The World’s Wife
by Carol Ann Duffy

Author’s Comments
by
Julia Geddes

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THE POEMS

Little Red-Cap

- The poem is divided into regular stanzas.
- There are 6 lines in each stanza.
- The lines are approximately 12 syllables long, although the exact length varies slightly.

- The longer line lengths produce a relaxed, narrative style.
- The enjambment also adds to this casual effect.
- The division into stanzas gives the poem an impetus that drives it forward.
- The stanzaic structure also neatly divides the story into episodes.

Stanza 1

- The time is vague: we are at ‘childhood’s end’ which fits in obviously with the Freudian interpretations of the story of Little Red Cap as a coming-of-age tale or a story about sexual awakening.
- Note that the houses (signifying protection, safety and childhood) give way to playing fields (suggeting the childhood play of experimentation and exploration).
- These give way to the factories, possibly suggesting that the childhood world is over and the world of work beckons.
- The allotments and their attendant ‘married men’ might suggest the next stage in life, of marriage, but these marriages are already stale: the men kneel to their allotments ‘like mistresses’. The simile stands out in the stanza and highlights the fact that these men are already fleeing the home and looking for relief and escape elsewhere.
- The railway line follows this train of thought with its connotations of escape.
- The hermit’s caravan might signify a man who has escaped the confines of the world.
- The edge of the woods at the end of the stanza therefore is suggestive of these ideas of freedom and escapism. The woods symbolically represent a place of escape. In Literature in general, the woods are often a place where a character goes to discover his or her true nature.
- It is therefore significant that the girl, in testing out herself, trying to find herself, is confronted by the wolf.
- The wolf signifies danger, as he does in nearly all fairy tales of northern European origin. (Note that humans always most fear a monster that dwells nearby. The woods of Northern Europe make ideal hiding places for such creatures). The wolf is very obviously male and therefore also suggests a challenge to the girl’s burgeoning sexuality. She is attracted to, repelled by, afraid of and wishes to conquer him at all once. The challenge will be for her to confront these fears and longings.
- The colloquial language used here (‘clapped eyes on’) borders on comedy and lightens the tone of a stanza otherwise heavily loaded with symbolic content.
Stanza 2

- The wolf is a literate, writerly rogue. He attracts the girl with his literary talent.
- As a male, he has access to the traditionally male canonical texts and his demeanour may promise to introduce the girl to all of the secrets of literature. She cannot resist.
- He is relaxed, nonchalant: he speaks in a ‘wolfy drawl’.
- He is a drinker: the red wine staining his jaw speaks volumes about excess, consumption, sybaritic pleasures.
- The cataloguing of his attributes, the ears, eyes and teeth, obviously parodies the original language of the Grimm tale, with the exclamation marks suggesting the naivety of the young girl. It also mirrors the cataloguing of a lover’s features or the visual exploration of an attractive person.
- Notice his position in the clearing, so that many can gather around. Duffy does not specifically mention others present, but the reference to the interval, buying her a drink, makes this sound like a public recital, possibly of the wolf’s writing.

- She is ‘sweet sixteen’, a term that smacks of popular culture. It highlights her innocence and naivety.
- ‘Never been’ continues this line of suggestion, with the internal rhyme of sixteen and been highlighting the ellipsis used humorously to gloss over the essential word here, kissed.
- She is a ‘babe’ in both the literal sense of being a youngster and in the trashier, slang sense of the word, suggesting that she is also attractive. Interesting that the two terms mesh so clearly together, suggesting that youth and innocence are always attractive, especially to those sufficiently cynical to prey upon these qualities when they find them in others.
- She is also a ‘waif’. Again, Duffy plays on both senses of the word. She is a waif as in a homeless person. The term ‘waif’ is often used together with ‘stray’ to signify a person, especially a child, who is lost or abandoned. She is also a waif, presumably, in the fashionable sense of being thin and willowy.
- She is not so naïve, however, as to be unaware of the tactics required to woo the wolf in this situation.
- She deliberately uses her attractiveness to lure the wolf to her, to attract him and extract a drink from him. There is obviously more to this young girl than sweetness and innocence, as we are about to find out.

Stanza 3

Duffy is clear about this: the attraction, she says, was ‘Poetry.’ It was the promise of literature that seduced the young girl. This might suggest a desire for knowledge or a wish to discover a core ‘truth’. It shows clearly the danger of words: they are seen as something subversive and possibly corrupting. They are also, like the wolf, irresistibly attractive.

Notice the colloquial language used by Duffy at the beginning of this stanza. She uses the suggestion of a rhetorical question, ‘You might ask why,’ and immediately answers it. This serves to highlight the answer given at the end of the line: ‘Poetry.’
The enjambment of ‘my first’ at the beginning of this line, flowing from the previous stanza, suggests an unstoppable sequence of events, like the seduction of the wolf once the girl met him. Detached from the context of the drink, the words also work on a different level, suggesting that he is to be her ‘first’ in a sexual sense.

• The woods are ‘away from home’ signifying that they are away from the protection of her parents. She is venturing as an adult into an unknown world.
• They are ‘dark tangled thorny’. The darkness is suggestive of the unknown. The tangles might suggest contradicting impulses, uncertainty. The thorns suggest pain, and possibly bloodshed (which links with the sexual connotations of this episode, with the blood shed by the girl at the first sexual encounter).
• The lighting ‘by the eyes of owls’ seems to suggest that there will be someone watching over them, someone all-knowing. It is also significant that the owls are creatures of the night, hunters and predators, like the wolf.

• The girl is clearly subservient: she follows ‘in his wake’.
• She is crawling, not walking, again suggesting that she is being reduced in stature.
• The shredding and loss of her clothes almost suggests a striptease.
• The description of the red scraps as ‘murder clues’ is interesting: she seems to be looking forward in time, imagining those coming after her searching for her. This appears to suggest that she considers herself lost already: she has given herself up to whatever fate will bring.

Stanza 4

• The triple rhyme of ‘there…lair…beware.’ obviously stands out in a poem with little regular rhyming features.
• It sounds almost playful because of the close proximity of the rhyme.

• Notice that the ‘breath of the wolf in my ear’ is obviously sexual, but Duffy could be simultaneously suggesting that the wolf is reciting poetry, teaching her the lessons she wants. It seems, however, that this is to be a practical lesson!
• The verb ‘clung’ shows us her willingness in this seduction.
• The wolf’s ‘thrashing’ suggests the violence of their passion.
• The rhetorical question, ‘what little girl doesn’t dearly love a wolf?’ draws the reader’s attention to the universal stereotype of the male as a rapacious, dangerous wolf, and to female attraction to such types.
• The verb ‘slid’ again suggests their passion and the sweat produced during their lovemaking session, as does the description of the wolf’s paws as ‘matted’.
• The bird seems to remind the reader of a more innocent love. Doves are often associated with harmonious love as turtledoves mate for life. The colour white signifies the innocence of the girl, now lost.
Stanza 5

- The bird flying straight to the wolf's mouth to be devoured further represents this loss of innocence.
- The wolf's dangerous qualities are clearly suggested by his devouring the bird in 'one bite,' and the dismissal of the episode with a mere 'breakfast in bed'.
- His bestial nature is further emphasised by the use of the word 'chops' and the licking of them, which makes him sound even more dog-like. This is obviously shocking for the reader, who may have been thinking of the wolf as more human after his antics with the narrator.
- The stanza seems to suggest that she was mistaken in seeing the wolf as a provider of all things literary. She realises in this stanza that she can acquire this knowledge for herself, by plundering his bookshelf.
- Notice the adjectives chosen to describe the books: 'crimson, gold, aglow' sounding rich and eye-catching, but also magical, a feeling expressed by the use of the adjective 'aglow' as if the books are warm, alive and friendly.
- The repetition of 'Words, words' creates a sense of wonder.
- This sense of wonder may be seen to link with innocence (both childish qualities) as the words are described as 'winged' like the white dove, suggesting that they can carry you away to far-off places. The verb 'beating' also links with this idea of words as birds, winged things.
- The description of the words as 'frantic' suggests her passion again, a passion to be introduced to words, to truly know them. The link with 'music and blood' continues this idea, with the music seeming almost primeval and the blood obviously a life force.

Stanza 6

- It seems that Duffy is playing on words here: the poem is called Little Red-Cap. The Red Cap mushroom, otherwise known as Fly Agaric or Amanita is a poisonous mushroom which, when ingested in minute quantities, can bring on drug-induced hallucinations and visions. In any larger quantity, it can kill you, which might account for the mushroom found in the mouth of the buried corpse. In Greek mythology, coins were placed in the mouths of the dead in order for them to use the currency to pay the ferryman to row them over the river of the dead to Heaven. Could Duffy here be drawing a comparison with this ancient practice?
- The fact that it took ten years to tell this could also be an indication of gathering experience and the time it takes to gain sufficient skill to know the ways of the woods and which mushrooms one can pick.
- The idea of birds representing ideas is an old one, which can be traced back to Plato. He explained that birds flying from tree to tree were a representation of ideas being passed from person to person.
- This is obviously appropriate for the poem, with its emphasis on learning and words and its forest setting.
- It would suggest that the girl can now see through the wolf: he is a 'greying' bore, merely a creature growing old, repeating himself.
- There is a play on the phrase 'neither rhyme nor reason' as Duffy says that the wolf repeats the 'same rhyme' (the one that snared the girl?) for the 'same reason' (to seduce others?).
Stanza 7

- Notice the enjambment from Stanza 6: ‘I took an axe…’, which seems to suggest her impatience with life and her experiences once she has seen through the wolf. She has turned from peaceful investigation of the world around her to a violent destruction. Notice the link with the fairy tale of “Little Red Cap” here. In the story, it is the hunter who takes the axe to chop the swallowed grandmother out of the belly of the wolf. Here, the girl is liberated and chops the wolf’s belly open herself. Notice the sexual liberation suggested by the anatomically correct term, ‘scrotum’.

- The girl sees the ‘virgin white’ of her grandmother’s bones in the stomach, which could represent her own previous incarnation. In Freudian interpretations of the story, the grandmother is mistaken in clothing the girl in such an attractive red colour because in doing so she is thought to be transferring her own sexual attractiveness to the girl. Here we have a reversal of that, with the girl transferring her own innocence back to the grandmother.

- In the story, there is also the incident where the girl fills the wolf’s belly with stones so that he does not feel empty and miss the body in his stomach when he wakes. The weight of the stones kills him when he stands. Here, this ending is merely assumed. At the end, the poem focuses not on the wolf but on the girl’s independence as she comes out of the forest alone, carrying flowers. Possibly these symbolise the fruits of her labours or simply mirror the old tale, when Little Red Cap is led off the path because she wants to pick wayside flowers. It is whilst doing this that she encounters the wolf. This heroine escapes with knowledge, the flowers and a triumphant victory over the wolf with not a huntsman in sight.
The World’s Wife

Mrs Midas

Form and Structure

- The poem is written in a series of stanzas of regular length. Each stanza is six lines long. There are eleven all together. The lines are all long, varying between approximately twelve and fifteen syllables, creating a relaxed, narrative effect.

- As is usual in this collection, Duffy chooses to write a dramatic monologue from the perspective of the wife of the famous legend. This poem sees a very modern resetting of the legend.

- There is no regular rhyme scheme but Duffy makes use of internal rhymes as well as personification and frequent enjambment to give the effect of conveying the narrator’s train of thought.

The poem begins with a simple statement of fact to set the scene. The reader is told the season and the time is set at supper. The narrator is relaxing, the vegetables cooking, her unnamed husband (‘he’, as is usual in this collection) outside in the garden, visible through the kitchen windows. Duffy uses personification to suggest the atmosphere: the kitchen itself is ‘relaxed’ and has ‘steamy breath’. One of the windows is wiped ‘like a brow’. These devices suggest a narrator at peace with herself and the surroundings, a situation to be completely disrupted in the next few stanzas. There is no rhyme here but Duffy uses frequent plosive ‘b’ sounds to suggest the disruption to come. The last line signals this even more clearly as the reader is informed of the husband’s presence ‘under the pear tree snapping a twig’. The importance of the details of the setting are to be revealed in the next stanza.

The stanza begins with a narrative device – ‘Now’ – as the narrator clarifies further details for the reader so as to suggest the scene exactly as she reveals that there is something very amiss at the bottom of the garden. She uses a simile, ‘the way the ground seems to drink the light of the sky’, to suggest how dark it is, in order to set up the contrast between this darkness and the light coming from the golden twig, then pear, in her husband’s hand. She also provides a small detail, the exact variety of pear, to add verisimilitude. The fact that the simile, ‘like a light bulb’ runs to the end of a line, allowing the one-word sentence, ‘On’, to stand alone at the end of a line, gives it a further sense of importance and emphasis. This line is also shorter than the ones around it, drawing attention to this crucial line as it develops her understanding of the situation. The stanza ends almost humorously as the narrator muses about various rational explanations for the lights in the garden.
Duffy uses a series of comparisons to emphasise to the reader how very unusual the scene is. At the beginning of the stanza, three short sentences convey information simply. When describing the transformation of the blinds at her husband’s touch, she uses a historical reference to King Henry VIII’s ‘Field of the Cloth of Gold’, a description used to suggest the riches of his travelling army. She continues the reference to royalty as she describes his chair as a ‘burnished throne’ to show how it has turned to gold. A triplet, ‘strange, wild, vain’ describes the look on her husband’s face, the last description clinching the way she truly views him. His laughter in the face of her bewildered question is presumably intended to demonstrate his callousness and stupidity: he has not yet discovered the true horror of his condition.

The stanza begins once more with a simple statement of fact: the meal is served and the couple begin to eat. The corn on the cob turns to gold in her husband’s mouth. Duffy’s narrator uses a metaphor to describe the situation: he is spitting out corn like gold fillings or ‘the teeth of the rich.’ The ‘toying’ with the cutlery, however, suggests that he still does not understand the significance of his affliction. The narrator continues to inject a chilling reality into the narrative by giving more details about the wine, ‘a fragrant, bone-dry white from Italy.’ The triplet used to describe the transformation of the ‘glass, goblet, golden chalice’ is particularly effective as it places the reader in the same position as the narrator, imagining the gradual transformation.

There is an element of humour in the dramatic quality of the narrator’s next admission, ‘It was then that I started to scream.’ Notice that Duffy places the effect on the narrator before the admission that the husband ‘sank to his knees,’ suggesting her placing importance upon herself first and foremost. Drama is created by Duffy’s omission of the actual event that made her narrator scream – her husband’s choking. With this omission, the reader is left to imagine the worst possible situation. Further humour is created by the narrator’s revelation that she finished the wine on her own, and that she made her husband sit ‘on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself.’ Again, her selfishness is brought to the forefront: she is more than happy for the hapless husband to turn the toilet into gold: ‘the toilet I didn’t mind.’ Similarly, she makes the most of his riches once he has turned the spare room into the gold-strewn Tomb of Tutankhamun. However, her care for her own welfare is demonstrated by the fact that she keeps him from touching the telephone. Duffy uses enjambment across two stanzas as she says ‘I couldn’t believe my ears’ adding to the story-like feel to the poem at this point.

The stanza begins with the run-on line from the previous stanza. There is a play on words as the narrator jokes about the idea of having ‘wishes; granted’ (agreeing that we all have wishes) and ‘wishes granted’ (come true). The colloquial effect is added to by the imperative, ‘Look,…’ There is a suddenness about the one-word sentence, ‘Him.’ This suggests a certain dismissiveness in tone. The question directed at the reader in the next stanza engages directly. She lists qualities and different names for gold in order to clarify its deadly quality when applied to her husband’s wishes. This is consolidated by the acknowledgement that not only can her husband no longer eat or drink, but cigarettes too turn to gold in his mouth. Her joking about this, ‘you’ll be able to give up smoking for good,’ is humorous but also extremely callous, suggesting a lack of regard for her husband’s situation. This is highlighted when the reader considers how long ‘for good’ might now be for her husband.
The simple statement of fact, 'Separate beds.', suggests her personal (and understandable) fear of her husband in his new state. Her additional precaution, the chair against the door, suggests an element of humour in her over-cautious response to their new situation. The statement that ‘He was below, turning the spare room into the tomb of Tutankhamun.’ sounds unconsidered for her husband’s welfare in its lack of gravity. She is, however, concerned about the money generated by her husband’s gift as she proves later by selling the contents of the house. The next sentence begins in a conspiratorial tone, ‘You see...’ as she lets the reader in on a secret about the love life that she shared with her husband. Unusually in this collection, this is portrayed in a positive light: the early days of their courtship are described as ‘halcyon’ and Duffy uses similes to suggest their passion, portraying them divesting themselves of clothes ‘like presents, fast food.’ The similes suggest the throwaway quality of this passion. However, they are not qualities or conditions that last. There is an element of passion still in the expressive adjective ‘honeyed’ to suggest the sweetness (and also the goldness!) of her husband’s embrace. Any such positive quality seems marred by her next statement that displays her own concern for herself, for ‘my lips.’

The stanza begins with a rhetorical question that is also a play on words. The idea of her husband having ‘a heart of gold’ sounds like joking once more. This is, of course, a rather inappropriate tone in the circumstances. The child dreamed of is described in a positive fashion: it has ‘perfect’ limbs, a ‘precious’ tongue. However, there is a fear communicated in the emphasis of the strangeness of the child: its limbs are ‘ore’, its eyes are ‘amber’ and their pupils ‘flies’. There is a real sense of physicality communicated in the burning of the dream milk in her breasts. Reality strikes again, however, as she wakes ‘to the streaming sun’, the colour reminding her of the colour of gold. The alliteration of the ‘streaming sun’ suggests its power and therefore the all-consuming quality of the gold.

The tone becomes immediately more factual: ‘So he had to move out.’ The connective ‘So’ appears to suggest that it is as a result of their mutual passion, such as would lead to the birth of a dream baby. The use of the informal, abbreviated ‘We’d’ emphasises their previous relationship as well as the fact that they shared the caravan. The fact that the caravan existed ‘in a glade of its own’ also emphasises the past physicality of their relationship, the secluded caravan seemingly positioned so as to protect the privacy of the couple in their ‘halcyon days’. This is contrasted with their new separate life: ‘He sat in the back.’ Notice the fact that it is the wife who appears to be in control here and the husband who is driven by her decision that he had to leave. The sentence ‘And then I came home’ again follows an ellipsis: the reader is made to question the nature of their farewell as the narrator supplies no details. There is a bitterness, however, in the tone of ‘the woman who married the fool who wished for gold.’ There is also a coldness here: the husband is merely ‘the fool.’ The layout of this line, with the word ‘fool’ at the end emphasises this term of abuse directed at her husband. It also demeans her equally in its suggestion of her callousness in using this term against her husband and the fact that she was foolish enough to marry him. This callousness is also compounded by the fact that she visited only ‘at first’ and was sufficiently cautious to park the car ‘a good way off’.

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Duffy emphasises the loneliness of the husband by portraying him against the background of the natural world. He is obviously still trying to eat and drink: she notes a 'hare hung from a larch' which has been turned to gold, 'a beautiful lemon mistake' and his footstep by the river might suggest that he is attempting to be healed, as the Midas of Greek legend originally was. The reader's sympathy, if not the narrator's, is aroused by the description of the husband as 'thin, delirious'. The reference to the music of Pan also relates back to the original story, where Midas judges the music of Pan to be preferable to that of Apollo. The impatience of the woman is emphasised once more as she deems his request that she 'Listen' to this as 'the last straw.'

The narrator is pictured once more thinking of herself, musing on the 'idiocy or greed' of her husband and how it has affected her, rather than the horror of the husband's fate. She judges his conduct as 'pure selfishness', not recognising her own selfishness as she has turned him from their house and deserted him. The detail that she has sold the contents of the house adds to this final impression of her coldness and selfishness. She has profited from his unfortunate, 'idiotic' wish just as surely as it has destroyed him. She clearly feels that the fact that she thinks of him sometimes 'in certain lights' is sufficient mourning. She states that she misses him, but Duffy is careful to emphasise that she misses the man not for his own positive qualities but for the way he made her feel sexually: 'I miss most...his hands, his warm hands on my skin.' Even in mourning she is selfish. Duffy cleverly ends the poem with a play on words again as she states that she misses his 'touch' – his Midas touch that would have turned her to gold but instead turned her house into a treasure trove – the tomb of Tutankhamun. In this way, Duffy emphasises the fact that this poem, like Mrs Faust, is very much a poem for our times - a poem about the sort of greed and selfishness that motivates truly self centred individuals whilst blinding them to their own failings. It reveals Mrs Midas to be completely morally bankrupt. Whilst castigating her husband for his perceived 'idiocy or greed', she is happy to live off the proceeds.
The poem is divided into regular, six line stanzas.
- Line length varies.
- Some lines are very short.

Each stanza illustrates a different challenge that Thetis must face.
- Short lines create tension and suspense.
- Rhythm and flow are disrupted by the short line lengths.

**Stanza 1**
- First person – begins with ‘I’ so the reader makes a connection with her automatically and understands that this will be a personal account.
- She is small but initially has control over her own destiny – ‘I shrank myself’.
- Duffy echoes the phrase ‘a bird in the hand…’ but completes it on the next line with the short, snappy phrase ‘of a man.’ This emphasises, very early in the stanza, the control the male figure has over Thetis.
- Her song is beautiful. The repetition of ‘sweet’ and the sibilance emphasise this. There is a sense that she is happy and proud of her new form. This does not last however as the final ‘s’ sound is ‘squeeze’, the action of the man who is squashing her.
- By the end she is being gripped and ultimately overpowered by the man’s fist, a point that is emphasised by the fact that ‘his fist’ is the final phrase in the stanza.

**Stanza 2**
- Contrasts between images of freedom (‘sky…ship…wings’) and restraints (‘albatross… clipped’). This symbolises Thetis’s own struggle with the freedom and independence she experienced and the constraints of marriage.
- Use of images such as ‘hill’, ‘sky’ and ‘wings’ suggests goals and aims. Duffy may be illustrating the dreams Thetis has for her future that are literally shot down by the ‘crossbow’s eye’.
- By using the phrase ‘wings clipped’, Duffy is highlighting the fact that other people now control Thetis’s fate.

**Internal rhyme features throughout the stanza and echoes the personal, internal struggle Thetis is facing.**
- The internal rhyme helps the images to flow into one another reflecting the movement of Thetis as a bird.
• Colon used to introduce the next metamorphosis.
• Question – creates a conversational tone bringing the reader closer to the persona.
• Personification – ‘squint of a crossbow’s eye’.

**Stanza 3**
• Mimics the sound of a snake’s hiss.
• Used only in the first part of the stanza and so its absence marks the strangulation of the snake and the point where Thetis must change shape once again.

The idea reflects social expectations, in particular male views on what makes the ‘perfect’ woman. Duffy could be making comments on the notion that women often feel pressured into conforming to what men want. It is ironic however, given that the outfit that Thetis is buying in this small size, turns her into a deadly, powerful animal.

The phrase is particularly interesting when coupled with the idea of ‘shopping’ for the outfit. Shopping is a stereotypical female pastime. Duffy is drawing our attention to roles that are governed by social expectations. This is a metaphor for the things that Thetis is trying to escape by remaining single and independent.

• The snake is a dangerous, cunning animal and choosing this shape gives Thetis power.
• A snake is often considered a phallic symbol. Duffy is therefore giving Thetis access to a male sphere through her manipulation of this image. The phrase ‘coiled in my charmer’s lap’ could also be seen as a sexual image.

**Stanza 4**
• The use of commas to create a list speeds up the reading of the poem initially but this is contrasted with the lengthy second sentence. The first, speedy sentence echoes the movement of the lion Thetis has now become. The more languid final part reflects the hunter who is still waiting for a time to shoot.
• Ending with the short sentence that simply describes the type of gun being aimed at Thetis (the lion) emphasises the fact that the sighting of this alone is enough to make Thetis change shape once more and the poem moves on to another stanza, another shape.

• The rhythm created through the internal rhymes adds to the pace of the stanza and emphasises the quick and deft movements of the lion.
• The fact that the final word in the sound pattern is part of the gun that is hunting Thetis means that, once again, she is overpowered by a man.
Stanza 5
This time the list is of several different animals into which Thetis turns herself in an attempt to escape rather than the list of different features of one animal. This would suggest that her attempts are being thwarted at every turn and she is beginning to run out of ideas. This concept is used in the next stanza as well where the list is longer, creating more of a sense of panic.

The pronoun ‘his’ is placed before each part of the phrase ‘hook, line and sinker’ to emphasise the presence and control the male persona has at this time.

Stanza 6
As we are coming to the end of the poem, Thetis is running out of ideas. A taxidermist has the skills to stuff any type of animal and so there is little she can do to escape his threat. It would indicate that soon she is going to have to submit to defeat.

- Two meanings: a) The action of the taxidermist; b) The casual comment made when people decide to quit an action.
- The phrase is colloquial and so it maintains the personal tone established earlier on. It also adds an element of humour.

Stanza 7
- As Thetis’s plight becomes more desperate she moves away from changing into different animal shapes and instead attempts to escape by becoming things that are more ethereal and seemingly harder to catch or destroy.
- Similar to the images seen in stanza 2, the descriptions here suggest freedom and space. This freedom is short lived.

- War and destruction.
- Invented and flown by men so may represent the masculine world.
- Its attack on Thetis, when she has taken on very natural forms, could represent the natural against the man made.

Stanza 8
- She describes small changes to Thetis rather than a complete metamorphosis creating a sense of surrender – she is no longer trying to escape.
- The metaphor in the first line suggests that Thetis is attacking her ‘groom’ verbally.
- Instead of being shot down or attacked the male character is instead protecting himself from Thetis and so she appears to admit defeat.
• She becomes a mother and the use of the phrase ‘turned inside out’ suggests that this final change alters her perspective of the world. She has conceded but remains independent as she takes on a role that is unique to women, a role that - according to the myth - becomes her reason for living.

• Duffy is making the reader think about motherhood and the way that it may change a person’s perspective of the world. In using the phrase ‘burst out’ to describe the arrival of the child she is emphasising the energy and verve a child can bring. Ending with the image of birth also suggests that Duffy is creating a cycle and that, rather than being the end of Thetis’s story, this is the beginning of a new adventure.
The poem is divided into nine stanzas of different lengths - from twenty-four to three lines apiece.

- The last three stanzas appear to be more regular.

- The length of the lines varies considerably - from twelve to three syllables, even within the same stanza. A crucial line contains only two syllables.

- There is frequent enjambment and some very short sentence fragments.

- Thought the poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue, there are a few passages of dialogue here too.

- There is little apparent rhyme though occasional pararhyme strikes the reader.

- The irregular line and stanza length suggests that the mind of the narrator is very troubled as she makes her terrible confession and reveals her despairing conclusions. The effect on the reader is often disturbing.

- In some places, the awkward rhythm of the poem seems to reflect the uncomfortable camel ride of the visitors.

- Enjambment gives a breathless, almost delirious tone to the narrator’s account; shorter lines and sentence fragments crystallise and emphasise.

