Mrs Lazarus

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker, the wife of Lazarus, tells readers that she had mourned her husband's death. She'd sobbed for 24 hours straight, in fact; she'd raged in her grief, tearing her wedding outfit from her body, screaming, crying, and scraping her fingers at Lazarus's gravestone until they started to bleed. She gagged every time she said his name, seemingly unable to stomach the fact that he was dead.

When she finally went home, she tore the place up and fell asleep on a narrow cot meant for one. That's because she was a widow now—like a glove with no hand inside it, a single thigh bone laying in the dirt, cut in two. She gathered up Lazarus's clothes and shoved them into dark bags, then stumbled around in his shoes. Then she knotted one of his ties around her naked neck like a noose.

Looking in the mirror, she watched as a haggard, emaciated nun (her reflection) touched herself. She memorized the iconography of Jesus's crucifixion and saw her own sorrow reflected in each miserable depiction of Jesus's suffering. Still, as the months wore on, Lazarus began to fade from view. His presence grew smaller until he was no larger than an instant photograph, slowly disappearing.

Eventually, hearing his name no longer immediately conjured his face into her mind. Mrs. Lazarus found one of his hairs in a book, but that was the last one. She couldn't smell him around the house anymore. His money and property were divvied up according to his will. And throughout it all, his presence was fading from her life, eventually shrinking into the empty space within the circle of Mrs. Lazarus's gold wedding band.

And just like that, he wasn't there anymore. He became nothing but a story, just words. Meanwhile, Mrs. Lazarus was walking arm-in-arm with the local schoolteacher beside the hedges, feeling surprised at the firmness of his arm under his coat sleeve. She insists that she had remained true to Lazarus as long as she needed to—that she'd waited to move on until he'd faded into nothing more than a memory.

Having done this, she could stand at dusk in the field, the delicate air wrapping itself around her shoulders like a shawl. Her pain had finally stopped, and she was thus able to appreciate the way the moon looked against the night sky and the way a rabbit ran from the bushes. It was then that she saw a group of local men sprinting towards her and yelling.

They were followed by women, children, and yapping dogs. And that was when Mrs. Lazarus realized what was happening. It was clear in the crafty way the blacksmith was looking at her and in the piercing eyes of the woman who ran the local bar. She was thrust forward into the throng of people, with its sour stench. People stepped aside to let her through.

Lazarus was alive, looking horrified. Mrs. Lazarus could hear the sound of his deranged mother singing somewhere, and she inhaled his terrible smell. Her husband was standing there in the decaying cloth he was buried in, damp and rumpled from having been chewed up by death. He rasped out his name, the name of someone whose wife has been unfaithful, of someone who has been disowned by death and yet doesn't belong with the living.

THEMES

GRIEF, LETTING GO, AND MOVING ON

"Mrs. Lazarus" reimagines the biblical story of Lazarus, whom Jesus famously resurrected, from his wife's point of view. In the poem, Mrs. Lazarus grieves the loss of her husband intensely. But as soon as she's finally "healed" and started to move on with her life, Lazarus is raised from the dead. Mrs. Lazarus doesn't welcome his return; on the contrary, having struggled for so long to accept his passing, she's shocked and disturbed by this sudden intrusion onto her hard-won happiness. The poem implies that letting go and moving on is an essential part of healing—and, it follows, that the past should stay in the past.

The intensity of Mrs. Lazarus's mourning reflects the depth of her grief. She says she "howled, shrieked, [and] clawed" at Lazarus's grave until her "hands bled," and that she "retched / his name over and over again." It seems the mere thought of Lazarus being dead made his wife physically ill. She also says that she tied a rope around her "bare neck" and saw a haggard, skeletal "nun" starting back at her in the mirror. This imagery conveys her devotion to her grief as something darkly holy: she serves it as a nun serves God, and this has sapped her of her energy and vitality.

But as her husband's presence eventually fades, Mrs. Lazarus is able to heal from her loss. She says there came a time when his "name was no longer a certain spell / for his face" (i.e., it didn't make his face instantly pop up in her mind). Eventually, his "scent went from the house" and he transitioned into nothing more than "legend, language." Lazarus finally becomes just a "memory," and this is what allows Mrs. Lazarus to enjoy her life again—"to watch the edge of the moon occur to the sky," feeling present in the moment and able to appreciate the beauty of the world. Moving on, the poem implies, requires acceptance and letting go.

Lazarus's resurrection thus throws a wrench in things. The

dismay with which she describes the scene, noting his "stench" and his "rotting shroud," tells readers that isn't a joyous moment. On the contrary, she describes him as being "out of his time," meaning that he belongs to her *past*—he isn't supposed to be part of her present. She was able to heal only when her husband faded to a memory, but now he's there in the (rotting) flesh, again an unavoidable presence in her life.

Lazarus being brought to life may seem like a miracle to everyone else, but to Mrs. Lazarus (and seemingly to Lazarus himself), it has brought nothing but pain. His return has upended her life and the happiness she'd finally found. Healing, the poem suggests, is a one-way street: the only way to overcome grief is to leave the past firmly in the past.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29
- Lines 36-40

PATRIARCHY, FAITHFULNESS, AND BETRAYAL

On one level, "Mrs Lazarus" pushes readers to question whether it's a betrayal to find new love after losing a partner. But given that this poem appears in a collection devoted to exploring women's perspectives on famous moments from history and myth, it's also fair to interpret this question in a more explicitly feminist context. That is, the poem isn't just exploring the nature of betrayal *in general*, but also probing traditional expectations around *women's* grief, sexuality, and faithfulness.

