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**Pop Culture Analysis: Carol Ann Duffy’s *The Long Queen***

Born in Glasgow, 1955, Carol Ann Duffy reigns as Britain's first female Poet Laureate holder. Duffy attended the University of Liverpool where she studied philosophy and was heavily involved in the ‘Underground’ poetry seen of the 70’s. Duffy's poetry focuses on speaking for society's oppressed and ignored and I believe The Feminine Gospels does just this. The Feminine Gospels is a collection of poems which highlights the “herstory” of an otherwise patriarchal history. *The Long Queen* is the first poem in the collection and is interpreted to describe the reign of Queen Elizabeth I- one of the first female monarchs. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The fact that the poem is based on Queen Elizabeth I in itself highlights the legal issues surrounding gender equality in our society today; female figureheads were a minority in England during the seventeenth century where there were no laws protecting equal rights for women. However, despite laws such as The Equal Pay Act of 1963 preventing the discrimination of women [[2]](#footnote-2) even in the twenty-first century we are yet to have our first female president.

Regardless of the many laws that create the illusion of gender equality, some laws are yet to have ‘evolved’. I would argue that laws surrounding National Service and drafting have created and maintained gender-based perceptions and stereotypes. Specifically, in countries such as Singapore the National Service laws clearly state that when a Singaporean MALE is of age (18) they must go through a period of military training called National Service, or face being banned from Singapore entirely. [[3]](#footnote-3) One could argue that it is simply a case genetics and that generally, men are perceived as physically stronger and therefore would be able to endure the physical tests of the army where a female would not. However, I would not only argue that it is impossible to make the sweeping assumption that all men are stronger than women due to environmental factors, but also that there are many non-physical roles within the army such as an army engineer which women are perfectly capable of performing, so it is illogical to exclude women. I believe it is drafting laws such as this which not only worsens equality between men and women, but it creates a stigma that women would make inadequate “soldiers”- both literally and metaphorically in terms of the workplace. Duffy alludes to this is the second stanza of *The Long Queen*, writing:

*“What was she queen of? Women, girls,*

*spinsters and hags, matrons, wet nurses,*

*witches, widows, wives, mothers of all these…”*

Duffy’s use of matronly language, as opposed to more typically masculine language such as ‘builders’, emulates the connotations surrounding women and ultimately the profession which they take on; statistics report that careers in which females dominate are professions such as nursing, teaching primary school children and social workers. The tender, nurturing nature of these careers exhibits society’s inability to envision men in nurturing roles and females in more labour-intensive, ‘strength-based’ roles. The fact that women are yet to be drafted, I believe, is largely responsible for this perception and this stigma is further exhibited in the generally physically intensive careers such as the police force and manual labour which are typically male dominated. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Moreover, the drafting laws which exclude women suggest women cannot be commanders. This creates a ripple effect into society, causing positions of leadership to be associated with men only. Interestingly, as The New York Times reported in May, women in chief executive positions has decreased by a stunting 25%.[[5]](#footnote-5) Duffy’s *The Long Queen* underlines the sparsity of women in power with the stanza “*What was she queen of?....widows, wives*…” suggesting that in a society which generally views a heterosexual relationship as the norm, a women’s position and title (wife and widow) are almost destined to revolve around men, and according to statistics this is reflected in the career world.

Another area where laws appear to have empowered women to seemingly give them the same control over their bodies as men are laws surrounding birth control and abortions. Abortions have been made legal and laws criminalizing the use and distribution of contraceptives have been invalidated (Bowman and West pg. 9). Yet, only in February of this year did The University Notre Dame begin providing health coverage for “simple contraceptives” in its plan.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although contraceptives such as the pill have been legal since the sixties, the university had previously excluded contraceptives as the use of contraceptives to prevent conception is contrary to Catholic teaching- a concept dating back to the sixth century. So, despite evolving laws which suggest women have regained control over their bodies as equally as men, women are still being bound by the restricting laws dating from the years where the Bible- containing verses which likened women to mere possessions of men- was the sovereign.

Moreover, despite the legalization of abortions, there are still limits on the reasons one might choose abortion and requirements for foetus internment. Bowman and West note that a concept exists that claims abortions are dangerous according to the theory that women choose abortions without enough information and come to regret their abortion decision. (Bowman and West pg. 9) The mere hypothesis that women typically choose to abort their foetuses without enough information entirely revokes a woman’s control over her own body, suggesting that she is incapable of understanding the depth of her situation and making decisions over her body and her foetus. It could be interpreted that Duffy’s *The Long Queen* references this false assumption of female hysteria or women lacking the ‘correct mindset’ in the previous stanza- “*What was she queen of? …witches*…” - Arguably, the use of the word “witches” when describing women is perhaps a nod to the seventeenth century male perception that women were hysteric and deceptive- just as Eve was believed to have tempted Adam into eating the Forbidden Fruit- and therefore were related to the devil. Thus, reiterating the degrading illusion that women are without the proper rational to make decisions regarding their own bodies.

