilscher's class, a traditional classroom complete with blackboard, milk bottles (milk was provided free for all primary school children then), a long window pole and hand-rung bell. The description is nostalgic and there is a feeling of security and stimulation as the learners' different senses and imagination are engaged.

Analysis

Title

The title establishes that Mrs Tilscher's name is central to the memories, just as she is central to the classroom, the setting for the poem. It leads straight into **You...**, creating an immediate sense of a memory that is still vivid. Direct address to the reader immerses us in the speaker's experience: we are remembering and reliving it with her. This continues throughout the poem.

Line 1

travel suggests that the children are not just looking passively at the map but making the journey themselves: such was the power of the learning experience. **Blue Nile** is exotic as well as calm, serene and beautiful, reinforced by the repeated liquid 'l' sounds. Note that this is the first experience of learning in the poem, which emphasises the **metaphor** of learning as an expedition. The vast distances 'travelled' create the sense of a magical journey.

Line 2

[travel...] with your finger creates the child's sense of wonder as she follows the river with her finger on the map.

Line 3

chanted suggests an almost religious incantation, a ritual saying of sacred or magical words; **scenery** refers to the countryside through which the river flows but also suggests a stage set for the drama that is the experience of learning.

Glossary

Metaphor: a comparison in which a writer says – or implies – that one thing is another.

Build critical skills

How does Duffy use journeys in this poem to develop her ideas?

Line 4

The names chart the progress of the river. Single words with full stops focus on the stages and create a feeling of drama, showing that each word had a magical significance for the speaker. Lake Tana is the main significant water source of the Blue Nile; from there it flows through the country of Ethiopia, then into the Sudan. Khartoum is where the Blue and White Niles meet, then the Nile flows towards the Aswan Dam in Egypt and the Nile Delta beyond. These words tell the river's story – both historical and geographical – in a compelling and imaginative way.



Line 5

The **skittle of milk** captures the shape of the milk bottle and suggests a playfulness about the daily classroom routine (think of a game of skittles). Also, the focus on milk, which is nourishing for children, reminds us that the classroom is all about nurturing and child-centred activities.

Line 6

The **chalky Pyramids...dust** describes the traditional blackboard drawing of the pyramids which is erased at the end of lesson. Mrs Tilscher drew them and removed them, ready for the next lesson. The words **rubbed into dust** create a feeling of her power at the centre of the children's experience, as if she controls history or somehow enables destiny to be fulfilled through the passage of time.

Line 7

This line continues to evoke the traditional classroom, with a high window which has to be opened by a pole stretching up. The opening of the window also suggests the feeling of a window opening on the world: the children's learning is all about adventure, discovery.

Line 8

The **laugh of a bell** metaphor suggests the happy, playful atmosphere of the playground. Although the bell ringing would be regular, punctuating the day at predictable intervals, the word **laugh** creates a feeling of spontaneity. The words **swung** and **running child** conjure up the picture of a child rushing round the playground energetically ringing the bell – epitomising the joy, excitement and energy which the children feel during both playtime and lessons.

Stanza 2**Knowledge and understanding**

Stanza 2 continues the picture of the captivating and thrilling classroom, again emphasising how the different senses are engaged. Mrs Tilscher's softer side is conveyed. There is a slight uneasiness created by the reference to Brady and Hindley, notorious multiple murderers of children and teenagers in Yorkshire, whose crimes horrified the country and destroyed previous beliefs about the safety of children.

Analysis**Line 1**


This was better than home is a short, emphatic (definite) statement which the rest of the stanza then elaborates on. The **caesura** after **home**

Glossary

Caesura: a break in the rhythm of a line which can add dramatic impact to the point(s) being made.

Key quotation

'This was better than home' Stanza 2, Line 1



4 Approaching the Critical Reading paper

4.1 Critical Reading Section 1: Scottish text

Target your thinking

- How should I approach answering shorter questions in Section 1: Scottish Text
- Do I need to answer in sentences?
- Do I need to quote in my answers?
- How is the final question marked?
- What is 'commonality'?

