

## **HOTELS, ROOMS AND BEDS: A JOURNEY INTO CAROL ANN DUFFY'S HAUNTED PLACES**

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***Abstract:** In this article, I will dissect four poems written by Carol Ann Duffy in order to highlight the theme of “hauntedness” – *unheimlichkeit*, which engulfs the stories and personae presented in the poems. By analysing the disturbing presence of “ghosts” and the merging of past, present and future into one haunting repetitive space-time, I will reveal all the uncanny elements featured in these brilliant poems by Carol Ann Duffy.*

***Keywords:** Duffy, ghosts, haunted, house, *unheimlich**

### **1. Introduction**

What confers the very quality of “hauntedness” to a place? Professor Montague in *The Haunting of Hill House* (Jackson 1959), for example, summons some volunteers to prove the house is haunted. According to Sigmund Freud (2003:148), “the German phrase *ein unheimliches Haus* [‘an uncanny house’] can be rendered only by ‘a haunted house’”; this will be the focus of this study. Starting from the word’s meaning, I shall explore the concept of “hauntedness” experienced as a dwelling in the uncanny, as the awareness of the ‘iterability’ of past experiences – ours and others’ – into a haunting present and within unhomely places.

According to dictionaries, “to haunt” means to appear in a place repeatedly, to cause repeated suffering or anxiety. As a noun, it stands for a place often visited. Haunting involves both time and space; therefore, it involves repetition, overlapping presence, and excessive abundance; and yet what haunts is not easily graspable and thus not easily destroyable. Indeed, Freud (2003: 144) again believes one of the features of the “uncanny” is repetition itself. In this regard, I quote one of the brilliant stories written by Algernon Blackwood (2020a), “The Woman’s Ghost Story”, as an example of uncanny repetition. The female protagonist tells the story of her night visit to an allegedly haunted house in the middle of London. There, she meets the ghost, a man who was “frightened to death” (Blackwood 2020a: 178), and she releases him by showing love and kindness and kissing him. But before that, he explains why he keeps appearing in every room she goes to: “I’m in different space, for one thing, and you’d find me in any room you went into; for according to your way of measuring, I’m all over the house. Space is a bodily condition, but I am out of

my body, and am not affected by space. It's my condition that keeps me here." (idem: 179-180). Indeed, "the ghost... is a paradox. Though non-existent, it nonetheless appears." (Castle 1993: 46) The ghost's repetition both in terms of his appearing again and again in different rooms of the house and his staying there day after day is precisely what makes the house "haunted".

Haunted places such as castles, secret rooms, spooky cities, and misty graveyards have always featured in haunting gothic stories and science fiction books. They proved charming settings for poems and detective and horror stories since pre-Romanticism. Yet, as Hogle (2002: 123) pointed out in his *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, hauntedness is much closer to us than we might suspect: "Domestic, industrial and urban contexts and aberrant individuals provided the loci for mystery and terror. Haunting pasts were the ghosts of family transgression and guilty concealment; the dark alleyways of cities were the new villains, cunning, corrupt but thoroughly human". Indeed, it is within city walls, in hotels, inside rooms, and in pubs that we experience a haunting atmosphere in some of Carol Ann Duffy's poems. Villains, heroes, or just tormented people are not necessarily imprisoned in old castles or creepy manors; they travel, they move from house to house, from room to room. They drag haunted suitcases, they rent insidious rooms, and they are chased by their own lives. As far as the relationship between haunted people and haunted places is concerned, in the introduction to their study, Buse and Scott (1999: 9), interestingly point out: "Whether property is a Gothic ancestral home, a Romantic heroine's inheritance, a loft space in downtown Manhattan, or a sacred site in Australia, it is never free of ghostly vicissitudes, contrary to all rhetoric of property and possession which would exorcise past struggles over it".

Displacement and the longing for/escaping from the past are triggers for the characters' haunting experiences: "Duffy's frequently occurring 'something', 'somewhere' and 'somewhen' contribute to the shared human sense of displacement, of not being at home" (Smith 2008:118-119). Time is not linear. Past seeps back into the present through space and the present peeks into the future. It is precisely the haunting feeling of homelessness caused by a peculiar relationship between the personae and space-time that this paper studies.

