



Anthropocene Aquariums: Eco-critical Resistance in the Confined Voices of Duffy's "The Dolphins"

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Abstract— Carol Ann Duffy's poem "The Dolphins" dramatizes the plight of marine life constrained within human-made enclosures. Written in the first-person plural, the poem grants dolphins a voice to articulate their alienation, captivity, and displacement from their ecological habitat. This paper examines "The Dolphins" through the dual theoretical lenses of anthropocene and eco-criticism, situating Duffy's poetic voice as a form of ecological resistance against human domination and exploitation of non-human species. The aquarium here becomes a metaphorical and literal emblem of the anthropocene: a site where human intervention reshapes ecological existence into spectacle, consumption, and confinement. Drawing upon eco-critical thinkers such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Timothy Clark, as well as scholarship on animal studies and green poetics, the paper argues that Duffy's dolphins function as submerged witnesses to the violence of the anthropocene. Through a close textual analysis of the poem, this essay demonstrates how Duffy's dolphins resist erasure by articulating memory, loss, and ecological consciousness within their imprisoned waters, transforming poetic form into a site of resistance against ecological degradation.

Keywords— Anthropocene, eco-criticism, captivity, Carol Ann Duffy, marine poetics, animal voice, green poetics, ecological resistance



I. INTRODUCTION

Carol Ann Duffy, Britain's first female Poet Laureate, is widely recognized for her ability to combine lyricism with sharp socio-political critique. Her poem "The Dolphins" (first published in *Standing Female Nude*, 1985) exemplifies her ecological consciousness by granting voice to dolphins living in an aquarium. Unlike the traditional human-centered lyric, this poem foregrounds the non-human perspective, compelling readers to confront the ethical implications of animal confinement.

The poem opens with the haunting lines:

"World is what you swim in, or dance, it is simple.

We are in our element but we are not free" (Duffy 35).

Immediately, the dolphins' voice juxtaposes natural belonging with human-imposed captivity. The oceanic freedom intrinsic to their being has been replaced by a limited, artificial "world" within the aquarium. This

displacement dramatizes the broader conditions of the anthropocene—a geological epoch defined by human dominance over ecological systems.

This paper situates Duffy's "The Dolphins" as a poetic site where the anthropocene is resisted from within the very structures of confinement. By analyzing the dolphins' voices through the lens of eco-critical thought, the study reveals how the poem becomes a critique of ecological exploitation, animal subjugation, and human-centered spectacle.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ANTHROPOCENE AND ECO-CRITICISM

i) The Anthropocene

The concept of the anthropocene, first popularized by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, refers to a new geological epoch where human activity has become the dominant

influence on climate and ecosystems (Crutzen and Stoermer 17). In literary studies, the anthropocene has been explored as a cultural paradigm that redefines how humans understand their relationship with the non-human world. Timothy Clark notes that the anthropocene involves "an unthinkable scale of human agency" that destabilizes older ecological categories (Clark 7).

In this framework, aquariums epitomize the anthropocene. They are artificial ecosystems where human control is absolute, shaping marine life into spectacle. Dolphins in aquariums represent the reduction of ecological beings into anthropocentric entertainment. Duffy's dolphins, however, disrupt this reduction by voicing the trauma of confinement.

ii) Eco-criticism and Green Poetics

Eco-criticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Lawrence Buell expands this view by emphasizing that eco-critical texts should recognize nonhuman interests, foreground ecological interconnectedness, and resist anthropocentric reduction (Buell 7–8).

Carol Ann Duffy's poem participates in what may be called 'green poetics', a poetic practice that restores ecological subjectivities and articulates environmental resistance. By adopting the dolphins' perspective, Duffy resists anthropocentrism and invites readers to empathize with non-human suffering. The dolphins become subjects rather than objects, narrators rather than exhibits.

III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: THE DOLPHINS AS CONFINED VOICES

i) Captivity and Alienation

The dolphins declare:

*"There is a man and there are hoops,
there is a constant flowing guilt"* (Duffy 35).

The imagery of "hoops" signifies the artificial tricks imposed by trainers, transforming dolphins into circus performers. The presence of "a man" embodies anthropocentric authority, dictating the terms of their existence.

The phrase "constant flowing guilt" reflects both the imposed routines and the unceasing exploitation that underlies captivity. Guilt flows like water, becoming part of the very environment the dolphins inhabit. This demonstrates how the Anthropocene creates spaces of

ecological alienation where natural agency is curtailed by spectacle.

ii) Memory and Displacement

The dolphins lament:

"We were blessed and now we are not blessed.

It was the same space. It is

the same place always and above it is the man" (Duffy 36).

The shift from blessing to deprivation dramatizes the dislocation from their natural habitat. Though water remains constant ("the same space"), its meaning has changed under human control. This captures what eco-critics call ecological displacement: the transformation of natural environments into sites of confinement.

The dolphins' memories of the ocean function as a form of resistance. Memory preserves ecological continuity against anthropogenic rupture. By voicing remembrance, the dolphins resist the erasure of their natural lives.

iii) Anthropocene Aquariums

The aquarium in the poem becomes a metaphor for the anthropocene: a world reshaped entirely by human hands. The dolphins explain:

"The world we have is small.

