Mrs Aesop

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker, Mrs. Aesop, begins her monologue by bluntly expressing how she finds her husband so boring that he'd make Purgatory even worse than it already is. Aesop is a little man who doesn't make a good first impression, so to get people to like him, he tries to impress them. After he recites a famous aphorism to his wife about dead men telling no tales (meaning the dead can't give away anyone's secrets), Mrs. Aesop makes fun of him by twisting the language of his aphorism about how a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush into an insult: the bird in his hand pooped on him, and the two in the bush were worthless. He's utterly tiresome, she says.

Mrs. Aesop hates going anywhere with her husband. He's slow, taking his sweet time to look around before stepping outside their property. He combs the hedges in search of animals to describe like humans (i.e., a shy mouse and a sly fox) and make up stories about, even imagining that common animals like crows and donkeys must want to be like more majestic animals like eagles and lions.

Mrs. Aesop tells a story about one walk with her husband she particularly hated. They walked past a sleeping hare in a ditch—of course, Aesop had to stop and write a note about it—and, later in their walk, they came upon someone's pet tortoise. While she compared the tortoise's glacial speed to how slow their marriage feels, Aesop used the moment to quote the moral from one of his most famous fables: slow and steady wins the race. Mrs. Aesop insults him.

In her frustration, Mrs. Aesop asks a series of rhetorical questions alluding to details in Aesop's tedious tales. For example, what race was he talking about in "The Tortoise and the Hare"? What sour grapes was he talking about in "The Fox and the Grapes"? She also alludes to the phrase "you can't make a silk purse out of sow's ear" and to the stories "The Dog in the Manger" and "The Fisherman and the Little Fish," questioning the existence of any purse, pig, dog, or fish. Aesop's stories are so boring that she nearly falls asleep when he tells them. She thinks Aesop just tells the stories for the sake of telling them. She mockingly quotes him comparing how actions are louder than words, which reminds her of their sex life.

Aesop is devilishly bad at sex. One night, Mrs. Aesop says that she made up her own fable to make fun of her husband, specifically targeting his sexual impotence. Her heart, she says, has grown blacker than the pot in the famous idiom about "the pot calling the kettle black," which she proves by using a double entendre to threaten to chop off his penis to make herself feel better. Having finally silenced her husband, Mrs. Aesop gleefully claims the last laugh.

THEMES

THE TEDIUM OF MORALIZING

"Mrs. Aesop" is a dramatic monologue from the point of view of the wife of Aesop, an ancient Greek storyteller famous for his fables (stories that teaches a moral lesson). While Aesop is traditionally considered a very wise figure, his wife describes him as a boring, patronizing man whose incessant moralizing has ruined their marriage. Instead of making someone a better person, the poem thus suggests, relentless moralizing can distract from actual *morality*—and drive people away in the process.

Mrs. Aesop sees her husband as a smug, tedious bore because of his need to make a moral out of everything. He's consistently distracted, more interested in finding animals to put in his stories and making up pithy lessons than in spending quality time with his wife.

When Aesop sees a tortoise and a hare, for example, he says, "Slow but certain, Mrs Aesop, / wins the race." Mrs. Aesop, meanwhile, compares the tortoise to their relationship: "slow as marriage." The implication is that Aesop's moralizing has made him utterly oblivious to the feelings of those around him, including his wife's immense resentment.

Indeed, Aesop is distant from and formal with his wife. Instead of using her first name or a pet name, he refers to her only as "Mrs. Aesop." The only time he even speaks to her in the poem is to patronizingly quote his own moral lessons at her—hardly a romantic husband!

And despite spending all his time moralizing, there's nothing in the poem to suggest that Aesop is actually more "moral" than anyone else. On the contrary, Mrs. Aesop declares that the real purpose of Aesop's stories is the stories themselves rather than living the good life his fables supposedly teach. Even *he* doesn't even live by the morals he celebrates. He says, "Action, Mrs. Aesop, speaks louder than words," yet seems to do nothing but talk throughout the entire poem; there's never an indication that he's taking any "actions" to improve his own life or their marriage!

Aesop, in this poem, is thus unable to see the irony inherent in who he is: a man who tells fables about how to live a good, moral life, whose storytelling has destroyed his relationship with his wife.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

FRAGILE MASCULINITY AND PRIDE

In Duffy's poem, the wife of the famous storyteller Aesop describes her husband not as a wise fable-master but as a man who is deeply insecure in his masculinity. Aesop overcompensates for his physical insecurities by developing a sense of moral superiority that his wife sees through even as he patronizingly tosses lesson after lesson in her face. In this way, the poem considers the fragility of the male ego: behind some men's desire for fame and authority, the poem implies, is nothing more than wounded pride.

The poem quickly establishes that Aesop is not a traditionally "manly" man. Mrs. Aesop describes her husband as "Small," boring, and sexually impotent. He "didn't prepossess," meaning he didn't make a good impression on first meeting people. Thus, "he tried to impress" with his fables; lacking a conventionally masculine presence, he decided to act as though wiser and more moral than everyone around him.

Ironically, some of his fables are about animals who want to be more powerful than they are supposed to be, but Aesop is too proud to apply that lesson to himself. Instead, he overcompensates without considering how his behavior affects those closest to him—like his wife. Indeed, as his wife, Mrs. Aesop is forced to bear the brunt of Aesop's wounded pride. Aesop, focused on showcasing his moral authority, shows no real interest in her. He only talks to her to condescendingly tell her the morals of his stories, and even then he doesn't notice how she can "barely keep awake."

Unfortunately for Aesop, his overcompensation ultimately backfires when Mrs. Aesop twists his morality tales in order to emasculate him further. Fed up, Mrs. Aesop tears apart both his insecurity and his carefully constructed moral authority at the same time: "I gave him a fable one night / about a little cock that wouldn't crow," she says, going on to threaten to "cut off your tail." She's viciously (and, depending on how much sympathy the reader has for her at this point, quite cruelly) mocking his sexual impotence and threatening to cut off his penis. Aesop, whose identity is based on his stories, is ultimately silenced: "That shut him up," says his wife. The normally verbose Aesop ends the poem with nothing to say.