## 2. Homelessness

The title of the first poem analysed, "Away from Home" (*The Other Country*, 1998), already preludes the experienced *unheimlichkeit*: the comforting presence of home is broken by the preceding adverb "away". Since this poem deals with travel, separation from home, and loneliness, I decided to compare it with what can be considered its 'twin' poem: "Never Go Back" from Duffy's *Mean Time* (1993). Here again, an adverb is used to create distance: the adverb of time "never" exhorts the persona not to go back (home). For the sake of clarity, I refer to "Away from Home" with the abbreviation AFH and to "Never Go Back" with NGB. AFH has a very precise structure, as it consists of twelve tercets, divided into four sections, almost depicting the twelve months of a year, divided into four seasons; while NGB consists of six octonaries, divided into three sections. While the former poem talks about a

person basically longing for home, the latter presents a person who has returned to a place where she used to live and feels uncomfortable now. Distance and uncertainty are the main themes in both poems: indeed, AFM starts straightforward: "Somewhere someone will always be leaving open / a curtain as you pass up the dark mild street, / uncertain, on your way to the lodgings." (Duffy 1998: 49). But while the use of two consecutive indefinite words – an adverb and a pronoun – conveys complete uncertainty about the place and social context, creating a state of expectation, the future continuous and the adverb "always" that follow confer certitude about the person's continuous travels, as if she were undoubtedly expected to walk towards new lodgings for good. A similar contrast is expressed in NGB: while the two negative words in "a journey into nowhere, nowhen" at the end of the poem provide no hope, it is also true that "Already / the fires and lights come on wherever you live" (Duffy 1993: 31) draws the relieving picture of a warm and bright home. The use of time and place adverbs or nouns is crucial in creating the feeling of hauntedness: "never", "always", "away", "already", "wherever", "nowhere", "nowhen", are used to provide a powerful contrast in terms of time and space distance-proximity.

Another specular element in both poems is the train carrying the personae. In AFH "the train unzips the landscape, sheds fields / and hedges" (1998: 49), opening up possibilities and hope; in contrast, in NGB, it "sighs / and pulls you away, rewinding the city like a film / snapping it off at the river" (1993: 30) giving a melancholic and bleak hue to the journey. The train is, therefore an agent, not just a means of transportation: it is in charge of unzipping new places and getting closer to new experiences; however, it sadly puts a distance between people and places, rewinding cities, too.

Then "Treacherous puddles lead to the Railway Hotel. *No bar / till 7 pm*. At the first drink, a haunted jukebox / switches itself on, reminds you, reminds you." (1998: 49); in AFH, the puddles recall those "rains" mentioned earlier in the poem emphasising the passing of time. They are "treacherous" too and this is not only because they hinder the traveller's way, but also because they lead to the "Railway Hotel". A hotel is a liminal place par excellence, with its anonymous – yet haunted by past visitors – rooms and corridors. Here the sense of liminality is reinforced by the fact that this hotel is near a train station. We know that the traveller waits until the bar opens; after the first drink, a jukebox starts playing music, reminding her of something.

In NGB, though, there is a jukebox with a reminding function too – "a jukebox reminisces in a cracked voice / there is nothing to say" (1993: 30) – but this is only to reinforce absence; instead of being silent, the jukebox speaks just enough to rebut its own voice. As a matter of fact, this jukebox is haunted too. Everything in NGB is haunted and upsettingly alive; things acquire human qualities: the jukebox "reminisces", the streets "tear litter", the smoky mirrors in the pub "flatter", the house "prefers to be left alone" and its window is "myopic with rain", then the sums of money in the cab "wink" and finally the train "sighs". Things become alive, but, in contrast, people seem pretty much dead: in the pub there are "living dead drinking all day", the persona is basically a "ghost", the driver of the taxi "looks like death" (30-31). The very definition of "ghost" is controversial as a ghost is not a dead

person; it is its apparition to the living people: “Ghosts are neither dead nor alive, neither corporeal objects nor stern absences. As such, they are the stock-in-trade of the Derridean enterprise, standing in defiance of binary oppositions such as presence and absence, body and spirit, past and present, life and death” (Buse, Scott 1999: 10). The persona’s return to her – presumably – hometown is an uncanny event and haunting experience: she is a ghost making her apparition in her old town. Indeed, “the idea of a return fractures all traditional conceptions of temporality. Therefore, the temporality to which the ghost is subject is paradoxical, as at once they ‘return’ *and* make their apparitional debut” (idem: 11).

