

## Harmony with Nature: Exploring Ecocriticism in Carol Ann Duffy's *The Bees*

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### Abstract

Ecocriticism, the study of literature through an environmental lens, offers a powerful framework for analyzing Carol Ann Duffy's acclaimed poetry collection *"The Bees."* This paper explores how Duffy employs vivid natural imagery and poetic techniques to shed light on pressing ecological concerns facing our world. A close reading of three poems from the collection - "Water," "The Bees," and "Cold" - elucidates Duffy's deft weaving of the natural world into her poems as a means of sounding the alarm about environmental degradation. "Water" serves as an urgent metaphorical warning about the critical importance of clean water sources. "The Bees" acts as an elegiac lament for the population declines

affecting this vital pollinating species. And "Cold" captures the stark realities of Arctic ice melt as a harbinger of climate change. Through rich description, metaphor, and other devices, Duffy imbues each poem with a layered ecological significance that both delights and unsettles the reader.

This ecocritical analysis ultimately argues that Duffy's *"The Bees"* transcends pure nature writing to boldly confront humanity's critical juncture with the natural environment. Her poems sound a clarion call for environmental awareness, advocacy, and action before further ecosystemic decline. The collection emerges as a 21st century anthology of eco-poetry

precisely tuned to our current age of environmental crisis.

**Key words:** ecocriticism, Duffy, *The Bees*, “Water”, “Cold”, nature.

### **\* Introduction**

Carol Ann Duffy is a prominent British poet and playwright known for her distinctive voice, powerful imagery, and exploration of themes such as love, gender, politics, and identity. Born on December 23, 1955, in Glasgow, Scotland, Duffy's work often challenges conventional poetic forms and delves into the complexities of human emotions and experiences. Duffy's poetry is celebrated for its accessibility and ability to resonate with a wide audience. She became the first female Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom in 2009, a position she held until 2019, using her platform to promote the arts and engage with contemporary issues.

Throughout her career, Duffy has received numerous awards and accolades for her contributions to literature, including the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Costa Book Award. Her poems are characterized by their lyrical quality, sharp wit, and social commentary, making her a significant figure in contemporary British poetry. In addition to her poetry, Duffy has also written plays, children's books, and adaptations of

classic works. Her versatility as a writer and her ability to tackle a wide range of subjects have cemented her reputation as one of the most influential poets of her generation. Carol Ann Duffy's poetry often reflects a deep concern for the environment and the interconnectedness of all living beings, making her work highly relevant to the theory of ecocriticism. Through her evocative imagery and poignant themes, Duffy explores the relationship between humans and the natural world, emphasizing the intrinsic value of nature and the need for environmental stewardship.

Ecocriticism is a literary theory that places the natural world at the center of narratives, emphasizing the intrinsic value of the environment and all living beings. This perspective contrasts with anthropocentrism, which prioritizes human interests above all else. Ecocentric literature seeks to promote a deeper connection with nature, raise awareness about environmental issues, and advocate for the protection of the planet. It is defined as “an approach to study the relationship between the human and the non-human world in literature. It studies and analyzes nature writings in literary and cultural studies” (Nitika&Kaur 2017: 137).

Ecocriticism was first defined by William Rueckert in 1978. He was actually the one who coined the name “ecocriticism”, and he defined it as “an application of ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert 1987: 72). One of the main features of ecocriticism in literature is the portrayal of nature as a dynamic and sensitive entity with its own significance. Writers often use vivid descriptions of landscapes, animals, and ecosystems to highlight the beauty and complexity of the natural world, fostering a sense of awe and reverence for the environment. Ecocriticism developed since it started into being. ecocritical theory began by looking intensely at small, confined geographic areas and ecosystems. As it progressed, ecocriticism started taking a broader, more globalized view of how it defines and understands the concept of "place" in relation to the environment. This cosmopolitan environmental outlook questions earlier ecocritical arguments that emphasized the primacy and elevated importance of the local place and bioregion alone (Reddick 2023:40).