Ironically, when overviewing laws surrounding birth control and abortions, although the consequences of these acts would directly and immediately effect the women involved, the potential mothers are not the central focus of these laws. Instead, the potential life of a mass of cells is prioritized over the existing life of a mother. According to the Hyde Amendment, Federal law funds, and none of the funds in any trust fund to which funds are authorized or appropriated by Federal law, shall be expended for any abortion. [[7]](#footnote-7) Consequently, even if a woman is a candidate for an abortion, if she is of a lower income bracket, she no longer has control over her future. Ironically, even though a potential mother may not be able to afford an abortion, she is forced to provide for a child for eighteen years.

Stanza six of *The Long Queen* portrays the supressing features of these laws:

*“…push till the room screamed scarlet and children…*

*some to be godmother, aunt, teacher, teller of tall tales,*

*but all who were there to swear that the pain was worth it…”*

The way that Duffy immediately describes the destiny of daughters after describing their birth possibly infers that, because of suppressing laws such as the abortion laws which prevent women from governing their own bodies, a female’s role in society is pre-determined from birth. Moreover, Duffy continues to use matronly language (godmother, aunt) which mimics how the laws which prioritise the foetus will solidify their position in a patriarchal society to mothers, aunts and godmothers. In the fourth line of the stanza *“…all who were there to swear that the pain was worth it…”* Duffy appears to adopt a more sarcastic tone, virtually mocking what women are known to say after giving birth, perhaps suggesting her dissatisfaction with society’s treatment of women. Interestingly, it could be interpreted that the phrase “pain” is duplicitous; Duffy could be referencing the pain of childbirth or the pain of suppressing laws by a patriarchal society.

A third legal issue in our society surrounds the “Tampon Tax”- a sale tax placed on menstrual hygiene products throughout the world. For example, in much of the Europe, feminine hygiene products are considered “luxuries” and therefore subject to the highest rate of VAT (Crawford pg. 495). Access to affordable feminine hygiene products is vital for allowing women to function regularly whilst protecting their dignities. The fact that many states still include the “Tampon Tax” highlights the lack of equality in legislation today. If women (half of the world’s population) are unable to afford hygiene products, they are shamed from education and work when their male peers would be learning and thriving in the meantime.

Some have argued against the revolt of the “Tampon Tax” as it would “…require 40 separate statewide campaigns to sort out all of the weird inconsistencies in their respective sales tax codes...” Moreover, some use the fact there are sales taxes on essential items like toilet paper used to maintain personal cleanliness to insert feminine hygiene products under this umbrella and justify their tax as non-discriminatory (Allen pg. 1). However, I would argue that economic reasons cannot be a factor in preventing the abolison of the “Tampon Tax” if multiple states have successfully done so without causing an economic crash. Furthermore, until the volume of women in more executive, and therefore higher-paying-jobs increases I would reason that unaffordable hygiene products creates a vicious cycle of women being forced to miss school or work and therefore leaving them unable to obtain the skills necessary for a job that allows them to afford these products.

*“Blood: proof, in the Long Queen's colour, royal red,*

*of intent; the pain when a girl*

*fist bled to be insignificant, no cause for complaint,*

*and this to be monthly, linked to the moon, till middle age*

*when the law would change…”*

Duffy highlights the lack of consideration of female bodily functions when describing the menstrual cycle as “*insignificant*” and “…*no cause for complaint…*”. Moreover, although the second half of the stanza could be interpreted as an exact description of the natural laws which govern a female’s body, Duffy metaphorically captures the helplessness of being a woman in a patriarchal society in the way that external forces have more authority over a female than she does herself. A literal understanding of the fourth and fifth lines of the stanza “*when the laws would change*…” further emphasises this metaphor with the idea that until the legal system evolves further, there will never be equality for men and women.

In closing, even with Acts preventing the surface-level discrimination of women, laws surrounding drafting in certain countries, abortions and birth control and finally, the taxing of feminine hygiene products fashions powerful perceptions of women. These influential prejudices against women as authority figures in society and over themselves ultimately governs the status of women in society. Therefore, until laws are adapted, the “herstory” of women will be silenced under the thumb of the patriarchy.

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6. 2 https://president.nd.edu/writings-addresses/2018-writings/letter-on-health-care-coverage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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