Disturbing uncertainty emerges fully in the next stanza of AFH (Duffy 1998: 50): “Anonymous night. Something wrong. The bedside lamp / absent. Different air. Against the hazarded wall / a door starts faintly to be drawn”. At this point, we witness a change, something is wrong there, it can be inferred that the bedside lamp is either missing or not working, the air might smell different or be colder/warmer and the wall is unexpected. The traveller cannot see her way, as the following stanza confirms: “you mime your way ineptly to a switch” (ibid.). This is a turning point: though she faced darkness, anonymity, now she is struggling towards the light. Indeed, in his essay, Freud (2003:144) presents a very similar situation as an example of the feeling of the uncanny, when one is “groping around in the dark in an unfamiliar room, searching for the door or the light-switch and repeatedly colliding with the same piece of furniture”. The repetition of the same action over and over again in order to reach something, in the dark, is upsetting, as it almost feels like the environment is changing around us without our realising it.

In the next tercet, we hear the traveller’s own voice trying to reassure herself: “Calm yourself. By dawn you will have slept again / and gone. You have a ticket for the plane. Check it. / The flight number. Your home address. Your name.” (Duffy 1998: 50). Despite the scary anonymity and her ongoing journeys, the traveller looks for homely elements by trying to focus on certain things, facts she can actually check: a ticket, an address, even her own name. Like a sort of zoom into a picture, we share her point of view, we become auditors of this truth: she really has got a ticket, with the correct flight number, the address, and the correct name on it. Instead of the future continuous, the future perfect is used here to suggest certainty, future completeness.

Then, instead of puddles, “urinous broken phone booths” lead her to the last one, which “unbelievably” works (ibid.). “With a sense of luxury” though, the persona lights a cigarette as “there is time yet” (ibid.). The desired call she wanted to make is distanced, the accomplishment of the aim is delayed, as if she wanted to linger in the unhomely liminality, to taste her loneliness a bit longer. The traveller eventually dials the number in the final tercet: “Tomorrow you return. Below the flyover / the sparkling merging motorways glamorise / the night. The telephone is ringing in your home.” (ibid.) This tercet contains several contrasting elements: on the one hand, the certainty of her return is expressed through the positive statement “you return”, adjectives such as “sparkling” and “glamorise”, on the other hand, the threatening adverb “tomorrow” implies that something might still happen, it is still “night”; and, finally, no one is actually answering the phone. This last verse

is quintessential in the poem as it embeds the safety and reassuring presence of her home and the ringing telephone; yet, at the same time, we have no certainty that someone is actually at home or will answer the phone. As Freud (2003: 124) claims: “the uncanny is that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar”. Therefore, this is no end to the *unheimlich* journey. On the contrary, the fleeting property of life is maintained and a happy ending is questionable since whenever there is a home, something unhomely is likely to be found around the corner.

Moving on to NGB, a sense of actual wrongness pervades the entire poem: the persona is not sleeping in a hotel room, but in a proper ‘haunted house’ which “has cancer. It prefers to be left alone / nursing its growth and cracks, each groan and creak / accusing as you climb the stairs to the bedroom” (Duffy 1993: 30). Then a bleak warning voice warns the persona: “You shouldn’t be here. You follow your shadow / through the house, discover that objects held / in the hands can fill a room with pain.” (idem: 31). Her former house is the perfect example of “haunted house”, and yet the house is haunted precisely *because* she has come back to it. The persona is the ghost which reiterates all the past sorrow experienced in it. Since she shouldn’t be there, her presence is “wrong”, she takes on the characteristics of a ghost as “anachronism might well be the defining features of ghosts, now and in the past, because haunting, by its very structure, implies a deformation of linear temporality” (Buse, Scott 1999: 1).

When she actually decides to leave, it is a very different aura that accompanies her, since in “a taxi implying a hearse” she gets to the station where she is an “emigrant / for the last time” (ibid.). This phrase is very ambiguous and it might imply that this is the end of her haunting journey as a “ghost” and that she is therefore free. This sort of freedom is maintained by the sudden change of tone at the end of the poem. After the bleak atmosphere, we are told that “Already / the fires and lights come on wherever you live” (ibid.). From darkness to light, and from a haunted house to a bright “wherever” home, the woman has apparently ended her ghostly journey, but, “wherever” she lives, she might be exactly the haunting shadow next to fires and lights.