Introduction

This section of the guide gives you detailed information and advice on how to approach the Scottish Set Text analysis section of your National 5 (N5) or Higher exam. There is a detailed breakdown of both the type of shorter questions you can expect and the advice on how to tackle the final 8- or 10-mark question. The guide uses examples from SQA exams.

Exam tip

The full SQA marking instruction is not included here: instead there is guidance and suggested answers with explanations. (You can find the full marking instructions on the SQA website.)

Answering the shorter questions in the Scottish text section

Shorter questions: general advice for N5 and Higher levels

- Each year, one of the poems from the Duffy list is chosen for the exam. Generally, we can expect the whole poem to appear: the only poem for which a segment has been selected is 'Mrs Midas', which with 11 stanzas is too long for an exam paper.
- The shorter questions in the Scottish text section are worth a total of 12 marks in N5 and 10 marks in Higher. That's a large chunk of the 40 marks available in the Critical Reading paper. The questions are on a

Exam tip

The Scottish text section is sometimes called different things – the Scottish Textual Analysis or Scottish text question.

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poem (or extract) which is printed in the exam paper for you to read and work with – it is not a memory test.

- Each question directs you clearly to a segment of the poem, using line references. You must select your answers from the lines requested: any answers from outside those lines, no matter how skilful, will gain zero marks.
- The questions 'lead' you through the poem/extract, starting at the opening and working chronologically through the lines. It makes sense to start at the first question and work your way through before tackling the final 8- or 10-marker, as the shorter questions help you prepare for that final one.
- You do not need to answer in full sentences, bullet points are fine.
- Technical accuracy is something that should always be aimed for, especially in an English exam. However, remember that in the Scottish text section, the marker is assessing your knowledge and understanding of the literature and your analytical skill. As long as your ideas are clear, spelling and punctuation errors will not lose you marks. It is a test of reading, not writing.

Glossary

Command word:

the word which tells you what to do in the question. SQA uses the same command words every year, to help you have a clear idea of what is expected.

- The usual command words for N5 are 'Identify', 'Explain' and 'Explain how' for the shorter questions and 'Show how' for the longer question.
- In Higher, 'Analyse' is the main command word used for the shorter questions, with 'Explain' used less often, and 'Discuss' is the command word for the final question.

Exam tip

Writing in bullet points in the Scottish text part of the exam can help you to focus your ideas and to be clear about how many points you are making in an answer. It also saves time! It will make no difference at all to your mark.

The only section in the Critical Reading exam where you must write in correct sentences is the critical essay. You must be technically accurate enough to communicate your ideas clearly – or you will lose marks.

Shorter questions: advice for National 5

- The shorter questions will be marked out of 2, 3 or 4 – making a total of 12. There will usually be three or four questions.
- The usual **command words** in the question are 'Explain' and 'Identify'.
 - 'Explain' – requires you to explain an idea in the poem or explain the effect of an aspect of language or poetic technique (usually 'Explain how').
 - 'Identify' – requires you to pick out ideas from the text.
- You will usually be asked to use your own words if you are identifying or explaining ideas from the passage.
- In 'Explain how' questions at N5 level, marks are awarded for appropriate quotations or references. Many students find it easier to focus by using quotations rather than references, but remember

that a specific reference is also acceptable, so don't worry if you cannot quite remember the quotation – you will not lose marks. Usually marks are awarded for these questions in multiples of 2. This is because you can gain 1 mark for a quotation (or reference) and 1 mark for the comment: think of it as a QUOTE + COMMENT formula. For questions worth 2 marks, follow this pattern once; for questions worth 4 marks, follow it twice.

Example N5 shorter questions

Let's try this out in practice.

The following questions are from the 2017 N5 Critical Reading exam. The Duffy selection that year was 'War Photographer'.