- The way that rhyme and pararhyme reoccur in the poem suggests that each aspect of the story is shot through with memories.

- The dialogue makes the poem more vivid, peopled, dramatic.

- The stanzas represent separate episodes, often very different in content and tone.

Stanza 1

- The poem is not immediately a first person account. Instead, the narration dwells on the physical setting and the striking appearance of the three Queens. They seem magical, almost iconic, recalling folk tales, mediaeval carols, the mysterious connotations associated with playing cards.

- The Queens are ostentatiously rich, exotic and classy with their furs, their foreign accents (though ‘accented’ here also refers to the attention to detail in their dress), their ‘courteous, confident’ manner and the narrator’s bemused description of them as ‘vivid’.

- The frank, physical description of the animals anchors these dreamlike creatures and makes the story more immediate.

- The Queen-narrator’s awe is well conveyed by the stuttering delivery of lines seven, eight, and eleven to fifteen. She has to remind herself that she is also a queen (‘the King and Queen of here – Herod, me’). We quickly identify with her shy awkwardness.

- The lavish lifestyle of the palace is emphasised by the cumulative listing of lines nine to eleven.

- The expression ‘as it turned out to be’ hints that the story is going to have a twist quite different from the expected ending.

- The stanza begins and concludes with reference to the weather, which reflects the wintry Christmas of Christian tradition (see Rossetti’s familiar In the bleak midwinter and the cold of Eliot’s poem) rather than a more likely Middle Eastern scenario. However, ‘ice’ suggests that the narrator’s heart is now numbed and ‘bitter’ implies a savagery and a resentment, which adds to the poem’s suspense.
Stanza 2

- The Queens are older and wiser than the Queen-narrator. ‘They knew what they knew’ suggests both sophistication and mystery. The Queen-narrator is still an innocent at this point.
- The Queen-narrator’s daughter (clearly hers rather than Herod’s) appears as the Sleeping Beauty and the three Queens become the fairy godmothers of the folk tale, giving appropriate gifts and administering their awful warning.
- The disquieting Queens – one very tall, one visibly exotic (‘hennaed’) and the other representing the definitive chess adversary, whose very body language (‘stared at me...insolent’) intimidates – are juxtaposed with the lyrically invoked baby. She is precious (‘silver and gold’), glowing, ‘soft...tiny’, her minuteness suggested by the suddenly short lines, her vulnerability by the fact that she is ‘fast asleep’ and that her ‘fist’, symbol of aggression, is merely small and pretty.
- Herod is sidelined, maybe even stereotyped.
- The black Queen is possibly sexually rapacious, an idea which is developed in later stanzas.
- The frightened conversation, where ‘Watch...who? Him.’ are pinpointed, lends real urgency to the masculine menace.
- As in the New Testament, the ‘star in the East’ indicates the birth of an iconic male but this ‘new star’ foretells a baby boy who will be everyman, in all his guises, summed up in Duffy’s list of titles and clichés. The Queens’ injunction to ‘Watch’ means that, however positive a role he plays, any man is dangerous news for the narrator’s daughter.
- There is a link with the specific biblical tale of the crucifixion (‘pierced...like a nail’). Is even Jesus – or the male-dominated Church - a threat or is Duffy using the ultimate image of cruelty, injustice and self-sacrifice to show just how painful the Boyfriend’s impact will be?

Stanza 3

- The baby wakes and is both reassuringly typical (‘stirred, suckled the empty air’) and frighteningly susceptible: the suckling gesture implies that soon the narrator will be unable to nourish her and the girl will turn to people whose care for her is inadequate.
- ‘I kneel’ suggests that the narrator worships her child, as Mary did Jesus.
- The short lines are direct and ingenuous.
- As the previous stanza revealed, the black Queen evidently has her own agenda though here her ‘scooped...guiding...down’ of the narrator’s breast hints more at a supportive and practical sisterhood among the women than the predatory signals given in the second verse.
- The narrator’s defiant vow seems unrealisable even as she speaks it. She is perhaps unfair and certainly unwise to target all men and her promise that not even ‘one tear’ will be shed is impracticable.
- The peacock, a well-known bird of ill-omen whose gaudy display perfectly symbolises the extravagance of the court, ‘screamed’ – a harsh sound which mocks the narrator’s doting naivety.
Stanza 4

- In the first few lines of the stanza, Duffy describes physical sensations, mostly unpleasant ones, to add immediacy to her story: there is the ‘pungent’ smell of the camels, the cold of the snow, the ‘rough’ sound of the guide’s shout.
- The guide himself is an unattractive character with his gross habits, his greed and the suggestion that, like Herod Antipas, he is a little too fond of young girls (‘she was twelve, thirteen’).
- There is a real sense of bereavement when the three Queens depart, leaving the narrator to reflect on the dreamlike tenor of their visit, wistfully watching each gorgeous woman ‘rise like a god’ and herself come brutally down to earth ‘splayed’, like a helpless animal, ‘below Herod’s fusty bulk’.
- The warnings of the black Queen are similarly highlighted by Duffy’s literal and metaphorical use of the senses: the Queen’s eyes are ‘fierce’, they ‘flash’ and her words ‘scald’.
- The repetition of ‘Watch’ and ‘a star, a star’, and the inconclusiveness of the ellipsis again stress the gravity of the situation.

Stanza 5

- The stanza is short, spare, brusque.
- As the verse progresses the narrator’s words are nearly all uncompromisingly monosyllabic and unambiguous: ‘Take . . . kill . . . Spare not one’.
- The words of command are further stressed by being italicised.
- To excuse her actions, she tries to demonise first the ‘swaggering lad’ who will ‘break her [daughter’s] heart’ and deprive her of her identity, then the Chief of Staff with his ‘red scar’ and ‘mean stare’.
- Triadic structures underline the urgency of her fears. Firstly she shows how a wedding ring, a visual nought, signifies nothing in reality. Then she lists the ‘knives, swords, cutlasses’, each more vicious than the last, as though any weapons are justified in such a venture. Finally, she repeats and reiterates her deadly command, the imprecise ‘Do it.’ a chilling reminder of Claudius’s mealy-mouthed orders to the potential murderers of Hamlet in the play of that name.
- The ‘Ride East’ implies a worthy quest.
- Yet we are left with the unmistakable reminder that the people who will suffer will be mothers like herself.

Stanza 6

- Echoing so many representations of the original, the star blazes forth at ‘The midnight hour’ – a witching, sinister, magical time. Pathetic fallacy emphasises the extreme tension of the wait. Even the stars are personified as ‘chattering’, shivering, the pararhyme recalling the flustered girl of the fourth stanza. The sky itself becomes ‘nervous’.
- Duffy develops the traditional personifications of the constellations where Orion is cynical, the rhyme (‘score...before’) emphasising his lack of interest. The Dog Star is ‘yapping’. The universe is heartlessly beautiful and dazzling and simply does not care.
• The star appears with a huge burst of alliteration. The stressed words convey the Boyfriend’s swaggering maleness (‘blatant, brazen’), his refusal to take no for an answer (‘buoyant’) and his unequivocal maleness (‘blue’ is the conventional colour in which to dress boy babies).
• ‘Blue’, a colour which also signifies mourning, is further highlighted by being placed on the shortest line of the poem.

Stanzas 7 to 9
• The lines are short, expressing resignation. Our best is ultimately not good enough.
• Duffy reiterates the horror of the fifth stanza. To defend their vulnerable daughters, the narrator insists, mothers should be fearsomely single-minded, prepared to ‘wade through blood’, seeking to eliminate the delusions of romance in their girls’ lives however appalling the cost.
• Inevitably the mothers of daughters are over-protective. They must live with the dread (as, stereotypically, fathers are supposed to do) that their girls will succumb to the blandishments of the heroes who woo them grandiosely – or rape them terrifyingly - with ‘thunder and drum’, which drown out their most tender lullabies and nullify their most passionate vows.
The poem opens with the stark statement ‘All I know is this:’ It emphasises the speaker’s surprise and lack of any foreknowledge of events and also her honesty and humility as if she might not be believed. We are told, ‘he went out for his walk a man/ and came home female’. The use of enjambment focuses the reader’s attention onto the key issue gender change. Duffy expresses this life-changing event in an understated and matter-of-fact tone, reinforcing the sense of shock and disbelief in the protagonist.

Here are my ideas:

- In this section Duffy refers to her husband being ‘Out the back gate with his stick, / the dog’. This is an interesting use of enjambment. On the one hand, it suggests a normal situation, a man with his dog. On the other hand, the dog seems to be the stick, which may suggest the idea of power and the man’s need to impose his authority on all that he considers to be of less value than himself.

- The surreal imagery continues as the line runs on to the description of ‘wearing his gardening kecks’. Clearly there is a semi-colon that separates the dog from the word ‘wearing’ but nevertheless the familiar and ordinary is given a slightly strange air. Duffy maintains the homely image by her choice of words like ‘kecks’ (trousers) and ‘Harris tweed’ (a famous Scottish brand of cloth used for making jackets). The familiar relationship is reinforced as she asserts that the jacket had been ‘patched at the elbows’ by the speaker. The man, as we have seen, is outside in the open, whereas the wife is presented as being indoors providing support for her husband, patching his clothes.

- The word ‘Whistling’ is placed alone on a line. It implies a carefree time in which the man felt at one with his surroundings, master of the house, accompanied by his dog and with his wife close at hand. The whistling suggests a sense of harmony between the man and his environment.

- In the following lines, the man’s sense of self-importance is illustrated as the speaker describes the man’s desire to assert himself even in terms of his relationship with nature. It is not enough for him just to hear the cuckoo but he must ‘write to The Times’. He cannot engage with nature for its own sake but must appropriate it to reinforce his self-importance. His wife however, is clearly more observant having ‘usually heard it/days before him’ but she humours his male pride and ‘never let on’. Hence Duffy creates a picture of the everyday life of Middle England, the rather pompous self-important husband and the wife who humours his ego.
• The image of the cuckoo is reiterated in this next stanza and it begins to suggest the idea of something being placed into the family nest that is not wanted or expected. Just as a cuckoo destroys the small birds in a nest so that its young may be fed by the host bird, so here the cuckoo is heard whilst the husband sleeps unaware of his impending fate. The sound of the cuckoo is linked to the ‘sneer of thunder’, the word ‘sneer’ suggesting a mocking sound and with this the tone and mood of the poem change. The use of the word ‘sneer’ suggests that the elements are mocking the complacency of their life-style as the impending storm presages calamity in their lives. It is Mrs Tiresias who physically experiences the sensation of ‘sudden heat/at the back of my knees’. It seems to imply that she is more alive to the world around her and to the signs offered by nature to suggest alteration and change.

• Once again Duffy uses the technique of placing a statement alone on a line, ‘He was late getting back.’ The isolation of this statement from the rest of the poem reinforces the sense of impending doom. Even before Mrs Tiresias sees her husband, she is alert to idea that things are not as they should be; he is late, his normal pattern of behaviour has changed.

The stanza opens with the picture of Mrs Tiresias engaging in her daily ablutions, ‘brushing my hair...running a bath’. The structure of the stanza focuses the reader onto the importance of what is about to be seen in the mirror: ‘a face’ which ‘swam into view’. The use of the word ‘swam’ here creates an image of distortion suggesting movement and a lack of focus. A mirror frames an image and this face is ‘next to my own’, so the man has moved into her frame, into the world of female vanity; he has crossed boundaries but, in so doing, he is invading her personal space. However, she does not see him as a stranger; she recognises him straight away and so it is suggested that, although externally he appears to have been transformed, underneath the veil of womanhood, he is still the man she knows. There is now a space between the last line and the next suggesting perhaps the distance between the couple as the speaker asserts, ‘The eyes were the same.’ But clearly everything else has changed and, at the sound of ‘his woman’s voice’, Mrs Tiresias passes out. The poem seems to have reached a climatic moment as this section is clearly separated from the next by an asterix.

Here are some ideas to add to your own:

• The section opens with a positive statement ‘Life has to go on.’ There is a suggestion of the wife’s determination to maintain a sense of balance, a normality that will enable them to continue to function as a couple.

• The structure of the next section is interesting. Duffy places the words ‘come down to live’ in direct opposition to what the man himself is allegedly doing which is ‘working abroad’, that is to say isolated and distanced from his own country, the outsider, the stranger in a foreign land. The feigned twin sister however, has ‘come down to live’, to engage with life, to be part of the community.

• The transformation of the relationship is explored now through female activities. He is no longer the master with his dog but rather vulnerable, a new creature that must take advice, learn to ‘blow-dry his hair’. The wife is now ‘sisterly’ and there is a sense of female bonding and a suggestion of a relationship built on new terms and with completely different expectations. The mood remains calm and intimate as we are told how she held ‘his new soft shape in (her) arms all night’. The language is gentle as the male has become feminised and there is a sense of closeness and bonding between the two.
The placing of the issue of the period on a separate line creates the division that now occurs between the couple. Here the man is experiencing the all important bleeding that enables a woman to reproduce, to engage with herself as a woman and to connect with her own fertility. His response however, is a totally male engagement. He is self-pitying, selfish, insistent and demanding. Duffy shows the man ‘peering at the moon’ repeating the words ‘The curse’. Once again, Duffy plays with language as the moon is associated with change and transformation. It is also a female symbol because of its lunar cycle and the idea that it has no light of its own. Interestingly, the sun (whose light enables us to see the moon) is always associated with the idea of the male as it provides warmth and light for the earth to function.

The stanza concludes with the husband’s imperative voice ‘Don’t kiss me in public’ emphasising the division between the couple and the sense of alienation and distance.

The final statement in this section ‘It got worse.’ develops the dramatic effect of the crumbling world of this couple.

As a woman, Tiresias can only achieve power vicariously and so he is shown ‘entering glitzy restaurants/on the arms of powerful men’. This lack of power is reinforced by the use of the conditional tense ‘if he had his way’. It is not certain that his voice will be listened to because in the body of a woman he may be marginalised and his wishes may be secondary to those of the powerful men he accompanies.

His male persona is not however, completely lost as he maintains the right to tell women that he knows how they feel. The placing of ‘he’ and ‘we’ further reinforces the idea that he is separate from women. He is not a real woman but his arrogance allows him to insist that he ‘knew how we felt.’

The description of ‘His flirt’s smile’ seems to suggest that he cannot be trusted. He is acting out a role but underneath he is a sham; hollow and empty. This idea appears again when the voice is described as something that comes from within and which he is unable to emulate. What he utters sounds synthetic, slimy and cloying like ‘A cling peach slithering out from its tin.’

In direct contrast to the male response to the issue of the period, the woman ‘gritted her teeth.’ She does not complain or try to change him, she merely deals with it and copes.
• The section opens with the introduction of the wife’s new lover, a woman. They meet at a ‘glittering ball/under lights/among tinkling glass’. The language suggests a falsity as all is glitzy and sparkling and characterised by lights and glass both of which suggest an unreal image and also fragility.

• The female lover is described through colour. She is a woman with ‘violet eyes’ and her skin blazes. Both of these descriptions suggest passion and desire. This is reinforced by the image of the ‘slow caress of her hand on the back of my neck’. The suggestion however, is not of dominance but of a soft, caring and considerate engagement, a slow and lingering touch.

This is balanced by the far more aggressive image of ‘her bite’, which is developed into the ‘bite at the fruit of my lips’. This is clearly a sexual image but with overtones of religious imagery, the biting of the fruit of knowledge in the story of Adam and Eve and the resulting fall from grace.

• Having explored the sense of sight we are now presented with sound: ‘my red wet cry in the night’, a wholly female image, suggesting fertility, womanhood and the possibility of creativity through procreation.

• The poem concludes with the fusion between the masculine and feminine worlds as the lover engages in a very masculine gesture of shaking hands. It is this action that reveals the truth of the situation to Mrs Tiresias as she notices ‘his hands, her hands/the clash of their sparkling rings and their painted nails’. The structure of these lines allow for ambiguity but it could be suggested that what is revealed to her is the falsity of both these characters. The use of the onomatopoetic word ‘clash’ suggests an incongruity. The ‘sparkling rings’ and ‘painted nails’ imply deceit, superficiality, and a cover for the truth that lies hidden beneath the veil of sparkling adornments. On the other hand, it could be argued that the comma that separates ‘his hands, her hands’ is referring only to the husband and that the poem concludes with a confirmation of his sham existence as a man locked in the body of a woman.
Pilate’s Wife

**TASK 71**
- The poem is divided into six stanzas, each one a quatrains.
- The lines are all quite lengthy, some as long as fourteen syllables. The occasional iambic pentameter makes an appearance.
- The lines are frequently punctuated by caesura.
- Duffy employs enjambment in a number of places but short sentences and sentence fragments are more common.

**TASK 72**
- The poem relates a story, which is told chronologically. The stanzas act as paragraphs, each one dealing with the next phase of the narrative, each establishing a slightly different mood.
- The long lines represent the thoughts of a woman who is struggling to make sense of her situation. Frequent caesuras and the piling up of short sentences or sentence fragments reflect the woman’s nervousness and scattered thoughts. Enjambment enhances the action in the story, adding to its pace and emphasising moments of epiphany or crisis.

**Stanza 1**
- She chooses to emphasise Pilate’s hands, not just by the use of ‘Firstly’ but by devoting the whole stanza to various aspects of them. Pilate’s hand washing is the most well known and perhaps thought-provoking symbol of the historical story.
- The root of her disdain for Pilate seems to be his effeminacy - his hands are ‘softer than’ hers, as maybe his personality is; she describes his ‘pearly nails’, the hands’ ‘camp’ peremptoriness as he demands to be waited on, their ‘pale’ colour. In her view, he is not man enough for her.
- Traditionally, Roman slaves fed their masters and mistresses grapes by actually dropping the fruit into their mouths. Duffy illustrates Pilate’s ‘indolent’ nature by referring to this near stereotypical picture.
- Pilate’s wife stresses how physically unappealing she finds her husband by the evocative term ‘mothy’, underlining the impression of his desultory approach to life and maybe to her. She reinforces this idea by using *synaesthesia* (where the effect of one sense is described in terms of another sense) when she calls his touch pale.
- The word ‘Pontius’ is almost spat out in its position at the end of the last line.

**Stanza 2**
- Pilate’s wife is desperate. She is homesick, a feeling that is emphasised by the rhyme here, and so disenchanted with her husband that it seems that anyone will do, so long as he is ‘someone else’.
- She is ripe for an unwise liaison as she confides in her maid, disguises herself and joins the dangerous mob, all because she is ‘bored stiff’.
The woman adds to his mystery and iconic stature by referring to Jesus as 'the Nazarene'.

Jesus entering Jerusalem is presented as an important spectacle, a must-see for bored noblewomen, which has whipped the crowd into a frenzy.

When she comes upon him, strikingly, he is riding an ‘ass’ rather than ensconced in state.

After the first three lines of description, her actual encounter with him is clumsy and surprising, an effect which is heightened by the short clauses and the enjambment as she almost tumbles into the next stanza.

Stanza 3

The enjambment emphasises the epiphanic nature of their encounter, as if suddenly her deepest needs are about to be addressed.

‘Ugly. Talented.’ she says, the juxtaposition highlighting the fact that these were the last attributes she expected to attract her.

Duffy carefully picks up the woman's proneness to cliché and over dramatisation: ‘I mean he looked at me . . .His eyes were to die for’. (Note the irony here - Duffy cannot resist the play on words).

Two traditional attributes of Jesus - his ability to see each person, immediately, as an individual and his lack of conventional good looks - are explored here.

‘My God.’ she says. Is Pilate's wife on the lookout for God or does she only see sex in this God-man?

As magically as he has arrived, he vanishes. There is perhaps an element of lasciviousness as Pilate's wife describes 'his rough men' powerfully 'shouldering a pathway'.

Stanza 4

Pilate's wife outlines an erotic encounter here. Initially it is tender, though the touch is not pale like Pilate's, but 'brown', implying hands that are more earthy and virile.

She goes on to reveal how 'it hurt. Then blood.' as if she were physically born again, reliving the losing of her virginity. She identifies with Jesus as he is scourged and bleeds.

As if her own tough hymen was punctured, she pictures each of Jesus's palms viciously 'skewered by a nail'. The enjambment vividly expresses the drama of the wounding.

She wakes and her responses move from the frankly physical, emphasised by the alliteration of 'sweating, sexual,' to the suddenly emotional. Why is she 'terrified'? Is she scared of what is going to happen to Jesus or to herself? Or is she horrified because she senses that her dream is somehow blasphemous?

Stanza 5

‘Leave him alone.’ is the only italicised sentence in the poem, though Duffy commonly employs italics to denote speech. This highlights a desperation in her communication and the fact that it is unembellished indicates that she does not know why she is asking for him to be spared, though she describes her note as 'warning', suggesting that Pilate's fate may rest on his decision too.

Not trusting Pilate, she ‘quickly’ dresses herself.

The scene at the Praetorium is evoked bleakly. Jesus's torture is described sparsely and the fickle crowd is likened to an animal 'baying'.

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• The caesura in the third line isolates the words 'Pilate saw me,' starkly, giving the impression that what he saw - her expression, her uncalled for presence - had a lot of bearing on his decision.

• The adverb 'carefully' in an otherwise unadorned line implies premeditation and spiteful slowness.

• Duffy hints that the complications of the relationship between Pilate and his wife (the mix of jealousy, cruelty and contempt) led to the death of Jesus and Pilate's abrogation of responsibility for it.

Stanza 6

• The first line of the stanza is a beautifully measured iambic pentameter, stressing the crucial significance of every word. It is Jesus's death sentence but seen in terms of Pilate's failure rather than Jesus's sacrifice.

• Pilate's wife particularly emphasises the calculated culpability of her husband's impotence. Not only are his hands 'useless'; they add insult to injury by being 'perfumed'.

• Jesus is now, impersonally, 'the prophet'. He dies at 'the Place of Skulls', an undignified end, like that of many others before him.

• 'My maid knows all the rest.' This almost throwaway remark suggests that Pilate's wife has lost interest in Jesus. Or does she hint at some new, maybe dark secret?

• In the last line, Pilate's wife is almost scornful. She refuses to accede to the popular role of near saint, which has been thrust on her. 'Of course' she doesn't believe that Jesus was God. The implication is that she never did. Their connection was, for her, only ever about sex. Her triumph comes in the last four words, 'Pilate believed he was' - and yet Pilate connived at Jesus's death, not because he felt it was right but to spite her. So the poem ends on a savage but bittersweet note. Pilate's wife has her revenge.
Mrs Aesop

• She uses the verb ‘bore’ and the adjectives ‘small’ and ‘tedious’ to describe him creating a rather dull and unimpressive character.

• She creates a negative image of a man who is trying to prove himself to overcome his inadequacies. The phrase ‘tried to impress’ confirms this. (It is interesting to note that history reports that Aesop was small in stature.)

• Her language would suggest that she is angry and annoyed with her husband. ‘By Christ’ and ‘Well, let me tell you’ are two phrases that could suggest this.

• She has suffered throughout the marriage and has found the experience painful. The reference to Purgatory suggests this.

• Her use of humour and sarcasm would suggest that Duffy wants us to like her and that she is an entertaining character, more so than her husband.

• She shows little interest in her husband’s fables and humorously disregards them. Her re-phrasing of ‘the bird in the hand shat on his sleeve’ suggests this.

• Ending with the one word sentence ‘Tedious.’ would suggest that, unlike her husband, she is blunt and straightforward.

• It is free direct speech presented without the use of speech marks. This could indicate that Mrs. Aesop is taking control, as Duffy does not allow the husband to have his own voice within the poem. As the poem is about the long-suffering wife of a storyteller, this fact is particularly significant. After all his years of telling tales, finally his wife gets to have her say. Duffy could therefore be using this format to empower Mrs. Aesop.

• Duffy uses this technique throughout the poem. Each time, she repeats Mr. Aesop’s personal address of his wife as ‘Mrs. Aesop’ or ‘Mrs. A.’. This could be seen as a patronising address that emphasises ownership – she is his wife. This fact though contrasts with the lack of speech marks.

We would expect (following the opening sentence) that we are going to learn about the two characters socialising but instead we get a list of the things Aesop looks for before they even leave the garden.

• Duffy wants us to feel sympathy for Mrs. Aesop as she suggests that they never actually get to go out and that she is constantly ignored by her husband – there is no mention of her, only of animals from his tales, in the rest of the stanza.

• We feel anger towards Aesop because of his cautious nature (‘look, then leap’) that goes against the lively and humorous character of his wife. His obsessive behaviour also means that he ignores her when they are meant to be going out.
In the traditional tale, the tortoise is rewarded for his slow and steady progress instead of the hare, who speeds ahead and then takes a nap, confident that he will win. The hare is overtaken and loses the race. It could be seen that Mr. Aesop represents the tortoise, stopping to make note of the hare asleep in a ditch and having carefully observed the animals around them in the previous stanza. Mrs. Aesop, on the other hand, craves the more adventurous and spontaneous nature of the hare. Duffy shows this by using the simile ‘slow as marriage’ and the final insulting phrase ‘Asshole.’

- Duffy firstly uses two very short sentences to speed up the pace of the poem. This change in pace could echo the point raised in the previous stanza – the hare goes quickly and is therefore more exciting and interesting.
- Duffy also uses a list of questions that all refer to the many stories and platitudes Aesop wrote. This not only helps to maintain the quicker pace of the stanza but also reflects the obsessive nature of Aesop’s search for stories and Mrs. Aesop’s lack of interest in them - the question format takes on a disregarding tone.
- These features are followed by a longer sentence that starts on the second line and ends on the fourth. This slows the pace down again and reflects the laborious nature of their marriage. The point is emphasised by Duffy’s descriptions (‘barely keep awake… droned’).

- The final part of the last line introduces a new topic – ‘the sex’. Using enjambment foregrounds this important and emotional aspect of the failing relationship and creates sympathy for Mrs. Aesop once again.
- The phrase also creates suspense and interest for the reader as we are waiting to hear what Mrs. Aesop has to say about this area.
- The curt comment also creates amusement. As we know from her tone in the rest of the poem, Mrs. Aesop is humorous and sarcastic. The phrase maintains this idea. The second part of the sentence in the next stanza however could indicate that this humour is actually Mrs. Aesop’s way of dealing with her pain.

- The word ‘cock’ is used as slang for the penis and the fact that she then goes on to say that it ‘wouldn’t crow’ suggests that Aesop fails to achieve an erection. Mrs. Aesop is berating him for his inability to perform.
- ‘I’ll cut off your tail’ is another reference to male genitalia. This time Duffy is illustrating Mrs. Aesop’s rage and anger towards her husband for his inability to satisfy her in bed. This suggests that the marriage is a failure in every way. The action indicated also echoes the story of Loretta Bobbit who famously cut off her husband’s penis with a knife and threw it out of her car window.