### 3. Rooms

We are now going to zoom into a “Room”, where an anonymous character is supposed to live for some time. The poem consists of four tercets and the narration covers one evening. Here the room in its bleakness represents the uncertain, the estranged, *unheimlich* experience of dwelling in a place inhabited by ghosts from the past and expected ghosts from the future. The very renting of a room already arouses issues about its past lodgers, the used furniture bearing the ghostly marks of others; yet at the same time one is aware that someone else will be staying there after we leave. When we think about a rented room, its being haunted is inevitably both horizontal and vertical in that we can see the tangible disturbing marks left by others surrounding us, so we can imagine these people before but also after us. In order to support this idea, I am using Algernon Blackwood’s words once again, since in his

story “The Occupant of the Room” (2020b: 543-544), he describes a similar situation - “the whole room was pervaded with a curious sense of occupancy that he found exceedingly distasteful. One moment the atmosphere seemed subtly charged with a ‘just left’ feeling—the next it was a queer awareness of ‘still here’ that made him turn cold and look hurriedly behind him”. I strongly believe the feeling described by Blackwood is an intriguing example for our analysis of the “hauntedness”: when we feel there is something wrong, something that we cannot actually grasp, something not there and yet there, then we are approaching the *unheimlich*.

In the poem “Room”, the author emphasizes that the persona is alone in a room located in the town’s poor area, where even the dusk is greasy, recalling dirty and wrongness. In this room there is “one chair to sit in, / a greasy dusk wrong side of the tracks, / and watch the lodgers’ lights come on in the other rooms” (Duffy, 1993: 50). At twilight, one by one, other lodgers switch the lights on, but it is not night yet. We stay in this rather gloomy atmosphere as “a cool lightbulb” is waiting for a “moth” and the silence is “hard” to bear. The image of the lightbulb’s cool light is very powerful, as it is that of the awaited moth which reveals the lightbulb’s projection towards death.

The threatening idea of spending a long time in that room is conveyed by the words “The roofs of terraced houses stretch from here to how many months”; time and space merge into one, imprisoning the persona into a repetitive, *unheimlich* present. It is almost as if the persona’s thought about the stretch of those terraced houses turned into wondering about the duration of her stay. The third stanza then provides the theme of death, by drawing our attention to the bed: “Room. One second-hand bed / to remind of a death, somewhen. Room.” (ibid.). Others have slept there, someone might have even died there. In the poems analysed before, the function of reminder was carried out by the haunted jukebox; here, it is the bed that fulfils this function.

Indeed, in *Hotel World*, a book by the Scottish writer Ali Smith, the young protagonist, the chambermaid of a hotel, who died falling from a dumbwaiter, conjectures about beds:

I go from room to room here and see beds wrecked after love and sleep, then beds cleaned and ready, waiting again for bodies to slide into them; crisp sheets folded down, beds with their mouths open saying welcome, hurry up, get in, sleep is coming. The beds are so inviting. They open their mouths all over the hotel every night for the bodies which slip into them with each other or alone; all the people with their beating hearts, sliding into spaces left empty for them by other people gone now God knows where, who warmed the same spaces up only hours before. (Smith 2001, 7)

Beds are among the most haunted places: people sleep there in all their vulnerability, people have sex and dirty them, people die in them. Beds *embed* bodies: fragile, naked, and dead bodies. Duffy’s room lies in the liminal space between past and future deaths, which are respectively represented by the bed and the moth. While the indifferent light bulb is waiting for future death and the bed reminds of past death, the room itself embraces both: we can notice how Duffy brilliantly repeats the word “room” at the beginning and at the end of the sentence, as if she was talking



about two different rooms: one room for the past and one for the present. Derrida, in his *Specters of Marx* (1994), analysed “ghosts” and he claims that, when we deal with ghosts, we deal with “inheritance, and generations, and generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us” (Derrida 1994: XVIII).

