

How does Carol Ann Duffy explore the representation of love in “Medusa”, “Mrs. Midas” and “Little Red Cap”?

Carol Ann Duffy’s *A World’s Wife* is a collection of poetry published in 1999, inspired by Duffy’s strong feminist views, that focuses on the complexities of gender relations through a reconstruction of women in fictional contexts. Her works reimagine the conventional narrative by presenting dramatic monologues from the perspective of female characters. However, her poetry is most compelling in its depiction of love. This is because romance in “Duffy’s work is composed of duplicitous texts [where] lovers can be heroes [and] bastards” (Rowland). This is evident to the reader through her exploration of the representations of love within the poems “Medusa”, “Mrs. Midas”, and “Little Red Cap”, which present subverted interpretations of the Greek Myth of “Medusa”, the tale of “King Midas”, and the fairytale of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Duffy uses these altered versions of well-known stories to explore the influence of societal expectations, the realistic possibility of a decaying relationship, the timeless qualities of love, and the effect of its loss to accurately represent the multifaceted nature of love and its different stages.

Firstly, Duffy demonstrates the effects of misleading societal expectations on embellishing the notion of love and distorting the reality of romantic relationships. Both “Medusa” and “Mrs. Midas” are from the perspective of women with conflict-ridden marriages - Medusa, who suspects her husband is a cheater, and Mrs. Midas, whose husband’s selfish wish has increased tensions between them. Medusa was deceived by the idealistic notion of the “perfect man” and fell in love with a “Greek God, [of her] own” (line 14), who she now believes is unfaithful. Here, the alliteration and capitalization of the letter ‘G’ glorify male partners and lend divine qualities to romantic relationships. This emphasizes the unrealistic perception of love as flawless, which is conventionally perpetuated by the media as an attainable standard. On the other hand, the first

stanza of “Mrs. Midas” paints a peaceful scene depicting an idealistic marriage. Duffy’s word choice of “poured” (line 1), “cooked”, “kitchen” (line 2), and “blanching” (line 4) establish a semantic field of domesticity, thereby alluding to the conventional marital role of a housewife. Additionally, the first stanza contains seven cesuras, setting a languid pace for the poem and creating a relaxed mood. However, this serene atmosphere is broken by Mr. Midas “snapping a twig” (line 6). Unlike the rest of the stanza, this line is complete without any cesuras or pauses, implying a clear shift in tone. Mr. Midas’ disruptive destruction shatters the idealistic illusion of their marriage and reveals the reality of their tense, conflict-ridden relationship.

By illustrating the experience of gradual decay as a possible progression within marriage, Duffy accurately represents the dynamic and volatile nature of love. In the second stanza of “Medusa”, the persona remarks that her “bride’s breath [has] soured [and] stank” (line 6); this metaphor indicates that the initial sweetness of love has dissipated and transformed into bitter resentment of her husband. The lexical choice of “soured” and “stank” symbolize the rot that gradually poisoned their relationship and festered as a growing doubt of his fidelity. Here, the use of sibilance imitates a snake’s hissing, alluding to Medusa’s cursed hair in the Greek myth and commencing her monstrous transformation. Furthermore, the alliteration of the “b” creates a whimsical mood, mimicking a fairytale, to juxtapose the traditional image of a happy bride to Medusa’s current Gorgon form - both of which stem from her feelings for her husband. Additionally, Duffy illustrates the loss of love in “Mrs. Midas” through the ultimate separation of the couple. The seventh stanza begins by revealing that the pair now sleep in “separate beds” (line 37) - a symbol of their deteriorating relationship. The short syntax, coupled with a caesura, displays a clear shift in tone to a more detached character, juxtaposing the descriptive language used in earlier stanzas. When Mrs. Midas discloses that she “feared his honeyed embrace” (line 41), the

word “honeyed” holds connotations of overly sweet love, and the contrast provided by her fear emphasizes the selfishness of Mr. Midas’ wish, which has ironically made a husband’s loving gesture life-threatening. As the couple’s physical and emotional separation persists, Duffy demonstrates the dynamic nature of love.