In suggesting that Aesop's famous morality tales are actually the result of his bruised ego, his wife ultimately robs those tales of some of their power. It's also worth remembering the poem's context: "Mrs. Aesop" appears in Duffy's book *The World's* Wife, a collection featuring poems told from the forgotten (or imagined) female counterparts of famous male figures. In granting Mrs. Aesop a (decidedly scathing) voice, the poem also cheekily pokes holes in the unquestioned authority granted so many men from history and myth.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 14-15
- Lines 17-25

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

By Christ, he ... bore for Purgatory.

The title of the poem tells readers that the speaker is Mrs. Aesop, the wife of the ancient Greek storyteller famous for his fables. Aesop, a legendary figure who supposedly lived over 2,500 years ago, is one of the most influential and loved storytellers in history. However, Mrs. Aesop quickly makes clear that she has some major problems with her husband, and her use of contemporary and conversational language provides the first clue that Duffy is using these characters to explore modern themes of marriage, morality, and storytelling.

The poem itself begins in media res, Latin for "in the middle of things," as it expects the reader to understand through context who the "he" in the first line is. This makes it feel almost as if the reader is stepping into the middle of a conversation, with Mrs. Aesop describing to an unknown but trusted listener how her highly-respected husband is actually a total bore. By delivering an unexpected opinion in such an inviting way, the poem beckons the reader to lean in closer, to read on as if a friend is telling them a secret.

The poem opens with Mrs. Aesop making fun of her husband, using colloquial, everyday language to describe how she finds Aesop to be extremely boring. "By Christ," she says, using lightly blasphemous language that establishes her as a cheeky, funny character who is unafraid to speak her mind.

She continues by saying, "he could bore for Purgatory," invoking the notorious place in the Catholic tradition where the souls of the dead go to make up for their sins. By mentioning Purgatory, Mrs. Aesop uses hyperbole to stress how their marriage seems like an endlessly boring place with no end in sight.

While the poem is written in free verse, without a regular meter or rhyme scheme, the first sentence creatively plays with rhythm and sound, using stresses and assonance to show how Mrs. Aesop will continue to use sonic devices to make fun of her husband.

The poem begins with a foot called a spondee, the two stressed syllables in "By Christ," which also share the same long /i/ sound, immediately communicating the sharp, frustrated tone Mrs. Aesop takes when describing Aesop. By repeating the long /or/ sounds in "bore" and "Purgatory," the poem stresses the sound of "boring," cementing for the reader exactly the problem that has come between Mrs. Aesop and her husband.

LINES 1-5

He was small, ...
... the bush. Tedious.

The poem continues by saying that Aesop isn't just boring, but also that he is physically small and doesn't make a good first impression: "He was small, / didn't prepossess":

- Note the lack of any conjunction between "small" and "didn't"—this is an example of asyndeton, which further contributes to Mrs. Aesop's conversational voice.
- The ancient Greek Aesop was said to be small and shockingly ugly, so by saying he "didn't prepossess," Mrs. Aesop might be alluding to this.

Next, Mrs. Aesop claims that, as a result of his small size, "he tried to impress." Aesop's small stature and inability to make a good first impression (perhaps due to his looks or his lack of masculine sexual power) is a problem for him, so he attempts to make up for this insecurity by inventing fables and pithy, moral aphorisms.

The poem illustrates this through a direct quote: "*Dead men, / Mrs. Aesop*, he'd say, *tell no tales*." This is a famous saying that means the dead can't spill any secrets. It's not actually attributed to Aesop, but that's not the point here; instead, the poem is illustrating how Aesop speaks to his wife:

- Notably, he refers to her very formally, calling her "Mrs. Aesop" instead of her name or a loving pet name. He also isn't asking her a question, expressing love, or even engaging in small talk—when he talks to her, all he does is quote himself!
- The specific saying here might have a deeper resonance as well, given that Aesop apparently does nothing *but* tell tales. His identity is *defined* by his ability to tell tales; without this, he seems to say, he might as well be dead, with no thought to his relationship or life *outside* of storytelling.

The internal rhyme of "prepossess" and "impress" strengthens the causal relationship between Aesop's insecurity and how he compensates through storytelling. The assonance of the short /eh/ sound in "Dead," "men," and "tell," then echoes this rhyme.

Mrs. Aesop, of course, isn't a big fan of any of this. "Well let me tell you now," she says, inserting her own voice over that of the famous storyteller. In doing so, she pointedly extends the short /eh/ sound Aesop just used, rhyming "tell" and "Well" in what amounts to a threat to expose how she truly feels about her husband.

She goes on to mock him by making her first allusion to one of Aesop's own fables, "The Hawk and the Nightingale":

- The famous moral of this story is "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," meaning it's better to hang onto what you've got than to risk it all in pursuit of something more.
- Misquoting this moral, Mrs. Aesop says that "the bird in his hand shat on his sleeve." This vulgar image undercuts the loftiness of Aesop's tale, making him seem foolish rather than wise.
- She continues by mentioning "the two [birds] worth less in the bush," again mocking his stories by implying that they're totally useless.

She finishes her thought with a one-word sentence that sums up the image of her husband she built in the stanza: "Tedious." Coming after a nearly three-line sentence, this single word hits like a slap in the face. "Tedious" is also a slant rhyme with "prepossess" and "impress," reminding the reader of Mrs. Aesop's argument for why Aesop is the way he is, and just how much she has come to hate it.

LINES 6-10

Going out was ...
... to be lions.

The second stanza of the poem expands on Mrs. Aesop's claims that her husband is boring, providing specific examples that show how all he does is look for animals to make up fables about.