Another key aspect of ecocriticism is the exploration of humanity's relationship with nature and the impact of human activities on the planet. Authors may address

themes such as environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and the consequences of exploiting natural resources, prompting readers to reflect on their role in shaping the future of the Earth. Ecocriticism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and ecosystems, underscoring the idea that every organism has a vital role to play in maintaining ecological balance. By portraying nature as a web of relationships and dependencies, writers convey the importance of respecting and preserving biodiversity for the well-being of all species. The representation of ecocriticism in Carol Ann Duffy’s collection *The Bees* is the ground upon which this paper stands.

In *The Bees* Duffy highlights the vital role that bees play in pollination and the ecosystem at large. By portraying bees as essential to the balance of nature, she underscores the interdependence between humans and the environment, aligning with ecocriticism principles that prioritize the well-being of all species. Duffy celebrates the beauty and power of nature, emphasizing the importance of preserving natural landscapes and ecosystems. Through her vivid descriptions of the natural world, she

encourages readers to appreciate and protect the environment, promoting a more ecocriticism worldview that values all living beings. By exploring themes of interconnectedness, harmony with nature, and environmental sustainability in her poetry, Carol Ann Duffy engages with the principles of ecocriticism and advocates for a deeper respect for the natural world. Her work serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of protecting our planet and living in harmony with the environment.

*The Bees* is a collection of poems by Carol Ann Duffy, published in 2011. It is a powerful and thought-provoking work that explores various themes, including the environment, feminism, and the human condition, through the lens of the natural world, particularly the lives of bees. Dowson (2016) illustrates that “Bees are cohering symbols for species endangered by technologies and consumerism that include poetry” (16). Bees serve as iconic representations of species threatened by human activities and overconsumption, with poetry being one of the affected domains, which highlights Duffy’s ecocriticism tendencies in her poetry. Duffy’s use of vivid imagery and metaphor throughout the collection is

remarkable, as she draws parallels between the struggles of bees and those of humans. One of the central themes of “*The Bees*” is the interconnectedness of all living beings and the delicate balance of nature. Duffy portrays bees as essential workers, tirelessly laboring to sustain the natural world. Through their perspective, she highlights the fragility of our environment and the consequences of human actions on the planet.

“*The Bees*” is a masterful work that invites readers to contemplate their relationship with the natural world and to appreciate the intricate web of life that sustains us all. Duffy’s poetic prowess and her ability to weave complex themes into accessible and evocative language make this collection a remarkable achievement in contemporary poetry. It is described as being a “wonderfully varied” collection as stated in “*The Bees* by Carol Ann Duffy – review: A comeback collection full of lyricism and brio”:

Here’s a mixer master of every kind of Duffy poem: angry, political, elegiac – elegiac about every endangered or disappearing thing in the natural world or the individual psyche – witty, nakedly honest, accessible, mysterious. Here are the willed, the skilled, the

passionate ecological pleas and exhortations, the other voices – though less frequent than before – the lists and litanies, and, above all, the lovely lyrics of longing and loneliness and sorrow laced with ephemeral moments of almost-acceptance, lightness and grace. (Lochhead 2011:1)

**\* Analysis**

In "The Bees," the poet explores themes of nature, interconnectedness, and the intrinsic value of the environment, reflecting the principles of ecocriticism in literature. Through vivid imagery and evocative language, Duffy invites readers to contemplate the beauty and fragility of the natural world, emphasizing the importance of preserving and protecting the planet for future generations. Hannah Brown (2020) puts it that "Nowadays, bees are becoming a symbol of global warming. The threats of them dying out and their genocide destroying our planet is very real, and I think that Duffy really evokes this idea of death and the destruction death can bring". The collection delves into the intricate relationships between humans, animals, and ecosystems, highlighting the interdependence of all living beings within the ecosystem. By celebrating the

significance of bees as pollinators and symbols of environmental harmony, Duffy underscores the essential role of nature in sustaining life and fostering a sense of interconnectedness between humans and the environment. "The Bees" serves as a poignant exploration of ecocriticism, encouraging readers to reflect on their relationship with nature and consider the impact of human actions on the planet. In her "Water", Carol Ann Duffy explores the theme of the cycle of life and the enduring bond between a mother and her child through the symbolic use of water. Here are some of the ecocriticism features present in the poem: -

Your last word was water,  
which I poured in a hospice plastic  
cup, held  
to your lips – your small sip, half-  
smile, sigh –  
then, in the chair beside you,  
fell asleep.