The poem pushes readers to sympathize with its speaker, presenting her as someone who mourned her husband long enough and deserves a shot at happiness with a new man. Yet society, the poem implies, sees this as a betrayal that turns Lazarus into a "cuckold" (an outdated term for a man whose wife cheats on him). By making Lazarus's return something horrific and humiliating rather than joyful, the poem might be subtly critiquing the way stories have often celebrated grieving women for their endless devotion to their lost husbands. The idea that Mrs. Lazarus was supposed to place a dead man's needs above her own, the poem might suggest, is rooted in patriarchal ideas about feminine faithfulness and purity that deny women their full humanity.

Mrs. Lazarus's initial grief is extreme, to the point that it seems like allowing herself happiness would be insulting to her husband's memory. She says that she "wept for a night and a day" and "ripped" her wedding clothes from her "breast." Her life, for a time, revolved around Lazarus's absence. She was like a "nun," starved for touch and dedicating her body and soul to a man who was no longer there.

She remained "faithful / for as long as it took," implying that she believed it wasn't proper to seek new love until she had properly mourned Lazarus's death. Eventually, however, she did move on. This took so long that feeling "a man's strength under the sleeve of his coat" again came as a "shock"; she was chaste and true to the point that she'd forgotten what it felt like to touch a man.

Apparently, this wasn't enough. When Lazarus unexpectedly returns, Mrs. Lazarus's walking "arm on arm" with "the schoolteacher" makes her husband a "cuckold." This idea, combined with the fervor with which the crowd pushes her back to her newly-risen ex, suggests that in society's eyes she was somehow *wrong* to heal and is obligated to return to Lazarus—a proposition she finds, understandably, revolting.

The term "cuckold" is distinctly gendered and rests on the assumption that it's uniquely humiliating and emasculating for a man's wife to be unfaithful—to acknowledge her continued need for love and intimacy without him. The use of this term hints that the poem isn't just questioning what it means to be true to a lover, but also the ways patriarchy has circumscribed women's grief, healing, and ability to move on.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

I had grieved. ...
... again, dead, dead.

The poem picks up immediately after Lazarus's death, with his wife saying

> I had grieved. I had wept for a night and a day

Anaphora (the repetition of "I had") starts the poem off on an insistent note, making it feel as though Mrs. Lazarus is trying to convince readers that she had indeed mourned her husband thoroughly.

Mrs. Lazarus's immense grief is the first thing the reader learns about her, and she goes on to describe it in great detail. She wept and tore at her clothing (the "cloth" she was "married in," to be precise). She "howled" and "shrieked" with anguish. She "clawed" at Lazarus's tomb until her "hands bled." She "retched" (or dry heaved) "his name," suggesting that the very thought of his death made her physically ill.

Her mourning, these violent images make clear, wasn't perfunctory; it seemed to almost *consume* her. Just listen to the repetition in line 5:

his name over and over again, dead, dead.

The diacope of "over" emphasizes the relentless nature of her grief, while the epizeuxis of "dead" suggests that she couldn't quite wrap her mind around what happened. She seems to have been in shock over her husband's death.

The poem is written in free verse, so there's no meter or rhyme scheme. This allows the poem to feel more intimate and direct. Meanwhile, the use of asyndeton (the lack of coordinating conjunctions between clauses) gives the stanza a hurried, frantic feel. The actions come at the reader thick and fast, as though Mrs. Lazarus has no time to catch her breath.

Alliteration also contributes to the intensity of this opening stanza. The blunt /b/ sounds in "breasts," "burial," and "bled," for example, help to convey just how battered Mrs. Lazarus has been by this loss.

LINES 6-10

Gone home. Gutted ...
... my bare neck,

Mrs. Lazarus says that she had "Gone home" after Lazarus's death. Given that she just mentioned clawing at his "burial stones," she's probably talking about the time period shortly after his funeral.

She empties out their shared home, presumably because it would be too painful to continue living surrounded by evidence of her old life together. The guttural /g/ alliteration in "Gone" and "Gutted" evokes her devastation, as do the short, splintered sentences throughout this stanza. Note how there are no pronouns here; while "I went home and emptied the place out" would convey a similar meaning, it lacks the emotional punch of the poem's clipped phrasing.

Mrs. Lazarus goes on to say that she "Slept on a single cot." She's no longer in their shared marital bed, that "single" emphasizing her newfound solitude. She's now a "widow," a state she compares to being "one empty glove" or a "white femur / in the dust, half." In other words, her life doesn't really make sense anymore. She was one "half" of a whole; there is no "wife" without a "husband." Like a "glove" with no hand inside it or a single thigh bone laying in the dirt, she feels her existence suddenly lacks meaning.

Notice how the enjambment in lines 7-8 pushes the reader down the page without pause:

widow, one empty glove, white femur
in the dust, half. Stuffed dark suits
into black bags [...]

The poem's momentum in these lines again conveys the intensity and relentlessness of the speaker's grief.

Note, too, how the imagery of Mrs. Lazarus shoving her husband's "suits" into "black bags" is devastating while also being rather vague. That is, the word "Stuffed" implies that she can't stand being surrounded by her dead husband's things and just needs to get them out of her sight, but she doesn't specify whether these "bags" are going to be put in storage or donated or thrown in the trash. It doesn't seem to matter—the point is that Mrs. Lazarus needs to be rid of this painful evidence of her old life. And the blunt /b/ alliteration in "black bags" suggests the painful emotions behind Mrs. Lazarus's action.

She then goes on to say that she "shuffled in a dead man's shoes." On the one hand, this imagery depicts Mrs. Lazarus forlornly wearing her husband's shoes around the house as if she is trying to feel his presence again. On the other hand, it metaphorically suggests the crushing feeling of living in the shadow of her husband's death. Everything reminds her of him.

Muffled /sh/ alliteration in "shuffled" and "shoes" evokes the sound of her dragging her feet across the floor, too exhausted and sad, perhaps, to walk properly. She also says that she wore one of his "tie[s]" around her "bare neck" like a "noose[]." This suggests that she is longing for her husband and also that she is losing her will to live without him.

