

CONTENTS

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

How to study a poem.....	5
Reading <i>The World's Wife</i>	6

PART TWO

THE TEXT

Note on the text.....	9
Detailed summaries	
Little Red-Cap.....	9
Thetis.....	11
Queen Herod.....	13
Mrs Midas.....	16
<i>from</i> Mrs Tiresias.....	18
Pilate's Wife.....	21
Mrs Aesop.....	24
Mrs Darwin.....	26
Mrs Sisyphus.....	26
Mrs Faust.....	28
Delilah.....	31
Anne Hathaway.....	33
Queen Kong.....	35
Medusa.....	38
Circe.....	40
Mrs Lazarus.....	42
Pygmalion's Bride.....	44
Mrs Rip Van Winkle.....	46
Mrs Icarus.....	48
Frau Freud.....	49
Salome.....	51
The Kray Sisters.....	53
Elvis's Twin Sister.....	56
Pope Joan.....	58
Penelope.....	60
Mrs Beast.....	62
Demeter.....	64

Extended commentaries

Text 1 – Mrs Quasimodo.....	66
Text 2 – The Devil's Wife.....	69
Text 3 – Eurydice.....	73

PART THREE

CRITICAL APPROACHES Themes

The female voice.....	77
Marriage.....	78
Sexuality.....	81
Motherhood.....	83
Poetic forms.....	85
The dramatic monologue.....	86
The sonnet.....	87
Free verse.....	88
Language and style.....	89
Dark humour and double meanings.....	90
Satire and irony.....	91
Imagery.....	93
The power of the tale.....	94
Revisionism.....	97

PART FOUR

CRITICAL HISTORY

Critical reception.....	101
Contemporary approaches.....	102
Feminist literary criticism.....	102
Psychoanalytic criticism.....	105

PART FIVE

BACKGROUND

Carol Ann Duffy's life and works.....	108
Historical and political background.....	109
Literary background.....	112
Chronology.....	115

FURTHER READING.....	121
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LITERARY TERMS.....	124
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AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES.....	132
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CONTEXT

The monologue should not be confused with the **soliloquy**. Hamlet's famous soliloquy 'To be, or not to be' is addressed to himself, even though the audience is listening.

CONTEXT

Robert Browning wrote several dramatic monologues. 'My Last Duchess' (1842) is his best-known example.

CONTEXT

Christina Rossetti's 'The Convent Threshold' (written around 1860) was inspired by the true story of the twelfth-century lovers Abelard and Heloise.



CHECK THE NET

To read 'The Convent Threshold' in its entirety, go to www.victorianweb.org

THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

The monologue, in which a character addresses an audience, has a long theatrical history. Opera uses monologue too, and it is used in poetry, by the poet John Milton, for example. The **dramatic monologue**, which was popular in the Victorian period, is a development of this form. Robert Browning (1812–89) was its main practitioner. In his best work there is complex **imagery** and the character is fully developed. A dramatic monologue less often referred to is 'The Convent Threshold', written by Christina Rossetti (1830–94). A short examination of it illustrates the features of the dramatic monologue as conceived during the Victorian period. 'The Convent Threshold' is typically a **lyric** poem, written at length in which an imaginary female speaker, not the poet, is addressing her lover. We hear only her words, never his. Both have reached a critical point in their lives, again a feature of the form. She wishes to enter the convent because their love has caused family conflict: 'There's blood between us, love, my love, / There's father's blood, there's brother's blood', and by removing herself from the world and entering a convent, she can pay penance: 'And blood's a bar I cannot pass'. She pleads with him to repent as well, in order that they be reunited in Paradise: 'There we shall meet as once we met, / And love with old familiar love'. The use of speech allows the poet to shift the voice from the self (which seems like the poet's voice) and encourage the development of the speaking character. This technique can more easily create the sense that an argument is being presented – as here where the speaker is making the case for redemption. By allowing an imagined character to present his or her view in this way, we can see why Duffy finds the dramatic monologue so appealing. In particular it **foregrounds** the speaker-character and accommodates a combative style, both distinct features of *The World's Wife*.

Duffy is, of course, positioned quite differently from Christina Rossetti. Their concerns are not the same. In 'The Convent Threshold' the female speaker wishes to be reunited with her lover in a pure union after death. The speakers of *The World's Wife* have scant regard for men's souls. Both Duffy and Rossetti do, however, make it their business to give women a voice, to describe experience from a woman's perspective.

Carol Ann Duffy takes the dramatic monologue and makes the form her own, shaping it to her needs. Her poems can be lengthy diatribes or short and pithy exclamations like 'Mrs Icarus'. Ideal for performance, some are like the monologues of a stand-up comedian. The voices are theatrical and almost without exception fearless, a trait usually associated with masculinity. Delilah emasculates her lover by eliminating the source of his strength: 'Then with deliberate, passionate hands / I cut every lock of his hair' (41–2).