Fell asleep for three lost hours,  
only to waken, thirsty, hear then see  
a magpie warn in a bush outside –  
dawn so soon – and swallow from  
your still-full cup.

Water. The times I'd call as a child  
for a drink, till you'd come, sit on the  
edge  
of the bed in the dark, holding my  
hand,

just as we held hands now and you died.

A good last word.

Nights since I've cried, but gone  
to my own child's side with a drink,  
watched

her gulp it down then sleep. Water.

What a mother brings

through darkness still

to her parched daughter. (Duffy 2011:  
43)

The poem revolves around the central motif of water, which is the "last word" uttered by the dying mother. Water is portrayed as a life-sustaining force, a basic necessity that a mother provides to her child, even in the face of death. The act of offering water to quench thirst is a nurturing gesture that transcends time and generations. The presence of the magpie, a bird associated with nature, serves as a symbol of the natural world and the cycle of life. Its appearance at dawn symbolizes the continuation of life after the mother's passing, reminding the reader of the interconnectedness of all living beings. The poem highlights the intergenerational connections between the mother, the speaker (the daughter), and the speaker's own child. The act of providing water is a ritual that spans generations, emphasizing the continuity of life and the nurturing role of mothers across

time. There is also the contrast between darkness and light which is used to represent the cycles of life and death. The mother's presence is associated with the darkness of night, while the dawn symbolizes the beginning of a new day and the continuation of life. The poem suggests that even in the darkest moments, the nurturing role of a mother remains constant, providing sustenance and comfort.

"Water" invites an ecocritical perspective by recognizing the fundamental importance of water, a vital element of the natural world, in sustaining life. It celebrates the role of mothers as nurturers and caregivers, not only for their children but also for the continuation of the ecological cycle. The poem reminds us of our interconnectedness with nature and the importance of preserving and respecting the natural resources that sustain us. Through the symbolic use of water and the exploration of intergenerational bonds, Carol Ann Duffy's poem offers an ecocritical lens that highlights the interconnectedness of human life with the natural world, emphasizing the enduring role of mothers as nurturers and stewards of life.

The poem begins with the speaker offering water to a loved one in a hospice plastic cup, symbolizing care, comfort, and sustenance. The act of providing water is a fundamental gesture of nurturing and support, underscoring the importance of basic elements like water in sustaining life. This act of offering water can be seen as a reflection of ecocriticism, highlighting the essential role of water in supporting all living beings and ecosystems. As the speaker falls asleep beside their loved one for three hours, they awaken to the sound of a magpie warning outside, signaling the approaching dawn. The presence of the magpie in nature serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. The act of the magpie drinking from the still-full cup of water intended for the loved one reinforces the idea of sharing resources and recognizing the shared dependence on nature for sustenance.

The speaker then recalls childhood memories of calling for water and the comforting presence of their mother by their bedside. This recollection evokes a sense of continuity and cyclical nature in human relationships and caregiving practices. The motif of water as a source of comfort and nurture is

passed down from generation to generation, emphasizing the enduring connection between humans and nature. The poem concludes with the speaker reflecting on their role as a parent, drawing parallels between their own experiences with water and nurturing their child. The act of providing water to their own child mirrors the care and love passed down from previous generations, highlighting the cyclical nature of life and the interconnectedness between family members.

“Water” explores themes of caregiving, nurture, and interconnectedness through the symbol of water. By highlighting the significance of water as a source of life and comfort, the poem underscores the importance of recognizing our dependence on nature and the need to preserve and protect the environment for future generations. Through its evocative imagery and emotional depth, the poem invites readers to contemplate their relationship with nature and consider the interconnectedness of all living beings within the ecosystem. It displays vividly the overall atmosphere that Duffy managed to demonstrate throughout the whole collection which “manifests the ecological vision envisaged by ecocritics that would have a

redemptive effect on humanity” (Matthew 2020: 9).