- The saying is no longer masculine as the ‘he’ has been replaced with ‘I’.
- The saying now belongs to her as she uses ‘I’ and so writes herself into her husband’s world.
- The changes made by Duffy suggest that, by the end of the poem, Mrs. Aesop has gained power and status. She has not only the last laugh but also the final word and manages to shut her husband up. It could be argued that the act of writing her views and feelings on the marriage has given her this power. Duffy could therefore be commenting on the often cathartic and empowering role of the poet. Ironically, in this final stanza, the failure in the marriage is seen as her husband - author not poet.
Here are some of my ideas to add to your own:

- The poem begins with an introductory stanza of five lines of reasonably similar length (although ‘the absolute berk’ is emphasised by the slightly greater number of syllables).
- Each of these lines rhymes with ‘jerk’. This creates a feeling of stasis – going nowhere; there is no progression in the sound of the poem – just as the labours of Sisyphus went nowhere, merely up the hill and down again.
- The second stanza sees the line lengths going from fairly long, to merely three syllables (‘Mustn’t shirk!’), possibly mirroring the endurance of Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill: the lines get shorter as he gets more tired towards the top.
- Alternatively, it could be said that the lines are long at the beginning of the stanza, mirroring the time when Sisyphus has much to do to push the boulder upwards. They get shorter as the boulder nears its desired position at the top of the hill.
- The final stanza returns to the same sort of shape as the first, with the last line even longer than the first of the poem, suggesting the relentless repetitive pattern of Sisyphus’s labours.
- The last stanza echoes the first in its rhyming pattern, with the rhymes almost all matching. The repetitive, dissonant ‘k’ sound is evident again, suggesting that we have come full circle. Here, however, there is a slight modulation and variation over the stanza, and the rhymes become paraphrymes and patterns of echoes rather than the exact rhymes of the first stanza. There is almost the suggestion of exhaustion on the part of the narrator – as if she is too exhausted, merely by watching her husband’s work, to produce the sparky, feisty exact rhymes of the first stanza.

Here are some of my ideas to add to your own:

- Like Mrs Darwin, the poem deals with a man obsessed by his work, the difference being that Sisyphus’s work is pointless whereas Mrs Darwin merely seems to think her husband’s is pointless.
- There is the same coldness of address in the personal pronoun used by the narrator as the narrator of Mrs Midas: ‘That’s him . . .’ mirroring ‘He was standing under the pear tree.’
- The dismissive tone utilised by the narrator of Mrs Aesop is also in evidence here: ‘By Christ, he could bore for Purgatory.’ mirroring the frosty tone of ‘That’s him pushing the stone up the hill.’ The reader may also spot a link in the purgatorial nature of Sisyphus’s eternal task.
The stanza begins with a statement of fact, like Mrs Aesop, Mrs Tiresias, Mrs Darwin.

The deictic phrase, 'That's him', seems to imagine a physical audience alongside the deserted wife near the hill, looking on with her as they observe the husband's pointless labours.

Her insult, 'the jerk', is startling in its directness: there is to be no beating around the bush here! It seems, however, a natural progression from Mrs Aesop, which begins with a similar insult.

The nature of the poem as dramatic monologue is made immediately obvious by this and reinforced in the second line as the narrator speaks in the first person 'I call it a stone'.

The wife is honest in acknowledging that the stone is actually the size of a 'kirk', a church. Duffy nods towards her own Roman Catholic Scottish origins here, as the word 'kirk' refers specifically to a Scottish Roman Catholic church. In this line, there is also an interesting combination of the paganism of Greek and Roman mythology, from which the story of Sisyphus is taken, and Christian tradition.

The wife's irritation is suggested in the next line, as she says that the practice used to 'irk' her.

There is the suggestion of an easier, colloquial tone as she says 'When he first started out,' as if this is merely an everyday job that he must do.

The verb 'incenses' on the next line demonstrates how far her feelings have changed, however, with its connotations of burning, smoking, smouldering.

Similarly, the abusive term 'berk' with its plosive 'b' as opposed to the softer 'j' of 'jerk' suggests an escalation in the woman's dislike of her husband.

The vague suggestion that she 'could do something vicious to him' sounds almost humorous in its uncertainty (remember King Lear's 'I will do such things!/ What they are, yet I know not, /but they shall be the terrors of the earth!'). However, the threat becomes more serious when she threatens to do the deed 'with a dirk'. The noun 'dirk' refers to a dagger or poniard. This word, like 'kirk' is Scottish in origin, referring to the sort of weapon probably carried by a Scottish Highlander. With the proliferation of vocabulary taken from Scotland, Duffy seems to suggest a new setting for the poem itself.

The sheer proliferation of rhymes, echoes and pararhymes used here creates a frantic effect, almost akin to the frantic way that Sisyphus apparently applies himself to his work.

The volume of rhymes also creates a humorous, nursery-rhyme-like, sing-song effect that adds to the feeling of irreverence in the poem as a whole. This atmosphere is compounded by the use of derogatory name-calling like 'dork'.

The playful atmosphere might remind the reader of Larkin's poetry. Although Duffy is making a serious point here, she is doing so in a very playful way.

The rhymes both point forward and backwards, e.g. 'quirk' recalls the 'kirk…dirk' rhymes of the first stanza; 'shark' will be recalled in the final stanza with the rhymes of 'dark…Ark…Bach'. In this way, the rhyme pattern mirrors the relentlessness of Sisyphus's work which pointed both forwards to his inevitable future beneath the boulder and backwards to the previous day identical to the one he was currently experiencing. It creates a feeling of circularity and continuity, which is at the very heart of Sisyphus's work.
The register is very colloquial, with slang used for the derogatory name-calling like ‘dork’.

There is also some demotic language: ‘A load of old bollocks’, ‘that feckin’ stone’s no sooner up…’. This adds to the humorous, irreverent tone of the poem. It also communicates the frustration of Mrs Sisyphus who is reduced to ranting at friends about her husband.

The word ‘feckin’ again suggests the Scottish dialect of ‘kirk’ and ‘dirk’.

The rhetorical questions used in the stanza (‘What use is a perk…/when you haven’t the time to pop open a cork/or go for so much as a walk in the park’…’And what does he say?’) add to the air of casual familiarity engendered by the poem. They suggest a persona for the reader to adopt – that of the old friend to the long-suffering wife, accustomed to hearing Mrs Sisyphus’s complaints. There is a tone of familiarity about this that makes the experience of the poem more involving for the reader.

The plosive ‘p’ sound repeated on the first few lines reminds us of the very popping of a cork suggested by the character in the poem.

The image of folks flocking suggests that the people are mindless – their behaviour is that of a collection of birds, drawn helplessly to the spectacle of Sisyphus’s unending labours.

The plosive ‘b’ sounds of ‘bit’, ‘bark’ and ‘bollocks’ on successive lines sound as if spat out in anger and the reader can clearly imagine Mrs Sisyphus’s bleak mood at this point.

Duffy makes plentiful use of enjambment here, especially in the line ‘that feckin’ stone’s no sooner up/than it’s rolling back/all the way down.’, where the enjambment mirrors the unbroken, continuous nature of Sisyphus’ work.

The idea of the husband as keen as a hawk suggests not only his determined refusal to be beaten by the task but also an animal-like mindless repetition. There is an underlying hint of menace with the use of the comparison with this bird of prey.

The comparison with a shark also has dangerous connotations. His labours have literally made him lean. Is there also a suggestion here that his refusal to attend to the wife’s needs because of his job might result in her developing her own leanness?

Both of the animals chosen are unsympathetic, untouchable and distant: the hawk is a bird of the air, the shark a sea-creature. Neither belongs in our element. As a result, there is a suggestion of distance being created, as well as a feeling of coldness on the part of the narrator towards her husband.

The initial ‘Mustn’t shirk –’, with its dash indicating the breaking off of the words mid-sentence, is supposed to be spoken by Sisyphus and Mrs Sisyphus is repeating them here, hence the lack of quotation marks.

As in Mrs Aesop, this suggests power on her part, as she is seen to be taking over her husband’s voice and speaking for him, just as Duffy intends to do in the collection as a whole, as she acts as a ventriloquist for the traditionally silent women.

The dash seems to suggest that the husband himself cut off his words mid-sentence as he returned to his never-ending task.

The repetition of these two words with an exclamation mark in place of the dash clearly shows the reader a new, infuriated tone from Mrs Sisyphus, who is now spitting this out with disgust.
The stanza before has focused on the labour of the man, how he is dedicated to his work completely. The ‘But’ seems to suggest that, although he may be able to give ‘one hundred percent and more to his work,’ his wife suffers from neglect, as Mrs Aesop does.

**TASK 100**

- Towards the end of the poem, just as in Mrs Aesop, the narrator turns to the subject of their sex life to show that this area, too, is deficient.
- The idea of lying alone in the dark suggests that she is sexually neglected as her husband is busy working.
- The comparison with Noah shows another mythical figure who was completely absorbed in his task. The narrator describes him hammering away, using the aggressive verb with its sexual undertones to suggest not just building the Ark, but that he is pouring all of his creative juices into that labour and not his wife. Mrs Sisyphus feels just the same about her husband.
- The next comparison involves the wife of another dedicated worker, the musician J. S. Bach. Notice the way that Duffy links Frau Bach with Mrs Sisyphus in the next line through the idea of the musical tones of her voice which is ‘reduced to a squawk’ in her frustrated attempts to stop her husband from wearing himself away in his work. The idea of the squawk also has animalistic connotations, as though she has been dehumanised by her frustrated marriage.

**TASK 101**

- At 14 syllables long, it is one of the longest in the poem.
- Its sheer length reflects the longevity of the torture that the pair is suffering.
- The rhyme ‘work’ links with the first rhymes in the poem, ‘jerk...kirk...irk...’, drawing our attention yet again to the circularity of Sisyphus’s task and his never-ending labours.
The poem opens in a matter of fact tone as Duffy once again adopts the form of DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE. She states ‘First things first/I married Faust’. This statement suggests a commitment to this man and his values, attitudes and way of life.

- The language used to present the relationship is casual suggesting perhaps a lack of real love or understanding between the couple. The relationship is described in terms of a rather tempestuous affair, ‘shacked up, split up/ made up, hitched up’.

- The academic success of the couple reflects the achievements attained by Marlowe’s Faustus who was himself a Doctor of Philosophy much revered for his great learning.

- There are no distractions from material pursuit in this relationship, as Mrs Faust asserts ‘No kids.’; only the external signs of success in the form of ‘Two towelled bathrobes’. Interestingly, she places ‘Hers.’ before ‘His.’ seemingly asserting her sense of equality in the relationship.

- There is a real sense of partnership in the opening lines ‘We worked. We saved./We moved again.’ The pace is fast and racy with the use of short statements mirroring their quick success in the material world.

- We are given a catalogue of the couple’s acquisitions as we are told they ‘Prospered.’

- Faust is presented to us for the first time at this point and his face reveals his character as he is described as ‘clever, greedy, slightly mad.’ This series of adjectives builds up a picture of a man who is dazzled by the consumerist lifestyle he finds available to him and one who is not easily satisfied by worldly success.

- The stanza concludes with the admission ‘I was as bad’ and once again we see a return to the idea of partnership as Mrs Faust does not simply condemn her husband but confesses to enjoying the benefits of wealth and material success.

- The balanced rhyming couplets of the first four lines present a change in the relationship through the word ‘love’ being associated with the trivial and superficial ‘lifestyle’ and ‘kudos’ as opposed to the more important qualities of ‘life’ and ‘wife’.

- The relationship is no longer presented as a partnership as we are told ‘He went to whores.’ whilst she sought solace in ‘yoga, t’ai chi,/Feng Shui’. Her entertainments are associated with inner spiritual change whilst his are linked only to his libido. Faust, as is the case with many successful men who seem to have everything that money can buy, has to celebrate his power by taking his lust to prostitutes.

- Faust is now presented as boastful at dinner parties revealing his need to impress and be admired. His dealings are now ‘out East’ suggesting shady deals and fast money.

- His voracious sexual appetite mirrors his fast life in the business world. He takes ‘his lust’ to prostitutes to revel in a world of debauchery to ‘meet panthers, feast’. The image of ‘panthers’ suggests wild cats like the prostitutes with whom he satiates his desires.
Faust is seen as being still dissatisfied by his lot, ‘He wanted more.’ In a similar way to Tiresias, Faust’s desire for power and personal acquisition removes him from the basic needs of life. The internal rhyme of ‘hadn’t eaten’ and ‘in a meeting’ emphasises Faust’s inability to focus on the basic priorities of life. His wanting more has resulted in him seeking to strike a bargain with a being higher than himself.

The smell detected by Mrs Faust is ‘cigar smoke’, a smell normally associated with men of the moneyed classes. However, this smell is described as ‘hellish’ and linked once again to sex. This image serves to reinforce the link between sex and power and the cigar itself can be seen as a phallic symbol.

There is a sense of Faust’s abandon as Mrs Faust hears them ‘laugh aloud,’ suggesting complicity and the possibility of a bargain being struck.

The sexual association with power is developed in the next stanza as we are told, ‘the world...spread its legs.’ The image is stark and unromantic reflecting Faust’s attitude to his ever-increasing worldly status.

The following lines become a catalogue of Faust’s fame and power as he soars to the positions of Cardinal and Pope. It is asserted that he ‘knew more than God’. This statement serves to reinforce Faust’s arrogance and his detachment from any spiritual aspect of life. The list of his achievements becomes increasingly unrealistic and, as in the original story, it is possible to see Faust being used as an emblematic figure whose greed will surely destroy him.

The pace varies throughout the three stanzas but it is particularly noticeable after the description of Faust’s trip around the world, that ‘lunched’ is placed on a line on its own, suggesting Faust’s apparent lack of awe or wonder at such an achievement. It is it seems just an interlude between meals. His insatiable and unremitting desire for material success is presented through what could almost be described as a litany of worldly acquisitions.

Unlike her husband, Mrs Faust uses the money, power and influence to go her ‘own sweet way’. Her pleasures are to do with either external appearance or becoming more aware of the world through travel. Having her ‘breasts enlarged’, her ‘buttocks tightened’ might be argued to be superficial interests but she suggests that her foreign travel allowed her to return ‘enlightened’. Duffy is perhaps being somewhat ironic here but, nevertheless, we are offered a less threatening response to money and power.

In the next stanza, Mrs Faust catalogues the various changes she made to herself and her lifestyle but none of them carry the same menacing threat as those pursued by Faust. Mrs Faust seems almost vulnerable, and at war with herself, as she changes her body, her appearance, her hair colour, all to no avail. Ultimately she asserts she went ‘berserk, bananas;/went on the run, alone;/went home.’ The last line ‘went home.’ suggests a need for security and a return to the familiar unlike Faust whose desires lead him to engage in practices that affect all of mankind from arms deals to cloning.
Faust confesses to his wife that he has made a pact with the devil. He does not begin with an explanation of the deed to which he has committed himself but with a description of his night of unbridled passion with a ‘virtual Helen of Troy.’ Duffy is not only parodying the original story but also reinforcing the quality that has characterised all of Faust’s behaviour, his desire for sexual gratification. Earlier in the poem, you will have noted that even when he was at the zenith of his worldly powers, he was still surfing the net for ‘like-minded Bo-Peep.’

Once again, Faust’s description of Mephistopheles is a reflection of his arrogance as he calls him ‘the Devil’s boy’, implying he is merely a lackey or servant who dances to the Devil’s, or when summoned, Faust’s tune.

Faust’s description of the debt he has to pay is characteristically coarse and once again linked to sexual appetite ‘gagging for it/going for it/rolling in it’. His concluding statement, ‘I’ve sold my soul’, is unemotional and matter of fact. Unlike the original Dr Faustus, he has no apparent fear or conscience; his pact with the Devil is presented as merely another business transaction.

There is sensuality in the description of the Devil as Mrs Faust recognises first the ‘hiss’, then the taste of evil and finally its ‘smell’. Clearly, the Devil connects with human sensory perception until finally his ‘scaly devil hands’ touch ‘Faust’s bare feet’. Duffy maintains the understated effect of Faust’s imminent fate, keeping his situation well grounded in the everyday, rather lavish, domestic world as she describes his hands poking through the ‘terracotta Tuscan tiles’.

Mrs Faust’s description appears matter of fact, unemotional and lacking in any real concern, apart from the fact that Faust is described as ‘oddly smirking’, suggesting that, perhaps, there is something that the Devil does not know.

Once again we are given a catalogue of material possessions and the tone remains unconcerned, almost callous, in its lack of emotion or fear at what has ensued. The openings of the penultimate stanza with ‘Oh, well.’ and of the final stanza with ‘C’est la vie.’ suggest an acceptance of Faust’s behaviour and a casual unconcern for what he has done.

The concluding lines however, put the whole situation in context as Mrs Faust finally reveals Faust’s secret, ‘the clever, cunning, callous bastard/ didn’t have a soul to sell.’ Her words seem to suggest that, despite herself, she is rather proud of Faust’s deception. Mrs Faust is presented almost as an accomplice as she reminds us that self-obsessed hedonists are soulless and, in the 21st century, it appears that they are even able to swindle the Devil himself.

Carol Ann Duffy seems to have re-written the Faustian fable for a 21st century capitalist society. At least in the original story Faustus has something with which to pay his debt. Duffy seems to be implying that, in the modern world with its predilection for material possessions and its rejection of any spiritual or moral values, mankind has sold everything including its principles. Hence, although this poem can be read as a humorous satire, it can also be seen as a critique of western materialistic society and its lack of moral values.
The poem is divided into eight stanzas of very different lengths. The longest is ten lines long and there are two shortest, each of which is a line long. One of these short stanzas immediately follows the longest verse.

The lines vary considerably in length and enjambment frequently extends them even further.

Duffy makes wide use of the hyphen at the end of lines.

There is a striking absence of metrical regularity even in lines which rhyme.

Most of the lines end with a rhyme or, more commonly, a pararhyme but the rhyme scheme is haphazard. Sometimes the matching words appear at the end of successive lines; sometimes they are echoed later in the stanza or even further on in the poem.

Lines are sometimes strikingly self-contained. The transition between successive lines is often rather surprising.

As in previous poems, each stanza deals either with a different mood or a different phase of the story. The two one-line stanzas present their ideas starkly; and both, on examination, leave us with ambiguities.

The irregular lengths of lines and stanzas create unease, a sense that the narrator is being propelled erratically from conclusion to conclusion, letting the circumstances themselves guide her for the most part but then being pulled up short.

Enjambment enhances the sensation that the narrator’s emotions are being dragged. The hyphens enhance the impression that her mind is darting from one issue to another, inserting considerations, which she has forgotten.

The lack of metrical regularity makes the poem seem clumsy: the reader is listening for the line, which will straighten out all the complexities but the short statements and questions only add to them.

The rhyme and pararhyme, and their unpredictability, give the narrator’s voice a sense of desperation, as if she were anxious to sort her ideas out but could not reach satisfactory closure.
Stanza 1

- Duffy introduces us to a relationship, which is very largely concerned with sex. When we meet them, Delilah and Samson are in bed, a context which Delilah casually drops into the poem in line two. We are given the impression that this is the general context for their conversations, a sense strengthened by the petting that is going on (‘I nibbled the purse of his ear’).
- ‘Teach me’ are the first two words of the poem, indicating that, of the two, Delilah is empowered by her feminine wisdom but, with his brusque imperative, Samson is still in charge.
- The enjambment leading up to ‘how to care.’ places a huge emphasis on this short line. The reader is presented with a man who is perhaps stereotypically out of touch with his feelings and, again stereotypically, feels that it will take a woman to show him how to become emotionally mature.
- Delilah’s response is accompanied by a gesture of foreplay as if the request embarrasses or confuses her and she wishes to redirect his attention to sex.
- The words ‘nibbled’ and ‘purse’ suggest that her primary interest in him is predatory. The first of these words gives us a picture of a woman eating for diversion rather than hunger. The earlobe is often called the "purse" because of its shape. Here there is the implication that she prizes Samson for the financial rewards her relationship with him brings.
- Samson confirms his lack of finesse by ignoring her lovemaking as he ‘reached for his beer’, a response which can be seen as typically masculine.
- Note that Duffy does not italicise the actual words spoken by the couple as she usually does in her poetry though she does demarcate by using hyphens in places. This gives the speech and the story a seamlessness.

Stanza 2

- Duffy uses alliteration in the opening line, making Samson’s recital almost lyrical. Through this technique, which serves to highlight his savagery somewhat ironically, Duffy suggests that Samson regards his feats as glorious.
- The selected exploits emphasise a range of attributes, most of them implied by the biblical account. Samson represents himself as a superheroiic - one who can rip out the very ‘roar’ of a wild beast, depriving it not only of life but even of the power to lament its own fate - as capable of more sustained bravery – ‘sleep one whole night in the Minotaur’s lair’ and as susceptible to the lure of fame and applause. He seems to pick high-profile feats, such as the brush with the Minotaur, or plainly showy, daredevil ones, such as gargling with fire or skinning a bear alive. As in the Bible story, gratuitous violence is an important feature; Samson exemplifies the ultimate in cool as he boasts that these deeds were done ‘all for a dare.’
- Duffy uses the irregular line length, pararhyme scheme and transferred epithet (‘bellowing fur from a bear’) to illustrate an anarchy, an unpredictability in his actions.
- Duffy closes the stanza with two rhyming couplets. The lines shorten drastically and approach some degree of metrical regularity. These techniques help to stress Samson’s key characteristics: a desire to show off, a rather mindless courage and a lack of accountability.
- The last line explores the attachment many physical high-achievers feel for their wounds. ‘Put your hand here’, he says - she must actually feel his scar. The line also usefully leads the reader into the more intimate concerns of the next stanza, conveying Samson’s trust in Delilah and perhaps a tenderness with her that he denies he possesses.
Stanza 3

- Duffy begins this stanza with a parenthesis, a device, which seems to direct the reader to the protagonists’ most intimate concerns. Samson’s ‘scar’ could be said to represent his only vulnerable spot, situated appropriately enough over the seat of his frozen emotions, his ‘heart’.
- Samson has to ‘guide’ Delilah’s ‘fingers’, as if he is anxious that she too learn something, either how magnificent he is or how fragile.
- The scar is ‘a four-medal wound’, picked up ‘from the war’. Samson has obviously been deeply and spectacularly hurt in the past, either in his chosen profession or in the other “war” Duffy is exploring here, the inevitable war of misunderstanding and lack of respect between the sexes.
- The fourth line, the longest in the poem, states Samson’s predicament baldly, the clumsiness of the metre highlighting his inability to experience the emotions appropriate to the “new man”. The next line, expressing his actual position, is by contrast direct and fluent. Perhaps Duffy is revealing sympathy towards men who feel, like Samson, that they are trapped by the expectations of their gender roles.
- Samson is presented in the last line as a man used to finding solutions, perhaps glib ones. The indicative tense here suggests that he is quite sure that the cure exists.
- Note the pararhyme which links ‘care’ (Stanza 1), ‘scar’ and ‘cure’. The implication is that Samson would be more in touch with his feelings if he had not been wounded, literally or figuratively. Extending the metaphor, Samson’s wound requires healing before he can function properly.

Stanza 4

- The word ‘fucked’ implies a sexual exchange, which is functional, devoid of meaning and - since the use of the word is taboo - illicit, as Samson's and Delilah's is. It is a locker room, stereotypically masculine term. The rider ‘until he was sore’, placed on its own on the next line, implies that it is Samson's pleasure, rather than Delilah's, which is regarded as important.
- The inclusion of the ‘shower’ might indicate a number of ideas - for example, that their sexual experience could be perceived as dirty or that Samson insists on more sex even as they are washing themselves.
- The fourth line is longer, paralleling the sprawl of Samson's body. Duffy uses alliteration here to underscore the tenderness of Delilah's actions and the trust with which Samson is prepared to put himself at her mercy (‘lay with his head on my lap’).
- The reference to ‘a darkening hour’ suggests, through pathetic fallacy, a sinister outcome for the couple’s story. Indeed, Samson has already begun to ‘change’ and soften. His voice is a ‘burr’, implying that his background is rural and unsophisticated. She can ‘just about hear’ him: in fact, this is the last time he speaks at all in the poem - he has, literally, lost his voice.
- Delilah’s protest ‘I was sure/that he wanted to change’ is a little overstated. She appears to be trying to justify herself, not just to an audience but (‘yes’) to herself.
- As Delilah dubs Samson, ‘my warrior’, the reader feels her ambivalence about his personality - though she likes to treat him tenderly, she is also proud, almost possessive of his unequivocal maleness.
Stanza 5
- The three words can be seen as the answer to a question. The reader senses that Delilah may be the subject of an actual interrogation.
- The words may also indicate reassurance. Delilah’s response to Samson is partly that traditionally associated with the maternal: she is ‘there’ to support and care for him.
- ‘I was there.’ is an expression popularly employed by witnesses to a famous event. The biblical account does not tell us what happened to Delilah after she betrayed her lover but she must have been present at some dramatic scenes. Here she almost seems to be retreating from personal responsibility for them.

Stanza 6
- Duffy overwhelms the ear with sibilance, a device which she often uses to conjure up an ambience which is part gentle, part threatening (see Thetis).
- Delilah intimates that only in ‘sleep’, does Samson truly ‘soften’. The tenderness of this line is reinforced by the homeliness of ‘snore’ in the next. When Delilah reveals to us that this is Samson’s ‘usual’ performance, her sentiments seem both affectionate and resigned.
- The third line, the second longest in the poem, not only parallels Samson’s actual sprawling but suggests that this is her favourite view of him. This impression is heightened by the use of alliteration: she sounds as though she is relishes this picture of him. ‘Handsome and huge’ is a particularly successful juxtaposition: are these the most significant of Samson’s attributes for her?
- Samson is now ‘on the floor’, symbolically and literally in her power, a sense which is emphasised by the curt, short line.
- Delilah describes her next actions in chilling detail. First the scissors have to be ‘fetched’, then, ominously, ‘sharpened’.
- The word ‘before’ adds suspense as we are encouraged to anticipate some worse horror.
- The sixth line is a masterly inclusion. Like a professional - hairdresser, seamstress - who uses scissors to carry out the tasks of her trade, Delilah tests her tools by ‘snipping at the…air’. The impression we are given here is that she is coolly, almost ruthlessly, about to discharge a professional responsibility. But what exactly is her role? The clue lies in the use of the adjectives ‘black and biblical’: the first implying that her motives are evil, the second a word with more complex connotations which include both revenge and retribution.
- The reader is encouraged to expect a murder: why would Delilah lock the door unless she planned to kill him? The parenthesis of line six throws a greater stress on the last line of this stanza, making it even more menacing. The rhyming of ‘snore’, ‘floor’ and ‘door’ stresses the link between his abjectness and her imprisonment of him. Again, Delilah goes into meticulous detail, the words ‘fastened’ and ‘chain’ especially emphasising that Samson is indeed powerless, a prisoner.

Stanza 7
As before, Delilah seems to be facing an interrogation. But as she tries to sum up her answer in this dismissive, all embracing sentence, the reader is left to wonder what she is leaving out.
Stanza 8

- Delilah describes her actions as 'deliberate, passionate'. These words tell us that she stands by her actions. It is a significant departure for someone of her status and gender to deprive a man of the very attributes, which define his masculinity but she has done so wholeheartedly.