She sets the scene by saying that "Going out was worst," notifying the reader that what will follow is a series of horrible experiences that happen outside the couple's home:

- She describes how when they'd go for walks, before Aesop would even get past their gate, he'd stop to "look, then leap." This nods to the famous idiom "look before you leap," subverting its message of caution by using it to illustrate how frustrating Aesop is.
- When they're finally on their walk, Aesop constantly "scour[s]" the countryside for animals, which he anthropomorphizes by assigning them human characteristics: there's a "shy mouse," a "sly fox," a "swallow / that couldn't make the summer."
- Once he sees an animal, he begins to construct the moral lens that he uses for his fables. He sees a jackdaw and says that it "envied the eagle," and donkeys, of course, "prefer to be lions."

On their own, the examples that Mrs. Aesop gives in this stanza don't necessarily feel all that horrible. However, because she introduces the scene by saying it "was worst," the reader knows to read what Aesop does in a negative light.

Importantly, each example that Mrs. Aesop gives is an allusion to one of Aesop's fables:

- The way he looks before he leaps comes from "The Fox and the Goat";
- The shy mouse appears in "The Lion and the Mouse";
- A sly fox tricks a crow out of a meal in "The Fox and the Crow";
- The particular swallow is a reference to "The Spendthrift and the Swallow";
- The jackdaw that envies the eagle is, unsurprisingly, from "The Jackdaw and the Eagle";
- And the donkeys who want to be lions appear in "The Donkey in the Lion's Skin."

Thus, for Mrs. Aesop, the experience of "Going out" being "worst" is inherently tied up to Aesop's incessant drive to make a moral out of everything he sees. She sees this as boring, and because it's all Aesop does, that boredom is inescapable.

Notably, the final two fables Mrs. Aesop alludes to are about small, unimpressive animals that desire to become big and powerful. Mrs. Aesop is slyly pointing out that her husband is the same, and her derisive tone especially shines through when she inserts sneering asides like "according to him."

These lines also play on how many moral sayings, like aphorisms, use sonic devices like rhyme and alliteration to make them easier to remember. While Aesop would say "look before you leap," Mrs. Aesop says the experience "was worst," effectively using Aesop's own tools to make fun of him. The poem uses internal rhyme *and* alliteration in lines 7-8 with "shy," "sly," and "sky," alliteration in lines 8-9 with "swallow" and "summer," and assonance in line 10 with "envied the eagle."

When read as Mrs. Aesop would intend, these lines take on a mocking tone; she doesn't even need to say how much she hates these phrases for the reader to know she hates them.

LINES 11-15

On one appalling ...
... . Asshole.

In the third stanza, Mrs. Aesop recalls a particular evening walk with her husband that was so bad that she describes it as "appalling."

They walk past "an old hare / snoozing in a ditch" and Aesop pauses to make a note of it. Having set up Mrs. Aesop's opinions on her husband's stories about animals in the previous stanza, she clearly feels contempt for him at this moment, as it's just another example of his tendency to look for animals to invent fables about.

After he's made his note and they've walked another mile, they come upon a tortoise walking on the road. Mrs. Aesop thinks it is unremarkable, just somebody's pet that has gotten loose, and she uses the turtle in a simile, calling it "slow as marriage."

Aesop, however, sees it differently. Connecting the sleeping hare with the crawling turtle, Aesop has his second quoted sentence in the poem: "*Slow / but certain, Mrs. Aesop, wins the race*." This is, of course, an allusion to "The Tortoise and the Hare," arguably one of Aesop's most famous fables.

The difference between the two spouses couldn't be clearer: Aesop sees slowness as a virtue that can lead to success, while his wife sees slowness as utterly, mind-numbingly boring. Unfortunately for Aesop, she also links slowness and boringness to the failures in their marriage.

Note how Aesop uses the moment to condescend to Mrs. Aesop, yet again referring to her in awkward formality and talking as if only he knows what's moral and good. Mrs. Aesop doesn't just see him as boring—the way he ignores her and condescends to her makes him a jerk. She says so, ending the stanza with another colloquialism in the form of a one-word insult: "Asshole."

Here, the stanza's structure (three sentences of shortening lengths and quickening rhythm) and use of assonance has the effect of building up to Mrs. Aesop's insult, almost as if building up to a punchline:

- After introducing the topic of the stanza, the first sentence sprawls across four lines, broken into multiple clauses that are interrupted by caesura after caesura. This breaks the rhythm of the lines and causes the poem to feel like it's starting and stopping over and over again, reflecting Mrs. Aesop's frustrating experience with Aesop as he constantly stops to look at animals on their walks.
- The long /o/ sound also repeats six times, in "stroll," "old," "note," "tortoise," "slow," and "road," recalling its use in the poem's opening line to stress how Aesop could "bore for Purgatory."

When Aesop talks, his speech is markedly different; he speaks metrically, a series of four trochees (poetic units consisting of a stressed beat followed by an unstressed beat, DUM-da):

slow but | certain, | Missus | Aesop, | wins the race."

This mimics the simple rhythm of a children's rhyme—when this is the only way Aesop speaks to his wife, it's easy to see why she's so angry.

Mrs. Aesop's response couldn't be more different; her final word is a spondee made up of two stressed syllables, a one-two punch that cuts against Aesop's plodding nature: "Ass-hole." Her insult also contains the long /o/ sound, nearly rhyming with the "*Slow*" that ends the previous line. In this way, the profanity acts like a culmination of the sounds in the stanza, even while shocking with its blunt, cruel honesty.

LINES 16-19

What race? What ...
... moral of itself.

Aesop's invention of a race between the hare and the tortoise they happened to pass by on the road leads to Mrs. Aesop posing a rhetorical question: "What race?"