The night finally falls in Duffy’s “Room” in the last verse: “Night now; the giftless moon and a cat pissing on wall. £90pw” (Duffy 1993: 50). The “greasy dusk” has finally turned into night, yet not even the night shows mercy, as her moon is apparently “giftless”. The bleakness culminates with the price of the room: ninety pounds per week, to pay for “how many months”. The room here has a more temporal connotation rather than a spatial one: it locates the person as a “Being-towards-death”, haunting it, transcending past and present. The room provides the persona with the possibility of a suspended state, a limbo.

With the last poem that will be analysed here, we are getting even closer to the hauntedness seen as *unheimlichkeit* in time and space. The poem is “Close”, and with it, Carol Ann Duffy leads us into a more private room. Positive that “close” means both “near” and “lock”, I accept the invitation and will go into the last haunted room of our journey.

In this poem, once again in a precise structure (five quintains), the poet builds a powerful haunting story. The reader is welcomed by an almost morbid scene: “Lock the door. In the dark journey of our night, / two childhoods stand in the corner of the bedroom / watching the way we take each other to bits / to stare at our heart” (Duffy 1993: 37). The door needs to be closed to prevent impending menaces from getting in and therefore “closer”; yet in that journey, that is the night, a menace is already inside the room: two childhoods staring; ghosts from the past are trapped wherever the personae in the poem are.

Proxemics is hauntingly pivotal in this poem: intimacy must be protected from what lies outside, and yet, unfortunately, ghosts are already in. Moreover, the safety of the home is undermined by a lover coming closer, which in fact makes that home not a home any longer. Indeed, the speaker confesses: “I tell myself where I live now, / but you move in close till I shake, homeless, further than that” (ibid.). The keyword here is “homeless”: the speaker acknowledges where she is living now – as if this was something strange and unexpected – and as a person moves “close”, she becomes homeless. The idea of lovers being homeless is conveyed in another poem as well, “The Lovers” (*Rapture* 2005), where they have “no country to sail to” (Duffy 2005: 32).

Referring again to Freud, in his essay he talks about female genitals as the former entrance to a *heimlich* place that turns into *unheimlich* because of repression; love has something to do with this transformation as he says – quoting a saying – “Love is a longing for home” (Freud 2003: 151).

Indeed, love seems to be extremely powerful and dangerous: “Love won’t give in. It makes a hired room tremble / with the pity of bells, a cigarette smoke itself / next to a full glass of wine, time ache / into space, space, wants no more talk. Now / it has me where I want me, now you, you do” (Duffy 1993: 37). Rather than a limbo, the room of this poem seems to represent a heart: it “tremble(s)” with love, it must

be locked, it can be a home, but also a non-home if a lover invades it. The power of love here coexists with death: while it makes a room tremble, bells are presumably announcing a death out there. It is love that makes “time ache into space”, possibly meaning that past, present and future are merging and penetrating space. The fact that love will not give up does not necessarily mean something positive; on the contrary, in this case it seems to be more like a haunting presence.

However, it is the final stanza that reveals to us the scariest hauntedness: “Put out the light. Years stand outside on the street / looking up to an open window, black as our mouth / which utters its tuneless song. The ghosts of ourselves, / behind and before us, throng in a mirror, blind, / laughing and weeping. They know who we are.” (ibid.) The poet here resumes the image of time pervading space by drawing this picture of personified Years spying on the lovers from the street, as past and future ghosts crowd in the mirror. The lovers find themselves literally engulfed by their own ghosts which are haunting them from the past and from the future (as projections). Indeed, “In the figure of the ghost, we see that past and present cannot be neatly separated from one another, as any idea of the present is always constituted through the difference and deferral of the past, as well as anticipations of the future” (Buse, Scott 1999: 10-11).

#### 4. Conclusion

At this point, I would like to reassure the readers that, although our ghostly journey into Carol Ann Duffy’s hauntedness has finally come to an end, I strongly believe that they will be tempted to read some paragraphs again, read these poems once or twice more and wonder about all those eerie repetitions, all those strange feelings triggered by the impression that they have already been to a certain place or have already done something referred to in the poems. This is because we all experience “hauntedness” during our lives. After having dissected the poems, it is possible now to point out that “hauntedness” has definitely to do with our perception of repetition in space and time. Moreover, it is our own and others’ presence in that space-time that allows us to experience the uncanny: the impression that something or someone is where or “when” they shouldn’t be. So, wherever or whenever you are, the uncanny is always around the corner.

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