- The last line underpins the deliberateness of her action with its direct monosyllables. The use of 'lock' here may provide an important insight into the implications of the poem as a whole – while the word refers literally to Samson's hair, there is also the suggestion that the overt display of Samson's gender has figuratively “locked” away his emotions.
• As it was a favourite of Shakespeare’s, Duffy may be paying homage to the Bard.
• Sonnets are traditionally written as love poems by a man and sent to the focus of his affections. The fact that Duffy is using this format therefore helps us to understand the key theme. That she writes from a female point of view is interesting, as this goes somewhat against tradition, but could be seen as Duffy’s way of empowering and giving voice to a woman who had previously been unheard.

• Duffy creates a busy picture with her long list of images. Coupled with the use of the word ‘spinning’ there is a sense that their relationship is heady and exhilarating.
• The images used to describe their bed all have romantic connotations and are features often used in literature, including some of Shakespeare’s plays. Duffy could be suggesting that their relationship was an inventive and creative one.
• The phrase ‘dive for pearls’ is an erotic one and emphasises the very sexual nature of their relationship.

• Duffy compares Shakespeare’s words to shooting stars (bursts of energy from the movement of a meteor, seen occasionally from earth and associated with wishes), suggesting that his talent as a writer was energetic, beautiful and rare. For the persona in the poem however, it is much more realistic and down to earth as they become ‘kisses on these lips’. The image could suggest that she feels that her wishes are being fulfilled.
• The sibilance created by the phrase ‘shooting stars’ reflects the movement of the meteor and is echoed again in ‘kisses’, linking the two together.
• The phrase ‘My lover’ has connotations of romance and excitement as well as reflecting a sense of pride and possession through the use of ‘my’.

• Duffy uses lots of references to literary features (rhyme, assonance, verb, noun) to create an extended metaphor for the persona’s body linking Shakespeare’s skill as a writer to his skills as a lover. The fact that these features are coupled with very tender, gentle words (‘softer’, ‘echo’) increases the impact and creates a very romantic, sensual image.
• The culmination of these images is a metaphor for his physical contact (‘a verb dancing in the centre of a noun’) with her. Once again, this image is sexual as we can imagine what his verb and her noun are.
• The fact that Duffy associates him with action may be significant as it could reflect the stereotypical male role within relationships during the Elizabethan era. Her association with names is perhaps even more significant however as naming has been considered a very powerful tool historically and is a concept reflected in other literary texts. (Jeanette Winterson, for example, explores the issue in her novel Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.)
The image is sexual and is used to describe their physical relationship.

Duffy states that it is a dream, suggesting Hathaway fantasises about being touched by her husband in this skilful way. This also creates the image of Hathaway as a sexually confident woman who explores and dreams of physical contact.

The fact that he writes her may indicate that she feels that his touch brings her to life, that he has created her through their sexual relationship.

The image also maintains his prowess as both writer and lover.

The reference to ‘Romance and drama’ suggests that their relationship is exciting and adventurous. The connotations of both words evoke feelings of passion.

Through their encounters in the second best bed, the two of them are creating their own place to which to escape.

At the end of the analogy, Duffy lists three senses emphasising the fact that their embraces are very sensual, involving taste and smell as well as the touch mentioned previously.

The tone is quite abrupt and non-descript – the bed described primarily as ‘the other’, the concept of it being the best added only as a brief, passing comment.

The sentence is lacking in description, a harsh contrast to the elaborate, symbolic images seen previously. Adjectives used (‘dozed’, ‘dribbling’) have negative connotations and create the image of a dull, laborious relationship and unskilful lovers.

The repetition of the soft ‘l’ creates a melodic sound, echoing her feelings towards her husband.

The fact that she refers to him as ‘living’ despite the fact that she then refers to herself as a ‘widow’, tells us that his memory lives on as she dreams of their passionate time together.

Using the word ‘laughing’ emphasises the happiness she associates with the memory of her husband.

Referring to him as ‘my…love’ creates the impression that he has been her only love and will remain so even after his death.

She tells us how Hathaway retains the images of her husband in her head so instead of picturing him in a coffin, his resting-place is her memory.

Having presented several very sexual images, Duffy leaves us with the picture of them holding each other suggesting that their relationship involved much more than just sex.
The poem is divided into eleven stanzas, each of seven lines.
• The lines are all lengthy, between nine and fourteen syllables.
• Many lines are clearly divided by caesuras. Duffy makes considerable use of enjambment. There is little metrical regularity and the poem can almost be read as prose.
• Duffy does not employ rhyme at the end of lines but the occasional internal rhyme crops up. Some striking images and juxtapositions give the text its specifically "poetic" character which is not diminished by an often colloquial tone.

Each stanza details a different aspect and a different episode of the story, each carrying equal weight.
• The poem represents the telling of a tale to an unspecified audience and its garrulousness and formal irregularities portray a reflective, rambling narrator who cherishes her memories as she comes upon them.
• The use of caesura and enjambment tend to emphasise the rather random sequencing of her recollections. Enjambment is also used to add emphasis and urgency to the gorilla's expression of feeling.
• Imagery and juxtaposition are employed to show the attributes of her lover which Queen Kong has found the most precious. The informal tone endears the reader to the narrator and, importantly, makes her almost human.

Stanza 1
• The opening words ‘I remember’ give Queen Kong's reminiscences a gentle fondness.
• She describes herself as ‘peeping’, as if anxious to look covertly without disturbing or intruding. Simply watching him is enough; she is quite happy for him to be ‘fast asleep.’
• ‘My little man.’ could be a patronising epithet were it not for Queen Kong's delicacy in the first few words; here it has a tender tone.
• The logistics of staring through a skyscraper window do not immediately alarm the reader. Queen Kong seems at first to be a standard tourist doing what ordinary visitors do – ‘making my plans; staying at 2 quiet hotels.’ It is over halfway through the stanza before her account starts to beg a few questions. Why more than one hotel in the same place? Why does she seem obliged to stay in a traditionally bohemian area such as ‘the Village [Greenwich], where people… more or less left you alone’? And has she combed New York for her lover in as destructive a way as her male counterpart did in the film?
• Duffy deftly adds humour to Queen Kong's narrative where she tries to pose as a typical holidaymaker. Even in Greenwich Village, the residents would notice a stranger as massive as she is. ‘Pastrami on rye’ is a taste unlikely to be preferred by gorillas but it is the sort of local delicacy that tourists often boast of appreciating.
Stanza 2

- ‘This island's a paradise.’ There is a hint here that Queen Kong is trying to justify her kidnap of the filmmaker with the insistence that he could not have wanted for a better life back in the city.

- The filmmaker is quite different from Carl Denham, whose ambitions seem to be satisfied with an opportunity to win fame and fortune. This man is a serious naturalist, making a documentary about a particularly unappealing animal (the ‘toad that lays its eggs only here.’). It is therefore Queen Kong who is to be the aggressor in the relationship.

- The endearment, ‘my man’, underlines Queen Kong's possessiveness of him.

- The man (nameless, like so many of Duffy's males) is so intent on his work, that he pays no heed to potential island dangers, whereas in the film much is made of the exotic menace that surrounds the visitors. Queen Kong comes upon him ‘alone’.

- The term ‘scooped’ vividly conveys Queen Kong's “objectification” of the man. She likes him, so she simply appropriates him, regardless of his wishes.

- Like Ann Darrow, the man protests, though less forcefully. We are left to speculate quite what Queen Kong did to calm him.

- Love, expressed in a conventional cliché, which hints at her sentimentality, is as instantaneous for the gorilla here as in the film. Crucially Queen Kong stresses how it was ‘for me’, implying not only her preoccupation with her own needs, but the possibility that the man required a lot of persuading.

Stanza 3

- From the beginning of the stanza, Queen Kong tells us about her feelings - she has been ‘lonely’, blue, uncomfortable without a man. In the specific elements of her plight, there is a sense of a confessional made to a reporter from a women’s magazine. Later in the stanza she tells us only about what the man can ‘do for me’.

- ‘All right’ highlights her concession to the perceived disparity of their sizes. The cliché ‘small, but perfectly formed’ strengthens our impression that she regards him as a toy rather than a partner.

- With the words ‘and gorgeous’ isolated by enjambment at the beginning of the line, Queen Kong emphasises her most important criterion.

- In the long fourth sentence, which ranges over three lines, Queen Kong clearly revels in the ‘things he could do’, as she coyly states, ‘that no gorilla could’. The juxtaposition in ‘sweet finesse’ beautifully conveys her ecstasy and his delicacy with her. Evidently he has won her over.

- The cliché ‘follow him to the ends of the earth’ again suggests that her feelings are sentimental - though she does eventually do just that. From its initiation in her ‘huge heart’, this relationship is destined to be on a big scale.
Stanza 4

- At this stage at least, though he is too ‘nervous’ to put his whole trust in her, he obviously has some say in the relationship, refusing to stay on the island with her, prepared every night to ‘climb into [her] open hand, sit down’ for her to pet him.
- The size difference is emphasised a number of times, for instance in her description of the tents as ‘delicate’ and in her careful touching of him with ‘the tip of [her] tongue’, and generally seems to enhance rather than hinder their passion.
- Their lovemaking, which takes place in the romantic ‘dusk’, ‘each night’, is described very tenderly and erotically. She is gentle with him, peeling him as her male counterpart does Ann Darrow in the film. She likens the sweetness of his flesh to a ‘grape’.
- She is quite clear that the relationship is unorthodox; and there is an element of humour as well as threat in the fact that his terrified colleagues ‘always sent him out pretty quick.’

Stanza 5

- In the one word ‘Bliss.’ which opens the stanza, Queen Kong suggests that this is all that needs to be said about the relationship. ‘But’ then swiftly leads into her rejection. In this stanza the man calls the shots - he has done what he came to do (‘finished his prize-winning film’ - in other words, used the island and their affair for his own ends) and packs to go, unconcerned that, in ‘mimicking the flight back home’, he is leaving her heartbroken. Duffy cleverly links both the literal and the metaphorical as Queen Kong describes how her lover ‘hopped up and down on [her] heart line’.
- Perhaps inevitably in a Duffy man, Queen Kong’s lover underestimates her. Thinking her unsophisticated, the man tries to simplify the means of his departure for her (the only time when his voice is heard in the poem) in ‘Big metal bird.’ Queen Kong’s account turns uncharacteristically angry. His twentieth century technology is as vulnerable to her as is a ‘gnat’ and she is frustrated that he fails to see how easy it would be for her (like the gorilla in the film) simply to ‘swat’ it.
- Queen Kong is briefly altruistic in this stanza – ‘I let him go’ - though her pain is evident in her characteristic use of the endearment ‘my man’ and her description of the ultimate gesture of despair, borrowed from the film: ‘I thumped at my breast’. She is truly ‘distraught.’
Stanza 6

- Queen Kong metes out her anguish by matter-of-factly allotting times to each of its stages. Her grief follows a conventional route: the absolute denial of the week's sleep; the more expressive and uncontrollable raging, still tempered by oblivion-inducing substances, which lasts twice as long; the week it takes to acknowledge her femininity, which her refusal to wash has countered. She comes to a resolution at the end of the stanza.

- As she often does, Duffy explores emotional pain through physical images, both literal and metaphorical. The gorilla's anger at her lover's departure expresses itself in a rejection of basic hygiene. Suddenly, the jungle is populated and the creatures' noises as they clack and whinge, exacerbate her hangover. She feels 'fevered' and needs the cool river water (which has the added advantage of reminding her of her lover's body, as this was where he bathed). Then she menstruates and her monthly cycle is complete. In a touch of pathetic fallacy, Queen Kong shows how nature itself, in the shape of the 'fat, red moon', undergoes the healing process with her. The period of menstruation is often represented as a cathartic time and here Queen Kong finds that she has come to a momentous decision at its end (and when she is at her most fertile and womanly).

Stanza 7

- Despite its differences from her own home, New York is a terrain which she can command. She can blatantly 'sail up the Hudson' river straight into the city without fear of being accosted. She quickly translates New York's idiosyncrasies into her own terms: 'the skyline a concrete rainforest', where she can prowl 'in darkness' as she would in the jungle.

- Images of light - the glowing tower blocks, the 'glimmer of hope', the colourful scenes in the windows - are used to indicate Queen Kong's growing optimism.

- Though she is still passionate, 'lovesick' and conscious of her discrepant size, she is able to move about discreetly, her quest undertaken methodically as she scrutinises the interior of each apartment. This more feminine approach can be compared to the exploits of King Kong who crashes his way through the city, regardless of life and property, and terrifies the residents as he stares through their windows.

- She is able, as she searches, to enjoy 'each…modest peep-show'; and there is a sense, in the stately last line of the stanza, that she is reflecting on her own share of 'boredom…pain…drama, consolation, remorse' as she goes.
Stanza 8

- The first half-line, firmly marked off from the rest of the stanza by caesura, is quietly triumphant but, lest we feel the gorilla is too arrogant, the following half-line shows just how wearying her search has been, extending, we imagine, throughout several days and nights. She is rewarded by finding her lover at a peaceful, restful time. Even better - and we sense her treasuring each new point as she tells us - he is 'alone', sleeping in a bed which is not even designed for joint occupation. She enjoys watching him totally relaxed, 'dreaming' and, of course, 'lovely'. Best of all, and this revelation is highlighted by enjambment, the photograph of herself is in clear evidence, even 'blown-up'.

- Rather than reaching in and grabbing him, as her male counterpart does, Queen Kong first feasts her eyes till her happiness fills her eyes with tears. Then, she gives herself a little time, to get used to her discovery alone 'under the stars.' in one of the most romantic places on earth and to prepare properly for a joyful reunion. She is quite sure that nothing can stand in her way now, as the stark statement 'He was mine.' indicates.

- Many of Duffy's women appreciate, stereotypically, the pleasures of shopping. Here Queen Kong celebrates her man's gorgeousness by buying him clothes. But, newly confident in her own attractiveness (she refers to her 'big brown eyes' - this is the first time she has mentioned her own physical attributes with approval), she also rewards herself with 'treats' from the most prestigious store in the city.

Stanza 9

- The first sentence extends to almost four lines, giving Queen Kong space to show how she is revelling in every detail of their reunion.

- Using a very rich image, she describes how she 'picked him, like a chocolate from the top layer of a box'. We are left in no doubt that the power of choice is hers, that she has used it judiciously and that, in her mind, he exists entirely for her delectation.

- She reinforces her power over him by allowing him to 'dangle in the air' precariously. She may excuse this by referring to her 'teasing, lover's way' but it is difficult not to believe that she is also demonstrating her ability to rein him in if necessary.

- However compliant her man, the account of the two of them 'on the tip of the Empire State Building, saying farewell' to the cabs which wink and the helicopters which look like 'dragonflies' is almost idyllic, especially when compared to its bleak and violent filmic counterpart.

Stanza 10

- The stanza opens with 'Twelve happy years.' Is she trying to convince herself? Has it been as rewarding for him?

- The relationship is described largely in terms of its physical expression. She plays with him as with a pet, observing what he finds soothing, taking comfort from his body while she sleeps, blowing on him, scratching him with tender, detailed 'care', in an intriguing swapping of roles. He seems to contribute less.

- Neither communicates in words – though both can. The creative impulses he has brought to the relationship seem to dwindle – his fashioning of 'wooden pipes' occurs in their first year together (about which she is keen to use the personal pronoun 'our') and after this he simply plays to her on them. But the tunes are 'plaintive, lost' indicating that this is how he feels; and he can maintain this mood 'for hours'.
Stanza 11

- Duffy evokes a terrible, shocking grief here. The gorilla holds the body all night, ‘shaking him’ as if she believes she can wake him, ‘licking’ the dead face, breast, feet and even penis, roaring. Here, of course, her behaviour is much more gorilla than human.
- She admits here that he is ‘like a doll’ to her. Even in death, his body parts (such as ‘his little rod’) have a certain “cuteness” to them.
- She finds an outlet for her distress in the practicalities of raising a memorial to her lover: ‘heart sore as I was, I set to work.’ But, while this is understandable, the measures she takes to preserve his memory are rather chilling. The ‘tiny emeralds’ are especially worrying. She states that he is now ‘perfect.’ Does she think she has improved him?
- ‘I wear him now about my neck’. Was he only ever an accessory? Maybe she is happier now that she can fashion him to suit her own purposes.
- She still seems anxious to please him but perhaps it was her own peculiar form of loving which rendered him ‘silent’ and eventually dead.
- ‘No man has been loved more.’ But what does she mean by love? We can be reminded of Lennie in Of Mice and Men cherishing the things he loved to death; and we wonder why Queen Kong’s filmmaker only lasted twelve years.
Mrs Quasimodo

Here are my ideas:

- The poem begins with a celebration of Mrs Quasimodo’s love of the bells in the cathedral with ‘Their generous bronze throats/gargling, or chanting slowly’. She asserts that this sound calmed her suggesting perhaps that she often felt the need of a distraction from the confusion and turmoil of her emotions.
- The caesura serves to highlight a change in tone as the pace quickens and we are presented with a list of adjectives that tumble out just as the names may have been shouted to the young girl.
- In contrast to the vindictive nature of the village people, the protagonist describes herself as ‘bearing up…sweet-tempered’ and once again we see Duffy presenting a woman who suffers in an alien world but nevertheless is ‘bearing up’.
- The placing of ‘needlework’ on a line on its own reinforces this woman’s isolation and lack of value in a male world where traditionally female activities have no status.
- The protagonist describes herself as ‘an ugly cliché’ suggesting that she sees herself as hackneyed yet still conforming to the expected stereotype of a woman.
- In contrast to her malformed shape, the bells are cool and melodious, clearly in harmony with each other unlike the woman who is isolated and marginalised by her peers and who sees herself as a blot on the landscape.
- The power of the bells seems so intense that the woman suggests she thought that they could even control the elements, that ‘they could even make it rain.’

It appears that she feels more at home in the city as, unlike in the fields where her legs are stung, she is able to merge with the ‘jagged alley walls’. Her shadow is described as ‘lumpy’ and her movement as ‘lurching’ creating the image of a large disfigured shape that is graceless and heavy.
- In contrast to the large body, the woman describes herself as having ‘small black eyes’ and she compares them to ‘rained-on cobblestones’, suggesting perhaps a permanent sadness that is reflected in her watery eyes.
- On a single line she asserts that she ‘frightened cats’, creatures known for their arrogance and nightly wanderings. This statement serves to reinforce her isolation and alienation from her surroundings.
- The idea of her isolation and loneliness is reinforced through the description of her meagre diet and the fading of day into night being imaged as a rubbing out of her world.
- The stanza concludes with ‘and then the bells began.’ The bells provide a point of reference for the woman and seem to give meaning to what is an apparently meaningless life.
The bells act as a catalyst to action as the woman describes her quest to see for herself the bells being rung. She is described as ‘sweating anxiously, puce-faced’ suggesting both the effort required to reach her goal and the possible fear of rejection that haunts her as she leaves the safety of her isolated world.

The response of the bell ringers is to ‘make a space’ for her, to allow her access to their world. When she sees Quasimodo she feels an instant bond with him.

Duffy’s choice of the word ‘thump’ suggests not a romantic moment but a harsh almost violent jerk which acts as a catalyst to her emotions.

The placing of ‘It was Christmas’ on a separate line offers the possibility of two readings. The first that it was literally Christmas and the second that for her it was like Christmas, Quasimodo her gift, as she felt a sense of connection with another human being.

The consummation of this relationship is described in stark and uncompromising language and the use of the word ‘fucked’ suggests only a physical desire rather than a lasting bond between the two. The bells are described as ‘gap ing’ and ‘stricken’ quite different to the gargling ‘bronze throats’ she had engaged with as a child. The bells themselves seem vulnerable and open to abuse and the experience leaves her not elated but weeping.

The stanza opens with the dry factual statement ‘We wed.’ Once again, no romance appears to be attached to this coupling.

The tone and mood of the poem change however, in the next section, as she describes how he ‘swung an epithalamium for me’ (epithalamium being melodious music, a nuptial song often used in marriage ceremonies, thalamus from the Greek meaning brid al chamber). The language changes, as the women’s life seems to take a new direction. The music is now ‘embossed on the fragrant air’ suggesting permanence and a beauty to the world around her.

The chimes are now ‘Long, sexy’ and the sound reflecting her inner emotion ‘exuberant’. The ‘slow scales trailing up and down the smaller bells’ suggest a slow and sensual movement reflecting the intimacy and passion of the couple. The idea of devotion and sanctity in the marriage is further reinforced by the word ‘angelus’ on a separate line. Angelus is a devotional exercise that commemorates the incarnation and is recited by Roman Catholics in the morning, at noon and sunset after the sound of a bell.

This tone changes however, after the statement ‘We had no honeymoon/ but spent a week in bed.’ The description becomes far more intimate as Mrs Quasimodo lists the pleasures she took with his disfigured body. The language creates a picture of an animal-like character but one who is more than able to satisfy his wife’s passion. Duffy chooses, once again, to empower the woman as we hear only of the activities in which she engaged. The male appears passive and available for her pleasure. Here we see the stereotype of male/female sexual relations being inverted, as the male becomes the object of pleasure whilst the woman explores and avails herself of his body. The language is raw and uncompromising but the stanza concludes with a complete turn in tone and mood as we see baldly stated on a single line, ‘So more fool me.’ The balance is restored. The male is re-empowered and the reader is now prepared for a turn in the relationship.
The life of the Quasimodos is seen as conventional but paradoxically isolated as we hear the views of their neighbours. They are, on the one hand, ‘The Quasimodos’, just as any other couple might be labelled but, on the other, they are ‘Gross’, unacceptable and therefore distanced. Their neighbours are not the people next door but ‘sullen gargoyles, fallen angels, cowled saints’. The description of these lifeless artefacts suggests a sense of the couple’s alienation from society. The use of words like ‘sullen’, ‘fallen’ and ‘cowled’ (hooded) suggests a morose and melancholy world distanced from those favoured with conventional beauty, a world more in keeping with the fallen angels than with those who remain in the sight of God.

Duffy puns on the colloquial phrase “Get a life” by asserting the couple ‘got a life.’ Again, this suggests a certain tone of resentment as they get by and deal with their isolation. The everyday domestic life is reiterated in the carrying of the husband’s supper on a tray and we see the woman acting out the role of dutiful wife.

The tone changes as the words ‘But once’ are placed starkly on a single line.

There is a dramatic and almost sinister tone established in the concluding lines as Mrs Quasimodo relates how as Quasimodo rang the seventh hour, seven being in itself a number associated with mystery and foreboding. She ‘kissed the cold lips of a Queen next to her King.’ The image of the lips as cold suggests sterility, death and the absence of passion. The end-stopped line seems to signal finality and presages the impending death of passion and desire in Mrs Quasimodo’s life.

Here are some ideas to add to your own:

In the opening lines the protagonist signals not only a change but also a realisation that the love, desire and commitment had in fact always been one-sided. She suggests that the truth lies somewhere in between the change she now sees and the reality that there had never really been a bond between the two.

Mrs Quasimodo mimics her husband’s voice as he finds fault with her every move and she concludes with the statement ‘Look at myself.’ Characteristically, this offers an ambiguity to the reader. On the one hand, it could be read as the continuing complaint of her disaffected husband. On the other, it could be the voice of the woman herself. Robbed of her self-respect, she begins to lose faith and the ‘thump of confidence’ has disappeared as she feels him withdraw from her, leaving her once again in her isolated world. Duffy seems here to be highlighting the trap to which many women fall prey, that of defining themselves only in terms of their husband and his belief in them.

Duffy returns here to the original source of the story as she refers to Quasimodo being enchanted by the gypsy girl (Esmeralda in Hugo’s story).

His love is now linked with stone, a hard, unbreakable material that is cold and impenetrable. The stanza concludes with the bald statement, separated from the rest, ‘I should have known.’ suggesting that the woman never really believed she deserved happiness. She was always the one who was taunted and isolated and these lines seem to hark back to the opening of the poem. The loss of Quasimodo’s affections seems simply to confirm her view of herself almost as one not worthy of happiness.
The stanza opens with a rhetorical question and the repetition of the word ‘better’ reinforcing both Mrs Quasimodo’s acceptance of her isolation and articulating the dominant values of society in terms of women. As Daisy Fay asserts in *The Great Gatsby*, the best a woman can hope for is to be “A beautiful little fool”.

The sibilant and assonant lines ‘slim, … slight, /…slender neck’ reinforce the images of the slight sinewy body that is desired by men. The description that follows details the male fantasy of the vulnerable yet available young woman who is to be ‘kissed’ and petted much like a small animal, ‘so perfect’ and clearly so inviting. Duffy seems to be suggesting that in a world characterised by these values, happiness is only to be found by women who comply with this stereotype.

There is a bitterness as well as an acceptance in the tone as Mrs Quasimodo concludes that these women are ‘given sanctuary’, suggesting perhaps that they can be sheltered from the harsh realities of an uncaring and selfish world. In contrast, she is forced to confront a society characterised by shallow and degraded values where women are only valued as beautiful objects with ‘devastating eyes’ and ‘tumbling auburn hair’.

The opening lines focus on Mrs Quasimodo’s emotions. She feels ‘betrayed’ but her anger is not vented against Quasimodo but, in classic female style, she turns the burning light of truth on herself as she details her ‘ecstasy of loathing’.

The following lines take the form of a rant as she details the disgust she feels when she looks at her body. Duffy’s use of hyperbole here reflects the complexity of emotions that many women experience and the general inability of women to accept themselves and their bodies for what they are. Through the character of Mrs Quasimodo Duffy gives voice to the emotions of many women when they feel they can never measure up to the media hyped expectations of the male gaze.

The stanza concludes with a complete negation of the woman by herself as she launches into a series of lacerating statements that leave no room for compromise. The reader is left with the image of a woman who, in accepting society’s values, has no recourse but to punish herself. The tone is bitter and reflects the loathing she has of herself whilst the mood, although reflecting this hatred, also suggests desperation and a helplessness as the woman is left alone to confront her empty life.

The stanza opens with another rhetorical question but this time, rather than being an acceptance of her isolated situation, the tone is defiant. In the following lines she lists the equipment that she gathers and her determination to attain her revenge. There is no sign now of the weeping woman but instead of a woman who has ‘A steady hand,’ as she sets about her task of destroying what is most dear to Quasimodo, the bells.

The bells are personified. Quasimodo has female names for them, such as ‘Marie.’ The language becomes increasingly sexual and frenzied as Mrs Quasimodo lists the implements of destruction. The work is described as ‘agonising’; it is clearly a struggle but the result is that she ‘ripped out her brazen tongue/and let it fall.’ The use of the word ‘ripped’, a word she has used on herself, suggests a kind of abortion, and the description of the tongue as ‘brazen’ implies an unashamed boldness that has been eradicated by Mrs Quasimodo’s act. The description is almost like a kind of vicarious castration.