She doesn't expect an answer, but is instead making a point—there never was a race between the two animals, and Aesop's insistence on imagining one and making a moral lesson out of it has led her to a state of frustration. Of course, he does this all the time, so she follows up her first question with five more, each alluding to the premise of another one of Aesop's fables (or to a generally famous aphorism): "What sour grapes? What silk purse, / sow's ear, dog in a manger, what big fish?"

The fables being referenced here are:

- "The Fox and the Grapes"
- "The Dog in the Manger"
- "The Fisherman and the Little Fish"

The sow's ear line comes from the saying "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," which is often attributed to Aesop but was actually coined by a 16th-century English satirist. The stories in question don't matter all that much, however; the point is how much they annoy Mrs. Aesop.

Mrs. Aesop asks her first two questions in complete sentences, and even uses assonance to repeat the long /ay/ sound in "race" and "grapes." But as she continues, her pace quickens. The poem uses anaphora to repeat the word "What," making the pile of questions feel repetitious and overwhelming. The questions come fast, using many accented single-syllable words in a row, like "What silk purse" and "what big fish," which communicate an increasingly aggressive tone. In line 17, the grammatical structure breaks down completely, matching the frenetic speed of Mrs. Aesop's anger.

At the end of her questions, the poem slows down again, almost as if Mrs. Aesop is regaining her composure. She continues, "Some days," when Aesop tells a story, it's so boring she "could barely keep awake as the story droned on / towards the moral of itself."

Here, Mrs. Aesop reveals that Aesop's fables, which are generally thought to be for teaching moral lessons to others, are nothing of the sort to Aesop. To him, the purpose of the story is "the moral of itself"—that is to say, he comes up with his stories simply because he likes to tell them. In fact, his stories are such a central part of his identity that he doesn't even tell them; they "drone" towards themselves, like brainless insects or thoughtless machines.

LINES 19-21

...
... was diabolical.

Since Aesop only really exists to tell his stories, he only talks to quote his own aphorisms. The poem continues with its third example of this, as Mrs. Aesop quotes him saying, "*Action, Mrs. A., speaks louder / than words.*"

This is the first—and only—time he calls her something other than "Mrs. Aesop," though he is still just talking to condescend to her by quoting yet another moral from one of his fables.

Aesop's thoughts on "action"—which are pretty rich coming from a man who mostly talks—lead Mrs. Aesop into the climactic moment of the poem. "And that's another thing," she says, reminded of what's really been on her mind by his last quote. She continues, "the sex // was diabolical." This is the only moment in the poem where a stanza ends with an enjambment, which makes "the sex" command extra attention as it sits alone at the end of the line.

Coming after Aesop's stuffy moralizing, this return to Mrs. Aesop's shameless use of colloquial language is both shocking and funny. The sudden introduction of sex into a poem about what seemed like a remarkably sexless relationship feels as if it comes out of nowhere.

However, her use of "diabolical," which means "devilishly bad," recalls the very beginning of the poem; if Aesop is as boring as Purgatory, having sex with him is as bad as being in Hell! Here, one of the central ironies of the poem comes to a head: Aesop expresses his moral belief that actions are more powerful than words, but his actual ability to act sexually is greatly lacking.

LINES 21-25

I gave him ...
... laughed last, longest.

Having established the sexual problems that lie at the heart of their failing marriage, Mrs. Aesop continues by saying, "I gave him a fable one night." She's moving on from using Aesop's *own* fables to make fun of him to appropriating the creative act of storytelling itself. She doesn't actually make up a fable of her own but rather takes existing idioms and twists them to threaten Aesop's manhood.

She begins by mentioning a "little cock that wouldn't crow," a phrase that sounds like a children's rhyme due to the alliteration of "cock" and "crow." She starts her "fable" here to play with the double meaning of "cock," a double entendre that describes a rooster that can't make noise and, well, a penis that can't become erect, heavily implying that Aesop is sexually impotent.

After sexually humiliating her husband, she physically threatens him, comparing herself to "a razor-sharp axe," which in proximity to a mention of his penis would have Aesop shaking in his boots. As if to prove she's capable of using it, she declares she has "a heart blacker than the pot that called the kettle," twisting a common idiom about hypocrisy ("the pot calling the

kettle black") to insist she's capable of exacting her revenge.

The final idiom she invokes, "cutting off one's nose to spite one's face," normally describes an unnecessarily self-destructive reaction to a problem. However, she again twists it to scare Aesop, threating to "*cut off your tail*," another word that stands in for penis, "*to save my face*."

The violence threatened here is shocking, but the way the poem establishes her voice as colloquial and unafraid to joke and use hyperbole means the reader doesn't have to take it seriously. Her threatened emasculation of her husband is more rhetorical than physical, which gets at a central theme of the poem: the way Aesop overcompensates for being insecure in his masculinity—by developing a sense of moral superiority over others—ironically leads to his moral principles being used to emasculate him even further.

In the last line of the poem, Mrs. Aesop finally gets what she wants: for Aesop to be quiet. "That shut him up," she says, putting a stop to Aesop's incessant holier-than-thou moralizing. The poem closes by saying "I laughed last, longest," a reference to a popular idiom, the reader is most likely laughing along with her.

Within this uproarious passage, the poem continues to pay close attention to the sounds and rhythms that propel it forward. The recurring assonance of the long /ay/ comes to a crescendo here, in "gave," "fable," "razor-sharp," "tail," finishing with the end-stopped penultimate phrase, "save my face." This sonically mirrors how Mrs. Aesop ends the poem on top, as she is also now the Aesop who gets to define their family story.