LINES 11-15

gaunt nun in ...
... a snapshot, going,

Mrs. Lazarus says that, after fastening one of her husband's "tie[s]" around her "neck," she stood in front of "the mirror," looking like a "gaunt nun." The word "gaunt" indicates the physical toll grief has taken on Mrs. Lazarus, while the word "nun" suggests how serious and chaste she is in her husband's absence.

She also says that her reflection is "touching herself," implying that Mrs. Lazarus is lonely and missing physical affection. Perhaps she is raising a hand to her face in disbelief at her haggard appearance; perhaps she is masturbating to the memory of her husband, trying to feel close to him again as she wears his "tie."

She goes on to say that she "learnt / the Stations of Bereavement." This refers to two different concepts at once:

- The five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance).
- The Stations of the Cross, which refers to the traditional images depicting Jesus's crucifixion.

In saying that she sees "the icon" of her own "face / in each bleak frame," Mrs. Lazarus suggests that she herself is experiencing the five stages of grief as well as the terrible suffering Jesus endured.

Yet, as the "months" wear on, Mrs. Lazarus finds that no amount of mourning can keep her dead husband from

disappearing from her life. His presence slowly "dwindl[es] / to the shrunk size of a snapshot." He is "going" away from her, and as he "shr[inks]" to a memory, so does her grief.

Diacope (the repetition of "going" in lines 14-16) emphasizes the increasing speed with which he becomes part of a past she can no longer touch.

LINES 16-20

going. Till his ...
... of my ring.

Mrs. Lazarus continues to describe the way her dead husband's presence slowly disappears from her life.

She says that at some point "his name was no longer a certain spell / for his face." In other words, hearing his name no longer instantly made his face pop up vividly in her mind.

Soon enough, she continues, "The last hair on his head / floated out from a book" and "His scent went from the house." In other words, his presence is fading from their home. Mrs. Lazarus undoubtedly still misses her husband, but she's no longer in the throes of despair. Finally, "The will was read." Mrs. Lazarus was ready to puts her husband's affairs to rest.

The metaphor in the next two lines conveys Lazarus's dwindling presence in his wife's life:

> [...] See, he was vanishing
> to the small zero held by the gold of my ring.

That "See" again makes the poem feel intimate: Mrs. Lazarus is addressing the reader directly, trying to get them to understand where she's coming from (and thus not to judge her in the next lines when she moves on). The language implies that Mrs. Lazarus has taken off her wedding ring; instead of being wrapped around her finger, it now "h[olds]" a "small zero"—empty air.

The poem continues to use lots of enjambment, propelling the reader forward. This mirrors the way time moves on, pulling Mrs. Lazarus away from her grief.

LINES 21-25

Then he was ...
... he was memory.

In the fifth stanza, Mrs. Lazarus says that her husband was finally "gone"—not just dead, but no longer a tangible presence in her life. Instead, he was only "legend, language." Notice how anaphora and /l/ alliteration add emphasis to line 21:

> Then he was gone. Then he was legend, language;

The repetition creates a feeling of inevitability and momentum, again suggesting the way that time fades Lazarus into nothing more than "legend, language." Alliteration emphasizes the relationship between these words: he's just a *story*, *words*.

In light of this, Mrs. Lazarus describes allowing someone new into her life. Note how diacope ("arm on the arm") highlights the fact that Mrs. Lazarus is no longer alone (i.e., it emphasizes that there's another "arm" in the picture):

> my arm on the arm of the schoolteacher [...]

Earlier in the poem, Mrs. Lazarus described herself as a "nun" who was "touching herself." She's been alone for so long that the feel of the "schoolteacher's" arm comes as a "shock." She'd forgotten the feel of a "man's strength under the sleeve of his coat."

The hissing /s/ alliteration ("schoolteacher," "strength," "sleeve") adds some intensity to these lines, hinting at the vividness of Mrs. Lazarus's experience. Everything feels sharp and new because she hasn't been with anyone since Lazarus's death; she "was faithful / for as long as it took."

Mrs. Lazarus gave herself entirely to the process of mourning her husband, but now that process is complete. Lazarus is only a "memory" now and Mrs. Lazarus is ready to move on with her life.

LINES 26-30

So I could ...
... towards me, shouting,

Mrs. Lazarus describes what it feels like to be free from the weight of her grief. Now that Lazarus is nothing more than a "memory," she's able to appreciate her surroundings. She's no longer consumed by her pain; instead, she "could stand that evening in the field / in a shawl of fine air, healed, able / to watch the edge of the moon occur to the sky."

Notice how gentle and beautiful this imagery is compared to the violent grief of the poem's earlier stanzas (when she tore her clothes and clawed at her husband's grave until her fingers bled). The gentle sounds of these lines add to their loveliness. For example, listen to the /f/ alliteration, /l/ consonance, and long /ee/ assonance of lines 26-27:

> So I could stand that evening in the field
> in a shawl of fine air, healed, able

The musicality of these lines conveys Mrs. Lazarus's newfound ease and happiness. The metaphor of the "air" as a "shawl" also implies that the night air feels comforting and soft.

She sees "the egde of the moon occur to the sky," another lovely image that presents the moon as a kind of thought that pops into the sky's mind. Next, she sees "a hare thump from a hedge" (notice the rhythmic /h/ alliteration). This image of vivid life at first seems to fit right in with the beauty of the moment so far. After all, she's paying attention to her surroundings enough to

notice that cute little rabbit in the first place!