The description of ‘Josephine’ is similarly sensual as she is described as keeping open ‘her astonished, golden lips’ to ‘let me in.’
The structure of the following lines reflects the silencing of the bells. ‘The bells. The bells.’ is repeated to echo the haunting and now dying sound of the desecrated bells almost like a death knell.

Beauty seems to have gone out of the world as the bells are silenced; the word ‘No’ is repeated reinforcing the sense of negation that now characterises the world as the ‘divine, articulate’ sound has been effaced. The pace slows and the tone becomes increasingly melancholic and the section concludes with the one word ‘grief’. The word alone on the page seems to sum up the mood of the poem. The woman’s revenge has been vented not only against her husband but also against herself as she robs her own world of the beauty of ‘Their generous bronze throats’.

With music wrenched from her life after she ‘sawed and pulled and hacked’, she is reduced to nothing more than a beast. In punishing Quasimodo she has metaphorically torn out her own soul and all that is left to her are basic instincts. The language is harsh and uncompromising as the poem concludes with an image of the woman who ‘squatted among the murdered music…and pissed.’ The tone is not one of triumph or of victory but it seems to reflect the hollow emptiness of the woman’s life reduced to the level of an animal, a guilty murder of the ‘clarity of sound’ that could ‘purify the air’.
Medusa

- Duffy has used 8 stanzas in all. The first is five lines long, the next six are six lines long and the last a mere one line.
- The lines vary in length from three syllables ('spattered down') to eleven syllables ('which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes').
- This variation in line lengths suggests the disturbed state of mind of the speaker/narrator as she spits out her angry thoughts.
- There is no regular rhyme scheme although there are a few uses of pararhyme and echoes that create a jarring, dissonant effect appropriate to Medusa's state of mind.

- On the first line, she uses a list of three feelings to show the gradual modulation of Medusa's emotions: there is initially a 'suspicion', which leads to the formulation of 'doubt' in Medusa's mind. This doubt crystallises into 'jealousy' before the line is ended. She needs no proof or confirmation of this 'suspicion'. The reader is reminded of Shakespeare's character, Emilia, in Othello, who says of jealous people: "They are not ever jealous for the cause, But jealous for they are jealous:’ tis a monster, Begot upon itself, born on itself."
- The characterisation of jealousy as a MONSTER is obviously significant here: Medusa becomes the very personification of jealousy, a monster in herself, as she is consumed by a jealousy that robs her of her beauty and vitality.
- The third line is the longest in the poem. It represents Medusa's transformation as the hairs on her head turn into 'filthy snakes'. The length of the line could represent the time taken by this transformation. The reader is left to question whether the 'snakes' are literal, hissing snakes, or whether they are the unwashed, lank tangles of a woman whose jealousy has given up on hygiene as she has given up on love (as in Queen Kong who 'didn't wash' when deprived of her lover).
- The adjective 'filthy' is telling: it suggests dirt but also a disgust: at herself, at her lover and possibly at sexuality in general.
- The choice of 'snakes' as the hair-tendrils recalls the snake in the Garden of Eden: the original tempter of Eve into original sin.
- The woman's snake-hair becomes the physical representation of the hissing and spitting of the character's thoughts.
- Note the dissonance created by the sibilant 's' sounds of 'hissed' and 'spat' and 'scalp' combined with the plosive 'p' sounds here. All combine to create an almost onomatopoeic representation of the woman's angry disgust.
- There is a line "missing" in this stanza (a line shorter than the others) as if to represent the woman's state of mind: she is missing too, missing her lover and the peace of mind that she once knew when she trusted him.
• We learn here that the woman was married: even worse, as her ‘bride’s breath’ turns foul, the reader is given the impression that she is quite newly wed.
• The plosive ‘b’ sound of ‘bride’s breath’ suggests the woman is spitting out the words in disgust.
• The sibilance of ‘soured, stank’ combined with the harsh consonantal ‘t’ and ‘k’ sounds produce a truly dissonant effect. More words being spat out in disgust.
• The description of lungs as ‘grey bags’ is disturbingly graphic and realistic.
• The repetition of ‘foul’ on the third line reinforces Medusa’s own disgust at herself. It is as though her thoughts have poisoned her tongue, her mouth and her words.
• The description of her teeth as ‘yellow fangs’ further serves to emphasise the difference between her old persona and this new, monstrous one. There is something distinctly dragon-like about this character.
• Her tears are metaphorically described as ‘bullets’ in order to emphasise the potential damage that they could cause; the damage she intends them to cause. It is, of course, Medusa’s gaze that petrifies, so her tears are flowing from the very instruments of destruction: those eyes that will turn men to stone. The tears are harbingers of doom.
• The final line of the stanza is only three words long: a question directed at the betraying lover: ‘Are you terrified?’ It suggests, threateningly, that he should be terrified of her. An alternative reading might focus more upon the pity of the bride desperately attempting to get her own back by scaring her ex-lover. Her eagerness to do this smacks of desperation.

• She begins with an IMPERATIVE (command): ‘Be terrified.’ This stark command stands out, placed as it is on a line alone. It obviously links contiguously from the previous stanza, neatly linking the two.
• The command is directed at the husband, it seems, who is now addressed as the one she loves, ‘perfect man’. His perceived perfection adds to the sense of Medusa’s delusion: no human could be this perfect.
• The next moniker (name) given to him, ‘Greek God’, explains this perfection. He is not, or not perceived as, human.
• The final moniker of the line emphasises her sense of ownership of the man, ‘my own’. It is chilling in tone and in its absolutism.
• The semicolon at the end of this line is interesting as it leads into the next line, which suggests his betrayal. It seems to suggest, therefore, that she has no sooner possessed him as her own than he has betrayed her. The internal rhyme of ‘stray’ and ‘betray’ emphasises this idea, as well as the certainty in Medusa’s mind that this will indeed be what he does.
• ‘From home.’ placed on its own on the next line suggests the isolation of Medusa in this home, alone without him.
• The contrast between the long fourth line and this very short fifth one suggests her feeling of anticlimax when he leaves.
• Duffy uses the connective ‘So’ at the beginning of the last line of this stanza to emphasise her change of direction and emotion. In this way, the length of the last line of the stanza suggests her sense of resolution as she decides upon and seals his fate.
Duffy demonstrates Medusa using her powers apparently at random, directing her violent impulses at the world around her in order to take revenge on the world for her husband’s perceived betrayal.

The bee is the first target. Her use of the verb ‘buzzing’ is a little childish (as well as onomatopoeic): it reminds the reader of learning the sounds of the animals in childhood. Consequently, her cruel treatment of this innocent creature seems more terrible.

As it is petrified by her gaze, it falls out of the air, halted in mid-flight and becomes merely a ‘dull grey pebble’, as though she has sucked the beauty out of its striped, furry coat as well as sucking the life out of it.

The decreasing length of the lines at this point suggests the bee’s halted progress as it falls clean out of the sky.

The alliterative, harsh ‘g’ of “grey…ground… glanced’ sounds dissonant here, emphasising her cruelty.

The next victim is a bird. Notice how Duffy uses a positive adjective – ‘singing’ – to describe it before it is destroyed by Medusa’s gaze. Its melodious flight becomes ‘a handful of dusty gravel’ that ‘spattered down’. Notice the onomatopoeic quality of ‘spattered’ and the way that this is contrasted with the idea of the former singing of the bird.

The cat is described as ‘ginger’, an image that conjures up a sense of wholesomeness and homeliness, of picture postcard cats.

She also gives the cat an action: it has been drinking its milk as she accosts it. Its instant petrification results in the smashing of the bowl from which it has been drinking.

The fact that the cat is recast as a ‘housebrick’ reminds the reader of its domesticity (not just any old brick!) even as it is recast.

In the same way, the pig is described as ‘snuffling’, emphasising its innocence, as though it is oblivious to its fate, going about its business when it meets Medusa’s gaze. Its destruction is complete: it becomes a ‘boulder’ and its reduction to the very lowest level is emphasised by the fact that it ends up ‘in a heap of shit.’

The reflective mood is suggested by the literal reflection of Medusa in the mirror as she bitterly thinks of her ‘love gone bad’.

Medusa sees not a beautiful young vision but a ‘Gorgon’, the generic name for the monster she has become.

This reflection produces Medusa’s truly monstrous anger. She therefore chooses a target worthy of her wrath: a dragon, a powerful adversary.

The fire spewing from the mountain could be the dragon’s last breath before it is turned to stone. It seems that the mountain here is used metaphorically, like the pig-boulder, the housebrick-cat, the pebble-bee. It is the dragon itself, turned to stone. The metaphor chosen demonstrates the size of the monster, the size of her wrath.

The fact that she has gone from bee to bird to cat to pig to dragon shows the ever-increasing size of her anger: she is not being satiated by these random acts of destruction. They are merely leading her towards greater, more powerful targets until she seems unstoppable.
• The man is not named: the male characters in Duffy are often nameless in order to suggest that they could stand for “Everyman”. He is merely ‘you’.

• His shield is metaphorically named as his heart, suggesting his sense of self-preservation comes first at all times. He is not open to love or experience.

• His tongue is metaphorically a sword – a weapon that he can use against women, whether to allure them and charm them or, as here, to strike them down.

• The girls in his company also seem calculated to anger Medusa: to remind her of his attractiveness to others, of his unavailability to her, especially in her new incarnation as the terrible and terrifying Gorgon.

• Duffy uses repetition: ‘your girls, your girls.’ This emphasises his faithlessness, his inability to be satisfied by one woman – her. It seems that there is a whole stream of these girls ready to replace her, to make her feel inadequate to him and endlessly disposable.

• The poem moves towards its end with rhetorical questions, as Medusa considers her previous glory compared with her current state. The adjectives ‘beautiful…fragrant…young’ all list the desirable qualities that she feels have been robbed by the man – the husband – who has reduced her to the state of the Gorgon.

• The final line, emphasised by being placed alone, appears to suggest her acceptance of this state: ‘Look at me now.’ The tone is despairing, accepting, bitter and blaming all at once. Its stark simplicity belies the fact that it works on these different emotional levels, challenging the reader, seducing them, for we all know what happens if we look the gorgon in the eye! ‘Look at me now.’ therefore represents Medusa’s last laugh at our expense. We cannot help but be beguiled by her. Our own curiosity invites us to look at this wreck of humanity, to compare the legendary beauty, the fragrance and youth she once possessed with her current, hideous state. As the reader ‘looks’ they too are turned to stone, petrified in her imagination.
The poem is divided into five parts, each self-contained. There are sixteen stanzas in all, unevenly divided between the sections.

The first section employs one of Duffy's standard forms in this collection. It contains three stanzas, each six lines long with between nine and thirteen syllables to a line. Most of the sentences or sentence fragments are rather short and Duffy often uses enjambment. Lines are not linked by rhyme though repetition, internal rhyme and pararhyme sometimes make an appearance as do other techniques such as juxtaposition and triadic structures. This dramatic monologue, like some of the others in the book, veers into a colloquial register; and here the colloquialisms are distinctively Mancunian.

The second section, at sixteen lines, is slightly shorter and more regular, almost rhytmical with the last two lines of each couplet (except in the first stanza) rhyming and a number of rhymes and pararhymes featuring internally. There is quite a lot of patterning and repetition. Again there are short sentences and sentence fragments and in this section Duffy makes more use of caesura but very little of enjambment. The colloquial register is maintained through vernacular expressions and clichés.

The third section is slightly shorter again. Its fourteen-line form reveals it as a sonnet though rhyming is negligible. However the repetition in this section is even more marked. An absence of punctuation is a key feature.

The fourth section is the briefest at six lines and three very short stanzas, the last being only one word. The two longer sentences contrast with a line, which seems to be made up of slogans.

In the last section of twelve lines the reader is presented with what seems to be a list of potential deaths, each phrase or clause introduced by the word ‘if’. There is an overriding impression of unfinished utterances: there is no main clause or punctuation to make sense of this list - though rhyme links the most significant words - merely what can be deduced from the question which comprises the final short stanza.

The sections are in chronological order. Each deals with a different stage in her acceptance of her situation and, crucially, in her presentation of it to outsiders.

The first section is the nearest to conventional narrative. The short sentences and sentence fragments convey Hindley as brusque, tough, cool, to the point. Enjambment emphasises the way she revels in aspects of Brady and their relationship, which particularly excite or satisfy her. Unusual juxtapositions – ‘I’d stare him out’, for example and ‘on fire for him’ - and the less than obvious links of the groups of three – ‘He bit my breast. His language was foul. He entered me’, for instance - underline the fact that this couple will make their own logic. Mancunian dialect lends the speaker a strange vulnerability which is especially effective in ‘Nobody’s Mam’, following the ambiguous ‘Thumped wound of a mouth.’

More recognisably “poetic” features and patterning, such as repetition and rhyme, give the second section the lyricism of a dream. As a more conventionally rhymed stanza yields to a curious scheme where only the last two lines of each stanza are rhymed, there is a sense that Hindley suffers periods of confusion or distress. She then finds a way of dealing with them, even if this involves deceiving herself: ‘I cannot remember . . . I didn’t care . . . It was nowt to me . . . we’d be out on the open road . . . how could this be hell?’ The use of caesura and internal rhyme often gives the impression of a desperate attempt to impose symmetry on a
situation which is impossible to bear. Hindley seems to toy with the vernacular expressions as if she is considering what others have said about her.

- That it is in the shape of a sonnet - a form traditionally associated with lofty sentiments - enhances the shock value of the third section, which comprises a list of blatant excuses and sheer lies. The missing punctuation, absence of rhyme, the constant repetitions and the peremptory commands highlight the panic Hindley is feeling. Colloquialisms such as ‘I never’ again stress her moral and emotional frailty, as if she is a child denying a more trifling misdemeanour.
- The fourth section is couched as a prayer with the conventional ending ‘Amen.’ The brevity of the slogans only adds to their power while the long second line parallels the slow excruciating length of nights spent pondering her condition. The short line ‘I will finally tell.’ indicates almost resignation.
- In the last section, the speaker seems to be weighing up different modes of dying. The unfinished nature of her utterances and the lack of punctuation suggest that she is contemplating them all for her own purposes but cannot bring herself even to articulate them. The final, short stanza is key. At last she seems to be asking the vital question.

1. DIRT

Stanza 1

- With the striking juxtaposition of ‘The Devil’ and ‘one of the men at work.’, Duffy immediately challenges us with the skewed logic of the couple, the sinister way in which these atrocities took place against a backdrop of terrible ordinarness.
- To begin with, Brady's chief sin seems to have been that he ‘fancied himself’, placing her early response to him on a very banal footing.
- Brady's attraction lies in the fact that he is ‘different’. He doesn't play by the rules: ‘Didn't flirt. Didn't speak.’

- Hindley is susceptible to Brady because he is ‘sarcastic and rude’, implying a fundamental flaw in her self-esteem.
- ‘I'd stare him out’: from the start, the relationship is described as a contest.
- Where he is ‘rude’, she is ‘insolent’, a slightly more sophisticated word. Duffy plays on the meanings of ‘dumb’, to emphasise not just a haughty silence but Hindley's ignorance, stupidity, powerlessness. Hindley's best attempts at nonchalance are to chew ‘my gum’.
- The juxtaposition of this posturing in the office and the scene ‘on my bed at home, on fire for him.’ demonstrate the recklessness with which Hindley is already courting danger.
Stanza 2

- The triadic list at the start of the stanza stresses how hard she is trying.
- The colloquial ‘I gave as good as I got’ introduces the central question begged by their story: was theirs a true partnership or did Brady dupe and manipulate Hindley? Though the poem as a whole shows us that Hindley's presentation of her situation cannot always be trusted, this stanza seems to suggest that she was in control only ‘till he asked me out.’
- From now on, Brady seems to take charge, even deciding whether and when they should smoke. The use of the colloquial ‘fags’ implies that the relationship is conducted in his rougher language.
- The triadic structure of the fourth line emphasises the clear link in their relationship between casual violence and sex.
- Again Duffy employs a triadic structure to confirm Hindley's quick and utter capitulation. Brady has hit exactly the right buttons: ‘We’re the same,’ he tells the woman who craves danger and the excitement of evil. She recognises ‘That’s it.’ Her dream has come true: ‘I swooned’; and her innermost being, ‘my soul’, responds to his.
- As in the original story, Brady tests her out, to see how far he can push her. ‘He made me bury a doll’ implies that she is already trying to pretend that their exploits are less serious than they were.

Stanza 3

- While revelling in them, Hindley also presents herself as almost prim about the details of their sexual encounters. The colloquialism of ‘went mad for’ suggests the encroachment of genuine insanity where ‘I won’t repeat what we did.’ hints not only at embarrassment at an unorthodox sex life but the inclusion of their sadistic and murderous activities.
- During this stanza - and, indeed in the poem as a whole - there is no mention of the actual abductions and murders, which are subsumed in the expression ‘It was’ and the grimness behind ‘looking’. Instead, Hindley seems quite indifferent as she lists the haunts where they kidnapped the children and later abused and killed them, as if these places were to be recalled as pretty memories of ‘Coloured lights in the rain.’ Later, she outlines their methods with chilling economy: ‘I’d walk around on my own. He tailed.’
- Much of this poem is about Hindley's own response to events, as if she were the victim and this line is about how it felt for her. Here she refers to the photograph, which is as famous a representation of evil as pictures of Hitler or Stalin. An unattractive teenager, Hindley consciously worked on her look, aiming for a hard sophistication, which made it easier for an appalled public to demonise her. Here she describes herself in imagery, which stresses how cold, hard, depraved and empty she has become. The words ‘thumped wound’ suggest that she too has been the subject of violence, at the hands of Brady or earlier in her life.
- The very intimate dialect word ‘mam’ touches on the horrifying methods the ex-babysitter used to lure away her prey and maybe expresses a regret that she has put herself as far beyond the pale as it is possible to go. A life of ordinary tenderness is lost to her now.
2. MEDUSA

Stanza 1
- The beginning of the poem is dreamlike, as though she is denying the facts even to herself. Her victim is a ‘doll’, Duffy emphasising the extent of Hindley’s deception or self-delusion by the enjambment. The triadic structure with its grudging repetition of ‘I know’ emphasises the little she is prepared to admit as she pleads ‘I cannot remember’.
- The rhyme of ‘there’ and ‘where’ implies that there is every reason to believe that she does in fact know what she did and where the bodies were buried.

Stanza 2
- The stanza is disjointed, swerving from one consideration to another, as if desperate to locate an excuse which will stick. Again, caesura helps to impress symmetry on her ramblings.
- The repetition of ‘nobody’ suggests that she is still sensitive about her lack of attractiveness as an adolescent. Its inclusion here hints that she is using her unpopularity as a reason for what she did.
- For the first time, she blames Brady, signalling the lack of conviction in her claim by the use of the hyperbolic cliché to impress her audience: ‘He held my heart in his fist and he squeezed it dry.’ [Though their relationship was often savage, there is every indication that they both enjoyed it to the full.]
- In the third and fourth lines she shows how aware she is of the media sensation she is causing. She works on her image for the courtroom, acknowledging the power of her ‘Medusa stare’ and reacting to the verdict with a studied carelessness.

Stanza 3
- Hindley boasts of how little imprisonment bothers her and how important she is. The care with which she is secured shows this: ‘locked up, double-locked. I know they chucked the key.’ Her predicament is ‘nowt’ - not even worthy of standard English.
- She comforts herself with the illusion of herself and Brady as romantic outlaws in a Bonnie and Clyde mould, sustaining herself with the vision of ‘the open road.’ The relationship is still urgent and tender: ‘I wrote to him every day in our private code.’ She is so much in tune with Brady that she even uses the language with which he obsessively bemoans the fact that the authorities will not let him die: ‘left to rot.’

Stanza 4
- She recognises suddenly that ‘they’, the authorities and the public whose demands (‘life… means life’) they value, hold her fate in their hands. The implications of this are presented starkly at the end of the first line. ‘Dying inside’ hints not just at her physical sentence but at the slow mental, emotional and spiritual deterioration indefinite incarceration means.
- In the rest of the stanza she outlines her confusion as though she is working it out as she goes along. There is no conviction on her part that her feminine status ‘made’ her ‘worse’ as the public reiterate.
- The stanza concludes with the simple agony of less. ‘I howled in my cell’ because ‘the Devil was gone’ not because she has faced up to her nature. ‘How could this be hell?’ she cries, perhaps implying that for her, without him, it is.
3. BIBLE

Stanza 1
- Here Hindley presents a list of excuses and ways out, generally implying that it was quite out of character for her as (‘I couldn’t I wouldn’t . . . not in a million years’) to have perpetrated these crimes.
- The use of clichés suggests that her protests are bogus.
- Again she falls back on a reliably unreliable memory (‘Can’t remember no idea’).
- Further degeneracy is exposed when she is prepared to swear on the Bible to validate her claims.
- Some of her expressions (‘honestly promise you swear. I never’) betray an immature unwillingness to take responsibility for her behaviour.
- ‘It was him.’ is the ultimate childish refuge. If all else fails, she will callously sacrifice him.

Stanza 2
- The tone is more cynical here. The repetition of ‘send me’ and the haphazard list imply that she will turn to whomever might be of service. She is not fussy about denomination, she wants all the media coverage she can muster, she will use whatever legal loopholes she can find and she is determined to be certified as cured.
- ‘Can’t remember not in the room.’ she adds for good measure and in case anyone has forgotten.

Stanza 3
- The tone of this stanza is more distracted as she seeks any excuse to clear her name. The list of the first line indicates that any reason will do.
- Repetition (‘Not…not…not…not…Didn’t…didn’t…may be…) gives a new urgency to her denials.
- Intriguingly, she slips in the occasional ambiguity and hesitation (‘not like that . . . maybe’) though she swiftly refutes these.
- The stanza closes again with a more insistent denunciation of Brady who, like most of Duffy’s male portrayals, has become the nameless ‘him’.

Stanza 4
In a conventional sonnet, the final couplet sums up the rest of the poem and achieves resolution; here, panicky repetition and muddle replace the expected concluding rhyme.
4. NIGHT

Stanza 2

• ‘Morning’ is a metaphor for moral enlightenment here. It seems that Hindley will confess what actually happened [as she did – though she perhaps downplayed her role in the murders].
• The word ‘finally’ emphasises how long it took for her to admit to her crimes.
• ‘Tell’ still recalls the register of the playground, implying that she is keener to implicate Brady than to acknowledge her own guilt.
• The lines diminish in force suggesting that her spirit is broken.

Stanza 3

• Possibly she intends at last to face her crimes and lay her guilt to rest.
• Maybe she is still professing a religion she does not truly embrace.

5. APPEAL

Stanza 1

• Perhaps in her ‘long fifty-year night’, Hindley has suffered these punishments in her imagination – maybe she feels that they would have been more appropriate sentences. Brady always maintained that he deserved the death penalty.
• The list comprises ten subordinate clauses and phrases. That she is terrified at the thought of these various deaths is suggested by the incomplete meanings of these lines, particularly ‘If an injection’.
• On the other hand, there is a sense that she is still preoccupied with her own star appeal – she is almost fantasising about herself in the centre of these very public executions. The lines referring to ‘my peroxide head on the block’ and ‘my outstretched hands’ reveal the way she revels in the pictures, fleshing them out.
• The short repeated sentence ‘life means life’ – a development of the expression “life should mean life” often reiterated whenever Hindley’s parole was discussed – could indicate that for her, life imprisonment is a form of death.

Stanza 2

• Hindley still tries to distance herself from her guilt. The use of ‘when’ implies that she has now stopped being ‘the Devil’s wife’.
• She seems clear that her association with Brady harmed ‘myself’. But here she acknowledges that her relationship with him had repercussions, which affected ‘us all’.
• ‘But what did I do . . .?’ The uncertainty remains unresolved.
Circe

- The list on the second line harks back to previous lists of ‘types’ of men, for example, the list in *Queen Herod*:
  
  The Boy Next Door. The Paramour. The Je t’adore.
  The Heartbreaker. The Ladykiller. Mr Right.’

- When the reader encounters ‘the tusker, the snout, the boar and the swine.’ they are therefore reminded of this list. The categorisation of creature/man thus, according to type, is therefore a familiar one.

- The phrase ‘under my thumb’ is one used to describe power struggles in human relationships, not farming ones.

- The adjective ‘yobby” calls to mind the noun “yob” used to refer to unruly men.

- The oxymoronic idea of a ‘porky cologne’ obviously refers to male attempts to cover their apparently porcine natural scents. The description of the air as ‘spicy’ also recalls male scents (especially the 1970’s classic, *Old Spice*).

- There are four stanzas in all.

- The line lengths are generally long, between ten and thirteen syllables, producing the effect of a relaxed narrative.

- The first stanza acts as an introduction to all things porcine, according to Circe. The next two stanzas deal with a different recipe or tip for the preparation of the meat/offal of a pig. The final stanza acts as a retrospective or flashback to a time when Circe was young and innocent, in the thrall of men rather than in the habit of categorising them as pigs.

- The stanzas diminish in length as the narrative proceeds, beginning with eleven lines, then ten, then nine and finishing with eight. This gives the effect of an initially enthusiastic narrator venting her spleen with venom and gusto but gradually losing impetus as the narrative continues. As each stanza gets shorter, so too does the venomous tone. In the final, shortest stanza, the tone is not angry, aggressive or violent but rather wistful and reminiscent. The narrator has to gird herself to continue with the venomous narrative with the prompt, ‘Now…’.

- The narrator begins her talk with an address that includes the audience as ‘nerieds and nymphs’. This demonstrates to the reader that this is an all-female audience. The reader may even be reminded of American-style self-help groups. In this reading, Circe can be seen as the main speaker, leading the audience of inexperienced females to a greater understanding of the horrors of the male species.

- In the first stanza, the repetition of the reference to herself is noticeable: ‘I’m fond…mine…I’m familiar…I’ve stood…I want…’ It places Circe firmly in charge. It establishes her as a figure of authority, one who has had much experience and one who is therefore well qualified to speak on the subject.

- The interjection ‘unlike some’ places Circe in a minority group. It suggests (ironically, considering the subject matter) that she is more positively inclined towards the subject under discussion than most.

- The categorisation of the pig in the second line reminds the reader of Duffy’s earlier categorisation of ‘types’ of men. It can also be read as
suggesting types of men as well as pigs. The ‘tusker’ suggests a wild boar, or particularly aggressive male. A ‘snout’ is a slang term for a spy or a “grass”. A ‘boar’ could also be read as a “bore”. A ‘swine’ is also a common term of abuse.

• The boast ‘all pigs have been mine’ sounds like a reversal of the usually male boast of having “had” all kinds of women.

• Circe’s boast that she has had them ‘under [her] thumb’ also relates to the fact that she has literally had them in her thrall as she has overpowered them with her sorcery.

• There is a sexual suggestion underlying the idea of her having their backs ‘under [her] thumb’, their skins ‘bristling’ at her touch. The saltiness of the skins relates to the mythological story in which she lived by the sea. The bristles suggest both masculine body hair and the hair of pigskin.