Additionally, ending the poem with the highly alliterative "I laughed last, longest" not only gives a feeling of musical finality to the poem but also shows Mrs. Aesop's comfort with continuing to use Aesop's favorite type of language to express her newfound freedom.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"Mrs. Aesop" is chock full of allusions. The first—and most important—allusion is in the title itself, "Mrs. Aesop," which alludes to Aesop, an ancient Greek storyteller famous for his fables:

- While not much is known about Aesop, including whether he ever really existed, the ancient stories do say that he was small and ugly, which Mrs. Aesop notes in the poem.
- Whether he was real or not, many fables have been attributed to Aesop. The poem alludes to some of his most famous fables, including "The Lion and the Mouse," "The Tortoise and the Hare," "The Donkey in Lion's Skin," "The Dog in the Manger," "The Fox and the Grapes," and more.
- Duffy doesn't include these many allusions to Aesop's fables to celebrate the famous storyteller. Since Mrs. Aesop sees her husband as a condescending, moralistic bore, she alludes to his own fables to critique, make fun of, and ultimately emasculate him.

One way the poem uses allusion to critique Aesop is through direct quotes. In lines 2-3 ("*Dead men, Mrs Aesop*, he'd say, *tell no tales*"), 14-15 ("*Slow / but certain, Mrs Aesop, wins the race*"), and 19-20 ("*Action, Mrs A., speaks louder / than words*") the poem quotes Aesop directly reciting the morals to some of his stories, after which Mrs. Aesop immediately says something degrading about him.

For example, after Aesop says, "Action, Mrs A., speaks louder / than words," Mrs. Aesop pivots to her most biting critique of her husband: their sex life sucks. The effect is simple: direct allusion to a fable is directly correlated with anti-Aesop feeling.

Another way the poem uses allusion is by referencing components of one of Aesop's fables. In the second stanza, Mrs. Aesop mentions a "shy mouse [...] a sly fox [...] one particular swallow / that couldn't make a summer." Each of these alludes to a specific fable ("The Lion and the Mouse," "The Fox and the Crow," and "The Swallow and the Crow" respectively), but doesn't expand to include other parts of the fable. By excluding the morals those animals correspond to, the poem shows how Mrs. Aesop really just doesn't care about the fables in the first place.

The final and most cutting way Mrs. Aesop alludes to her husband's fables is to use the language of fables in a way that makes fun of her husband. "The bird in his hand shat on his sleeve," she says, disrupting the moral of the fable "The Hawk and the Nightingale" ("a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush") to disrespect Aesop, only to continue by calling the birds from the fable "worth less" anyway.

In the final stanza, Mrs. Aesop bitingly twists other well-known idioms, including "the pot calling the kettle black" and "cutting off one's nose to spite one's face," to directly threaten his masculinity.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 16-17

- Lines 19-20
- Line 23
- Lines 24-24
- Line 25

IRONY

At the heart of the poem is the irony that Aesop's identity is built on telling stories about how to live a good, moral life, but all this constant moralizing has destroyed his marriage. Mrs. Aesop, with her characteristic bluntness, cements this irony at the very start of the poem by saying that Aesop "could bore for Purgatory." That one of the world's most famous storytellers is nearly boring his wife into the afterlife is ironic indeed!

The poem develops this central dramatic irony by contrasting Aesop's values with his wife's feelings. Aesop constantly quotes his own morals but is unable to see how those principles, when applied back to himself, make him look like a loser to his wife. "Dead men [...] tell no tales," he says, unaware that his *silence* is exactly what his wife wants. "Slow / but certain [...] wins the race," he says, unaware that his slow pace has caused him to lose his wife—she even calls him an "Asshole!" He infuriates her when he says that "Action [...] speaks louder / than words," not realizing that his preference to speak instead of act is what ultimately drives his wife to "shut him up."

The sum effect of all this irony is that when Mrs. Aesop silences her husband and literally claims the last laugh at the poem's end, the reader knows she's earned it. Additionally, because irony is often used for comedic purposes, the reader is most likely laughing along with her.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "By Christ, he could bore for Purgatory."
- **Lines 2-3:** "Dead men, / Mrs Aesop / , he'd say, / tell no tales / ."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Slow / but certain, Mrs Aesop, wins the race / ."
- **Lines 19-20:** "Action, Mrs A., speaks louder / than words / ."

COLLOQUIALISM

As a dramatic monologue, the whole poem is written in Mrs. Aesop's voice. To contrast her with her patronizing husband, Mrs. Aesop uses colloquialisms and conversational language to show that she is a funny character, unafraid to use everyday language to express contempt for her husband's stuffy fables.

One major way the poem uses colloquialisms is in Mrs. Aesop's humorous use of swear words to describe both her husband and his stories. The poem begins with a blasphemous profanity ("By Christ"), which makes the poem feel almost as if it has begun mid-conversation. She describes how "The bird in his hand shat on his sleeve," interrupting the familiar aphorism—which is itself a colloquialism—with a comic vulgarity.

Later in the poem, after he ponderously quotes another boring moral aphorism at her, she tears him down with a simple insult: "Asshole." Indeed, in the poem's climactic moment, she even slips in a comic vulgarity as a double entendre. "I gave him a fable one night / about a little cock that wouldn't crow," she says, playing on the standard use of "cock," or rooster, in Aesop's fables to cover up her colloquial use of "little cock" to describe her husband's small penis.

A few other poetic devices contribute to the colloquial tone of the poem. When Mrs. Aesop asks, "**What** race? **What** sour grapes? **What** silk purse, / sow's ear, dog in a manger, **what** big fish?" the poem uses anaphora and asyndeton to show Mrs. Aesop getting caught up in her frustration, just as anyone would when expressing their resentments to a friend.

And as the poem progresses, the lines become increasingly enjambed, enforcing the feeling of being swept up in Mrs. Aesop's tale. Take lines 17-20:

> [...] Some **days**
> I could barely keep awake as the story droned **on**
> **towards** the moral of itself. *Action, Mrs A., speaks*
> ***louder***
> ***than*** *words*. And that's another thing, the **sex**

This culminates in the enjambment between the penultimate and the final stanzas: "the sex // was diabolical."

