

Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry as a Return to the Kristevian Chora
Patricia Tabarés Pérez/Leonor Pérez Ruiz, University of Valladolid (Spain)

Index

- 1 Introduction
 - 2 Exploration into women's world(s): synchronic and diachronic perspectives
 - 3 The materialization of Kristeva's *chora* into Duffy's poems on women
 - 4 Conclusion
- Bibliography

1 Introduction

Needless to say that without the struggle of suffragists and existential feminists, women would have not participated in the political and legal systems propitiated via the vote. Needless to say either that without the battles waged by women after May 1968 and the work of committed scholars, women would have not obtained access to any sociocultural recognition. These feminist consecutions are easily found today in academic manuals about the history of feminism, its interdisciplinarity and intertextuality, its general effects and consequences upon groups of average women. However (and this is the consideration from which the questions raised in this paper have emerged), it is not so easy to come across rigorous academic examinations of how feminism has affected (if it has and to what extent) to particular women as individuals; to women belonging neither to political nor academic circles.

2 Exploration into women's world(s): synchronic and diachronic perspectives

It is obviously true that works such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1962), where groups of average women are described, have obtained their data from particular women's behaviour and experiences. But, due to the inductive method of their academic research, this information has been generalized *a posteriori*. The exploration carried away from the opposite direction, the deductive analysis of the particular cases from the theoretical precepts, has been usually undervalued because of two reasons: firstly, its scope has been narrowed to individuals; and secondly, its examination has been relegated to the so-called non-scientific minor genres (as diaries or letters), and to artistic manifestations. These last ones have exploited recently the very postmodernist technique of clashing women from different generations in the same space-time context occurring in the artistic work. In other terms, they pretend to offer a holistic representation of feminism through generations where synchronic and diachronic perspectives are synthesized. A novel as A. S. Byatt's Booker-prized *Possession* (1990), Stephen Daldry's film *The Hours* (2002), or Carol Ann Duffy¹'s lyric poem 'A Clear Note' (1985) are just but a few of these inter-generational routes lately traced for analysing women's evolution, transformation and consecutions, the literature-life encounter, and the enigmatic answer to 'what being a woman means' from this deductive perspective.

This exploration into women's world(s) has been a Duffy's poetry's hallmark since the 1980s, when after two pamphlets of poems, a deeply sensitive, fresh and witty

¹ Scottish woman, feminist, lesbian, working class, left-wing, nominated for becoming Poet Laureate (1999), a leading member of the *New Generation Poets* (1994), and widely-awarded poet, Carol Ann Duffy (Glasgow, 1955-) has contributed to revitalise Scottish and British poetry since the early 1980s with a fresh, witty, social and eclectic discourse.

approach to women overflowed in her first poetry collection² *Standing Female Nude* (1985). From the late 1980s, and due to historical reasons, Duffy's writing has evidently benefitted from the first and second feminist waves. And, even though this might seem to be a reductive obstacle for her poetry, her areas of interest have been greatly ramified after such contact with the previous feminist background. This privileged perspective, defined by Rees-Jones as "a bridge between a feminist and postfeminist *poetics*", has favoured the conjugation of issues such as "the importance of women's experience, the difficulties of women's lives, [...] the difficulties that patriarchy presents to both men and women" (Rees-Jones 2001: 3) together with "issues of gender, identity, sexuality, alienation, desire and loss in a way which at the same time foregrounds the difficulties of communication, objectivity and truth" (3).

