

# The Dolphins

by Carol Ann Duffy

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**1. (a) In the poem 'The Dolphins' the poet talks about the collective understanding of the dolphins about their individual pain, which helps them in survival. Explain.**

**Answer:** The poet -Carol Ann Duffy, has given a voice to the feelings and woes of dolphins kept in captivity in her poem 'The Dolphins. The dolphin in the poem starts with a second person narrative but after a few lines, it switches to the first person plural. The collective voice in 'we' signifies a quest for truth and an awareness of selfhood that is not selfish. This is made clear in references to the 'other'. The third stanza stresses the mutual understanding between the dolphins and how they define themselves in terms of each other. "The other knows/and out of love reflects me for me". This emotionally touching insight into their relationship shows a sense of otherness, respect for independence and mutuality. The dolphin's companion shares the knowledge that life has changed irrevocably and tries to reduce the present pain by simply being a sympathetic other' of its species. The pronoun 'myself clearly indicates that the fact that the dolphin who speaks in the poem is able to maintain its veracity as a result of this mutual understanding. The sense of loss of former freedom is intensified by the visual description, We see our silver skin flash by like memory, or somewhere else.' The simile brings together the dolphins' intimate bodily knowledge of each other but simultaneously reminds them of a time when there were multitudes of such sights. The dolphin is naturally sociable and often travels in shoals of several hundred. Their real-world is now referred to as 'somewhere else'. The support that one dolphin gives to the other helps them in making this captive life bearable and sustainable.

**(b) The artificial nature and monotonous routine of the dolphins' lives have been depicted in the poem. Explain.**

**Answer:** The poet has depicted the unbearable life that the dolphins are exposed to once they have been brought from the free life of the oceans. This life is artificial where a natural phenomenon is replaced by artificial objects and settings, like the ball that a dolphin is given to play with. When the dolphin observes that the 'moon has disappeared' there is a visual association being made between the spheres that are the ball and the moon. An artificial manmade object has replaced the natural creator of the tides. The artificial ball is a funny and foolish replacement for the real moon. The final stanza's presentation of the dolphins' predicament is bleak and hopeless. The image of a record being played repeatedly is used as an analogue for the seemingly eternal circuits that the dolphins make in the pool that confines them. They have nothing new to do in their lives. The poet effectively depicts the experience of sound that the animal experiences when they 'circle well-worn grooves, of water on a single note.' The monotony of existence communicated in

a single note' and its effects are compounded by the dolphin's expression of utter desolation as, in the next sentence, it tells of the effect of its companion's mournful voice. The dolphin can feel the sadness of its fellow and its eternal music of loss' keening over its dilemma and imminent doom is enough to turn the listening dolphin's heart 'to stone'.

**(c) What does the line "After travelling such space for days we began to translate" refer to?**

**Answer:** In the poem "The Dolphins", the poet mentions the monotonous routine to which the dolphins are bound and how they are reduced to a life of captivity. The line-"After travelling such space for days we began to translate" signifies how the dolphins are now trying to accept their fate. They are well aware that once they have been brought by humans to this artificial home, they cannot leave it until they die naturally. The dolphins who were used to travelling around in the open space for days have now started to translate. The word 'translate' refers to the fact that the dolphins had to change their mindset to live in these limited waters now. The dolphins who were once surrounded by oceans are still surrounded by water, but though it's the same space, the latter space is not the one they are used to. They still desire the same space but the difference is that the present life is one in captivity where there is nothing natural. It also explains that what looks basically the same is so different in reality. Swimming in a pool and playing in the ocean are two totally different experiences. There can never be similar pleasure in both. The dolphins have lived since birth in open spaces and now they are in captivity. This captivity is also without a limit. They can never get out of it until they are dead. The knowledge of their imminent death in captivity makes their present life unbearable.

Long Questions and Answers

**1. What are the themes conveyed by Carol Ann Duffy in his poem 'The Dolphins'? In what way is the poem symbolic?**

**Answer:** In the poem The Dolphins, Carol Ann Duffy tried to focus on the themes of oppression, control, domination, confinement, and limitations. This poem is written for the purpose of telling us that although dolphins are mammals and are man's friends, man is dominating these dolphins. controlling them and restricting their freedom.

The tone is depressing and it is evident from the lines "There is no hope" and "our mind knows we will die here" and it shows how the dolphins are assured that they will have a bleak future. "We are not free" and "cannot breathe for long emphasizes that they have no freedom as their movements are restricted as they are captives. Dolphins require water to survive. The pool in which they find themselves is limited and shallow circumscribed which represents a disturbing alien environment.