Mrs. Aesop's consistent colloquial voice makes her insult absolutely destructive, and because the reader is encouraged through the use of colloquialism to view Mrs. Aesop as a friend, they're inclined to agree with her.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Aesop's fables are made-up stories, often about personified animals in unlikely scenarios. While their fictional quality is broadly accepted by the general public, the poem uses rhetorical questions to show Mrs. Aesop's frustration with her husband's propensity for mythmaking.

After randomly seeing two animals, a tortoise and a hare, a mile apart from each other on the road, Aesop comes up with his most famous moral tale: "The Tortoise and the Hare." Mrs. Aesop, who has had enough of his fictionalizing, asks,

> What race? What sour grapes? What silk purse,
> sow's ear, dog in a manger, what big fish?

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For Mrs. Aesop, there is no race, just two random animals her annoying husband insists on making a story about.

She goes further, asking the same rhetorical question about the plots of many of his stories. She knows none of them are real, and wants Aesop to realize that as well. Unfortunately, because rhetorical questions are not meant to be answered, their use in the poem also shows that there is likely no chance for reconciliation between the Aesops. They will continue to have different answers, and that is unlikely to ever change.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-17:** "What race? What sour grapes? What silk purse, / sow's ear, dog in a manger, what big fish?"

ALLITERATION

Much of the alliteration in this poem comes from its allusions to Aesop's fables, which each communicate a famous, often alliterative, aphorism. For example, in lines 2-3, Aesop says that "*Dead men* [...] *tell no tales*," which includes an alliteration of the /t/ sound. Aphorisms often use alliterations like this because it makes them easier to remember; see also "look, then leap," "Slow / but certain," etc.

At a few points, the poem also uses alliteration to add emphasis and intensity to Mrs. Aesop's own descriptions of her husband. In line 1, for example, the poem alliterates the /b/ sound in the first sentence, enforcing the notion of Aesop being boring: "By Christ, he could bore for Purgatory."

Perhaps most notable is the sharp alliteration of the /c/ sound in lines 22-24: the "cock that wouldn't crow," "pot that called the kettle," "*I'll cut off your tail*." The sound thus begins in seemingly standard aphorisms but becomes part of a direct, terrifying threat—one that relies on the same sounds of those aphorisms, again twisting Aesop's own linguistic tricks to mock him.

In the final line, the slippery /l/ alliteration of "laughed last, longest" (plus /ah/ assonance and /st/ consonance) ends the poem on a rousing note.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "By," "bore," "Purgatory"
- **Line 2:** "prepossess," "impress"
- **Line 3:** "tell," "tales"
- **Line 6:** "Going," "was worst," "gate," "look," "leap"
- **Line 7:** "scour," "fields"
- **Line 8:** "for," "sly," "fox," "sky," "swallow"
- **Line 9:** "summer"
- **Line 11:** "appalling," "passed"
- **Line 14:** "Slow"
- **Line 15:** "certain"
- **Line 16:** "sour," "silk"
- **Line 17:** "sow's"
- **Line 22:** "cock," "crow"
- **Line 23:** "kettle"
- **Line 24:** "cut"
- **Line 25:** "laughed last, longest"

ASSONANCE

While "Mrs. Aesop" doesn't have a set rhyme scheme, it does use assonance throughout. This gives parts of the poems a musical structure that matches its focus on fables and aphorisms, which often use devices like rhyme and alliteration to make them easier for children to remember. Rather than using fairytale-like end-rhymes, however, "Mrs. Aesop" uses assonance within lines and across stanzas, building a more complicated sonic structure that mirrors Mrs. Aesop's rejection of fables as a boring waste of time.

The poem starts with three quick examples of assonance in Mrs. Aesop's voice before her husband has a chance to speak: the long /i/ that repeats in "By Christ," the long /o/ (and /r/) in "bore for Purgatory," and a short /eh/ in "prepossess" and "impress." This draws the reader into her character, both establishing trust in her as a narrator and showing that the poem will use sound in a humorous way. After all, while Aesop is the famous storyteller, his wife uses the same skills to make fun of him!

As the poem progresses, it uses assonance to stress words in sentences that are thematically connected. For example, the short /eh/ in the second line continues through the first stanza, in "men," "tell," "Well," and "let," providing sonic consistency across the poem's introduction of Aesop as a tedious bore. When describing the animals Aesop looks for in the second stanza, the poem features four instances of a long /i/ sound: "shy," "sly," "sky," and "lion."

In the third stanza, as Mrs. Aesop describes a horrible walk with her husband, she repeats a long /o/ sound in almost every line: "stroll," "old," "note," "slow," and "road." Thus, when Mrs. Aesop uses the same long /o/ to insult her husband as an "Asshole," it's both expected, since it shares the same sound, and surprising, since she hadn't used that sound to swear before. The final two stanzas even contain ten uses of a long /ay/ sound, which subtly stresses the poem's main A: Aesop.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "By Christ," "bore for Purgatory"
- **Line 2:** "prepossess"
- **Lines 2-2:** "impress. / Dead men"
- **Line 3:** "tell," "Well let," "tell"
- **Line 4:** "that," "shat"
- **Line 5:** "less," "Tedious"
- **Line 7:** "shy"

- **Line 8:** "sly," "sky"
- **Line 10:** "envied," "eagle"
- **Line 11:** "On," "appalling," "stroll," "old"
- **Line 12:** "stopped," "note"
- **Line 14:** "slow"
- **Lines 14-14:** "road. / Slow"
- **Line 15:** "Asshole"
- **Line 16:** "race," "grapes"
- **Line 17:** "days"
- **Line 18:** "awake"
- **Line 19:** "towards," "moral"
- **Line 21:** "gave," "fable"
- **Line 22:** "razor," "axe"
- **Line 23:** "blacker," "pot," "called"
- **Line 24:** "save," "face"
- **Line 25:** "laughed last"

VOCABULARY

Purgatory (Line 1) - In Roman Catholic tradition, the place in the afterlife where souls of the dead go to atone for their sins before going to Heaven. While Heaven is a place of eternal joy, and Hell is a place of eternal suffering, Purgatory is temporary and, importantly, often portrayed as bland and boring, a waiting room for the afterlife. By invoking Purgatory, Mrs. Aesop is equating being married to Aesop to a state of ultimate boredom.

