

Standing Female Nude

The idea of a woman being looked at, or gazed upon, is an image that goes far back in literature. Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' is a famous poem in which the narrator discusses the painting on the wall of his late wife, whom, it is implied, he has had killed. Looking at women, and appraising them in this way, suggests they are in a weaker position than the one doing the gazing (usually male). In many ways they are objectified, particularly once painted on to canvas and become an item or possession to analyse and criticise.

Bearing the above in mind, answer the following questions about Duffy's poem:

1. Who is the speaker in the poem? Think about the different perspective the voice gives on what is going on. How might the painter view the scene differently?
2. What does the juxtaposition of 'six hours' and 'few francs' in the first line imply? Why does Duffy start the poem in this way?
3. 'Belly nipple arse'; in what ways do these words affect how we view the description of what is going on? Do the words make the painting seem like a work of art or something else? Do they make the painting sounds sophisticated; interesting; vulgar or something else?
4. What does the speaker mean when she says, 'he drains the colour from me'?
5. Why does Duffy write, 'Madame. And do try to be still,' on the same line? Who is speaking here? What does it suggest about the artist's attitude to his model? Why has Duffy placed a full stop in the middle of the line?
6. Why is enjambement used so that 'hung' comes at the end of the line with 'in great museums' on the next one?
7. When Duffy has the speaker say, 'The bourgeoisie will coo/at such an image of a river-whore,' what impression do we get of the 'bourgeoisie'? Do they sound intelligent, intellectual, patronising, something else? Why does the speaker refer to herself as a 'river-whore'? What effect does this word have coming, as it does, at the end of the sentence?
8. 'They call it Art' comes after the speaker has made the comment about the bourgeoisie 'cooing'; what do you think is the speaker's view of these type of paintings?
9. In the second stanza what words or phrases give the impression that the painter merely sees the woman as an object? In contrast, we get a vivid view of the fact that the woman does this work in order to survive; how is this achieved?
10. Why do you think Duffy has included a reference to the 'Queen of England'? What is her purpose in doing this? What is the effect of the comment?
11. Why do you think, 'His name / is Georges' is split between the second and third stanza?
12. The third stanza makes sexual references. Find them and explain why you think Duffy has included them through the voice of the model. What is the model's opinion of the painter?
13. In the fourth stanza the woman directly addresses the painter. Why do you think Duffy waits until this final stanza for this conversation to take place? In what way does the extract of conversation affect the structure of the poem?
14. Why do you think the painter tells the model not to talk? Think about power relationships and status when you answer this question.
15. The sentence, 'At night I fill myself / with wine and dance around the bars' comes in the middle of other, seemingly unrelated, comments; why do you think Duffy has placed it here?
16. How do the last two lines return us to the ideas of the first lines of the poem?
17. Who do you think is more powerful at the end of the poem: the speaker or the painter? Explain your ideas.
18. What do you think of the last line, 'It does not look like / me.'? Again think about power and status when answering. Why do you think 'me' is on a line of its own?