• The next line supports this idea of physical proximity with its reference to the colognes of men ‘in my nostrils he’ re’. Any idea of romance is undercut immediately however by the dismissive tone of ‘porky’. As an adjective to describe a scent, it immediately categorises it as unsuccessful!

• A hog is a domesticated pig, especially a castrated male raised for slaughter. Here, the term ‘hog’ would therefore be derogatory, suggesting a pig that was not entirely “whole”, a pig that was like a “runt”.

• Notice that the term for a female pig, a sow, does not appear, even later in the poem when Duffy talks of the pig’s ear and the reader may be reminded of the saying, “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” The female pig, then, is NOT referenced in this poem.

• The description of the noise of pigs as ‘oinks…grunts…squeals’ is negative and demeaning. None of these words suggest effective communication. Use of enjambment here produces the effect of elongating the sounds, making it seem as if they go on and on.

• The description of the narrator standing with pig feed recalls Mrs Quasimodo taking her husband’s food to him on a tray at dusk, a servant to the man. Here, Circe sees herself as an attendant, hired help. The creakiness of the gate adds verisimilitude in the form of a sound effect (and, possibly, further criticism of the male species in highlighting another sphere of the domestic domain that they have failed to maintain when, traditionally, they are expected to do just this).

• The metaphor of the moon as a lemon adds again to the evocation of the senses and also sensuality, with the reference to the sky becoming merely a mouth to suck on the lemon. This sense of the mouth as sexual tool is to be developed in the second stanza. The air as ‘sweaty, spicy’ also suggests Circe being enveloped by the scent of the male. There is nevertheless a sense of Circe’s power being suggested as nature itself becomes merely an adjunct to her sexual awareness.

• This atmosphere is abruptly cut short with the connective, ‘But’, which introduces the next stanza with its ‘recipe from abroad’.
The stanza begins with the use of enjambment to suggest the fluidity and ease of the speaker's oratory. The reader is reminded of the television chef who effortlessly cuts from one task to the next.

The line continues with a pun. Duffy tells us that the recipe is rather 'tongue in cheek' meaning ironic or humorous, as it is both playful (in its reference to men's skills with the tongue) and literal in the sense that it is a recipe involving pigs' tongues and cheeks.

The next line includes the imperatives so familiar in recipe-texts: 'Lay two pigs' cheeks...'. The very familiarity of this formula is rather startling in this new ambiguous context, as Duffy invites us to imagine that these are men's, not pigs', tongues.

Another imperative, 'Remember the skills of the tongue', continues this idea. The enjambment of the lines emphasises the fluidity of Duffy's transition from pig to man in her terms of reference.

The alliteration of the 'skills of the tongue' on the next line is suggestive of the very licking, lapping process that Duffy is describing in her disarmingly vivid reference to oral sex.

The positioning of 'lie' at the end of the line reinforces its ambiguity, a point emphasised by the enjambment that playfully leads the reader to the benign interpretation of the verb "to lie". However, the word's position at the end of the line invites the reader primarily to consider the harmful, mendacious interpretation first.

The parenthetical dash in the next line propels the poem on effortlessly to its next point, one which most vividly evokes the idea of the man/pig crossover.

Here, Duffy invites the reader (or audience of nymphs) to remember the face of each "pig" they have known, characterising them as 'handsome ... plain ... cowardly ... brave ...', each adjective applying not to a pig's face but a man's. There is a surrealist quality to this list, overlapping the image of a literal laying-out of pig faces.

The list ends with 'kind' and appears to suggest a softening in the narrator's attitude. Instead, this adjective is used to reinforce the common quality to all of these faces: their 'piggy eyes'. It is as if the speaker has tempted her audience to consider the kindest of the men they have known and, instead of celebrating their kindness, to categorise them along with all of the others as cruel and "piggy."

The final imperative here, in relation to the eyes, to 'Season with mace.' is shocking in its violence. Whilst mace is a spice derived from nutmeg, Mace is the brand name of a temporarily disabling spray designed to be squirted into the eyes of potential attackers. The fact that Duffy places this imperative in a sentence of its own at the end of a line emphasises its violence and the duality of interpretations available here.

Duffy begins with the middle class modal verb form, insisting that 'Well-cleaned pig's ears should be blanched'. The tone communicated is conservative, that of a 1950's BBC TV cook. In this way, the stereotype of a ranting, enraged Bobbitt-persona is avoided.

The listing of verbs, suggested to deal with these parts, sounds business-like but also communicates relish in the activities that reduce living pieces of tissue to a food 'garnished with thyme.'

The description of the ear as a 'simmering lug' is striking: the onomatopoeic 'simmering', suggesting a rolling boil, contrasts with the brusque 'lug', its dissonant open vowel and harsh consonantal 'g' vividly evoking the ear, reduced to meat, in the pan.

The imperative to 'Look...at that ear' is followed by a question: 'did it listen, ever, to you...?' The nymphs are directed to another stereotypically male quality, that of being bad listeners, and asked to consider whether the "luggs" in their lives listened to them.
• Notice the positive associations attached to the female voices. They are described as ‘prayers…rhymes…chimes…singing and clear’, with the internal rhyme emphasising the musicality of these voices. The reference to ‘prayers’ highlights their purity and spirituality in contrast with the ‘oinks…grunts…squeals’ of the male/pig voices.

• Another imperative reminds the reader of the convention of the recipe being loosely followed; ‘Mash the potatoes…open the beer.’

• Notice that the nymphs are drinking beer, stereotypically linked with men, seeming to suggest that they can do as they wish. They do not have to conform to the feminine stereotype of the gin and tonic as a tipple of choice now that they have consigned the man/pig to the pot.

• The list of parts thrown into the pot continues towards the ‘sweetmeats’, the testicles. The adjectives used to describe these, ‘bulging…vulnerable’, are cruel as the would-be cook gloats over her power to inflict damage and pain.

• The stanza concludes with an image of the hardened ‘heart of a pig’ and instructs the women to ‘dice it small.’ The suggestion of cutting the cruelty out of their lives is unmissable, as is the tone of satisfaction.

• The final stanza begins with the smug repetition of ‘Dice it small.’ There is almost the sense of an uber-villain at work here, cackling in a self-satisfied manner at her young apprentices.

• Consequently, the next sentence, run into this line with, ‘I, too, once knelt on this shining shore’ is surprising. It juxtaposes the embittered personality of the instructing sorceress with the young, innocent woman she once was (recalling Medusa’s sad reminiscences of her younger, more beautiful self).

• The imagery here is romantic: ‘tall ships sail’ before a ‘burning sun’ as the young girl casts off her clothes and steps ‘breast-deep’ into the sea.

• The character of Circe sounds Siren-like as she swims towards waiting ships. Notice that we are given the detail that she swims ‘on my back’ with her breasts exposed to view as the ships ‘sighed’ in the shallow waves. The image is sensuous and the girl is welcoming the ships and the men they inevitably hold.

• The tone of the first sentence of the penultimate line is wistful, nostalgic. It becomes slightly more bitter as she says that she was ‘hoping for men.’ as though angry with herself for her past stupidity.

• The line ends with a sense of decisiveness, ‘Now…’ which is continued onto the next line. It is as though the speaker is rousing herself from a reverie and into action.

• The invitation to the audience involves each one: ‘let us baste’. The register is archaic, biblical, evoking the Book of Common Prayer: ‘Let us pray’.

• Instead of prayer, the audience is given an action: ‘Let us baste’ and the pig is once more turned on the spit.

• This stanza is the shortest of the four. It is as though Duffy has been building the suspense (and the anger of the audience) to this point. The retribution is simple: the pig is roasted on a spit, with its connotations of hellfire. The reader is reminded of the saying “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” as the women in the audience, led by Circe, communally spit-roast the memories of their ex-lovers, boyfriends and husbands.
Mrs Lazarus

- There are eight five-line stanzas, a fairly characteristic form for Duffy.
- Though the lines look as if they are of similar length, they do vary from six to fifteen syllables.
- Shorter lines often feature long vowel sounds or clusters of consonants.
- Short sentences or sentence fragments appear quite frequently. In the first half of the poem, the narrator is almost speaking in note form.
- There is some use of triadic structures and other paralleling devices such as rhyme, pararhyme and repetition.
- The narrator sometimes apostrophises the reader.
- Enjambment is employed widely; and caesura makes some crucial appearances.

The poem is divided into the self-contained stages, first of coping with bereavement, then of the awful, gradually dawning discovery.

Early in the poem, Duffy uses the variation in line length and sound to portray a woman beside herself; later, to create a rather lyrical atmosphere.

Long vowels suggest mourning at the beginning and, at the end, disgust.

The narrator seems bewildered, incoherent, often prone to dramatic realisations and summations.

These paralleling structures place emphases on points, which Mrs Lazarus perhaps does not realise she is making, highlight conclusions of which she is trying to convince us or stress the realisations to which she is forced to come.

Apostrophising is used to appeal to the reader, to grab attention.

Enjambment has at least two functions here: propelling the reader through the poem in a way which implies the powerful, chaotic force of her emotions and dividing sentences into telling sense units. Caesura tends to signal a new direction for Mrs Lazarus’s life and thoughts.

Stanza 1

- Though excessive, Mrs Lazarus’s responses do follow a prescribed pattern: not the stages of grieving which psychologists tell us to expect but the rituals of public grief. ‘I had wept for a night and a day’ suggests a very specific timeframe to be observed. When she tears her clothes (a traditional Jewish mourning custom) she must rip ‘the cloth I was married in’ a particular way ‘from my breasts’.
- As ever, Duffy vividly presents her subject’s emotions physically: orally and aurally (‘howled, shrieked’), through the pain of ‘clawed . . . till my hands bled’ and the nausea of ‘retched’.
- Much of Mrs Lazarus’s frenzy seems to be self-induced. She claws ‘till’ her hands bleed, she repeats his name ‘over and over again’, the repetition of ‘dead, dead’ indicating that she is drumming the fact of her loss into her consciousness.
Stanza 2

- The public display over, Mrs Lazarus faces her silent house where she is the remaining ‘half’ of a couple. The imagery elaborates this theme: the ‘single cot’, the realisation that she is a ‘widow’, the sense that ‘one…glove’ is poignantly ‘empty’.
- Her reaction is to strip the house until it is as bleak as she feels. The term ‘gutted’ offers the additional colloquial sense of being completely distraught. Duffy uses pathetic fallacy here to present the all-pervasiveness of Mrs Lazarus’s grief. The clothes she packs up are ‘dark’, the bin liners ‘black’, reflecting the gloom of her feelings.
- Mrs Lazarus’s depression is so intense that she seems to identify with her dead husband, either literally or metaphorically, as she tells how she ‘shuffled in a dead man’s shoes’.
- She toys with suicide as, packing up his clothes, she comes upon his ties and, she confesses, ‘noosed the double knot’ of one round her own neck, which is as ‘bare’ as her life.

Stanza 3

- Mrs Lazarus tries out the consolations of religion though more carnal considerations seem as important to her: she sees herself as a ‘nun’ though perhaps more because of her enforced celibacy than any access of faith, the phrase ‘touching herself’ suggesting either masturbation or signing herself with the cross.
- Again she finds relief in ritual. The Stations of the Cross are a selection of Catholic images which follow and explore the progression of Jesus’s story from his trial to his burial. Psychologists now argue that grief is experienced in a consistent sequence. Duffy conflates these two notions in Mrs Lazarus’s ‘Stations of Bereavement’.
- There is a sense that the role of ‘gaunt nun’ is not without gratification. She seems to enjoy looking at herself ‘in the mirror’, almost admiring the way her sad expressions form an ‘icon…in each bleak frame’, recalling the pictures which characterise the original Stations of the Cross.

- Mrs Lazarus blames her husband for the fading of her grief: ‘he was going away from me’.
- Duffy shows how his importance to her diminishes in the use of ‘dwindling…shrunk’.
- He is ‘a snapshot’ - not real, only a representation of his former self.
- ‘All those months’ implies an inevitability, perhaps one she resents, to the process of forgetting (which may include the period of a last illness as well as the length of time after his actual death). This inevitability is further emphasised by the enjambment of ‘going, / going’ which takes us in to the next verse and is finally resolved in ‘Then he was gone.’ of the fifth stanza. Once the auctioneer's hammer is poised, it is difficult to halt it.
Stanza 4

- The opening of the stanza is quite lyrical. Mrs Lazarus describes the way that calling a name conjures for us a presence or 'face' as magical – ‘a certain spell’; maybe she uses this imagery because his face is so dear. Or is she simply admitting that her memory of him is so distant that she can scarcely recall his face? ‘The last hair’ which ‘floated out from a book’ is another evocative image, suggesting not simply the sudden pang of coming across the reminder of a loved one as we go about our everyday lives but also the insubstantiality of her grasp on him.

- But how long does it take for a man's ‘scent’ to vanish from a house? And is the ‘will’ not ‘read’ fairly shortly after a death? The reader begins to wonder just how long Mrs Lazarus has taken to come to terms with her loss.

- ‘See,’ says Mrs Lazarus, again implying that what happened was beyond her control.

- Lazarus is described as ‘vanishing’ immediately after ‘the will was read.’ Perhaps it is his role as a provider that was most important to her, a reading which could be inferred by the mention of ‘gold’.

- That he so quickly becomes ‘the small zero’ - a heartless image - is chilling. All of significance that is left of him is the status she still retains by virtue of having been married to him.

Stanza 5

- Her new love is ‘the schoolteacher’, the definite article here telling us that the man had a very particular standing in the community.

- The gesture with which the relationship is introduced – ‘my arm on the arm’ - is both intimate and possessive and also suggests that Mrs Lazarus needs the protective care of a husband, a view which is reinforced by the revelation of his ‘strength’.

- ‘The shock of a man’s strength’ conveys the physical charge that Mrs Lazarus gains from simply touching the schoolteacher. This is the third indication in the poem that the sexual side of a relationship is important to her.

- The backdrop to their relationship is the rather idyllic setting of ‘the hedgerows’. Maybe they are enjoying a quiet country walk, interestingly, a pursuit which occurs in a number of poems in the collection.

- Mrs Lazarus again protests that she has behaved with total propriety. But the enjambment of the last two lines in this stanza stresses the ambiguity of her declaration: ‘for as long as it took’ is purposely vague and the afterthought ‘Until he was memory.’ only serves to throw her integrity into question.
Stanza 6

- In the first line of the stanza, Mrs Lazarus can simply ‘stand...able to watch’. Her troubles have been severe but they are over.
- The evening air is ‘fine’; it wraps her comfortingly like a ‘shawl’. She is represented here as vulnerable, scarred but the beauty of the countryside leaves her ‘healed’.
- Her evocations are strikingly accurate and demonstrate keen powers of observation and a real appreciation of the detail around her. Particularly effective are the uses of the word ‘occur’, which suggests a fascinatingly whimsical relationship between moon and sky and of ‘thump’ to convey the noise of a hare dropping out of a hedge.
- She is still reflecting, as evidenced by ‘notice’, when the new horror is introduced. Breaking into the idyll come ‘the village men’ - perhaps metaphorically as well as literally at the forefront of her disapproving neighbours – ‘running...shouting’. Her unpreparedness and their enthusiasm signals that she is about to be brought down to earth.

Stanza 7

- Enjambment thrusts the villagers into the stanza and continues throughout, representing the way that Mrs Lazarus is pushed willy-nilly towards her doom. There is an element of listing as they all gang up on her, the menace intensified by the ‘barking dogs’ and the ‘sudden’ appearance of the ‘hands’ which seem intent on ‘bearing’ her whether she wants to go or not.
- The repetition of ‘I knew’ emphasises Mrs Lazarus’s awful resignation, maybe representing the voice of her conscience.
- Duffy employs her favourite devices of transferred epithet (‘the sly light’) and synaesthesia (‘shrill eyes’) and alliteration (‘blacksmith...barmaid...bearing’) as she describes the nastier expressions of schadenfreude, presenting the villagers’ sentiments via their physical attributes. Particularly graphic is the crowd’s ‘hot tang’, monosyllables which perfectly convey the acrid smell of sweaty excitement.
- The stanza ends in suspense with the villagers ‘parting’ to reveal Mrs Lazarus’s fate.
Stanza 8

- The stanza opens with a very dramatic short statement which needs no glossing: it says it all.
- He feels ‘horror’ because he too has grasped immediately what has happened in his absence. This is worse even than the world of the dead from which he has come.
- Duffy uses triadic repetition (‘I saw…I heard…I breathed’) to represent the incontrovertibility of Mrs Lazarus’s discovery.
- Mrs Lazarus calls her mother-in-law’s song ‘crazy’, whether with joy or vengeance is uncertain.
- The long vowel of ‘breathed’, the uncompromising term ‘stench’ and the enjambment taking us into the next line emphasise the sheer unpleasantness of her ‘bridegroom’ and his ‘rotting’ clothes. Duffy does not spare us any of the grosser aspects of Lazarus’s condition: his ‘moist and dishevelled’ state, for example, even the fact that the process of decomposition (‘grave’s slack chew’) is well underway.
- Starkly, Lazarus’s funeral ‘shroud’ seems to be compared to a bride’s wedding dress (remember that Duffy wrote a poem about Miss Havisham).
- He has been some time dead and so cannot talk properly. The word ‘croaking’ suggests how terribly he needs to remind her that he exists, even if he is identifying himself as a ‘cuckold’.
- The word ‘disinherited’ again hints that she has no need for him now that she has his money.
- He is ‘out of his time’: was Jesus somehow wrong to raise him?
The poem opens with a staccato rhythm suggesting the woman's lack of engagement with the world around her, as she remains detached and 'Cold'. The concrete imagery presented through the use of the similes, 'like snow, like ivory' reinforces the "untouchability" of this woman.

We hear the woman's voice as she appears to feel secure in the knowledge that 'He will not touch me'. This, however, is immediately undermined on the next line as we are told 'but he did.' The placing of this statement on a single line makes it appear far more threatening, as she felt herself to be inviolable. His touch is almost like a kind of rape, unsolicited and unwanted.

The woman describes not only that Pygmalion kissed 'my stone-cool lips', suggesting her icy unresponsiveness, but also her reaction to his approaches. She says 'I lay still' offering the possibility that she could move if she wanted to but she chooses not to, hence her stillness is a form of power.

The use of enjambment in the following line 'as though I'd died.' suggests an effort to remain calm, to attempt to deflate his ardour, not to arouse him or respond to his advances.

The man's insistence is reaffirmed by the single statement: 'He stayed.' not simply to admire but to thumb 'my marbled eyes.' Once again, his advances are uninvited and the woman appears to have no control over what he does to her. However, she does remain distanced.

The stanza opens with the words 'He spoke' and the use of caesura creates a moment of stasis before we are told that his words were 'blunt endearments', suggesting that they could not pierce the woman's stony shell.

His words however, appear menacing as he describes 'what he'd do and how.' His words, we are told, were 'terrible' but, once again, the woman refuses to be penetrated as she distances herself from his advances.

The woman asserts that she 'heard the sea', a turbulent and elemental force, one that is forever changing and has an energy untamed by man. The water image is continued as she insists that she 'drowned him out' and almost as if he is drowning, she claims that she 'heard him shout.' However, she remains impenetrable as she hears but does not respond to Pygmalion's frustrated desires.
• The alliterative opening line with the plosive ‘p’ sound suggests the man’s determination to gain a response. The very nature of the presents reveals a man who believes a woman can be bought with trinkets.

• The gifts become more expensive and their description as ‘girly things’ suggests, on the one hand, that Pygmalion feels he knows what women desire but, on the other, it reveals his complete lack of sensitivity to this stone woman. In the original myth, Pygmalion’s efforts are ultimately rewarded even though he has scorned all women until he creates Galatea. In Duffy’s poem, the irony of his behaviour is highlighted as he treats the woman just like any other woman he may have met. He behaves in a traditional and stereotypical manner, making advances towards her just as he might have been expected to do towards the local girls he has scorned.

• The description of his hands as ‘clammy’ again reinforces the woman’s aversion to his touch. Her response is to remain invulnerable but she reminds us that she has other possibilities when she asserts that she ‘played statue’. The use of the word ‘played’ implies that her marble exterior is just an act. However, it is empowering, as she is not intimidated, ‘I didn’t shrink’. She remains detached and dispassionate whilst he appears to be the victim of his own lust.

• The language now becomes more sexual as Pygmalion is described as letting his ‘fingers sink into my flesh’, where ‘he squeezed, he pressed.’ There is a sense of urgency here and a clear desire for a response as he ‘looked for marks’ but once again it is the woman who maintains control over her own body, ‘I would not bruise.’

• Pygmalion’s behaviour takes a more violent turn as he becomes more desperate. He is now described in terms of an animal, as his nails become ‘claws’. The use of the word ‘claws’ suggests ripping and tearing but the woman remains inviolable.

• Duffy creates an interesting shift in the balance of power. Pygmalion seems to be in control ‘He propped me up on pillows’ and the woman is forced to listen to him talking all night; but it is the woman who actually maintains control both of the situation and over her own body. She says ‘My heart was ice, was glass.’ This is an interesting metaphor as, on the one hand, it can be read as being impenetrable but, on the other, it could suggest that it has a certain vulnerability. Glass can be broken and ice can melt. Once again, Duffy offers the sense of possibility in this woman. Her responses hide the real woman that lies beneath the stone veil: a woman whose protection, from the unwelcome advances of the man that believes he is her creator and as such can make demands on her, is her icy exterior. Neither his voice that ‘was gravel’, nor his touch which was ‘clammy’ can engender a response; the power remains firmly in her hands.
• The stanza opens in an almost conspiratorial tone as the woman asserts, ‘So I changed tack’, reinforcing the sense of the power the woman has held throughout the poem.

• The language now becomes sensual as she describes how she returns his advances, growing ‘warm, like candle wax’, implying that she can be moulded to suit his desires.

• She describes herself as ‘soft…pliable’ and clearly sensual. What we are now presented with is an assertive and sexual woman. She is no longer the Victorian stereotype, cold, passive and unreceptive. She is now ‘hot…wild’ and apparently intent on satisfying both Pygmalion and herself.

• At the end of this long description of the woman’s apparent passion, there is a caesura and the whole mood of the stanza is changed by the three words that stand alone on the last line, ‘all an act.’ Again, we see this woman’s ability to manipulate the situation in which she finds herself. Having found that remaining icy and unapproachable serves to fuel Pygmalion’s ardour, she performs yet another act, this time of lust and desire.

• The last two lines reveal that the second act was clearly more successful as she asserts ‘And haven’t seen him since.’

• It appears then that Pygmalion is only impassioned by what appears unattainable. He is excited by the woman’s stony exterior as she poses no threat and makes no demands, but he cannot cope with a woman who is aware of her own sexuality. In the myth, we are told Pygmalion disliked the local women because he found them immoral and frivolous. Duffy seems to suggest that he cannot cope with real women so his passion and lust can only be satiated when he is in the presence of a woman who poses no threat.

• Once again, we see Duffy undermining male sexuality as Pygmalion like many of the other characters in her poems cannot satisfy a woman’s demands. Like Pilate, whose ‘pale, mothly touch made me flinch’ or Aesop who apparently had ‘a little cock that wouldn’t crow’, Pygmalion is a man who is afraid of female sexuality and Duffy concludes ‘Simple as that.’
Mrs Rip Van Winkle

- There are six equal stanzas, each three lines long. This echoes the neat structure of the original story.
- Line length varies though it can be seen that the second stanza is notably shorter than the others.
- There is some rhyme but no regular pattern used.

- The first line is a simile that creates a sad and depressing image of Mrs. Rip Van Winkle’s failure. The fact that she is described as sinking suggests failure and creates the image of drowning; a traumatic, claustrophobic image where there is a feeling of futility and a lack of control.
- The comparison to a stone within this simile also creates the image of someone who has no control over their own destiny but instead is simply being pulled by gravity; forces beyond their powers. The image also has connotations of coldness.
- On the second line, Duffy extends the initial image into a metaphor in which she compares middle age (and possibly the menopause) with the ‘still, deep waters’ in which she is drowning. Using the word ‘still’ creates a sense of calm amongst the madness of the drowning woman. This could be seen to echo the feelings of Mrs. Rip Van Winkle and other women experiencing the menopause as it is only themselves that change, the rest of the world remains calm.
- In a stark contrast to the rest of the stanza, the final line is non-descript and literal. Duffy is emphasising the tiredness and the feelings of lethargy that the persona is experiencing. The lack of description seems to reflect her inability to continue in this way.

- This is a much shorter stanza and marks a change in tone. The lethargy from the previous stanza has gone and the persona is instead much more active, finding ways to deal with her situation that will make her feel better.
- The curt, stark style emphasises a matter-of-fact tone that creates a persona that is becoming determined and focused on getting on with her life.

- The fact that it is only in the third stanza that the man in the relationship is mentioned suggests he really is not very important to Mrs. Rip Van Winkle.
- He is presented as a passive character; he is sleeping whilst she is improving herself by finding hobbies.
- The contrast between the dismissive comment about him and the very personal second line (the line begins and ends with personal pronouns referring to her) emphasises the fact that he is not important to her or her development.
The length echoes the giddiness and excitement Mrs. Rip Van Winkle is experiencing in her search to find herself.

The brevity of the opening line is now seen in stark contrast to this lengthy line. This maintains the focus on her and her experiences rather than him. The line also uses sibilance to emphasise the stimulating and exciting experiences the persona is embarking upon.

These features all make the reader interested and involved in the adventure Mrs. Rip Van Winkle is going on.

Very short sentences comprising of majestic and powerful landmarks emphasise the grandeur of the sights she experiences.

This neat structure also suggests a methodical approach to her travel and could indicate that Mrs. Rip Van Winkle is, perhaps for the first time, taking control of her own life without her husband’s help.

Duffy uses rhyme in the final two lines, a feature that also adds to the neatness of the stanza; it is organised and complete.

The actions depicted in the final line indicate that Mrs. Rip Van Winkle has grasped full control of her situation as she captures the beautiful and evocative images she sees in her own unique way.

The language is much more child-like and simplistic, as is the rhyme that is used. This contrasts with the mature, sophisticated tone of the previous stanza.

The stanza is all one sentence opposing the previous, staccato structure. This creates a sense of eagerness and excitement that suggests the escape from sex being outlined here is more important and significant than the experiences of the fourth stanza.

The fact that the final line, ending with the word ‘sex’, does not rhyme with the rest of the stanza foregrounds the word. It jars in comparison to the rhyme in the previous stanza suggesting that this aspect of their relationship is a problematic one.

The fact that she reiterates throughout the idea that she was not disturbed or upset about missing out on sleeping with her husband creates sympathy for her.

The short opening line prepares us for the conclusion by creating a sense of finality and an element of foreboding.

The final rhyming couplet stresses the fundamental difference between the husband and wife: she is interested in beauty and culture, he is interested in sex.

We see now how their relationship was before his long sleep and clearly it was an unhappy one.