Prepossess (Lines 1-2) - To favorably impress beforehand. In the poem, it is used to say that Aesop didn't tend to make a good first impression, which is partly why he tries "to impress" people with his fables.

Hedgerow (Line 7) - A row of trees or bushes that form a fence or boundary. Since hedgerows are often associated with rural England, its use in the poem both provides imagery and establishes that the poem takes place in the English countryside rather than ancient Greece, where Aesop actually lived.

Jackdaw (Lines 9-10) - A small, black bird in the corvid family, which includes crows and ravens. Jackdaws are the smallest member of the corvid family and appear in many of Aesop's fables. The jackdaw in this poem is a reference to "The Eagle and the Jackdaw," a story about a jackdaw who tries—and fails—to be as strong as an eagle.

Appalling (Line 11) - Very bad; disgusting; horrible. In the poem, Mrs. Aesop uses it to humorously express her extreme dislike of walks with her husband.

Diabolical (Lines 20-21) - Horribly bad or unpleasant; as evil as the devil. The poem uses it to express how terrible Mrs. Aesop thinks their sex life is. Because of the word's dual meaning, it also calls back to the reference to the religious references in the first line—while being with Aesop is as boring as Purgatory, having sex with him is like being in Hell.

Cock (Line 22) - Rooster. Also, a vulgar slang term for penis. Since cocks show up in many of Aesop's fables, Mrs. Aesop uses its dual meanings to emasculate her husband by using the language of his stories to make fun of his small penis.

Tail (Lines 24-24) - While "tail" usually refers to a furry appendage that extends from an animal's hindquarters, here it is used as a slang term for penis. The poem is referencing the aphorism "to cut off your nose to spite your face," which refers to when a person harms someone else without realizing it will harm them as well. By changing "nose" to "tail" and "spite" to "save," Mrs. Aesop reverses the meaning of the saying, claiming that violently emasculating her husband will actually make her feel good.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mrs. Aesop" is made up of five quintains, or five-line stanzas. Like most of the poems in her collection *The World's Wife*, the poem is a dramatic monologue told in the voice of its titular character, which also makes it a persona poem. It is written in free verse, with no meter or rhyme scheme, which allows Mrs. Aesop's voice to mimic the natural, conversational patterns of a conversation with a friend.

Although it lacks a concrete rhyme scheme, the poem makes artful use of sonic devices like assonance and alliteration to give certain moments a storybook-like sound, matching the poem's exploration of children's stories and fables.

METER

Since "Mrs. Aesop" is written in free verse, it has no set meter. This allows Mrs. Aesop's voice to feel natural and conversational, mimicking the varying patterns and cadences of speech rather than the strict metrical rhythms of more formal poetry.

The way Mrs. Aesop jumps between stories about her husband, quotes (or misquotes) from his fables, and cutting, humorous insults makes the poem sound like Mrs. Aesop is an old friend unloading her sorrows upon the reader. The poem uses wildly varying rhythms to achieve this effect.

For example, listen to the way the third stanza uses the shifting rhythms of speech to ultimately land a punchline:

> On one appalling evening stroll, we passed an old hare
> snoozing in a ditch—he stopped and made a note—
> and then, about a mile further on, a tortoise, somebody's pet,

> creeping, slow as marriage, up the road. *Slow*
> *but certain, Mrs Aesop, wins the race*. Asshole.

Here, Mrs. Aesop tells a story in three sentences of vastly different lengths. First, she introduces the topic and provides the story's set-up in a sentence that sprawls across four lines, including multiple clauses, asides, and interruptions.

Next, she quotes her husband, who speaks with a slow, plodding rhythm across two lines that feel distinctly different from Mrs. Aesop's fast-paced voice. This is because, unlike Mrs. Aesop's free-verse voice, Aesop speaks metrically; "Slow but certain wins the race" is a series of three trochees (poetic feet with a stressed-unstressed beat pattern) followed by a single stressed syllable, making it a catalectic phrase that sounds like a children's rhyme:

> Slow but | certain | wins the | race

To fully illustrate just how differently the two characters speak, the stanza finishes with a single word insult made up of two stressed syllables (a spondee; "Ass-hole"), providing a sharp, adult response to Aesop's ponderous quotation.

RHYME SCHEME

While "Mrs. Aesop" doesn't have a steady rhyme scheme, it uses devices like assonance, internal rhyme, and slant rhyme to call attention to specific words and themes within the text.

For example, take a look at the very first stanza of the poem:

> By Christ, he could bore for Purgatory. He was small,
> didn't prepossess. So he tried to impress. *Dead men*,
> *Mrs Aesop*, he'd say, *tell no tales*. Well let me tell you
> now
> that the bird in his hand shat on his sleeve,
> never mind the two worth less in the bush. Tedious.

The use of assonance in "By Christ" quickly followed by the assonance/consonance in "bore for Purgatory" immediately show that Mrs. Aesop is skilled in using the type of language her husband employs in his famous fables. She continues in line 2 by rhyming "prepossess" and "impress," building a strong sonic anchor point for the poem's thematic exploration of Aesop's overcompensation for his lack of traditional masculinity.

The rest of the stanza uses the short /eh/ sound many more times: as assonance with "dead," "men," "let," and "never," and again as internal rhyme with "Well" and "tell." The fourth line rhymes "that" and "shat" to introduce Mrs. Aesop's propensity for swearing, an aspect of her character that introduces humor into the poem. The end of the stanza includes a callback to the rhyme in line 2 with the word "less", and finishes up by slant rhyming with the word "Tedious," reinforcing just how creative Mrs. Aesop is in her expression of boredom with her husband.