The creation of these new spaces in the poems, bringing about negotiations between Western binarisms as the old and the new, the essence and absence, the self and the other, feminism and postmodernism, etc., beyond their mere metaphysical speculation in the lyric frame, is an evidence of Duffy's preference for establishing factual dialogues between antagonistic discourses. This means that (as Gregson (1996) anticipated when describing Duffy in bakhtinian terms as a dialogic poet), such discursive dialogues are translated physically into her poems as crossroads where multiple and heterogeneous voices meet and interact as participants into a social encounter for which they were doomed. The dialogic essence in her poems becomes, thus, a reality with the presence of miscellaneous discourses inserted into dual context situations propitiated by the dynamic oscillation between the microcosm (where each voice speaks in), and the macrocosm (where each voice interacts with other voices), between the "lyric I" (who distils the world through the still of his/her words) and the "other(s)" (who influence the lyric I's wittgensteinian representation of that world). Such confrontation is accurately observed by Kinnahan, concerning feminism in Duffy's poetry, when she argues that "a 'mainstream' poet like Carol Ann Duffy displaces a strict opposition, bringing into contact varying modes of feminist work exploring the speaking subject with respect to social, public structures" (2004: 182). Nonetheless, that tensional encounter between the individual and the social impregnates Duffy's poetic texts whatever their topics are.

3 The materialization of Kristeva's *chora* into Duffy's poems on women

Bearing in mind the relevance of the key terms identified so far in Duffy's poetry: the discursive interaction, the relevance of context and the calculated opening of spaces, it is about time to formulate our hypothesis about Duffy's poems on women becoming the materialization of Kristeva's *chora* into lyric poetry. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) Kristeva borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus* the term *chora* (literally 'space' in Greek) meaning generally a space or receptacle associated with the mother. The Bulgarian feminist theorist related such space with the processes and relations anterior to sign and syntax and therefore to the maternal territory previous to the semiotic "discharge of Pre-Oedipal instinctual energies and drives within language" (Leitch 2001:2166). From our point of view, Duffy's poems on women embody this return to that receptacle or womb connected to the maternal, the feminine, the unsignifiable, the mysterious non-infected stage previous to the establishment of the patriarchal society (and patriarchal language), where women (as readers, writers, speakers and, above

² To the present, Duffy's poetry collections are *Fleshweathercock and Other Poems*, Walton-on-Thames: Outposts, 1973; *Fifth Last Song*, London: Headland, 1982; *Standing Female Nude*, London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1985; *Selling Manhattan*, London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1987; *The Other Country*, London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1990; *Mean Time*, London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1990; *The World's Wife*, London: Picador, 1999; *Feminine Gospels*, London: Picador, 2002; *Rapture*, London: Picador/Macmillan (forthcoming in September 2005).

all, participants) may attend to for revisiting, reconsidering, and rewriting their own place in a history exclusively carved by men. Considering this proposal, the aim of this paper is first, to explore how Duffy's female speaking subjects evolve in 'A Clear Note' once that her inter-generational route has been displayed in the discursive frame of a lyric poem; and second, to study if these particular female voices have found in Duffy's poem a real and useful space (a *chora* of their own) for revisiting, reconceiving and rewriting themselves, or if the poem has just resulted into an illusion wrapping a patriarchal reality from which it is impossible to escape.

Before approaching such questions, it is essential to advance that "A Clear Note" is a 144 verse lines poem included in *Standing Female Nude* (1985), divided into three parts which are the utterances of three women from the same family but from different generations. The first generation emigrated from Ireland to Scotland (Glasgow) bringing about widespread repercussions to the second and third generations. The sequence of poems follows the biological order, beginning with Part I, the grandmother's dramatic monologue (Agatha), followed by Part II, the daughter's dramatic monologue (Moll), and finished with Part III, the granddaughter's interior monologue (Bernadette). Because of the dialogic nature of Duffy's poetry mentioned above, these three women go beyond the limits of their speeches participating into the other women's parts and even reproducing the other women's voices. For that reason, the poem is an example of dialogic polyphony where the three women talk and advice interactively to each other about the consecution of women's dreams in a harmonious piece orchestrated by Duffy.

Proceeding to analyse the aim of this paper, two theoretical steps must be outlined after pondering the poem as a discursive exchange: first, the poem estimated as an example of literary communication, and second, the relevance of context for understanding the lyric speaking subjects' reactions and evolutions.