But the strong caesura towards the end of the line brings this lovely scene to an abrupt halt:

> and a hare thump from a hedge; then notice
> the village men running towards me, shouting,

After the caesura, it becomes clear that the rabbit has run from the bushes because these "running" and "shouting" men startled it. This creates a sense of unease going into the following stanza. Mrs. Lazarus's beautiful, peaceful moment has been shattered, and the reader is likely wondering what will happen next.

LINES 31-35

behind them the ...
... parting before me.

Something is very wrong: men, women, children, and even "barking dogs" are rushing toward Mrs. Lazarus (who, just a moment ago, was happily, peacefully watching the moon float across the sky).

Mrs. Lazarus knows what's going on—as does the reader if they have any familiarity with the story of Lazarus: her husband has been brought back to life.

Anadiplosis emphasizes the absolute clarity of Mrs. Lazarus's intuition at this moment:

> and I knew. I knew by the sly light

The strange imagery in these lines makes the crowd seem distinctly threatening. The blacksmith has a sly look on his face, while the barmaid's eyes are "shrill"—a word used to refer to high-pitched, penetrating *sound*. This moment of synesthesia conveys the icy, piercing coldness of the barmaid's stare and it also suggests just how disturbed Mrs. Lazarus is by what's happening.

There are all kinds of sonic devices at work in these lines as well. In addition to the rhythm created by anadiplosis, there's sibilance ("sly," "blacksmith's face"), /l/ consonance ("sly light," "blacksmith's," "shrill"), and /b/ alliteration ("blacksmith's," "barmaid"). There is also long /i/ assonance creating a slant rhyme between "light" and "eyes." All of this musicality ramps up the intensity of this moment as Mrs. Lazarus becomes aware of what's about to happen.

Soon enough, she's thrust through the crowd by "sudden hands." She's at the mercy of this rowdy throng, being pushed forward through the "hot tang"—the sour, spicy smell—of all these people. They begin to "part" before her, creating a pathway for her to reach her husband.

LINES 36-39

He lived. I ...
... grave's slack chew,

Mrs. Lazarus reveals what she saw when the crowd parted, what she "knew" the moment she saw people "running" towards her "shouting": that Lazarus "lived."

The crowd seems to be in awe of this miraculous occurrence—why else would they have dragged Mrs. Lazarus to him? They must assume she and Lazarus will both be thrilled. Or, maybe, they resent her for moving on with the "schoolteacher" and want to show her where she belongs.

Either way, neither Mrs. Lazarus nor her husband are pleased. Mrs. Lazarus says she "saw the horror on his face," indicating that he's pretty shocked and terrified by his own unexpected resurrection.

Notice the use of anaphora in the first few lines of the stanza:

> [...] I saw the horror on his face.
> I heard his mother's crazy song. I breathed
> his stench; [...]

The repetition creates momentum, propelling the reader forward. At the same time, though Mrs. Lazarus is repeating the word "I" at the beginning of each sentence, she seems suddenly absent. That is, she is saying she "saw," "heard," and "breathed" what was happening, but she isn't describing what she *thought* or *felt*. This suggests the utter shock of seeing Lazarus alive again.

She goes on to describe her "bridegroom" in a way that conveys how terribly disturbing this whole ordeal is:

> [...] my bridegroom in his rotting shroud,
> moist and disheveled from the grave's slack chew,

The "shroud" is the cloth Lazarus was buried in. He's been dead so long that his body and the garments he was wrapped in have begun to decay. "The grave's slack chew" is a grisly metaphor suggesting the way that death has half-eaten his body already; he's alive, but he looks and reeks of death.

LINE 40

croaking his cuckold ... of his time.

The poem's final line begins with Lazarus "croaking" out "his cuckold name." The verb "croaking" again conveys the gruesome reality of his decaying body.

The word "cuckold," meanwhile, is an outdated term for a man whose wife is unfaithful. This word thus undermines Mrs. Lazarus's earlier statement that she "was faithful for as long as it took." She's already told readers that she mourned her husband intensely, but the word "cuckold" implies that this wasn't enough: if he's a cuckold, that means her moving on was

a betrayal.

It's not clear if *Lazarus* thinks he's a cuckold or if this is only an idea in Mrs. Lazarus's head (supported, perhaps, by social pressure on women to remain "true," even to their dead husbands). In any case, it prompts readers to question the nature of faithfulness and betrayal. Was Mrs. Lazarus was supposed to remain miserable forever? Does moving on with her life really make her untrue? Should she go back to her decaying husband?

Notice the chunky alliteration and consonance in the last few lines of the poem:

> [...] my bridegroom in his rotting shroud,
> moist and disheveled from the grave's slack chew,
> croaking his cuckold name, disinherited, out of his
> time.

A combination of sharp /k/ sounds (which evoke the "croaking" sound of Lazarus's voice), rough /r/, thudding /d/, guttural /g/, and mushy /sh/ sounds convey the horrifying state of Lazarus's body. The poem clearly views Lazarus's resurrection as something unnatural and abhorrent. Lazarus doesn't belong among the living. Having been "disinherited" (or disowned) by the grave, he now exists "out of his time." In this way, the poem suggests that what is dead and buried should *remain* dead and buried.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem alludes to the biblical story of Lazarus of Bethany (told in John 11:1-44), who was resurrected by Jesus after having been dead for four days. The poem's title is the most obvious reference, providing the reader a lens through which to read the rest of the poem.

"Mrs. Lazarus" didn't exist in the original story of Lazarus. By creating her, Duffy gives the reader a chance to see Lazarus's resurrection from a different perspective, one that doesn't experience Lazarus's return as miraculous.

The poem changes the timeline of Lazarus's resurrection, with the narrative spanning "months" rather than days. The event central to the original story—Lazarus's resurrection—doesn't occur until the final stanza of the poem; the poem focuses more on Mrs. Lazarus's grief and healing than it does on the "miraculous" moment that undoes all her attempts at moving on.