SPEAKER

As with every poem in Duffy's collection *The World's Wife*, the speaker of the poem is the titular character, Mrs. Aesop. Mrs. Aesop's husband is Aesop, an ancient Greek storyteller famous for his fables. Not much is known about Aesop, including whether or not he was actually a real person or if he was ever married, so it's clear that Duffy invented her for the poem.

While Aesop supposedly lived over 2,500 years ago, the way Mrs. Aesop speaks places her solidly in contemporary times. In this way, the poem uses her character to show how history's prioritization of men's stories over those of women has lasted for millennia.

Mrs. Aesop is a dynamic character with a sharp, funny voice, who wants the world to know that Aesop is a condescending husband, a terrible lover, and a boring moralist. She begins her monologue with characteristic bluntness, using blasphemy ("By Christ") to say that her famous husband is actually as boring as Purgatory. She continues to demean her husband for being small and insecure, and she expresses total disdain for his fables, which she finds boring. She's very witty, twisting the morals of his stories to show how absurd his obsession with fables is. Additionally, Mrs. Aesop is quite vulgar, completely comfortable using swear words and other colloquialisms in her tirade against Aesop. Finally, she's completely honest, not shying away from talking about her problems with their sex life.

Her unguarded voice and cutting, comedic tone make her both funny and, perhaps, sympathetic to the reader. When she finally silences Aesop and claims the last laugh, the reader might be laughing along with her.

SETTING

The poem's allusion to Aesop would theoretically place the poem in Greece in the late 500s BCE. However, the poem contains a number of clues that actually place the setting in more contemporary times, most likely somewhere in rural Britain.

The first clue that the poem isn't about ancient Greece comes in the first line, which begins by referencing Christ, who wouldn't be born for over 500 years after Aesop's death! It goes on to mention Purgatory, a Roman Catholic idea that wouldn't exist until over 1,000 years after the death of Christ. And the mention of hedgerows in line 7 ends up placing the poem much later, as hedgerows are a ubiquitous presence in rural England (where they mark property lines between various farms and other plots of land).

By placing these characters from ancient Greece somewhere in

recent England, the poem develops a feminist theme: the stories of women have been ignored for millennia in favor of those of famous men, and it's finally time to hear what the long-ignored women of history have to say.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is one of the most well-known and highly-acclaimed contemporary poets in the UK. Born in Scotland in 1955 to working-class parents, in 2009 she became the first woman and the first openly LGBTQ person to be appointed poet laureate of the United Kingdom. Her influences include modernist poets like T.S. Eliot, Romantic poets like John Keats and William Wordsworth, and, most relevantly, free verse poets like Sylvia Plath, whose exploration of women's interior lives would prove foundational to Duffy's own poetry.

"Mrs Aesop" was included in Duffy's famous 1999 book *The World's Wife*, a collection of poems all told from the point of view of the female counterparts of some of history and mythology's most famous men, including Mrs. Darwin, Mrs. Sisyphus, Medusa, and more. Duffy's poems offer a feminist retelling of history by giving voice to women who have long been ignored and silenced.

"Mrs Aesop," of course, is based on Aesop, a legendary figure who lived over 2,500 years ago in ancient Greece. His fables, which were originally spread by word of mouth, have since been printed and reprinted countless times in numerous languages. As such, Aesop is undoubtedly one of the most influential storytellers in history. By telling the story of Aesop's *wife*, who summarily calls Aesop a boring, impotent hypocrite, Duffy's poem critiques the entire canon of storytelling, implying that the teachings of even the most influential men can often be taken with a grain of salt.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The rise of Carol Ann Duffy's poetic career coincided with two major developments: the shift from second-wave to third-wave feminism and the age of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of the UK.

Having secured suffrage and other legal rights for women, second-wave feminism began in the '60s, demanding an end to the gender norms that expected women to solely be wives, mothers, and homemakers. One woman who expanded the possibilities for what women could be was Margaret Thatcher, who was elected the first female Prime Minister of the UK under the promise of libertarian economics and conservative social policies. Thatcher's 11-year tenure was marked by inflation, unemployment, poverty, and union struggles, and she was greatly disliked by the working-class communities where Duffy was raised.

Third-wave feminism began in the late '80s partly in response to the social conservatism Thatcher embodied, and sought to critique the patriarchal social norms that it saw both in society in general and second-wave feminism in particular. Responding to this tumultuous time, Duffy's poems give voice to the too-often forgotten women of history with her characteristic humor, imagination, and compassion.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Aesop's Fables — Read an illustrated selection of Aesop's Fables presented by the Library of Congress. (https://read.gov/aesop/index.html)
- Duffy on Sylvia Plath — Read an article by Duffy on how Sylvia Plath has influenced her. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/02/sylvia-plath-poems-chosen-carol-ann-duffy?fb=native)
- On Aesop — Learn more about Aesop's life, with illustrations from a rare 1687 manuscript. (http://cooper.library.illinois.edu/rbx/exhibitions/Aesop/aesop-life.html)
- On Fables — Learn more about fables as a genre, including how to write one of your own. (https://www.masterclass.com/articles/writing-101-what-is-a-fable-learn-about-the-4-central-characteristics-of-a-fable-and-4-famous-fable-examples)
- Duffy's Life and Work — Learn more about Duffy in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Anne Hathaway
- Before You Were Mine
- Circe
- Death of a Teacher
- Demeter
- Education For Leisure
- Eurydice
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- In Your Mind
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Darwin
- Mrs Lazarus
- Mrs Midas

- Mrs Sisyphus
- Originally
- Penelope
- Prayer
- Recognition
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- The Good Teachers
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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