In this poem, "the man" shows how the man is seen to be superior and he has power over

the dolphins. The trainer's whistle periodically hails them from its limits to repeat a series of tricks. The dolphin narrates its plight by remembering its previous free life in the ocean, speaks about the experience of being confined to an aquarium with others of its kind where it is expected to perform tricks in the aquatic equivalent of a circus and where its freedom is limited.

The dolphins' survival is consequent upon the faultless and repeated performance of these tricks for they can never return to where they originated and failure will result in rejection and possible extermination.

The mood of this entire poem revolves around the depressing state of the dolphins who are devoid of hope and freedom and are confined by man. "We see our silver skin flash.....else'. Here the use of simile 'silver skin flash by like memory, shows how the dolphins keep thinking about the times when they were in the sea and when the natural sunlight reflects off their skin, giving it a silvery appearance. The poem is dominated by a sense of loss and nostalgia with reminders of oppression, control, and confinement.

**2. The Dolphins is a poem which conveys meanings in both metaphorical and literary sense. Explain. You may use the points below for reference.**

- **betrayal of friendship by humans.**
- **lost freedom.**
- **humans live in the technology-driven world, controlled by work.**
- **they, like dolphins, have no place to call home.**
- **the home consists of family, people to communicate and freedom.**

**Answer:** 'The Dolphins' is a poem, which highlights the troubled life of dolphins, man's best friend at sea. The poem portrays dolphins as the speakers who speak of their troubles in a tone of disappointment. They feel that although they are man's best friend in the sea, they are trapped and ordered to do the same work every day which they do not enjoy and know that they are around to entertain their so-called friends. They live in a world of doubt and wonder if humans were their best friends in the past and realise all they lived in was a make-belief. They have forever lost and forgotten what freedom is, as they are certain that they will live until death in the trapped waters with fanciful boundaries and toys. The dolphins, which sound and seem very friendly and put up a jovial front in front of humans live and think in a world of desolation and loneliness- away from home.

Humans can be considered similar to dolphins. They feel that they are blessed to be the most intelligent and most dominant of all animal kingdom. They lead a different life from the rest of the animals and believe that their world is easier and simpler than all other animals'. However, they are not aware that they themselves are trapped and live in the world in which they are forced to balance the coloured ball. The happy times they spent with family and for the human race are now the past, which is an illusion of joy to them. All

they are attached to is technology and modern devices, leaving their home, family and the free sea. At the end of the day, in the dark night, they return home which is now all deserted and adds to the emptiness in their hearts. They believe that they will die within the boundaries created by the technology-driven world, one that is far away from home.

**3. What do dolphins in the poem symbolize? Write your answer based on your opinions and understanding of the poem along with statements to support your answer. You may use the points below for reference.**

- dolphins represent oppression, lack of freedom and domination.
- their loyalty is disregarded by humans who trap them and restrict them from usual life.
- they lose all freedom, memories and begin to question their existence.
- after being trapped, all they can do is serve humans in circuses as entertainment, who were once their friends.

**Answer:** The Dolphins represent oppression, lack of freedom and domination. To them, the world is limited to only swimming and dancing at orders from humans. They live where they belong but are trapped. The line "We are in our element but we are not free", suggests the idea of the poem and the plight of dolphins.

Dolphins believe that they live in a world of lies, which has no explanations and question their lack of freedom.

A dolphin by character is considered loyal, friendly and delicate. Dolphins along with being friendly and loyal are also intelligent beings. The reason behind their questioning indicates their realization of the current conditions they live in. A dolphin's intellect is perhaps the only reason they question human systems, methods, and thoughts. From trusting people they turn into truth-seekers after they are locked up in the human environment. To them, life after being caught by man means living with hopes that they will remain safe in the human environment as long as they continue to rotate the coloured ball on their nose and pass through the multiple hoops prepared by humans in circus shows.

The will and memories of dolphins are clearly oppressed when they live with humans - the friends they once had but lost after they realized how human desires destroyed memories, families and erased all traces of a home. They are dominated every now and then by the will of humans - lack of freedom and restricting sea creatures to one region is an instance of humans domineering over dolphins.

To them, the oceans and the air are vast, limitless and without barriers. Trapping a dolphin in a fancy circus region is equivalent to trapping a free bird in a golden cage for entertainment. All that remains with them is the availability of basic resources to let them live.

A dolphin isn't only trapped by humans physically, but also begins to experience betrayal by humans, which continue to oppress the will and expression of these living creatures, humans' best friends at sea.