THE SONNET

The word 'sonnet' comes from the mid sixteenth-century Italian *sonetto* meaning 'little sound' or 'song'. The traditional form, in which a single idea is set out and explored, and a conclusion arrived at, often by employing **conceits**, is complex. The final **couplet** sums things up or gives an additional twist to the conclusion. Traditional **sonnets** consist of fourteen lines and are written in **iambic pentameter**, and are either **Shakespearean** or **Petrarchan** (sometimes called Italian). They are usually love poems with a philosophical bent, though Shakespeare also included erotic themes in his sonnets, and subsequently other poets also introduced religious themes. The Shakespearean sonnet has an *abab cdcd efef gg* rhyme scheme; the Petrarchan is normally *abba abba* followed by a *sestet cdcdcd* or other rhyme patterns. John Donne (1572–1631), John Milton (1608–74) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850) have all written sonnets; much later W. H. Auden (1907–73) composed poetry in the sonnet form. He, like Duffy, enjoyed writing within a range of forms and probably influenced her. The sonnet is one of the most durable of all the poetic forms and is still popular with poets today, although modern poets often take the form and play with it to suit their own purposes. They usually abandon the rhyme and **metre**, but keep the fourteen lines with the end couplet, and also the spirit of the sonnet form.

In *The World's Wife* there are four sonnets. The most easily recognisable is 'Anne Hathaway'. The remaining three are 'Bible', in 'The Devil's Wife'; 'Frau Freud'; and 'Demeter'. In 'Anne Hathaway' the theme of the poem, love, is ideal for a sonnet. Indeed, Duffy could hardly have chosen another form, since it celebrates the relationship between Shakespeare – whose collection



CHECK THE BOOK

Deryn Rees-Jones examines Duffy's use of the dramatic monologue in *Carol Ann Duffy* (2001), pp. 17–29.



CHECK THE NET

Further information about the **sonnet** can be found at www.sonnets.org



CHECK THE BOOK

W. H. Auden's sonnet 'Luther' stays within the traditional metre and, largely, the rhyme scheme. It is included in his *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957*.

World events	Carol Ann Duffy's life	Literary events
<p>1972 Civil unrest; Bloody Sunday shootings in Northern Ireland</p> <p>1973 Britain joins European Economic Community (EEC)</p> <p>1974 President Richard Nixon resigns over Watergate scandal</p> <p>1975 Fall of Saigon; American troops withdraw from Vietnam</p> <p>1979 Tories win general election; Margaret Thatcher becomes prime minister</p> <p>1981 Ronald Reagan becomes US president; mass protests at Greenham Common against nuclear cruise missiles</p> <p>1982 Falklands War</p>	<p>1974 <i>Fleshweathercock and Other Poems</i></p> <p>1974–7 Attends Liverpool University</p> <p>1982 <i>Fifth Last Song; Take My Husband</i> (play); awarded C. Day Lewis Fellowship</p>	<p>1974 Shere Hite, <i>Sexual Honesty: By Women for Women</i>; Anne Sexton dies</p> <p>1978 Adrienne Rich, <i>The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977</i>; Anne Sexton, <i>Words for Dr Y</i>; Stevie Smith, <i>Selected Poems</i></p> <p>1979 Angela Carter, <i>The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories</i></p> <p>1980 Elaine Feinstein, <i>The Feast of Eurydice</i>; Frances Horovitz, <i>Water over Stone</i></p> <p>1981 Liz Lochhead, <i>The Grimm Sisters</i>; Sylvia Plath, <i>Collected Poems</i></p>

World events	Carol Ann Duffy's life	Literary events
<p>1984 Miners' strike; IRA bomb at Conservative Party Conference, Brighton; Indira Gandhi, Indian prime minister, assassinated</p> <p>1986 Accident at Chernobyl nuclear power station, Ukraine</p> <p>1987 International stock market crash known as Black Monday</p> <p>1989 Berlin Wall dismantled; Tiananmen Square protests and killings in China</p> <p>1990 Demonstrations against poll tax; Margaret Thatcher resigns; John Major becomes prime minister</p>	<p>1983 'Whoever She Was' wins National Poetry Competition</p> <p>1984 <i>Cavern of Dreams</i> (play); wins Eric Gregory Award</p> <p>1985 <i>Standing Female Nude</i></p> <p>1986 <i>Thrown Voices; Little Women, Big Boys</i> (play); <i>Loss</i> (radio play); wins Scottish Arts Council Book Award for <i>Standing Female Nude</i></p> <p>1987 <i>Selling Manhattan</i></p> <p>1988 Somerset Maugham Award for <i>Selling Manhattan</i></p> <p>1989 Dylan Thomas Award</p> <p>1990 <i>The Other Country</i> published and wins Scottish Arts Council Book Award</p>	<p>1983 Grace Nichols, <i>I Is a Long Memored Woman</i>; Carol Rumens, <i>Star Whisper</i>; William Golding wins Nobel Prize for Literature</p> <p>1984 Ted Hughes becomes Poet Laureate</p> <p>1985 Gillian Clarke, <i>Selected Poems</i></p> <p>1986 Wendy Cope, <i>Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis</i>; Michèle Roberts, <i>The Mirror of the Mother: Selected Poems 1975–1985</i>; Simone de Beauvoir dies; Charles Causley receives CBE</p>