Read the questions carefully, pick out the command word and try to work out the key ideas in each question. In other words, work out exactly what the question is asking you to do.

Note that this is not the whole Duffy question 'set'. These questions have been selected to provide a range of question types. You will notice that the marks add up to 10 rather than 12 (as in the exam). That is why the questions start at line 9 of the poem.

- 1 Look at lines 9–12.
By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet makes it clear that the war photographer's home country is very different from the countries he visits. (4)
- 2 Look at lines 13–18.
By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet makes it clear that the war photographer has been strongly affected by his experiences. (4)
- 3 Look at lines 19–24.
Using your own words as far as possible, explain two key ideas explored in the final stanza. (2)

Let's look at how we would approach these questions.

Question 1

Points to note:

- You must find the answers from lines 9–12 of the poem – that's only four lines, so you should look really closely at them.
- This is a 4-mark 'Explain how' question at N5 level. That means you should quote/refer + comment twice for the 4 marks. The comment should explain the effects of the poet's language.

- Read the question again carefully. The key ideas are the difference between the 'home country' and 'the countries he visits' – so there is a clear focus. You must look at both 'sides' of the difference to gain 4 marks.
- You can choose to comment on any relevant feature of language: word choice (the poet's choice of vocabulary), sentence structure, imagery, punctuation and so on.
- If you choose to answer on specific words – or 'word choice' as it is sometimes called – focus on the connotations of the words you choose – what the word 'suggests' rather than its 'dictionary' meaning.

Question 1 – possible answers

Home country:

'Rural England' (1) – 'rural' has connotations of a quiet and calm country scene (1)

OR

'ordinary pain' (1) suggests that the problems back home are everyday, minor issues, not too difficult to solve (1).

Countries he visits:

'explode beneath the feet' (1) suggests that danger is everywhere as IEDs could be detonated at any time without warning (1)

OR

'running children' (1) suggests the fear of children who are innocent victims of the conflict and should be protected instead of killed (1).

You can see that there are many examples to choose from, even in a small segment of the poem. If you find you are running out of time, quickly write down quotations. Make sure you choose ones you can comment on. You need to think your comments through – but, if you know the poems well enough, you will have lots of ideas about them, going into the exam.

Question 2

Points to note:

- This time you are looking at lines 13–18 for your answers.
- You should select any two examples of language relevant to the question.
- The key idea is 'strongly affected by his experiences' – so you need to look for words which suggest intense feelings.
- If you choose to answer on word choice, remember to examine the connotations of the word(s).

4.2 Critical Reading Section 2: Critical essay

Target your thinking

- How do I choose the best essay?
- How do I write an introduction?
- Do I need to quote in my essay? How often?
- What is a topic sentence?
- What do I do if I am running out of time?

Introduction

Most people who study Duffy's poetry for the National 5 or Higher exam use it to answer the Scottish text section. However, you can of course choose to write your critical essay on her poetry.

Exam tip

Remember, that you can write a Section 2 critical essay on Duffy only if you have studied a second writer or text (not poetry) from the SQA Scottish text list and used that one for your Section 1 Scottish text. **You must not answer both textual analysis and critical essay on the same poem or same genre.**

All the poetry critical essay questions are on **one** poem only: though you have studied all six, you can use your knowledge and analytical skill on one of the poems in your essay. However, the critical essay is an excellent way to demonstrate your understanding of your chosen poem, as long as you choose a question that will really work for you and then answer it fully.

For both N5 and Higher, you write one essay: it is your one chance to show what you can do in this type of task. It is a complicated piece of work, as you have to select relevant information from all the knowledge you have to answer the particular question you have chosen. You must structure your essay coherently and make sure that it is technically accurate, as far as possible.

You have 45 minutes to complete the Section 2 critical essay.

This may seem challenging but there are ways of preparing which will help you. This guide aims to take some of the 'mystery' out of writing your critical essay, enabling you to approach your exam with confidence.