In the final stanza, Mrs. Lazarus describes Lazarus exiting his tomb "in his rotting shroud." This is a direct allusion to the burial clothes Lazarus is described as still wearing in the Bible.

It's worth noting that Jesus performed Lazarus's resurrection with the express purpose of convincing people of his divinity. Yet this poem doesn't mention Jesus at all—the details around Lazarus's resurrection are purposefully omitted. This allows for a less literal interpretation of the poem, with Lazarus's resurrection standing in for any number of ways in which something from the past might return, "out of [its] time."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 36-40:** "He lived. I saw the horror on his face. / I heard his mother's crazy song. I breathed / his stench; my bridegroom in his rotting shroud, / moist and dishevelled from the grave's slack chew, / croaking his cuckold name, disinherited, out of his time."

ASYNDETON

The poem uses quite a lot of asyndeton, which speeds passages up and imbues them with a sense of urgency. Take the first stanza:

> [...] I had wept for a night and a day
> over my loss, ripped the cloth I was married in
> from my breasts, howled, shrieked, clawed
> at the burial stones till my hands bled, retched
> his name over and over again, dead, dead.

There aren't any coordinating conjunctions between these separate actions to slow this passage down. As a result, these actions all start to blur together, as if Mrs. Lazarus can't really remember where one ended and another began. This, in turn, evokes the intense, overwhelming nature of her early grief.

The asyndeton in lines 6-8 works similarly:

> [...] Slept in a single cot,
> widow, one empty glove, white femur
> in the dust, half. [...]

Here, Mrs. Lazarus goes from describing an action ("Slept in a single cot") to describing herself ("widow") to *metaphorically* describing herself ("one empty glove, white femur / in the dust, half."). The lack of coordinating conjunctions between these clauses makes the *relationship* between them a little unclear at first, thereby evoking in the speaker Mrs. Lazarus's whirlwind of emotions. She's terribly disoriented by this loss, and the quickness of the language helps the *reader* feel what *she* feels.

Asyndeton also evokes the passage of time, and, more specifically, how slippery time can seem to someone who's grieving. Listen to lines 13-16:

> [...] but all those months
> he was going away from me, dwindling
> to the shrunk size of a snapshot, going,

going.

In these lines, asyndeton captures the way that Lazarus's presence steadily disappears from Mrs. Lazarus's life.

In lines 32-35, Mrs. Lazarus describes the moment when she realized Lazarus was alive. The asyndeton here creates drama and a sense of unstoppable momentum:

> [...] I knew by the sly light
> on the blacksmith's face, the shrill eyes
> of the barmaid, the sudden hands bearing me
> into the hot tang of the crowd parting before me.

Here, the lack of coordinating conjunction (an "and" between "barmaid" and "the sudden hands") suggests the speeding up of Mrs. Lazarus's heart. As she's being borne into the "crowd," the piling up of clauses suggests that none of this is in her control—she's being swept towards Lazarus almost against her will.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "I had wept for a night and a day / over my loss, ripped the cloth I was married in / from my breasts, howled, shrieked, clawed / at the burial stones till my hands bled, retched / his name over and over again, dead, dead."
- **Lines 6-8:** "Slept in a single cot, / widow, one empty glove, white femur / in the dust, half."
- **Lines 8-11:** "Stuffed dark suits / into black bags, shuffled in a dead man's shoes, / noosed the double knot of a tie round my bare neck, / gaunt nun in the mirror, touching herself."
- **Lines 13-16:** "but all those months / he was going away from me, dwindling / to the shrunk size of a snapshot, going, / going."
- **Line 21:** "Then he was legend, language;"
- **Line 31:** "behind them the women and children, barking dogs,"
- **Lines 32-35:** "I knew by the sly light / on the blacksmith's face, the shrill eyes / of the barmaid, the sudden hands bearing me / into the hot tang of the crowd parting before me."
- **Lines 38-40:** "my bridegroom in his rotting shroud, / moist and dishevelled from the grave's slack chew, / croaking his cuckold name, disinherited, out of his time."

REPETITION

The poem uses several different kinds of repetition to create rhythm, momentum, and emphasis.

In the first line, for instance, anaphora (the repetition of "I had") creates a feeling of insistence:

> I had grieved. I had wept for a night and a day

Mrs. Lazarus is making it very clear that she did her fair share of "griev[ing]," and that it wasn't exactly easy for her to heal and move on from Lazarus's death.

In line 5, she says that she "retched" (or dry heaved) "his name over and over again, dead, dead." Diacope (the repetition of "over") and epizeuxis ("dead, dead") again evoke the shock Mrs. Lazarus felt and emphasize just how unbearable her husband's death felt at first.

There's more diacope and epizeuxis in lines 14-16, where the repetition of "going" evokes the relentless passage of time and the way Lazarus's presence in his wife's life just keeps fading:

> he was going away from me, dwindling
> to the shrunk size of a snapshot, going,
> going. [...]

The repetition of "going" becomes more forceful the more it is repeated, suggesting that no matter how hard she grieves for him, Mrs. Lazarus can't hold on to her missing husband forever. Time eventually pulls him away from her.

There's yet more anaphora and diacope in lines 21-22:

> Then he was gone. Then he was legend, language;
> my arm on the arm of the schoolteacher—the shock

The repetition in these lines creates a sense of things falling back into place. There is a sense of orderliness, as if *healing* from the pain of loss is the natural next step for the speaker. The repetition is also rhythmic, lulling the reader into the sense of safety Mrs. Lazarus is beginning to feel. Her wounds have "healed"; she is ready to live again.