The first step for examining A Clear Note's female speaking subjects is to propose their inclusion in the poem as participants into a communicative interactive process. This perspective has been developed after the theoretical achievements in Linguistic Communication (Bühler 1934; Jakobson 1960; Lyons 1980; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1986; etc.) and its application to Literary Communication (Widdowson 1975; Sell 1991, 2001; etc.) and Literary Pragmatics (Ohmann 1971, 1976; van Dijk 1973; Pratt 1975; Levin 1976; Todorov 1981; York 1986; etc.). Accordingly, the template for analysing poetry proposed in this study conceives poems as triangular discursive exchanges where, as Sell puts it: "two parties will always be in communication about a third entity" (1991: 138).

The second step (supporting the dialogic nature of Duffy's poetry and the association studied in this paper between 'A Clear Note' and Feminism) is to outline the utmost importance of the very pragmatic concept of *context* in the poem. Context is understood here from an exophoric or situational reference (using Halliday and Hassan's terms 1976). It includes, from our point of view, a necessary revision to (1) the isolated speaking subject's environment at the time of uttering in the poem (the microcosm), and (2) the shared speaking subject's environment at the time of uttering in the poem (the macrocosm). In the first case, we receive the information about the speaking subject from him/herself (context D in Figures 1, 2, 3), and in the second one, the information obtained proceeds from his/her interrelation with the other participants in the poem (context F in Figures 1, 2, 3). This second context is equivalent to Sell's *unitary context* (1991:284, 2001:120) split into the *inner* context (space-time references; linguistic situation; non-linguistic situation) and *outer* context (direct style; irony; intertextuality).

Beginning with the analysis of Agatha's discourse, as the first speaking subject appearing in 'A Clear Note', and attending to the first type of context mentioned above (the speaking subject in isolation), Agatha describes herself as a stereotypical woman born in the early 20th century western world. She is a committed mother of eight children ("Eight children to feed," l.1; "Four kids to each breast", l.2), (Moll is one of

them), who had to emigrate from Ireland to Scotland looking for better working conditions (“all my life I wanted the fields the Ireland only”, III.9; “Instead, a move across the water / to Glasgow”, IV.13-14). Physically, she has been a pretty woman (“my long auburn hair.”, I.4; “Once I was glorious with a new frock and high hopes.”, VIII.32; “I was famous for my hats” X.40; “Remember / my fine hair and my smart stride”, XI.42-43), and desired by men (“Workmen whistled as I stepped out, / although I ignored them. I had pride.” XI.41-42). But she married a dominating husband only interested in using her for satisfying his desires (“*Kiss me goodnight*- me weeping in our bed. / The scunner would turn away cold, back rigid, / but come home from work and take me on the floor / With his boots on and his blue eyes shut.” II.5-8); “And he / wouldn't so much as hold me alter the act.” V.19-20). Personally, Agatha feels frustrated since her husband has suppressed her dreams as a woman (“the fields of Ireland only / and a man to delight in me / who'd never be finished with kisses and say / *Look at the moon. My darling. The moon.*” III.9-12), to the extent that she is not able to love any more (“I felt love freeze / to a fine splinter in my heart.” IV.15-16; “The snowqueen's heart / stopping forever and melting as it stopped.” VII.30-31).

A study of her vocabulary manifests significantly how Agatha's more aggressive discourse is accentuated whenever she insults at her husband (“scunner”, II.6; “the devil” IV.15; “a corpse walking round in a good suit and a trilby” VI.22-23; “*that bastard*” Part III.VI.22-23), as this illustrates their couple relationship from the wife's perspective. Her mother's role is present in her approach to a *family* where the father does not participate (“children” (I.1), “kids” (I.2), “daughter” (X.38), “grandchild” (XII.47). Dealing with her dreams as a woman (dream; IX.33, 36), pictures of kisses (“kiss”, II.5; “kisses”, III.11) and the moon as the three women's iconic links since its reference to love and fecundity (III.12(x2); VII.28(x2); XII.48; and Part III. VII.25). But such dreams have vanished, as it was expected, frustrating Agatha who cries about the *cooling of personal relationships* (“cold back rigid”, II.6; “freeze”, III.15; “snowqueen's heart”, VIII.30), her annihilation as a woman compared to the *spider* which ends up consuming itself (“rope”, V.18; “spinning and wringing at its own neck”, V.19), and her *voice being silenced* (“broken voice”, VII.25; “words”, VII.26; “recall”, VII.26; “whisper”, VII.27).