For us the world is flat and round, it has no end" (Duffy 36).

The paradox of a "flat and round" world reflects the contradiction of confinement—it mimics natural infinity but is inherently limited. This recalls Clark's notion of "anthropocene irony," where human-created environments simulate natural worlds while destroying the originals (Clark 18). The aquarium, thus, embodies both mimicry and violence: a reduced anthropocene version of the ocean.

iv) Eco-critical Resistance and Submerged Witnessing

Despite captivity, the dolphins continue to speak:

*"There is a coloured ball we have to balance till the
whistle blows.*

We have no hope. There is no hope.

We sink to the limits of this pool" (Duffy 36).

The repeated negation—"no hope"—marks the existential despair of confined life. Yet the act of speaking itself constitutes eco-critical resistance.

By testifying to their suffering, the dolphins become submerged witnesses of ecological violence. Their poetic voice disrupts the silence imposed by captivity. Duffy's choice of first-person plural ("we") emphasizes collective

identity and solidarity, transforming individual despair into a shared ecological testimony.

IV. DISCUSSION: POETICS OF RESISTANCE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Carol Ann Duffy's "The Dolphins" is not merely a lament of captivity but a carefully constructed 'poetics of resistance', where language itself becomes an ecological weapon against the silencing force of human domination. The poem operates within the anthropocene, a time in which human agency reshapes ecosystems to such an extent that even the natural habitats of dolphins become commodified spaces of entertainment. The aquarium, as depicted in the poem, is both a literal site of ecological control and a metaphor for the broader planetary condition of ecological confinement.

By choosing the dolphins' collective voice ("we"), Duffy disrupts the human-centered lyric tradition. The dolphins narrate their own alienation:

"The world we have is small.

For us the world is flat and round, it has no end" (Duffy 36).

The paradox of their "flat and round" world testifies to a simulated infinity that masks real limitation. What humans perceive as harmless containment—a circular pool—becomes, for the dolphins, an existential reduction of their lived oceanic world. This paradox is central to the anthropocene: environments designed by humans to mimic nature, but which in fact erase ecological authenticity (Clark 18).

Resistance emerges in Duffy's poetics through three interrelated strategies: voice, memory, and testimony. First, the act of granting voice to dolphins resists the anthropocentric silencing of non-human creatures. Scholars in animal studies such as Cary Wolfe have argued that the human/animal divide persists because animals are denied subjectivity (Wolfe 102). Duffy counters this divide by giving dolphins consciousness, perception, and language. Their words reclaim agency, destabilizing the human monopoly on voice.

Second, memory functions as a form of resistance. The dolphins recall the oceanic past:

"We were blessed and now we are not blessed.

It was the same space. It is different" (Duffy 36).

These lines express ecological trauma—where continuity of space (water) is disrupted by transformation of meaning (freedom replaced by confinement). Memory resists the flattening of history that captivity enforces; it insists on an

alternative narrative, one that remembers the ocean as a site of belonging rather than spectacle.

Third, testimony transforms suffering into critique. The dolphins' declaration, "We have no hope. There is no hope" (Duffy 36), while seemingly a cry of despair, functions as an ecological indictment. It directs ethical responsibility toward human readers, implicating them in the system of captivity. This recalls Lawrence Buell's insistence that literature must generate an "environmental accountability" that challenges readers' moral complacency (Buell 11). The dolphins' hopelessness becomes an ethical provocation for the human audience.

Importantly, Duffy's poetics does not romanticize nature in the traditional pastoral sense. Instead, it stages the Anthropocene condition as one of fractured belonging and ecological violence. As Ursula Heise notes, contemporary ecocriticism must move beyond nostalgia for untouched nature and engage with the global realities of ecological circulation and exploitation (Heise 59). Duffy's aquarium is not a pastoral but an anti-pastoral—a deliberately artificial ecosystem where resistance must be articulated from within confinement.

Thus, the poem's eco-critical resistance lies in its capacity to hold contradiction: to articulate despair while producing voice, to reveal alienation while invoking memory, and to transform captivity into testimony. The dolphins, though imprisoned, are not silent. Their voices disturb the spectacle, transforming the aquarium into a site of ecological critique. In doing so, Duffy reimagines lyric poetry as a vehicle for environmental resistance in the anthropocene.

V. CONCLUSION

Carol Ann Duffy's "The Dolphins" emerges as a powerful eco-critical text that situates marine life at the center of poetic expression. By voicing the dolphins' experiences of captivity, the poem critiques the ecological violence of the anthropocene and resists anthropocentric spectacle.

The aquarium becomes a metaphor for a world reshaped by human control—simultaneously mimicking and destroying natural habitats. Yet within this confinement, the dolphins articulate memory, loss, and resistance, transforming poetic voice into ecological testimony.

In doing so, Duffy demonstrates the capacity of green poetics to challenge the anthropocene, to amplify non-human voices, and to compel readers toward ecological consciousness. "The Dolphins" resists silence by transforming suffering into speech, captivity into critique, and confinement into poetic resistance.

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