The fact that the poem ends with Rip Van Winkle’s demand for his conjugal rights indicates that this is the end of his wife’s adventure. The end of her journey is marked by the beginning of his new one. The conclusion, it would appear, echoes their relationship prior to him waking in that she is immediately submissive and he has control.
The poem begins in an assertive tone as Mrs Icarus sees her situation as one that befalls many women.

The positioning of ‘hillock’, a rather unusual and somewhat archaic word, prepares the reader for the conclusion of the poem in which Duffy uses a far more colloquial term.

The humour of the poem is achieved through the use of the triplet as the pace slows down to give momentum to the assertion that the husband, like many of the men seen in this collection, is nothing more than a ‘Grade A pillock.’

This short poem links with the following poems:

Mrs Sisyphus
Mrs Aesop
Mrs Tiresias
Mrs Midas
Mrs Darwin

In all of these poems we see male arrogance in one form or another and male superiority being exposed as simply a myth cultivated by the men themselves for their own aggrandisement.
Frau Freud

- Duffy adopts the form of a lecture, just as Freud might have done. The tone is conversational whilst at the same time authoritative. The use of the phrase ‘for argument’s sake’ gives the following words the air of a debate and offers something of a hypothesis as this is followed by ‘let us say’.

- The poem moves on to offer a series of adjectives to describe male genitalia. A reference is made to Frau Fraud’s own sexual predilections as she asserts that her experience of sexual liaison can be linked to that of Monica Lewinsky, famous for her exploits with the then U.S. president, Bill Clinton.

- The use of caesura introduces a new tone to the poem as Frau Freud declares herself to be ‘equally sick up to here with…’ and we are then offered another series of names for the penis.

- This argument is now counterbalanced by a more positive view of ‘the snake in the trousers’ but as the poem draws to an end, just as a lecturer might, Frau Freud comes to the main thrust of her argument. This is that, when faced with a sighting of what a man considers to be his greatest asset, all women simply feel a ‘feeling of pity’.

- The argument is clinched as the pace is slowed down through the use of ellipsis and the ladies are once again addressed personally and thus invited to agree that this male attribute, rather than being something that a woman both desires and is envious of, is simply ‘not pretty’. It is, she suggests, envious itself, of what, she does not say, but the emotion it elicits is not envy from women but merely pity for its squinting one-eyed appearance.

- Once again, Duffy undermines both the Freudian concept of female penis envy and the male obsession with its powers. She uses a series of colloquial terms to describe the male attribute, terms often used by men to suggest power, energy and vitality. All of these are ultimately negated by the authoritative voice of Frau Freud who lays to rest her husband’s arrogance and apparent obsession with the ‘love-muscle’.

Structure/Tone

- The poem is characterised by a series of internal rhymes and pararhymes. These serve to develop the humour of the poem and draw attention to the multi-various and often self-indulgent terms that have been given to the male member.

- The pace is varied and Duffy uses both caesura and ellipsis to convey the sense of a one-sided discussion as the woman evaluates what she says before coming to the main point she wishes to make.

- The tone throughout the piece is conversational yet ultimately didactic as Frau Freud appropriates her husband’s teaching style to expose the arrogance of his theory on penis envy.
There are four stanzas, the middle two being of equal length but the opening and concluding stanzas are of different length. This random structure echoes the natural tone of the poem. The fact that the final stanza, when the persona curtly describes finding a head on a platter, is the shortest helps to create a disinterested and heartless character.

The lines are of varying length too (from three to fifteen syllables long), adding to the natural tone and creating the sense of a stream of consciousness.

Duffy uses caesura throughout the poem. This helps to create a sense of the thought processes the persona goes through.

There is no fixed rhyme pattern though Duffy does use pararhyme, internal rhyme and she plays with sounds through the use of techniques like assonance.

Salome's promiscuity is presented to us as we hear her describe the man with whom she wakes up whose name she doesn't know. Duffy uses phrases like the opening line to make it clear that this is a common occurrence. The fact that she describes the man purely by appearance also tells us of her attitude towards sex and relationships. She clearly considers men to be conquests, a characteristic often associated with men. This is quite different from many of the other presentations of women in the collection and makes it difficult for the reader to build a positive relationship with her.

Duffy uses casual asides (‘and doubtless I’ll do it again…of course…I’d guess’) to create Salome’s very dismissive and carefree attitude to sex. The use of rhetorical questions also adds to this tone, particularly when she is discussing the nameless man.

Using ‘of course’ not only adds to this callous tone but also creates the image of a very confident woman. Clearly Salome would accept nothing less than a handsome man.

Although there could be an indication that Salome was flattered and seduced by the man, the fact that his attempts to woo her are stopped by her sexual advances (‘which I kissed…’) gives her power and control over both the man and the situation.
The stanza begins with two very long sentences that initially echo the ramblings of a girl who has just woken from what was clearly a heavy, drunken night. More significantly, this structure creates an arrogant tone and suggests that Salome likes the sound of her own voice. She wants to tell us the tale of her wild antics and appears to be proud of her conquest, describing the situation in detail.

The long sentences are punctuated with semi-colons and dashes creating a rather rhythmical pace that could be suggestive of the sexual nature of the scene.

Duffy also uses ellipsis creating a breathlessness that again is suggestive of the sexual nature of the protagonist. This tone is cut short with the curt, flat following line. This juxtaposition highlights the line ‘Colder than pewter’ which can be read in two ways: that the relationship is mutually devoid of emotion or, more literally, that Salome is kissing the cold lips of a dead man.

In stark contrast to the lengthy previous lines, the concluding part of this stanza consists of three sentences. This change in pace suggests a change in Salome’s thought process. As she drifts away from thoughts of the physical relationship of the previous night, she begins thinking of the practicalities and tries to remember the man’s name. The brevity of the sentences creates a conversational tone and the final sentence leads us into a list that concludes on the second stanza. Using the list format emphasises the numerous possible names for the anonymous man. The fact that there is no conclusion suggests Duffy wants him to be universal. Any man could fall prey to Salome.

The fact that she calls for a maid suggests she is from a privileged background. This is a fact that may distance the reader even further from her as it creates the image of a spoilt and selfish character. By going on to describe the maid’s ‘regional patter’, Duffy consolidates this idea. She seems to suggest that the maid is there simply to entertain the girl who, for the moment, appears to have forgotten all about the man in her bed. This attitude does not help the reader to warm to Salome. The maid’s innocence is contrasted with Salome too.

When describing Salome’s situation on the end line Duffy uses colloquial language (‘hungover…wrecked…on the batter’). This creates a teenage voice to emphasise how young the protagonist is. This could evoke sympathy as we may consider her to be vulnerable but could also emphasise the arrogance of this girl who assumes she can behave in such a salacious way and not care.

The half rhymes of ‘better…butter…clatter…clutter…patter’ emphasise the maid’s noise and their severe sounds (the plosive ‘p’ and ‘b’ as well as the harsh ‘c’ sounds) stress the thumping of Salome’s post-alcohol head.

There are just three lines that do not end with this sound, a fact that foregrounds them. The first and second ones draw attention to the maid and the food she brings up on Salome’s request, perhaps suggesting her arrival is a calming influence on her mistress. The third, and most significant, is the second to last line where Salome says that this arrival is ‘just what [she] needed’. She craves company and Duffy seems to be suggesting that the girl is lonely; perhaps this is a reason for her bringing men home. In the following line though, Duffy shows that the girl is keen to emphasise her hedonistic lifestyle; Salome wants us to feel that her life is entertaining and exciting not lonely and sad.
• The exclamation mark at the end of the first line is the first indication that she is not sincere.

• Duffy’s use of the cluster of three on the fourth line with the repetition of ‘and’ emphasises in a giddy child-like way the vices Salome has, suggesting she’s enjoying herself too much to give up.

• Duffy follows this with the one word sentence ‘Yes’ as if Salome needs to convince herself that she will give up her wild antics.

• The casual, colloquial language (‘turf’, ‘blighter’), used to describe the removal of the man from her bed, emphasises her blasé attitude to this regular occurrence and indicates that it will be a hard thing to give up.

• The use of the saying ‘lamb to the slaughter’ indicates the thrill Salome gets from luring these men back into her bed; a bed that is given the title of ‘Salome’s bed.’ There is no mistaking that this is her domain and she is in control. The sense of power she gets from her actions means there is little chance she will give it up.

• The stanza tells of Salome’s discovery of the man’s decapitated head in her blood stained bed but Duffy begins with Salome looking at herself in the mirror and seeing her glittering eyes. The reader could easily be mistaken into believing that Salome will indeed change her ways as she appears to be showing tears of remorse. This idea is quickly undermined however by the fact that his head is ‘on a platter’ and not simply there by accident. The casual, sarcastic aside of ‘ain’t life a bitch’ also suggests that she is far from remorseful but instead still calculated and callous.

• The image of the ‘sticky red sheets’ creates a violent and dangerous image of sex. The bed should be, as in Ann Hathaway, a place of passion and romance. Here, however, it is soiled and soaked by the sign of death. Sex for Salome is something very different from what average teenage girls would experience. This may well create some sympathy for her. Clearly she has a very warped idea of what a relationship should be. It is hard to maintain this though.

• Ending with the image of the man’s head presented as the triumphant focal point of a feast emphasises the way in which Salome has devoured him, as she has many others before. He is dismembered and offered as a trophy, something to be looked at. Duffy is reversing therefore, the fate of many women in the media who are similarly “objectified” in pin-up shots for men to devour.
The poem opens in a conversational tone. The use of the term ‘Girls’ creates a sense of a general chat amongst a group of women. The notion of death is conveyed through the description of her being no more than ‘a shade’ or ‘a shadow’. We are told that she was ‘nowhen’, an unusual compound word suggesting a lack of location and a negation of self.

This idea of negation is reinforced by the idea of it being a place where ‘language stopped’ and words no longer exist. If it was Adam that named the animals, then language can be seen as a male domain. Perhaps that is why, after the pun on famous last words, Eurydice asserts ‘It suited me down to the ground’. Here is a place where there is no arena for the male voice or the power of words.

The persona appears content and in control as she is now detached from her ‘former self’.

The variable line length of this long stanza reflects the thoughts and reflections of the persona. It is almost like stream of consciousness writing; we hear the voice of this disaffected woman as she presents a scenario in which she feels her personal space has been invaded.

The first sentence takes the form of a tirade against this intrusion as she describes how her sanctuary has been taken away by Orpheus’s arrival. She presents us with a rather petulant and self-conscious poet who sees her as ‘His Muse’. The capitalisation here affirms the power balance. She presents herself as a possession. She, it seems, provides him with his inspiration, but she is not cast in the role of literary critic. Her role is apparently a passive one and any offer of constructive criticism is apparently negated as we are told, ‘he sulked for a night and a day/because she remarked on his weakness for abstract nouns.’

The tone remains conversational and the use of caesura in the lines ‘when I heard-/Ye Gods-’ reflects the slow realisation that the knock she hears is that of Orpheus.

In the following lines Duffy parodies a well-known song by Eric Clapton entitled Knock, Knocking on Heaven’s Door and she fuses this with the cliché of being at Death’s door, thus creating both humour and irony.

The monosyllabic ‘Him’ prepares the reader for the impact of the arrival of ‘Big O.’ The use of this term suggests Orpheus’s self-importance and the way he is to be received in Hades by the King.

His poem is seen as a bargaining tool. The use of the word ‘pitch’ suggests that to him this is a game of chance and the prize is to be ‘Eurydice’. Once again she presents herself as having no self-determination, she is simply something to be won.

The tone of the opening lines is reminiscent of Mrs Faust when she describes her husband’s relationship with the ‘Devil’s boy’. It is cynical and somewhat derisive, suggesting that his talents are over-rated and that the words on the back of his books were hollow and meaningless, simply ‘blurb’.

The claims made by his publishers are clearly exaggerated as nature itself is seen to respond. Even inanimate stones come to life when Orpheus sings. He is cast in a god-like role and hyped by the media into the form of a legend who can evince tears from ‘mute, sullen stones’.
The use of demotic language in the opening line serves to negate the image created by the publishers as the persona insists on being given the space to air her own thoughts and to be in control of the way she is seen and received by others.

The listing of the various terms of endearment, ‘Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady…’ ironically reveals how far short of the real woman they fall. In death, Eurydice has been given the space to voice her real feelings and to present herself as she wishes to be seen, rather than being simply the figment of the male imagination. Hence the importance of her assertion ‘I’d rather be dead.’ Death to Eurydice has been liberation not a negation.

Duffy seems to feel quite antagonistic towards publishers who have the power of Gods over writers either to print or to refuse work submitted to them. Her words seem almost like a personal comment about the vagaries of the publishing world and the possible advantage of being male.

The dismissive tone of the opening words ‘Orpheus strutted his stuff.’ serves to reinforce Eurydice’s contempt for Orpheus’s skill whilst this is set against the reception of the Gods and the male world.

Eurydice’s position is clearly determined by the male dictate that she has no choice ‘Like it or not’. Her literal and metaphorical position is to ‘follow him’.

The structure of the following line underlines her powerlessness and her role as an acquisition, ‘Eurydice, Orpheus’ wife’. She is no longer a woman in her own right but simply the wife of the legendary ‘Big O’.

Her lack of self-determination is characterised by the language used to describe the life she has to look forward to. She is to be ‘trapped’. The idea of closure and imprisonment is developed as Duffy lists the literary techniques used in poetry that distance the persona from herself and allow her to be seen only through the male imagination.

This section opens in conversational tone and the use of enjambment in the third/fourth lines highlights the importance of Eurydice’s quest. Her salvation is to be attained only through Orpheus’s defeat; he must ‘look back’.

The use of a rhetorical question is immediately followed by a series of assertions about her relationship with the living world. The use of the rhyming couplet and the triadic structure serve to reinforce the attitude adopted by Eurydice in relation to her former life. She insists on negating her identity and applying all the phrases used to describe the dead to herself.

The use of ellipsis signals a change of tack as she now resorts to both touching Orpheus and pleading with him for her release. Her vulnerability and desperation are exemplified by the use of the word ‘Please’ almost as if she is begging him to allow her to stay. Clearly she is aware of his power and her status in this relationship.

The concluding line of this stanza reinforces her hopelessness as the light is described as having ‘saddened from purple to grey.’ The richness of the colour purple, deep and opulent, is contrasted with the approaching world of the living, which is ‘grey’ and unwelcoming.
The stanza opens with an interesting reversal of the idea of the journey from life to death. Here Duffy uses the colloquial word ‘schlep’ to maintain the general conversational tone. At the same time, she subverts the normal passage of time as Eurydice is seen journeying towards life and a future from which she believed she had escaped.

The urgency of her quest is reinforced by the assertion ‘I willed him to turn.’ The success of her mission is emphasised by the rhyming of ‘willed’ with ‘thrilled’ as the pace slows now that ‘inspiration has finally struck.’ This, in turn, is rhymed with ‘shook’ creating a sense both of desperation and excitement.

The italicised words suggest an intimacy of tone. Their simplicity serves to highlight the arrogance of the male poet who is reclaiming his muse and apparent love but who can so easily be lured into turning around when given the opportunity of displaying his talents. Once again, we see Duffy satirising male self-importance and you might like to consider this in the light of your reading of Little Red-Cap and Pygmalion’s Bride.

The tone of the first of these three stanzas is matter of fact but there is a sense of Eurydice’s glee and self-congratulation as she repeats ‘when he turned’. This is the key to her release and there is a sense of relish and relief as she reiterates the word ‘turned’ and then ‘looked at me.’

The second stanza begins with a rhetorical question as the voice returns to the conversational style that has characterised most of the poem. Her response to what she notices about Orpheus, ‘he hadn’t shaved’, seems to reinforce any lack of passion or desire she now feels for him.

The final line of this stanza is both triumphant and dismissive as she waves only ‘once’ and is ‘gone’.

Duffy chooses not to leave the poem at this point but to offer a reflection on life. The tone now becomes almost arrogant. We hear Eurydice’s voice commenting on the shallow foolishness of the living who think that they are wise but in fact ‘walk [only] by the edge of a vast lake near the wise’, those who have nothing to prove or achieve or desire. It is the ‘drowned silence of the dead’ that is ‘so talented’. This is an interesting comment from a poet as the suggestion is that language and temporal knowledge are not seen as empowering. Humanity is seen locked in a world of illusion where the truth can never be expressed. As in Shakespeare’s King Lear, Duffy seems to question how the living can ‘heave [their] heart[s] into [their] mouths’ when in fact their understanding is so limited and their actions are motivated by vanity. So the poem concludes with a celebration of silence.
The Kray Sisters

• This is a dramatic duologue, with twin narrators.
• The poem is divided into six rather long stanzas, five of twelve lines and one of thirteen. The length of the lines varies considerably, from eight to seventeen syllables.
• As ever, Duffy employs enjambment, in this poem sometimes extending for half a stanza.
• The register of the poem is generally colloquial featuring a considerable amount of London vernacular, contemporary clichés and, in particular, Cockney rhyming slang. Snatches of popular songs are also included.
• Colloquialism is juxtaposed with some very lyrical writing, for example where ‘learning the map of the city under our feet’ is followed by ‘clocking the boozers’.
• The narrators draw on extracts of London history and popular culture - sometime rewriting them - and drop a number of famous names.
• Rhyming is internal. There is occasional metrical regularity as where ‘maybe this marked us for ever’ is echoed by ‘because of the loss of our mother’.
• Listing, for example, of ways to gain ‘respect’, of London landmarks, of famous feisty women and of social moves in their club, is also used.

Like the original Kray brothers, the women who narrate this poem are identical twins, a feature which is emphasised by their speaking with one voice.

• The narrators are reminiscing about ‘the Good Old Days when [they] ruled the streets.’ The sprawling lines, with proliferating enjambment, and irregular metre suggest a rather self-satisfied “longwindedness”. The final stanza is almost elegiac in tone.
• The numerous colloquialisms and incidences of rhyming slang seem to load every line self-consciously as if the twins need to make the most of every opportunity to broadcast their East End credentials. Perhaps for the same reasons, the women also trumpet their local knowledge and superior family connections.
• Duffy chooses internal rhyme – of which there is more in this poem than in most in the collection – to echo the rhyming slang which forms such an essential part of the twins’ expression.
• Listing highlights the women’s consummate sway over every detail of their domain. It confirms that they are in the same league as ‘Germaine, Bardot, Twiggy and Lulu, Dusty and Yoko, Bassey, Babs, Sandy, Diana Dors’, all female icons who were particularly famous in the 1960s (and some of whom actually did have connections with the Kray brothers).
• Double meanings often serve to point up the differences between perceived female and male choices; for example, when the Kray brothers ‘dressed to kill’, their sharp suits accentuated their menace while the women simply wanted to dazzle their admirers.
The poem opens with the overheard chatter of the neighbourhood asserting ‘There go the twins!’ affirming their notoriety and almost celebrity status. The colloquial use of the word ‘geezers’ serves to create the context of the poem as does the use of cockney rhyming slang ‘frog and toad’. We are presented with two women who patrol the streets of the East End of London in their ‘Saville Row whistle and flutes’. Clearly women of some substance and wealth who wear clothing tailored to flatter their attributes, ‘our thr’penny bits’.

The sisters are seen as one body, ‘No one could tell us apart’. Their love of London hinges on the fact that it gives them the space to be self-important as the use of the word ‘swagger’ suggests. They live the fast life and clearly have people in their pay who drive them around. However, the car that is mentioned, ‘an Austin Princess’, is not a particularly flash car but one that would have been seen to carry some status in the eyes of the East End neighbourhood. The slowing of the pace and the addition of the word ‘black’ serves to emphasise the importance the sisters feel this car gives them.

The use of alliteration and the plosive ‘b’ sound in the next line ‘bubbly…best…bucket’ serves to reinforce the sisters’ sense of self-importance and suggests a kind of decadence in their lifestyle. There is mention of Judy Garland, a famous celebrity ‘singing that night’. Their feeling of satisfaction, with this and their lifestyle in general, is clinched by the word ‘Nice’.

The stanza opens with the word ‘Childhood’, indicating a retrospective narrative. The cockney rhyming slang is reintroduced recreating their sense of identity with the East End. The insertion of ‘God Rest Her Soul’ with the use of capital letters reveals the respect they have for their grandmother.

The word ‘suffragette’ is placed on a single line to reinforce both the political affiliations of the grandmother and to establish a sense of female identity with the cause of women over the years.

Duffy subverts the historical fact of Emily Davison’s death. She was a suffragette who threw herself under the King’s horse and sacrificed her life for the women’s movement. In this version, the grandmother knocks the horse down and becomes known as ‘Cannonball Vi’. In Duffy’s version of the event, we are given a sense of female self-determination and survival against all the odds.

The influence of the grandmother is made clear through the stories she tells and the twins are presented as women who ally themselves with female rebellion.

Duffy refers to the 1914 war and the stories of Emmeline Pankhurst, a famous suffragette who campaigned long and hard for the rights of women both in and out of the political arena. The war itself was also a significant factor in the way in which women’s roles changed and served to highlight women’s ability to work in what had always been considered to be the male domain.

These women of history are called ‘Diamond ladies’, women of strength and fortitude. The colloquial use of the stereotypical word ‘birds’ is subverted as these women are not portrayed as sexual objects, available for male gaze, but as strong and fiercely independent, not necessarily from middle class backgrounds, the ‘salt of the earth’.

This section of the stanza concludes with the information that these twins were orphaned at birth. Duffy echoes the word ‘unusual’ with the word ‘us’, reinforcing the idea of difference associated with these sisters.
The tone of the poem becomes conversational, ‘Straight up’. The pace slows down to engage the reader with the self-determination of the sisters who see their future mapped out in front of them and view it as a ‘vocation.’

In the light of their grandmother’s stories, they too require a life that allows them to be shown respect but in the East End this is not easily attained. The catalogue of attributes they wish to attain reflects a male world where fear, violence and sexual prowess are the only qualities that have any value.

In the dream that they have for their future, the sisters are presented as hard gangster-like women in a similar vein to the women in Mrs Beast, who patrol the streets of London, living with the ghosts of the past.

London is presented as being set out before them, but it is not the fashionable world that they seek. The world that is detailed is the seamy side of life seen in ‘back alleys’, on ‘bridges’ and in ‘Underground stations’. Even the grand hotels, where the women they revere (Vita Sackville-West and her lover Violet Trefusis) have defied convention and had illicit sexual liaisons behind closed doors, are described in East End style as having ‘given it wallop.’

This section concludes with a picture of the sisters standing on the famous Hungerford Bridge designed by Brunel in 1841 and which spans the Thames. The women are pictured as looking out across the Thames, taking in the sights of London and there is a sense of ownership as if they are seeing their kingdom set out before them.

Stanza 4

Enjambment is used in the first line of this stanza, as if to suggest that the building up of their empire was a gradual, natural process.

The girls are portrayed as fallible: ‘we made our mistakes in those early years.’ as if to endear them to the reader.

Their rules are clearly laid out for the reader and it soon becomes obvious that these are to do with the way that the women treat their men. To be ‘well out of order’ involves being a traditional or old-fashioned wife who demonstrates loyalty to her husband, referred to disparagingly by the girls as ‘some plonker’. The colloquial language here is typical of the register of the poem.

The line beginning ‘But…’ demonstrates that the sisters learn quickly, that they become harder and insist upon adherence to their rules more strictly as time goes on.

The idea that ‘any woman in trouble could come to the Krays’ is an interesting switch from the real life Kray twins’ story as the connotations of a woman being ‘in trouble’ are different: the phrase is used to describe a woman who finds herself with an unwanted pregnancy.

The capital letter given to ‘Protection’ is humorous in this context: it suggests that strong-arm tactics would be used to dissuade anybody from intimidating, harming or bullying the girl. It also suggests, incongruously, a more feminine form of nurture and care. The double meaning also creates humour at this point in the text.

The name of their club, ‘Ballbreakers’, carries obviously violent overtones and is used to refer to a sexually aggressive woman who humiliates men.

The colloquialisms, ‘clout’ and ‘dosh’ serve to underline once more the the sisters’ particular East End origins while adding verisimilitude to the poem.
Stanza 5

- The stanza begins, once more, with enjambment, to suggest that their career is on a continuously successful upward curve.
- Again, the name of the club is humorous and appertains to sexually confident women who use their sexuality to get what they want from their men.
- The colloquial language, ‘gaff...bang to rights’ is used as before to create an authentic voice for the pair.
- The use of parenthetical dashes also adds to the impression that this is a speaking voice, with the parentheses suggesting asides.
- Associative Cockney rhyming slang is used again here in the imperative, ‘Have a good butcher’s at these’, meaning to look at them carefully.
- In this line, we see the sisters proffering photographs for the inspection of the reader who is therefore imagined to be in their physical company. The photographs are of legendary women. Some (such as Germaine Greer, Yoko Ono) have stood up for the rights of women in an intellectual manner. Others (such as Brigitte Bardot, Diana Dors, Dusty Springfield) have been considered sexually confident or aggressive women who have used that sexuality for their own ends. All of the women mentioned are iconic. By placing themselves alongside these women the sisters glorify and immortalise themselves.
- The italics in the next line suggest the speaking (or, here, written) voices of the general public thanking them for keeping the peace and upholding standards of decency. Note that there is no reference made to the methods used by these women to intimidate the general population into behaving themselves.
- The final sentence of the stanza, ‘We hear what’s being said.’ suggests their wisdom and envisages them in the role of wise overseers of all London.
Stanza 6

- The poem begins with an imperative to ‘Remember us…’. Unlike the previous stanzas, there is no enjambment here so the stanza begins with a very positive feel.
- The triplet of ‘in our prime, dressed to kill and swaggering’ creates dramatic impact because of its triadic structure. The threatening pun on ‘dressed to kill’, is also striking as the reader knows that this should be read in a literal sense as well as its more usual metaphorical one.
- The verb ‘swaggering’ clearly suggests their confidence.
- The colloquial phrase ‘leaned on’ is ambiguous and leaves the reader imagining the lengths to which these women would go to ensure that Sinatra graced their club with his presence.
- The women suggest their own legendary status (and their enjoyment of this) as they describe how they worked the tables after the ‘buzz’ of their entrance had subsided. The list of their activities ‘giving a nod or a wink, buying someone a drink…’ is lengthy and written using enjambment over several lines to suggest a seamlessness to their carrying out of these duties, as though their behaviour is a well-oiled piece of theatrical machinery.
- There is an ominous feel to the description of ‘That particular night’ to inform the reader that this was a particularly monumental evening. The imperative, ‘Leave us both there,’ suggests to the reader that this was the night that ended their careers and they wish to be remembered ‘at the top of our world.’
- ‘Sinatra’ refers to Nancy Sinatra, the eldest child of the legendary Frank Sinatra, who enjoyed several hits in the 1960s.
- There is also a semi-humorous bent to the threat implied in the song These boots were made for walking, a Number One hit for Nancy Sinatra in 1966. The song has connotations of female freedom, escape and liberation. It is also strongly reminiscent of George Orwell’s terrifying vision of the future as delineated in Nineteen Eighty Four: “If you want an image of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face forever.” This interpretation is particularly pertinent to a poem that describes the parallel imaginary lives of a pair of murderous female gangster-twins.
Elvis's Twin Sister

- The poem is divided up into six regular stanzas, each consisting of five lines.
- The line lengths are short and lyrical, giving the impression of a song.
- There is much use made of internal rhyme as well as rhymes that operate across stanzas, giving the poem a cohesiveness and rhythm that are appropriate for its subject matter.
- The regularity of the form is suggestive of the ritual of daily life in the convent.