In line 32, anadiplosis emphasizes Mrs. Lazarus's gut intuition. Upon hearing "the village men [shouting]" and the "dogs [barking]," she says, "and I knew. I knew by the sly light / on the blacksmith's face [...]" The insistence of her statement builds anticipation for the reader.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I had," "I had"
- **Line 5:** "over," "over," "dead, dead"
- **Line 14:** "going"
- **Lines 15-16:** "going, / going"
- **Line 21:** "Then he was," "Then he was"
- **Line 22:** "arm," "arm"
- **Line 32:** "I knew. I knew"
- **Line 36:** "I"
- **Line 37:** "I," "I"

IMAGERY

The poem uses lots of vivid, evocative imagery to bring Mrs. Lazarus's story to life. At the beginning of the poem, for instance, the reader can *see* and *hear* Mrs. Lazarus's grief as she describes it in visceral detail: she says she "howled, shrieked, clawed / at the burial stones till [her] hands bled," and that she "retched" (or gagged on) her husband's name, as though his loss made her physically ill.

Later, she describes going "home" and "Stuff[ing] dark suits / into black bags." The specificity of color ("black," "dark") evokes her grim mood (and might suggest that these are garbage bags). The word "Stuffed" is also more suggestive of the emotions she's grappling with than, say, "put" or "folded." That is, "Stuffed" indicates that she wants to be rid of these reminders of her dead husband.

At the same time, however, she "shuffle[s]" around in his "shoes" and "noose[s]" one of his "tie[s]" around her "neck" while staring in the mirror, actions which suggest she's also trying to *remember* him. She calls her reflection a "gaunt nun in the mirror, touching herself." This imagery suggests that Mrs. Lazarus is emaciated with grief, and that like a "nun" she is cut off from the sensual pleasures she once shared with her husband.

In lines 19-20, Mrs. Lazarus says that, eventually, her husband began to "vanish[] / to the small zero held by the gold of [her] ring." In other words, he exists only within the circle of her wedding band—which is a "zero," perhaps, because she's taken it off; it's no longer wrapped around her finger. By linking his fading presence to her wedding ring, the poem conveys that Mrs. Lazarus is moving on from her marriage. After all, she can't exactly stay married to a dead man, can she?

And as Lazarus turns into nothing more than a "memory," Mrs. Lazarus finds herself with another man, standing together:

> [...] in the field
> in a shawl of fine air, healed, able
> to watch the edge of the moon occur to the sky
> and a hare thump from a hedge; [...]

Compared to the stark, painful imagery at the beginning of the poem, this gentle, lovely imagery suggests how far Mrs. Lazarus has come since her husband's death. Now, the "fine air" wraps itself around her shoulders like a "shawl," a metaphor that presents the natural world as a comforting presence. She is once again able to actually see the world around her and appreciate it.

Her happiness is short-lived, of course, as she soon discovers Lazarus has been brought back from the dead. When she hears "the village men runnings towards [her], shouting," she says,

> [...] I knew by the sly light
> on the blacksmith's face, the shrill eyes
> of the barmaid, the sudden hands bearing me
> into the hot tang of the crowd parting before me.

The "sly light / on the blacksmith's face" suggests that these people are taking pleasure in the spectacle of Lazarus's resurrection, not really aware of how it's affecting Mrs. Lazarus. Notice the use of synesthesia with the description of the "barmaid" having "shrill eyes." By describing her "eyes" with a word that connotes a piercing, high-pitched *sound*, the poet is able to evoke Mrs. Lazarus's feelings of being completely overwhelmed by what's going on. She also notices the "hot tang," or strong, sour stench, "of the crowd."

In the final stanza, imagery conveys just how horrified Mrs. Lazarus is without her ever having to say explicitly what she's feeling. She says she "breathed / his stench," with the word "stench" implying that the horrible smell of death clings to her husband's body. She describes Lazarus as standing there "in his rotting shroud, / moist and disheveled from the grave's slack chew." In other words, he *looks* exactly like someone who has been dead and decaying for months; his presence is unnatural and disgusting.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-5
- Lines 8-11
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 19-20
- Lines 22-24
- Lines 26-29
- Lines 32-35
- Lines 37-40

METAPHOR

Various metaphors deepen and expand the poem's imagery.

In the second stanza, for instance, Mrs. Lazarus compares being a "widow" to being "one empty glove, [a] white femur / in the dust." Just as a single "glove" or "femur" (thigh bone) doesn't make sense on its own, neither does a wife make sense without a husband. She's "half" of what she used to be. That this femur is "in the dust" suggests that she feels buried herself, like part of her died with her husband.

She goes on to say that she "shuffled in a dead man's shoes." This imagery can be taken literally: she may very well have put her husband's shoes on and paced around the house in them. But it also reads metaphorically, suggesting that in her husband's absence, she's not really free to live her life—all she can do is traipse around inside his memory, trapped by her grief (and, perhaps, by societal expectations surrounding that grief).

When she then calls her reflection in the mirror a "gaunt nun," this conveys both her deep isolation and dedication to the

mourning process. She is as chaste and serious as if she had sworn off men and given her life to God.

She builds on this religious imagery in line 12, describing "the icon of [her] face / in each bleak frame" of "the Stations of Bereavement." This seems to refer to the traditional iconography of Jesus's crucifixion. While staring at these pictures of Christ's suffering, she sees only her own—less noble, perhaps, but every bit as painful.

In lines 16-17, Mrs. Lazarus says that, eventually, Lazarus's name stopped being "a certain spell for his face." This metaphor suggests the power of language to bring someone to mind, yet the poem implies that such magic loses its potency over time.

As Mrs. Lazarus begins to heal, she describes standing in a "field / in a shawl of fine air." A "shawl" is a garment worn over the head and/or shoulders, so this metaphor implies that the air feels good on her skin, delicate and warm. She is finally able to feel something other than grief.