The inner context (Fig.1) belonging to the unitary context propitiates the presentation of the socialized speaking subject, and thus, the poem's dialogic interaction between the participants. As it is displayed in the diagram, Agatha speaks directly (through the free direct speech typical of the dramatic monologue) to Moll and Bernadette by personal allusions, and to readers as extratextual addressees. This conversation will influence Moll's and Bernadette's speeches in Parts II & III.

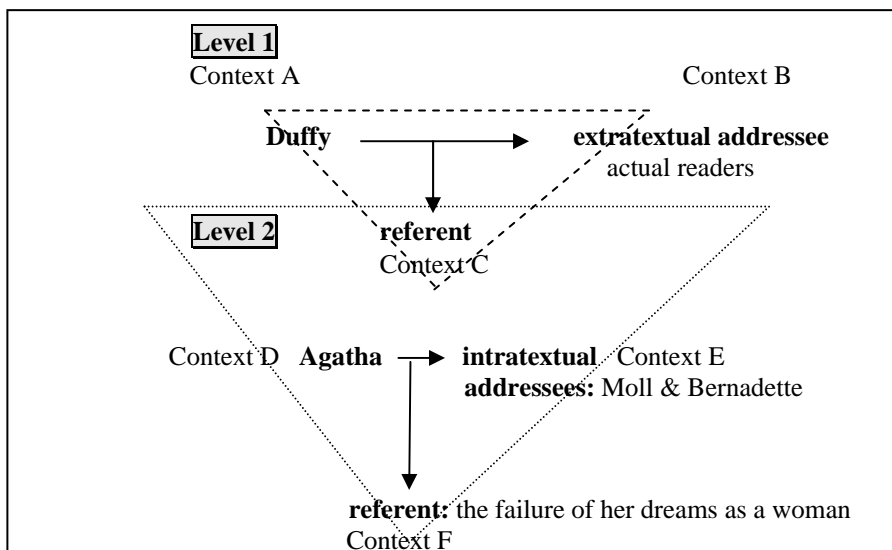


Fig. 1. Part I. Agatha (Verse lines 1-48)

The outer situation shows ironic comments about her husband (with the insults), and instances of direct style (in most of her speech), but it is of the outmost importance when dealing with intertextuality, since this is the point where we perceive the first stage in this inter-generational route. Agatha, this woman born in the early 20th century, evolves in the poem keeping a not so distant trajectory from the one traced by the first wave's activists. Even though if, at first sight, Agatha plays the female role patriarchally imposed to women over centuries (a committed mother and wife), her search for a space where she may self-express brings her closer to one of the main first wave's consecution. This is, using Kristeva's words, women's insertion in "the linear time as the time of project and history" (1989, 1993:197). Agatha may not be demanding publicly political or legal achievements or demonstrating along the streets. However, her particular battle begins when she is aware of being a dislocated woman dominated in her own home, her own bed, and even her own tomb (as she will have her husband "*rotting above [her] for all eternity*", Part III. VI. 22-23), so that she decides to transmit her frustration (speaking after being dead) to Moll, Bernadette, and the readers. This means that her access into Duffy's lyric poem together with her contact with the forthcoming generations (her relatives and readers) are the metaphysical territories from which she can avoid that her words are silenced for ever.