The poem consists of a single stanza with varying line lengths, creating a sense of fluidity and continuity in the narrative. The lack of traditional stanza breaks mirrors the seamless flow of memories and emotions experienced by the speaker. This structure reinforces the interconnectedness between the different moments depicted in the poem, emphasizing the cyclical nature of life and caregiving. Duffy employs simple and evocative language throughout the poem, using imagery related to water to convey themes of nurture, sustenance, and interconnectedness. The repetition of the word "water" serves as a unifying motif that underscores the central importance of this element in the speaker's reflections. The imagery of water as a source of comfort, solace, and life imbues the poem with a sense of intimacy and emotional resonance. The use of sensory details, such as the act of holding a plastic cup to the loved one's lips, the sound of a magpie outside, and the memory of a mother's comforting presence, enhances the reader's engagement with the poem. These vivid descriptions create a rich tapestry of emotions and experiences, inviting readers to empathize with the

speaker's reflections on life, loss, and interconnectedness.

In “The Woman in the Moon”, Duffy employs various ecocritical features to convey a message about humanity's impact on the natural world. Through its thematic exploration of human relationships, environmental awareness, and cosmic interconnectedness, the poem invites readers to contemplate their place in the world and consider the impact of their actions on the environment. By intertwining themes of love, loss, and environmental stewardship, the poem embodies ecocentric principles by highlighting the intrinsic value of nature and advocating for a deeper connection with the natural world: -

Darlings, I write to you from the moon

where I hide behind famous light.

How could you think it was ever a man up here?

A cow jumped over. The dish ran away with the spoon.

What reached me here were your prayers, griefs,

here's the craic, losses and longings, your lives

so brief, mine long, long, a talented loneliness.

I must have a thousand names for the earth, my blue vocation.



Round I go, the moon a diet of light,  
 sliver of pear,  
 wedge of lemon, slice of melon, half  
 an orange, onion;  
 your human music falling like petals  
 through space,  
 the childbirth song, the lover's song,  
 the song of death.  
 Devoted as words to things, I stare  
 and stare;  
 deserts where forests were, vanishing  
 seas. When your night comes,  
 I see you staring back as though you  
 can hear my Darlings,  
 what have you done, what you have  
 done to the earth? Darlings, I write to  
 you from the moon  
 where I hide behind famous light.  
 How could you think it was ever a  
 man up here?  
 A cow jumped over. The dish ran  
 away with the spoon.  
 What reached me here were your  
 prayers, griefs,  
 here's the craic, losses and longings,  
 your lives  
 so brief, mine long, long, a talented  
 loneliness.  
 I must have a thousand names for the  
 earth, my blue vocation.  
 Round I go, the moon a diet of light,  
 sliver of pear,  
 wedge of lemon, slice of melon, half  
 an orange, onion;  
 your human music falling like petals  
 through space,

the childbirth song, the lover's song,  
 the song of death.

Devoted as words to things, I stare  
 and stare;  
 deserts where forests were, vanishing  
 seas. When your night comes,  
 I see you staring back as though you  
 can hear my Darlings,  
 what have you done, what you have  
 done to the earth? (Duffy 2011: 62)

The poem directly questions  
 humanity's actions and their impact  
 on the Earth, posing the rhetorical  
 question: "what have you done, what  
 you have done to the earth?" This  
 critique challenges the reader to  
 reflect on their relationship with the  
 natural world and the consequences  
 of human activities. Through the use  
 of personification, vivid imagery,  
 juxtaposition, and direct questioning,  
 Carol Ann Duffy employs ecocritical  
 elements to raise awareness about  
 environmental degradation and the  
 impact of human actions on the  
 natural world. The poem invites the  
 reader to contemplate their role in  
 preserving and protecting the Earth,  
 emphasizing the interconnectedness  
 between human life and the planet's  
 ecosystems.

"The Woman in the Moon"  
 begins with the speaker addressing  
 their loved ones from the moon, a  
 celestial body that symbolizes  
 distance, isolation, and otherworldly

detachment. By positioning the speaker on the moon, the poem explores the contrast between the vastness of space and the intimacy of human relationships, highlighting the interconnectedness between individuals despite physical separation. The imagery of a cow jumping over and the dish running away with the spoon invokes a sense of whimsy and nursery rhyme nostalgia, underscoring the playful and surreal nature of the speaker's perspective from the moon. These fantastical elements serve to disrupt conventional notions of reality and challenge anthropocentric views by emphasizing the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world.