In the final stanza, Mrs. Lazarus describes her resurrected husband as being "moist and disheveled from the grave's slack chew." This metaphor treats death like a mouth that has gnawed Lazarus into something misshapen and grotesque, therefore evoking both his and Mrs. Lazarus's "horror."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "one empty glove, white femur / in the dust, half."
- **Line 9:** "shuffled in a dead man's shoes,"
- **Line 11:** "gaunt nun in the mirror"
- **Line 12:** "the icon of my face"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Till his name was no longer a certain spell / for his face."
- **Line 27:** "in a shawl of fine air"
- **Line 39:** "the grave's slack chew"

ALLITERATION

Frequent alliteration makes the language of "Mrs. Lazarus" more intense and memorable.

Listen to the harsh, guttural alliteration in "Gone" and "Gutted," for example, or the hissing /s/ sounds that seem to convey the speaker's distaste for having "slept in a single cot." The following lines are also bursting with alliteration as Mrs. Lazarus tries and fails to clear her husband's presence from their home:

> in the dust, half. Stuffed dark suits
> into black bags, shuffled in a dead man's shoes,
> noosed the double knot of a tie round my bare neck.

Broader consonance supports all that alliteration:

> in the dust, half. Stuffed dark suits
> into black bags, shuffled in a dead man's shoes,
> noosed the double knot of a tie round my bare neck.

There's also lots of assonance throughout these lines ("one," "glove," "dust," "Stuffed," "shuffled"; "shoes," "noosed"; "black bags"). Overall, the stanza's relentlessly pounding, swirling sounds convey the ferocity of Mrs. Lazarus's grief.

There are several other moments of alliteration (and consonance/assonance) throughout the poem that make certain moments stand out to the reader's ear. The /l/ alliteration in "legend, language" in line 21, for example, emphasizes the link between these two abstract ideas: when someone dies, they may live on only through "language" and stories.

And in the final lines, alliteration and consonance combine to bring the poem's disturbing imagery to vivid life:

> [...] my bridegroom in his rotting shroud,
> moist and disheveled from the grave's slack chew,
> croaking his cuckold name, disinherited, out of his time.

The sharp /k/ sounds of "croaking" and "cuckold" mirror the crackly sound of Lazarus's voice. Meanwhile, thick /r/, thudding /d/, guttural /g/, and mushy /sh/ sounds all evoke the visceral reality of Lazarus's rotting body.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "burial," "bled"
- **Line 6:** "Gone," "Gutted," "Slept," "single"
- **Line 7:** "widow," "one," "glove," "white"
- **Line 8:** "dust," "Stuffed," "dark," "suits"
- **Line 9:** "black," "bags," "shuffled," "dead," "shoes"
- **Line 10:** "noosed," "double," "knot," "neck"
- **Line 11:** "nun"
- **Line 12:** "face"
- **Line 13:** "frame"
- **Line 15:** "size," "snapshot"
- **Line 16:** "name," "no," "certain," "spell"
- **Line 17:** "for," "face," "hair," "head"
- **Line 21:** "legend," "language"
- **Line 22:** "schoolteacher"
- **Line 23:** "strength," "sleeve"
- **Line 29:** "hare," "hedge"
- **Line 33:** "blacksmith's"
- **Line 34:** "barmaid," "bearing"
- **Line 36:** "He," "horror"
- **Line 37:** "heard," "breathed"
- **Line 38:** "bridegroom"
- **Line 40:** "croaking," "cuckold"

VOCABULARY

Retched (Lines 4-5) - Gagged or dry-heaved.

Gutted (Line 6) - Cleaned out completely; emptied.

Femur (Lines 7-8) - A bone in the thigh.

Gaunt (Line 11) - Extremely thin and haggard; skeletal.

Stations of Bereavement (Lines 11-12) - This seems to be referring to both the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) and to the Christian Stations of the Cross, which are a traditional set of images that show Jesus at various points in his crucifixion.

Icon (Lines 12-13) - A portrait of a holy figure.

Dwindling (Lines 14-15) - Shrinking or slowly disappearing.

Hedgerows (Line 24) - A *hedge* or a *hedgerow* is a boundary between properties made up of a line of trees and shrubs.

Shawl (Line 27) - A garment worn over the head and/or shoulders.

Occur to (Line 28) - Cross the mind of.

Shrill (Lines 33-34) - Piercing and unpleasant.

Shroud (Line 38) - The cloth a corpse is buried in.

The grave's slack chew (Line 39) - The speaker is basically saying that the "grave" is like a loose mouth that has partially chomped up Lazarus's body.

Disheveled (Line 39) - Messy and rumpled.

Cuckold (Line 40) - An outdated term for a man whose wife is unfaithful to him.

Disinherited (Line 40) - Disowned or cast out.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mrs. Lazarus" was published in *The World's Wife*, a collection that retells the stories of famous men from the perspective of the women who surrounded them—wives, mothers, sisters, etc. For this reason, it isn't too surprising that "Mrs. Lazarus" and many of the other poems published in *The World's Wife* are dramatic monologues. This form allows these women to speak for themselves and tell their own version of events.

This particular poem's 40 lines of free verse are arranged into eight quintains (five-line stanzas). The use of consistent stanzas lends the poem some structure and also suggests the chronological passage of time. For instance, the first stanza describes Mrs. Lazarus's grief immediately after her husband's death; the second stanza describes her life once she returns home; the third stanza reveals that "months" have passed since Lazarus died; and so on.

By the sixth stanza, Mrs. Lazarus is "healed" and ready to move on, but no sooner has she come to this realization than her husband comes back to life. By presenting the events in order, the poet is able to convey all the time and effort that went into Mrs. Lazarus's recovery from the grief of her loss, thereby making it all the more tragic when she's faced with a resurrected Lazarus.