In “Mrs. Midas” and “Little Red Cap”, Duffy uses her characters’ nostalgia to allude to the timeless qualities of love. In “Mrs. Midas”, the persona directly addresses the audience to lament that “[they] were passionate then, // in those halcyon days” (lines 39 and 40). The diction of “halcyon” conveys an idyllic time of great happiness in the past, thus, juxtaposing the current state of their relationship with peaceful memories. The underlying sadness implies that, amid Mrs. Midas’ anger, she still finds comfort in the “halcyon days” and misses what their marriage once was. In addition to this, she concludes the dramatic monologue by admitting that “even now... his // warm hands on [her] skin [and] his touch” (line 66) are what she “miss[es] the most” (line 65). The alliteration of the soft “m” consonant proves the sincerity of her feelings, builds tension, and immerses readers into a memory of the love they shared. Moreover, the phrase “even now” suggests that, despite their relationship deteriorating, their initial love persists as longing. Similarly, in “Little Red Cap” the persona recalls her passionate love affair with the wolf and poses the rhetorical question, “What little girl doesn’t dearly love a wolf?” (line 22) The persona’s plosive alliteration suggests her equal enjoyment and desire for their sexual experiences, discrediting the view that young women are “little girls” frightened of sexuality. The humorous tone elucidates that Little Red Cap does not view herself as a victim of the wolf as she can still fondly reminisce over their shared memories.

In “Medusa” and “Little Red Cap” Duffy demonstrates how a loss of love can lead one to rage and violence. Both poems feature heightening metaphors that symbolize the women’s

increasing anger, confidence, and maturity. In “Medusa” this is seen when she turns animals into rocks of growing proportions. The stones are physical representations of her emotions, and as they grow in size from “a dull grey pebble” (line 19) to “a boulder” (line 28), they illustrate her intensifying fury. The percussive consonants in the semantic field of rocks seen in words such as “pebble” (line 19), “gravel” (line 22), “house brick” (line 25), and “boulder” (line 28) express harshness and create a spiteful tone. Here, the petrification of live creatures alludes to Medusa’s powers in the original Greek myth. Interestingly, animal cruelty is a sign of psychopathy (Editor), implying that love can drive one to insanity by fostering violent emotions and psychopathic tendencies. This is also seen in “Little Red Cap” when the persona “took an axe // to a willow” (lines 36 and 37), then “a salmon” (line 37), and ultimately “to the wolf” (line 38) himself. An anaphora is established by repeating “I took an axe” to emphasize the axe as a symbol of the persona’s aggression and power. Additionally, the internal rhyme created by “wept” (line 37), “leapt” (line 38), and “slept” (line 39) sets a rapid rhythm to portray her impatience and growing anger. Lastly, the repeated phrase “to see how” (lines 37 and 38) holds connotations of childlike curiosity, thus, indicating Little Red Cap’s fascination with inflicting torture on her victims; once again, this implies love’s potential to evoke madness.

Finally, Duffy subverts well-known stories to challenge traditional ‘fairytale endings’ by implying that the potential unraveling of love can lead to revenge. This is presented in “Medusa” when she directly addresses her lover to “Be terrified” (line 12) of her monstrous form. Here, the imperative structure consolidates her commanding tone and demonstrates a reversal of the power dynamic in their relationship. Medusa concludes her dramatic monologue by challenging her lover to “look at [her] now” (line 42). Once again, the imperative language connotes her confidence; however, this also alludes to Medusa’s mythological powers. At this stage, she intends to confront

her husband with her suspicions of his infidelity and threatens to retaliate by petrifying him. A reclaiming of power is also seen in "Mrs. Midas" when she declares, "So he had to move out." (line 49). By starting her statement with the conjunction "So", she lends a tone of finality to this decision and emphasizes that it is not merely an emotional response to their arguments. Moreover, the alliteration of the breathy "h" highlights the unconventional nature of this fairytale's 'happily ever after' ending. Little Red Cap also seeks revenge when she "[fills the wolf's] old belly with stones" (line 41). The word "old" serves as a double entendre referencing the wolf's old age, alluding to Duffy's relationship with Adrian Henri who was 23 years older ("Carol Ann Duffy"), while implying that their love has faded into the past. This line also intertextually references the classic fairytale where the woodsmen killed the wolf; however, Duffy has subverted the gender roles so that Little Red Cap can bring herself justice.

In conclusion, Duffy presents a positive and negative outlook on love through her female protagonists experiencing the various stages of love, from initial fascination to decay, longing, betrayal, and anger. This authentic interpretation of a typically romanticized concept allows Carol Ann Duffy to accurately and realistically explore the fundamentally complex nature of love in her collection of poetry *A World's Wife* - and more specifically within the poems "Medusa", "Mrs. Midas" and "Little Red Cap."

Word Count: 1500

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