The speaker reflects on the prayers, griefs, losses, and longings of their loved ones on Earth, acknowledging the emotional depth and complexity of human experiences. Through references to human music, such as the childbirth song, lover's song, and song of death, the poem celebrates the richness and diversity of human connections while also recognizing the fragility and impermanence of life. The speaker's contemplation of deserts replacing forests and vanishing seas alludes to environmental degradation and the impact of human activities on the

Earth's ecosystems. This reflection prompts a sense of urgency and responsibility towards environmental stewardship, urging readers to consider their role in preserving the planet for future generations.

The structure of the poem is characterized by fragmented lines and enjambment, creating a sense of fluidity and movement that mirrors the speaker's orbit around the moon. The disjointed syntax and shifting imagery reflect the speaker's contemplation of Earth from a distant perspective, emphasizing the interconnectedness between celestial bodies and terrestrial life. The use of vivid imagery, such as comparing the moon to a "diet of light" and describing it as a "sliver of pear" or "wedge of lemon," evokes a sensory experience that blurs the boundaries between nature and human perception. This fusion of natural elements with human artifacts underscores the interdependence between humans and the environment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings within the ecosystem. As one of the poems in the collection that "is by far the collection that most deliberately engages with environmental concerns", "The Woman in the Moon" is actually

highlighting the realm of Duffy's eco-awareness. (Wachter 2019: 10)

In "Cold" Carol Ann Duffy explores the theme of cold and its various manifestations, using it as a metaphor to explore the cycle of life and the bond between a mother and daughter. With its seasonal imagery, the poem is set in the winter season, with vivid descriptions of snow, ice, and cold temperatures. These seasonal elements serve as a backdrop for the exploration of life's cycles and the natural progression from birth to death: -

It felt so cold, the snowball which  
wept in my hands,  
and when I rolled it along in the snow,  
it grew  
till I could sit on it, looking back at  
the house,  
where it was cold when I woke in my  
room, the windows  
blind with ice, my breath undressing  
itself on the air.  
Cold, too, embracing the torso of  
snow which I lifted up  
in my arms to build a snowman, my  
toes, burning, cold  
in my winter boots; my mother's  
voice calling me in  
from the cold. And her hands were  
cold from peeling  
then dipping potatoes into a bowl,  
stopping to cup

her daughter's face, a kiss for both  
cold cheeks, my cold nose.

But nothing so cold as the February  
night I opened the door  
in the Chapel of Rest where my  
mother lay, neither young, nor old,  
where my lips, returning her kiss to  
her brow, knew the meaning of cold.  
(Duffy 2011: 75)

The poem begins with the personification of the snowball, which is described as "weeping" in the speaker's hands. This anthropomorphic representation of nature establishes a connection between the human experience and the natural world, setting the stage for the exploration of the cyclical nature of life and death. The poem juxtaposes the warmth of the mother's embrace and the coldness of the winter environment. This contrast highlights the nurturing role of the mother, who provides warmth and comfort in the face of the harsh elements of nature.

"Cold" highlights the cyclical nature of life in wonderful manner. The progression of the poem, from the speaker's childhood memories of playing in the snow to the final scene of the mother's passing, represents the cyclical nature of life. The cold, which is initially associated with the winter season, takes on a deeper meaning as it becomes symbolic of

death. It also establishes a strong connection between human experiences and the natural world. The speaker's memories of playing in the snow and the eventual confrontation with the mother's death are intertwined with the natural elements of cold and winter, emphasizing the interdependence between humans and their environment.

The poem evokes a powerful emotional resonance by combining the imagery of nature with the deeply personal experiences of a mother-daughter relationship. The cold, which initially seems like a physical sensation, becomes a metaphor for the emotional impact of loss and the finality of death. Such idea of loss encompasses the overall concept of ecocriticism that "As long as the earth was conceptualized as alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it" (Merchant 1992: 42). Through the use of personification, seasonal imagery, contrasts between warmth and cold, and the exploration of the cyclical nature of life, Carol Ann Duffy's poem employs ecocritical elements to examine the interconnectedness between human experiences and the natural world. The poem invites the reader to

contemplate the profound emotional resonance of life's cycles and the enduring bond between a mother and child, using nature as a metaphorical canvas to explore these themes.