Approaching Moll's discourse, the first important fact to mention is that she is the speaking subject who uses the 1st person singular pronoun more frequently for referring to herself (30 times in 48 verse lines as subject, object, reflexive pronoun and possessive pronoun). It appears to be the woman who really needs to convince herself about her own identity. She is a middle-aged woman ("I'm forty-nine in May." II.4), born in the transitional generation between the early 20th century (Agatha's) and the late 20th century (Bernadette's). She works out of the house ("The job pays well, but more than that / there's the freedom.", III.9-10), but she keeps on being the only one working inside ("Sometimes I think I'll walk out the door / and keep on walking. But then / there's the dinner to cook.", IV.13-15). Contrary to the taboo subject that sex was in Agatha's generation, Moll (whose name is the slang for prostitute (Gronow, 1998)) speaks openly to her daughter about her sexual desires ("I've been drained since twenty, but not empty / yet. I roam inside myself, have / such visions you'd no credit. The best times / are daydreams with a cigarette." VII.25-28). The barrier avoiding Moll's freedom and dreams has been erected by her husband's dominant attitude ("Your father is against it.", III.19; "I can't fly out to stay with you alone, / there'd be fights for a month. / He broods on what I'd get up to / given half the chance. Men!" IX.33-36) and Moll's underestimation by her husband and sons ("yet four daft sons / and a husband handle me like gold leaf. / Me with a black hole of resources." X.40).

Moll is the speaking subject who first mentions Agatha's death, so that her speech abounds with related words: "her death" (III.10), "flowers" (IV.15), "tombstone" (IV.16). Likewise, she uses vocabulary dealing with her liberation as a woman ("freedom", III.10; "drunk", VIII.29; "daydreams with a cigarette", VII.25-28) and those symbols (mentioned equally by Agatha and Bernadette), shaping women's space where their dreams will be true ("seaside", VI.22; "moon", XII.47; "impossible seas", XII.46; "stars", XI.43), revealing the connection between mothers and daughters (V), and the mystery of maternity just shared by women.

The inner context (Fig.2) shows the dialogic exchange between Moll who speaks directly to Bernadette, and to readers as extratextual addressees.

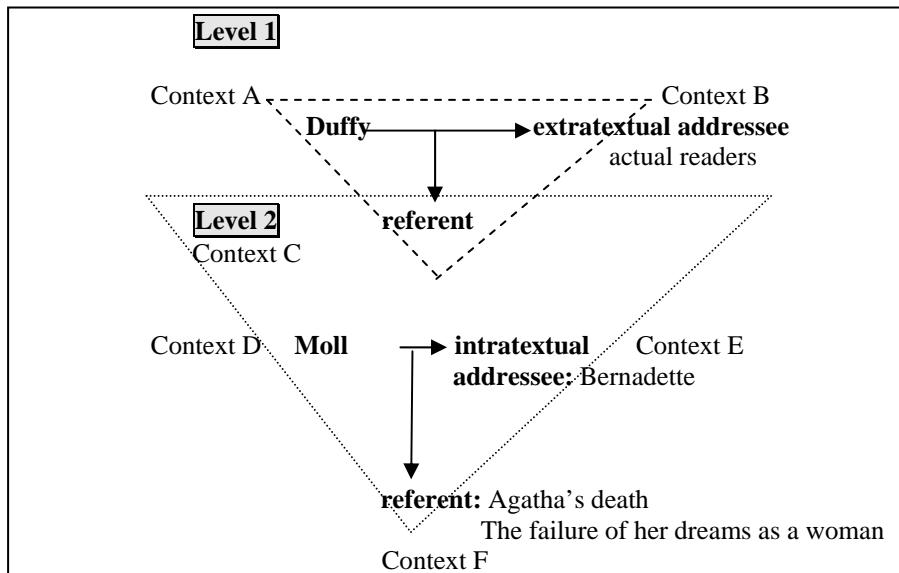


Fig. 2. Part II. Moll (Verse lines 49-96)

Moll believes firmly to belong to a different generation from that of her mother's one. She needs to reaffirm her identity into the space-time context which follows Agatha's one, so that she tries to change the depiction of femininity as second wave's women did (Whelehan 1995). And, instead of using feminine hats as Agatha, Moll contradictorily prefers to identify herself with the masculine power becoming closer to male caps (They call me Madcap Moll. I'd love to leap / on a bike and ride to the seaside / alone." VI.21-23).