- The physical scene is set first: the convent garden. The use of the southern accent in ‘y’all’ helps to establish a sense of place.
- Notice the verb triplet: ‘tend…watch…pray’, which suggests a sense of action despite the fact that none of these verbs are particularly lively.
- There is an interesting assonantal rhyme of ‘soul’ with ‘rock ‘n’ roll’, reminding the reader of the cross-fertilisation between spirituality and music that has always been a tradition in the south of the USA: Elvis’s own home was called “Gracelands” suggesting that it was designed to be a spiritual refuge. It is also interesting to recall that early critics of rock and roll music called it “the devil’s music.”
- The link between the “twins” is immediately established as the sister is seen praying for the ‘immortal soul/of rock ‘n’ roll.’ The reader also realises the pun on the idea of Elvis’s “sister” with the noun referring to both a sibling and a nun.

- The name chosen by the nun, ‘Sister Presley’, is unusual in such a community: a nun usually takes on the name of a saint. Here, the incongruity is humorous.
- The use of the verb ‘digs’ to refer to the Reverend Mother’s approval of ‘the way I move my hips’ is also amusing in its incongruity, as is the pun on the idea of gardening established in the first stanza. The line is taken from another of Elvis’s hits, “Rock a Hula”, whose lyrics included admiration of the way a certain “Rock a Hula Baby” “Moves her hips down to her finger tips”. Elvis was also castigated for his own hip-driven style of dancing, a style that led him to be called “Elvis, the pelvis.” The idea of a nun dancing in this way is also obviously incongruous.

- Gregorian chant establishes a calm atmosphere, opposed to the rock ‘n’ roll sound. The verb ‘drifts’ used to describe the movement of the music also creates this atmosphere of peace, as does the olfactory reference to the herbs.
- In modern translation, the Latin hymn being sung would read something like, “Our paschal [Easter] lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.” This could be read as a humorous and slightly irreverent reference to the “sacrifice” of Elvis to rock ‘n’ roll.
- The garment of the nun, her simple habit, is typical and in complete contrast with the later rhinestone-studded catsuits popularised by Elvis in his “Vegas years”.

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The simple habit of the nun is “accessorised” with keys, suggesting her attachment to the convent, a rosary for praying, a lace band. These are humorously contrasted with a pair of ‘blue suede shoes’ in homage to Elvis’s song. Despite their sturdy qualities, they remain an obvious homage to her brother and remind the reader of her attachment to him. The rhyme of ‘hues’ and ‘shoes’ serves to underline the completion of the description of her outfit.

• The stanza begins in a contemplative tone, with the sister thinking of her situation in the convent as ‘Graceland’, recalling the name of her brother’s house. The play on words in the line ‘a land of grace’ is humorous.
• The next long line recalls iconic images of Elvis, with his own ‘lopsided smile’ further linking the twins physically.
• The rhyme of ‘face’ and ‘grace’ lends a sense of completion to this stanza, a satisfying effect as the poem moves to its satisfied conclusion.

• The stanza begins with the southern accented ‘Lawdy’, a popular shortened version of the phrase, “Praise the Lord.” It suggests the sister’s satisfaction in her position. This is further underlined by her assertion that ‘I’m alive and well.’
• The reference to Heartbreak Hotel, however, is ambiguous. It obviously refers to another of Elvis’s songs and also links with the idea of loneliness brought up in the title song, “Are you lonesome tonight?” It could suggest that the sister has found refuge in the convent, with the companionship of the nuns and her relationship with God. It could also be read as suggesting that the convent itself is her ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ and that it has been a long time since she entered it. In this reading, the keys carried by the sister suggest a type of self-enforced imprisonment. It is, as always, up to the reader to decide which reading seems most appropriate.
Each stanza is three lines long, possibly echoing the Holy Trinity to which Duffy refers at the end of the fifth stanza. This structure becomes even more significant when conjoined with the lack of punctuation in the poem. Rather than creating pauses through the use of full stops, the breaks come at the end of each stanza.

The lack of punctuation also links each stanza to the next and so creates a sense of unity; this is the story of the completion of Pope Joan. Duffy suggests she is made a whole, a full sentence, by the end of the poem through the birth of her child. This point is further emphasised by the use of the cataphoric reference ‘After’. We are made aware at the very start of the poem that there is more to come.

On the whole, the persona is presented as a friendly and approachable character. Her direct address, as with the others in the collection, pulls the reader in, with the colloquial phrases and casual attitude to her duties (the use of ‘swung’ and ‘swayed’, for example) used to create a very personable Pope.

The duties carried out however, are very striking and important. Duffy uses religious vocabulary, including Latin, to represent this importance.

The combination of these two contrasting styles (perhaps summed up best by the phrase ‘Vicar of Rome’) creates a balance within the persona; she clearly takes her job seriously and yet is not carried away with the grandeur of her position.

The casual way that she describes what she does adds to this sense of confidence and, coupled with the cataphoric reference mentioned earlier, suggests that the tasks she must carry out are “old hat” to her now.

The repetition of ‘blessing’ could suggest a laid-back, blasé attitude to her job. Duffy is indicating that these are things Pope Joan does every day.

Interestingly Duffy moves on from the descriptions of the typical role of Pope to say that, despite the fact the role is one that seems to come naturally to her, she is still ‘nearer to heaven’ than some other, male religious figures. It could raise the issue that success in a job such as this is not about glorifying one's role but simply getting on with it.

Duffy makes reference to ‘home’ in this stanza, creating a comfortable, domestic feel.

The use of Latin emphasises Pope Joan’s intelligence and dedication to her job.

These two images encapsulate the two different sides of this powerful, dynamic woman.
Firstly, Duffy starts with the connective ‘but’ which initially can be seen as an anaphoric reference to the male counterparts who have been listed in previous stanzas. However, the phrase that precedes this is the Latin reference to Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Duffy may therefore be suggesting that Pope Joan considers herself to be more virtuous than even them. This relates to the original story and the fact that mother and child were both killed in the name of religion, purely because of Joan’s gender.

The connective also joins the two contrasting aspects of Pope Joan’s life: her position in the church and her personal role as mother. Coming at the mid-way point in the poem would suggest that these two aspects are of equal weighting within the protagonist’s life but ending with the image of birth and motherhood foregrounds this role rather than her position in the church.

The paradox within this stanza creates a sense of the confusion that would have been initially felt by the character when facing her crisis of faith. Repeating the word ‘believe’ emphasises the religious element of her trauma.

The final line is resolute: she does not believe anymore. The phrase appears to be cathartic and the following stanzas illustrate a determined and focused character celebrating her transgression into motherhood.

There are fewer references to religion. Instead Duffy focuses on describing the birth of Pope Joan’s child.

The use of repetition (‘lifting me, flinging me down’) emphasises the power of this experience: the process of giving birth being both an evocative, emotional event that lifts her spirits and a physical one.

Juxtaposing the phrase ‘power of God’ with ‘the sense of a hand’ could suggest that Pope Joan considers this birth to be the work of God. There is the sense that she has been touched by the hand of God and the baby is a blessing. (This idea makes the fact that the powers that be punish both mother and child in the original story once again significant.) By using ‘me’ and ‘my’ throughout the last stanzas however, Duffy emphasises the sense of ownership Pope Joan feels not just of the baby but of the experience itself. This is made particularly clear with the use of the phrase ‘in my miracle’.

The final stanza creates a very powerful parting image of mother and child lying in the road alone. As in the story of the Good Samaritan, Duffy could be using this image as a metaphor for the fact that those who should be helping her and supporting this miracle birth are turning their backs on her and the innocent child. The road could also represent the new journey upon which Pope Joan is about to embark.

The final line confirms that all things have changed for Pope Joan now. Duffy refuses to give a name to her protagonist’s new role. Instead she says what she is not: she is neither a gender defined role (‘not a man’) nor a gender specific job title (‘or a pope’). We are left with the idea that she is much more than either of these having gone through the transformation into mother, a title whose importance Duffy has illustrated in other poems in the collection (Thetis and Demeter, for example). This is a liberating end and illustrates Duffy’s personal views of motherhood clearly.
The World's Wife

Penelope

- There are five stanzas, each with nine usually longish lines of three to sixteen syllables.
- There are short lines here to create a contrast in the poem.
- The length and regularity of the stanzas suggest a narrative effect similar to Mrs Midas.
- The regularity also suggests the regularity of Penelope’s life, with its calm daily stitching and unpicking.

- There is a clear delineation of time here with the foregrounding of ‘At first’ emphasising that this was not the manner in which she continued to live.
- The wife waits for her husband and is depicted typically looking for him down the road. It is the dog, however, not the wife, who mourns his absence. It seems to suggest that the wife’s reaction is simply a learned response: she is behaving as she would be expected to do. It is also the dog who is ‘warm’, usually a human characteristic. Duffy appears to use him to emphasise his simple, unintelligent devotion in contrast with the wife’s self reliant, innovative and resourceful approach to single life.
- The phase of ‘noticing’ the husband’s absence (NOT “missing” or “mourning” him) lasted only six months, we are told, before paradoxically, Penelope “notices” that she no longer “notices” her husband’s absence. In this way, Duffy carefully suggests her nonchalance with regard to this absence. The brevity of the line, ‘Six months of this’, suggests Penelope’s lack of patience with herself in that phase of her life: it is as though she is angry with herself for missing the husband.
- Before the end of the first stanza she has decided upon an occupation. Although this is a typically female one, sewing, it is one that she finds life affirming.

- The enjambment across the first two stanzas is effectively suggestive of Penelope’s new busy-ness. Notice the deliberate contrast drawn by Duffy between the amusement expected to be provided by the sewing and the industry that it turned out to be. Is there a subtle comment aimed here at the typical devaluing of traditional women’s work?
- The line, ‘I sewed a girl’ is sufficiently short to stand out in contrast with the rest of the stanza. It seems to gather weight because of this and suggests a total re-creation of the character of Penelope: she is seen as fashioning herself from scratch.
- The colours are rich, warm earth tones as well as the glittering silver of the star. The images chosen suggest a new appreciation of nature and a coming to life.
- The verb chosen in the image of the snapdragon ‘gargling’ a bee suggests a new receptiveness to the world around her.
- The rhyme at the end of these two lines suggests a satisfied sense of completion.
• The use of enjambment across two stanzas again suggests a sense of busy preoccupation, in total contrast to the usual picture of Penelope as a woman bereft, merely waiting on her husband. The needle is pictured ‘pushing up through umber soil’ as if it is creating life rather than mimicking it.

• The stories depicted on the cloth replay the romantic myths of her childhood, falling in love ‘with heroism’s boy’ and experiencing ‘love, lust, loss, lessons learnt’ before watching him ‘sail away’. The alliterative ‘I’ draws emphasis to this line whilst seeming to suggest that, when involved with ‘heroism’s boy’, loss will always follow lust. The depiction of these scenes in her embroidery suggests that she is distancing herself from them, that they now seem to her like stories played out in somebody else’s life.

• The importance is instantly downplayed by the fact that the suitors do not appear until the penultimate stanza. By this time, Penelope’s habits are already established and she already embroiders for her own enjoyment, fulfilment and occupation. Unlike in the original story, where the habit is a response to the arrival of the suitors, here Penelope is merely adapting her own practices.

• The lack of importance of the suitors is emphasised by the fact that they are labelled merely ‘the others’, which also diminishes the importance of Odysseus himself (who is never named in the poem, like the absent males in many of these poems).

• Penelope’s calm in the face of the importunity of these men is emphasised by the idea of her carefully crafting a persona for herself. ‘I wore a widow’s face,’ suggests that she does not feel like one. The unruffled sewing and unpicking of the work also suggests Penelope’s unconcern.

• There is the suggestion that Penelope creates her own reality and her own world in the idea that ‘I stitched it.’ This creates the effect of her being in total control. The colours are still the soft, muted colours of the natural world that she is stitching.
• Enjambment is used to suggest a sense of movement across the stanzas, echoing the leaping of the fish that she is stitching. Note the lively verb 'leaping' used to describe the fish that is also notably escaping capture, just as Penelope is doing.

• The pointlessness of the suitor's wooing is echoed by Penelope's statement that the river 'would never reach the sea' because she controls their fortunes just as she controls the sea. 'I tricked it.' demonstrates the satisfaction of a woman who has the men around her dancing to her tune.

• The positioning of 'a woman at the centre of this world' demonstrates the sense of control that Penelope enjoys over the duped suitors. The triplet 'self-contained, absorbed, content,' emphasises this control.

• The return of Odysseus is clearly unwanted. His footsteps are described as 'far-too-late' and Penelope's absorption in her work is undisturbed: she simply adjusts the colour of the thread she is using and returns to her canvas. The choice of red as the new colour for her embroidery is interesting, suggesting as it does the colour of passion and lust but also blood. The adverb "surely" tells the reader that, despite the return of Odysseus, his wife is still very much in control of her life. Whatever course she is expected to adopt, she will not bend to her husband's will but certainly, 'surely/ continue to craft her own destiny, just as she has controlled it through her work for the last twenty years. The reader is reminded of the link between writer and embroiderer, both weaving their own stories and controlling the destinies of the characters depicted in them. Odysseus is therefore no longer 'heroism's boy' but a man in Penelope's embroidery. As such, the reader can feel sure that he is now subject to her will.
Mrs Beast

- The stanza opens in a self-assured and assertive tone as Mrs Beast claims to be putting her audience straight about women and the way she and others like her should be seen. Unlike in many of the other poems in the collection, in this case, it appears that the audience is male as the opening lines are issued as a kind of warning.
- We are given a list of beautiful women who have in one-way or another inspired and been glorified by men. The use of the hyphen, just before the admonishment to ‘think again’, serves to slow the pace and reinforce the warning.
- The following lines offer a new way of reading another well-known fairytale *The Little Mermaid*, referring to the sacrifices she made through a graphic description of physical rather than emotional pain.
- The reader is reminded of *Queen Herod*’s fear for her daughter and her similar belief that all Princes are ‘bastards’.
- There is an ambiguity in the line ‘look, love, I should know’ as the tone can appear chatty and conversational. It is almost as if the audience is being taken into her confidence whilst at the same time it could be read as an assertion by Mrs Beast of her knowledge of love.
- The stanza concludes with the insistence that what every woman needs is ‘a Beast’. Interestingly, the gender of her audience now seems to have changed, as Mrs Beast seems here to be addressing women. This is compounded by the use of enjambment to slow the pace and affirm the importance of her view that ‘the sex/is better.’

- The opening lines set the tone for the stanza as we now hear the voice of an experienced woman someone who is ‘no longer a girl’. Unlike the journey from innocence to experience we read of in *Little Red-Cap*, this girl knows her ‘own mind’.
- We are presented with a woman who has her independence both financially and emotionally. Once again Duffy subverts the fairytale myth of the Prince on the white charger as Mrs Beast asserts that she has her ‘own black horse at the gates’ to carry her off if the man/Beast transgresses in any way.
- The subservience of the Beast is demonstrated through the linguistic structure of ‘good…better…best’. Mrs Beast appears to be weighing up this man’s attributes both emotionally and physically as she dispassionately assesses his attitude towards her. He is, it appears, emotionally subservient whilst at the same time being sexually aroused by her physical presence.
- In the concluding lines the pace is slowed and the sense of anticipation is increased as the Beast is pictured waiting patiently to please the woman. She describes her drinking of the wine in masculine terms as she is seen to ‘quaff’ rather than drink or sip and he is made to wait and watch, not participate, until she is ready.
• The tone of the opening sentence is confidential as the speaker offers the reader/audience greater insight into her private and intimate world; she says, ‘I’ll tell you more.’

• Once stripped of his outward attempt to be like other men, what is revealed is ‘his pelt, /ugly as sin.’ We are reminded of King Lear when he comments that ‘robes and fur’d gowns hide all’. Naked and vulnerable, this man/beast is uncompromisingly ugly. He is also unable to communicate in language. All that is available to him are ‘grunts…groans…yelps’, on the one hand the sounds of sexual pleasure but on the other nothing more than the noise of a dumb animal.

• Duffy disempowers the Beast by undermining his sexual performance and asserting that he has the ‘breath of a goat.’ The narrator, it appears, must be the only one to enjoy sexual satisfaction. She asserts that ‘I had the language’, a statement that in itself is empowering as we are told in the bible “In the beginning was the word and the word was God”. Just as men have done for centuries in relation to women, she uses language to devalue and negate the Beast. She is formidable in the way she achieves his negation as she takes control of his sexual performance and concludes not on a note of satisfaction but rather of disappointment as she somewhat petulantly states, ‘That’s not where I meant.’

• The following lines remind us of Circe and the man/pig images presented in that poem. However, this woman is not angry, disappointed or vengeful; she is self-congratulatory as she celebrates her position of power as this ‘pig in my bed was invited’. The italicising of the word ‘invited’ serves to highlight how she articulates this word, out loud. This relationship operates only on her terms and, unusual in conventional relationships, when he fouls the sheets he washes them, not once, but ‘Twice.’ This word stands alone as a tribute to her power and his subservience.

• His abasement seems to have no end as he is described as available to ‘scour in between my toes’ and this is rhymed with ‘pick my nose’ to reinforce the slave-like qualities of her lover.

• This stanza concludes with a description of his attempts to demonstrate his joy and pleasure. These are unheard by the narrator and she once again reduces his behaviour to that of an animal as we are given a list of creatures that all have something in common with the Beast.

• The intimacy of the last stanza is dismissed with a rhetorical statement ‘Need I say more?’ but, before the poem takes a new turn, we are reminded of the Beast’s subservient role as he keeps ‘out of sight’, just as a gangster’s moll might in a similar situation.

• Mrs Beast now begins to describe her female friends and their card game, Poker, a game that is associated with hard gambling men and is often played in gangster movies. Once again Duffy subverts the male tradition of dirty talk and fast cards as she asserts, ‘We were a hard school, tough as fuck’.

• We are presented with a list of unusual women again from the world of myths and legends and the games they play are hard, uncompromising and unforgiving. The short stanza concludes with the name of a game that echoes a gun battle, ‘Hold ‘Em, Draw’, reflecting the fierce nature of the games and the intensity with which they are played.
• The first of these stanzas seems designed to reinforce the hard and heartless image of these women. There is no show of emotion or feminine feeling. This is not a “girly” evening. These are hard and ruthless women who have appropriated male attitudes and values. The game of chance and skill is played out in a similar way to the way they conduct their lives, with no compromise. It was, we are told, ‘a lesson learnt by all of us’. The lesson is that no matter how ‘drop-dead gorgeous’, these women do not ‘bluff’.

• The next stanza offers a different view of women; those who have been defeated by men and suffered the consequences. We are presented with a list that begins with Eve and concludes with Diana, Princess of Wales. These ghosts of the past act as reminders to the women of what happens to girls who allow themselves to “fall” for men.

• The women, unlike the ‘sheepish Beast’, maintain their ruthless façade as they continue to emulate men in their behaviour and gestures. They ‘tossed [their] fiery drinks to the back of [their] crimson throats’ as they toast Fay Wray, the actress who tamed the Beast in the film King Kong.

• The stanza concludes with a celebration of their success in a world that would otherwise destroy them. They are ‘Bad girls. Serious ladies’. Above all however, they are ‘Mourning our dead.’ that is to say, those women who have been destroyed by men and whose ghosts serve to keep these women mean, hard and heartless.

• The relationship with the man/Beast is seen as a game of chance just like the game of cards. She is determined to be ‘hard on the Beast, win or lose’.

• The poem now takes another turn as the ghosts of the women detailed in the earlier verse act as a catalyst to the narrator’s emotions. She is seen praying for ‘the lost, the captive beautiful’, women whose lives have been destroyed by men, ‘the wives’. It is for these women that Mrs Beast saves her heartfelt emotion as she mourns their passing and she empathises with their suffering. In return, they act as a talisman to keep her safe from her feminine side. The world away from the Beast is a world of feminine beauty. ‘The moon (a female symbol) was a hand-mirror breathed on by a Queen’ and her breath outside in the cold night air, ‘a chiffon scarf for an elegant ghost.’

• Once back inside with the Beast, the feminine world evaporates and she becomes, once again, the commanding, assertive, selfish persona that she feels she must adopt if she is not to join her defeated ghostly sisters. The concluding lines reaffirm the narrator’s belief that to show love is to show weakness and so she commands herself to ‘Let the less-loving one be me.’
Demeter

Duffy employs two features of the sonnet form: the fourteen-line length and the concluding rhyming couplet.

Unlike most sonnets, the poem is divided into four triplets and a couplet rather than the typical three quatrains/couplet or octave/sestet structures.

Though the lines are of approximately similar length - between six and nine syllables - their metre is irregular. This irregularity is echoed by the garbled syntax of some of the sentences.

Rhyme is used sparingly and is generally internal.

Most of the words Duffy chooses are monosyllabic. The diction is simple and straightforward.

Other characteristic devices employed here include enjambment between lines and between stanzas.

Duffy opts for a variation on the sonnet form four times in this collection. As a classic form normally chosen to explore a subject which is very important to a poet, the sonnet is regularly selected for love or religious topics. As a number of poets have done, Duffy has sometimes exploited this form to ironic effect, as in her anti-ode to the penis, Frau Freud. In the Bible section of The Devil's Wife, Duffy's use of the sonnet is more disturbing. She seems to be imposing this very disciplined form on a desperate list of excuses where panic and unreliability are communicated through such techniques as repetition and absence of punctuation as well as the incongruity of form and subject. But Duffy understands the power of the sonnet: it is best at encapsulating that element of love which is closest to worship, at characterising the beloved and what is special about the relationship itself. This is why she has adopted it for the two most tender poems in the collection: this overflowing of love for a daughter and Anne Hathaway's celebration of the love she shared with Shakespeare.

The unusual division into short stanzas makes the beginning of the poem starker and, in the second half of the poem, emphasises the swiftness of Demeter's realisation that Persephone is coming home, perhaps suggesting that Demeter actually hastens to meet her daughter. The rhyming of the final couplet beautifully expresses her cautious certainty.

Irregular metre and tortured syntax, especially at the start of the poem, reflect Demeter's abandonment of any attempt at grace - she is too heartbroken - while, as the poem progresses, they imply a breathless excitement as Persephone comes into view.

The infrequency of rhyme means that its use in the fourth stanza, to highlight Demeter's joy ('bare...swear...air'), is particularly striking.

Monosyllables give a vivid aural sense of Demeter's initially bleak mood. The diction is simple because the intensity of Demeter's feelings throughout the poem makes embellishment inappropriate.

Enjambment is an effective vehicle for expressing overcharged emotion.
Stanza 1

- Broken syntax in the first line emphasises how disjointed Demeter's half-crazed thoughts are.
- The phrase ‘Where I lived’ seems to imply not just a dwelling place but an emotional atmosphere, which can be illustrated by images of the coldest season: ‘winter and hard earth...my cold stone room’. Whether Demeter's emotions have literally affected the seasons or whether she merely feels as though they have is a question which Duffy examines a number of times in the poem.
- Demeter is not the wanderer of the myth here: ‘I sat’, she tells us, giving us a picture of a woman literally immobilised by grief. Her surroundings have turned to ‘stone’. She believes her own pathetic fallacy. It is difficult for her even to speak: she talks of ‘choosing tough words’ as though it is an effort to find any way of expressing her terrible sorrow. She likens the words she finds to ‘granite, flint,’ the hardest substances she can imagine.

Stanza 2

- Imagery to do with the cold again characterises not only Demeter's feelings but her environment. She is hemmed in by ‘ice’, whether literal or metaphorical, and her source of life-giving water has ‘frozen’.
- Enjambment leads us forcefully into this stanza, stressing Demeter's urgent need ‘to break the ice’, a term generally employed in awkward social situations. Maybe Demeter's grief has isolated her from other people; or perhaps she is trying to locate the words, which will bring relief to her own troubled spirit.
- The extended image of ‘my broken heart...[which] skimmed, flat, over the frozen lake’ is an intriguing one. It seems as though Demeter's heart is so battered that it is useless to combat her painful circumstances - it can only skim over the lake of grief, which encircles her. The word ‘flat’ suggests complete depression.
- Again, Duffy includes faulty syntax to reflect Demeter's distress, adding a desperate ‘I tried that’ after ‘my broken heart’.

Stanza 3

- The language is this stanza is particularly simple. Duffy wants to leave us with the uncluttered image of ‘her...walking’, which is all that matters to Demeter.
- Duffy uses repetition judiciously here. All Demeter's despair is conjured up in the ‘long, long way’ that separated the under and the upper world. The interjection of ‘my daughter, my girl’ conveys Demeter's loving possessiveness as she treasures her right to use these endearments again.
- In ‘I saw her at last’ the reader is given the sense of Demeter's life reduced to an indefinite waiting for the only sight, which would make any difference to her.
- In contrast to her mother, Persephone is active, vigorous, ‘walking’ the ‘long, long way ... across the fields' from which she was abducted.
Stanza 4

- Enjambment highlights Persephone's 'bare feet'. Despite what she has been through, the girl is childlike again. The image of the recreated Little Red-Cap, in the first poem of the collection, is suggested - she too brings 'flowers'.
- Persephone carries 'all spring's flowers', clearly an impossible task if taken literally. Demeter is here describing the effect of Persephone's arrival; and maybe she is implying that now her daughter is back, her own role in helping the flowers to bloom can resume.
- Enjambment is used again to emphasise 'her mother's house'. Demeter is stressing that Persephone is back where she belongs.
- Though the implementation of the seasons is Demeter's job, she speaks of the dawning of spring as though it is a surprise to her and is likely to be disbelieved by others: 'I swear the air softened and warmed'.
- The last line of the stanza is the ultimate accolade to a loved one. The closer Persephone moves, the more spring like becomes 'the air'. 'Softened and warmed' indicates a gentleness and tenderness about the change which contrasts beautifully with the cold, hard imagery of the first two stanzas.

Stanza 5

- Duffy blatantly personifies natural phenomena here – 'blue sky smiling...small, shy mouth' - to express Demeter's conviction that the whole world is in tune with her happiness.
- 'Blue' incorporates an interesting contradiction since it is both the colour of gloom and also, in its modifying of 'sky', the sign of fair weather.
- Now Persephone is back, Demeter can even risk being mildly reproachful as she chides the sky in 'none too soon'.
- Yet the 'new moon' is tentatively 'small' and 'shy', its shape a timid smile. Perhaps both Persephone and Demeter feel that they have to embrace their joy hesitantly.
- However, the book ends appropriately on a note of hope since new beginnings are always to be cherished.