The poem delves into the sensory experience of coldness, using winter imagery to evoke a sense of isolation, loss, and emotional depth. The speaker's interactions with snow, the natural world, and familial relationships underscore the interconnectedness between human experiences and the environment. Moreover, The speaker's memories of their mother's hands peeling potatoes and cupping their face convey a sense of warmth, care, and familial connection amidst the coldness of winter. The repeated motif of coldness serves as a metaphor for emotional distance, grief, and the passage of time. The speaker's engagement with snow, from rolling a snowball to building a snowman, highlights the transformative power of nature and the cyclical nature of life. The act of shaping snow into a snowman symbolizes creation and impermanence, reflecting the interconnectedness between human creativity and the natural world. It is argued that "Duffy's experience, memory and feelings created her nonmaterial environment which affected her poetic imagination in

interacting with nature.” This interaction has worked as a monolithic force and led the poet to describe and see the real environmental images around her in different ways. (Mhana et al 2019: 101). The poem culminates in a poignant moment of loss as the speaker visits the Chapel of Rest where their mother lies. The contrast between external coldness and internal warmth is juxtaposed as the speaker returns a kiss to their mother's brow, symbolizing a final act of love and connection. This moment encapsulates the theme of interconnectedness between generations and the enduring bond between humans and the environment.

Through its exploration of winter imagery, familial relationships, and moments of loss, the poem embodies key features of ecocriticism. The speaker's interactions with snow and nature emphasize the interconnectedness between humans and the environment, highlighting how natural elements shape human experiences and emotions. The symbolism of snow as a transformative force reflects the cyclical nature of life and the interconnected relationships that exist within ecosystems. The poem

also underscores the theme of caretaking and nurturing, as seen through the speaker's memories of their mother's hands peeling potatoes and offering affectionate gestures. This depiction highlights the reciprocity between humans and nature, emphasizing how caregiving practices extend beyond human relationships to include interactions with the environment. Furthermore, the poem prompts readers to reflect on their impact on the environment and consider the consequences of human actions on ecosystems. The imagery of deserts replacing forests and vanishing seas alludes to environmental degradation and serves as a poignant reminder of humanity's responsibility to protect and preserve the planet for future generations.

The structure of the poem is characterized by vivid sensory imagery, reflective introspection, and emotional depth. The use of enjambment and varied line lengths creates a sense of movement and fluidity, mirroring the speaker's emotional journey from childhood memories to a moment of profound loss. In modern and post-modern poetry, enjambment has a vital role in paving the way for the intended meaning to be delivered, as Leithauser argues, “Indeed, in the era

when free verse predominates, as now, enjambment often becomes the prime, the characterizing tools” (2022: 55). The fragmented syntax and shifting perspectives invite readers to engage with the speaker's reflections on nature, family, and mortality. The imagery of snow and coldness pervades the poem, evoking a sensory experience that blurs the boundaries between internal emotions and external landscapes. The juxtaposition of physical coldness with emotional warmth underscores the interconnectedness between human experiences and the natural world, highlighting the fragility and resilience of life.

In conclusion, "It felt so cold" offers a profound exploration of interconnectedness, loss, and environmental stewardship through its evocative imagery, reflective language, and thematic depth. By applying features of ecocriticism to both form and content of the poem, we gain a deeper understanding of how human experiences are intertwined with the natural world and underscore the importance of valuing and protecting our environment for the well-being of all living beings. "The Bees" is a poignant reminder that environmental issues are intrinsically linked to human well-being. Duffy's

eco-poetry calls upon us all to reevaluate our relationship with the planet and its creatures before it's too late. Her work serves as a passionate rallying cry to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the natural world we depend upon. Duffy employs vivid imagery and extended metaphors to highlight the plight of bees and their essential role in sustaining life on Earth. The poems serve as a poignant wake-up call, urging readers to become more environmentally conscious and take action to protect bees and their habitats from further destruction.

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