Moll has benefited undoubtedly from the first wave's consecutions, as this second generation (and second stage in the poem) has had the chance of working out of the house. Nevertheless, Moll can not escape from the social institution of family, or at least, to decide about the roles that she has to represent within it. Besides her job outside, Moll keeps on being, in Whelehan's terms, "the person in charge of the socialization of children" together with the "emotional cushion to protect the (male) worker from the psychological damage caused by the alienation of the workplace" (1995: 17). What is Moll's space then in her own life? As a representative member of the second wave (becoming aware, as the second wave's women did, of how her space has been neglected by men), Moll realizes that the achievement of total freedom has a dear price to pay. Even if she reaches the sea (her dream) at the end of the poem, Moll remains still enclosed into the obsessive limits of family which the patriarchal society has built up surrounding her. Her only chances of expressing herself and find her identity take just place in the evanescent territory of her imaginary daydreams and the more lasting frame of the lyric poem.

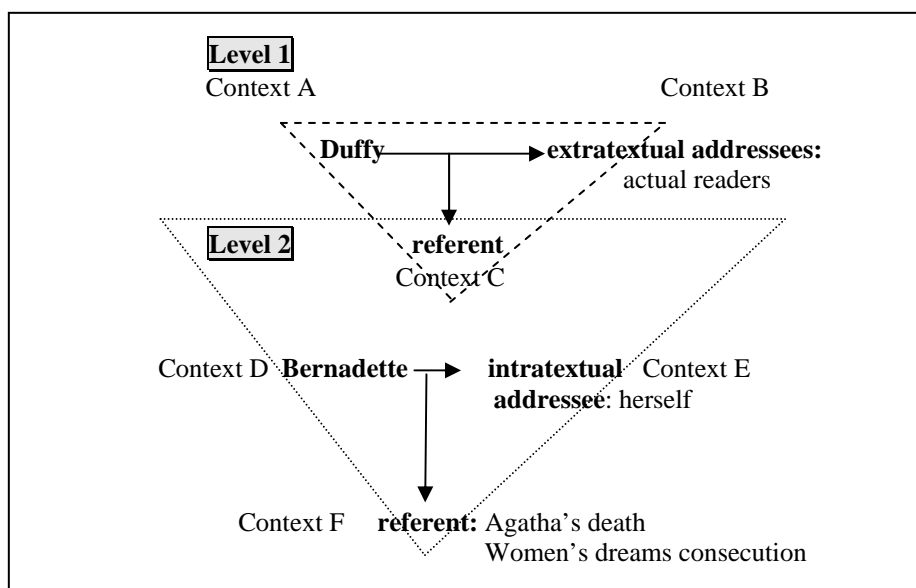


Fig. 3. Part III. Bernadette (Verse lines 97-144)

Bernadette's speech is on the contrary a purgative regeneration expressing her own reflection upon Agatha's death and the experiences gone through by her female ancestors. At this third stage of the poem, 'A Clear Note' abandons the public denounce uttered through the two previous dramatic monologues, opting instead for the more reflexive and calmer tone of the interior monologue. Her only addressees are herself (as the recipient of her own meditation), and the actual readers, witnessing Bernadette's female ancestor's suffering and dreams' destruction ("one day / you must tell *them* I wanted the moon. Yes." Part I. XII.47-48).

Bernadette is the only woman, out of the three, who does not mention the family, a husband, children, or the masculine. She has accepted her mother's advice of not becoming a mother ("*Never have kids. Give birth to yourself*", VIII.30), liberating herself from the role of maternity culturally, socially and biologically imposed to women; finding after the effort of many generations, an independence historically rejected and banned to women. Consequently, her voice is not broken like her grandmother's, nor she needs to convince herself about her identity, as her mother. Bernadette recycles her grandmother's expressions (apparently surpassed by Moll) about the sea (of dreams) which is already navigable ("seaside", I.2, "swim", IX.33, "possible seas", IX.34) due to the fact that women's independence has been accomplished in this third generation. According to this, Bernadette contemplates again words and expressions such as the kisses ("kiss", III.10,11), Agatha's "hat" (IX.36), the "moon" (XII.48), the importance of travelling ("travel", "world", VII.28; "aeroplane", X.38; "a plane's lights", XII.46), or Agatha's hair (X.37), bringing about the comparison between these women's genetic blood relation and the testimony ("diary", II.5; "catalogue of hatred", II.6; "extracts", II.7) which Bernadette has to transmit from her grandmother to ourselves.

In accordance with Bernadette's recovering of her grandmother's death, she avoids to remain in the empty feeling of loss impregnating Moll's speech, to reinterpret Agatha's death as opposed to T. S. Eliot's perception of April, defending death as regeneration turned into beauty ("April in the graveyard sees new flowers / pushing out from the old heart" (XI.43-44). A regeneration which summarizes Bernadette's emancipated discourse.

The outer context evidences that Bernadette's discourse is related intertextually to what Kristeva labelled as *third generation* (1979, 1993: 214). Bernadette is not a member of "another 'mass feminist movement' taking the torch passed on from the

second generation" (214). She is closer to the manifestation of a new attitude where generation is understood as a "both corporeal and desiring [signifying] mental space" (214). This is the reason for Bernadette being liberated from the oppressions of family and men which had dominated her female ancestors. As a member of this third generation, Bernadette's speech does not emphasize the divinisation of maternity nor family, but the celebration of women in a universal sense: from all generations, from all conditions, and from all territories. Hence, once that she has finally found her identity (her dream or her place) thanks to the previous generations, Bernadette's next task (as a representative of today's women) is to maintain it. And this may only happen, extended to all third generation's women, if they remain, as Hooks claims: "convinced that it is the only place where they can be self-realized and free" (2000: 29).

4 Conclusion

As it has been appreciated in this paper, 'A Clear Note' is a lyric space created by Duffy as a platform from where female voices from the first wave to the third generation can be heard. And this is Duffy's desire, as Gregson explains: "to give a voice to those who are habitually spoken *for*" (1996: 99), the "voices of outsiders" (Kinnahan 2004: 134) who in 'A Clear Note' are three women immersed into their particular battles against the patriarchal society. Solving the first question raised in this paper, the evident evolution and transformation processes suffered from Agatha to Bernadette are undoubtedly revealed in (1) the use and revision of linguistic constructions and behaviours used by the previous generations, (2) the deviation of Bernadette's attitude towards self-reflection after Agatha's and Moll's dramatic denounces, and (3) the final consecution of the three women's dreams. Such processes are undoubtedly favoured after being developed into descriptive inner and outer contexts in which Agatha, Moll, and Bernadette participate (whether in isolation or interacting with other voices). The consideration of the poem, then, as a "lyric chora", in response to the second question of this paper, is not meaningless nor futile, because as it has been evidenced, these particular women have used the poem as a lasting frame for self-exploring and expressing themselves. Furthermore, our perspective has propitiated the approach to three essential domains explored by Duffy in her perception of feminism through generations as: first, the synchronic representation of three women as individuals, projecting their efforts in linear time for the forthcoming generations' benefit; second, the delineation of the "universal woman" which encloses women from all generations; and, third, the approach to feminist theory within the literary (particularly lyric) frame, which has functioned for long as one of the only spaces or 'choras' where women have accomplished their desire for self-exploration and self-affirmation.

Bibliography

- Duffy, Carol Ann (1985): *Standing Female Nude*. London: Anvil Press Poetry.
- Gregson, Ian (1996): *Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Hooks, Bell (2000): *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center*. London: Pluto.
- Kinnahan, Linda (2004): *Lyric Interventions. Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Kristeva, Julia (1989): "Women's Time". In Belsey, Catherine & Jane Moore (eds.): *The Feminist Reader*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan.
- Leitch, Vincent, William Cain, Laurie Anne Finke & Barbara Johnson (eds.) (2001): *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York & London: Norton.
- Rees-Jones, Deryn (2001): *Carol Ann Duffy*. Horndon House, Horndon, Tavistock, Devon, United Kingdom: Nortcote House Publishers Ltd.