METER

The poem is written in free verse and therefore does not use meter. The absence of meter makes the poem sound more intimate. This speaker is describing with vulnerability what it feels like to try and move on from a terrible loss, and the poem's natural rhythms create the sense that the reader is hearing something personal and real rather than something artfully constructed for an audience.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Mrs. Lazarus" doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. The *lack* of rhyme scheme, like the lack of meter, contributes to the poem's intimate tone. The poem doesn't necessarily *feel* like something that's been artfully crafted (even though it absolutely is!). The language comes across as raw, unrehearsed, and vulnerable.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is the wife of Lazarus of Bethany, a famous biblical figure whom Jesus resurrected. The original story of Lazarus never mentions a wife; Duffy created this character for the poem.

At the start of the poem, Mrs. Lazarus mourns her husband intensely. She says that she "wept," "ripped" her clothes, "howled," and "clawed" at her husband's gravesite until her hands were bloody. Even after returning home (perhaps after the funeral/burial), she remains inconsolable, "shuffl[ing]" around "in a dead man's shoes."

In other words, for a time Mrs. Lazarus's whole life seems to revolve around the loss of her husband. She even wraps one of his ties around her "bare neck" as though it were a noose, a frightening image that speaks to the depth of her despair.

Yet her longing and despair eventually begin to fade along with Lazarus's memory. As much as Mrs. Lazarus misses her husband, she can't stop him from "vanishing." After she feels she has properly mourned Lazarus, she begins a relationship with a local schoolteacher.

Her happiness is cut short, however, when she discovers that Lazarus has been brought back to life. The way she describes her "bridegroom in his rotting shroud" makes it clear that Mrs. Lazarus feels no joy or relief upon seeing her husband resurrected. His return tosses a wrench into her hard-won

healing; to Mrs. Lazarus, Lazarus's resurrection is not a miracle but a nightmare.

SETTING

Though the biblical tale it references took place over the course of a few days 2,000 years ago, "Mrs. Lazarus" spans a period of several "months" and is set during an ambiguous era.

On the on hand, the poem contains many references that situate it in the modern world: Mrs. Lazarus describes getting rid of her husband's "dark suits" and "a tie," for example. She also describes her husband's memory as shrinking to the "size of a snapshot," and his "will [being] read."

Yet these modern references are at odds with some of the poem's other imagery. For example, Mrs. Lazarus says that she "ripped the cloth [she] was married in," the word "cloth" suggesting she was dressed in an ancient-style garment for her wedding. She mentions "the burial stones" rather than the "coffin" one would expect in a modern setting. Later in the poem, she describes "the village men," the "blacksmith," and a "barmaid," which again evoke the ancient setting of the poem's source material.

This mishmash of ancient and contemporary settings makes the poem feel both urgent and timeless.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Mrs Lazarus" was published in Carol Ann Duffy's fifth poetry collection, *The World's Wife* (1999). In this collection, Duffy writes from the viewpoints of the wives, sisters, and female contemporaries of famous and infamous men. Some of her characters include Mrs. Aesop, Mrs. Sisyphus, Penelope, Circe, Demeter, and Mrs. Darwin. In witty, conversational language, *The World's Wife* subverts the traditional male perspective on these women's tales.

Duffy was deeply influenced by Sylvia Plath, whose *Collected Works* she received for her 25th birthday. She would go on to edit an edition of Plath's poems, and to write a piece for *The Guardian* about how Plath's work, with its revolutionary interest in women's internal lives, blazed a trail Duffy would follow in her own poetry.

This poem in particular, of course, also draws from the biblical story of Lazarus of Bethany. In the Bible, Jesus resurrects Lazarus four days after his death—an event that becomes known as one of Jesus's greatest miracles. Countless works of art allude to Lazarus's story, including, famously, T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus." There's no mention of Lazarus's wife in the Bible; Duffy imagined the character for this poem.

"Mrs Lazarus" is also a dramatic monologue, a form Duffy often uses in her poetry. Dramatic monologues are told from the perspective of someone who is clearly not the poet (in this case, Mrs. Lazarus), and they are often addressed to a specific audience. Other famous dramatic monologues include Duffy's "Circe" and "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Duffy was born in Scotland in 1955 and came of age during second-wave feminism. While early feminism had been focused primarily on securing women's right to vote, second-wave feminism addressed a wider range of issues including reproductive rights, domestic violence, workplace equality, and more. Second-wave feminism was responding to many of the restrictive gender norms of the mid-20th century, including the idea that women's purpose in life was to become demure mothers and wives.

By the 1990s, when this poem was written, third-wave feminists began more actively seeking to upend patriarchal norms altogether—and with them, the treatment of the straight, white, male perspective as the model for all human experience.

"Mrs Lazarus" does this by re-examining a famous religious story from a woman's point of view. While Jesus's resurrection of Lazarus may have seemed like a miracle to the awed "crowd," the poem suggests that for the people directly impacted by it (both Mrs. Lazarus and Lazarus himself), all it did was stir up a lot of unnecessary pain.

It's also worth considering the poem within the context of Duffy's own relationship with poet Adrian Henri. She and Henri began a relationship when Henri was 39 and Duffy was 16; they lived together for 10 years, with Henri being not only Dufffy's romantic partner but also her mentor. Henri was persistently unfaithful, and it is likely that this formative relationship is at the heart of some of the core themes in *The World's Wife*.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Duffy Discusses the Genesis of The World's Wife — An interview with Duffy for the Lincoln Review in which she talks about how she started writing poems for this collection. (https://www.lincolnreview.org/interviewwithcaduffy)
- An Introduction to Lazarus of Bethany — Learn more about the story that inspired Duffy's poem. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lazarus-biblical-figure)
- An Overview of the Dramatic Monologue — A video

explaining the history of the dramatic monologue, a form Duffy uses in many of her poems (including this one!). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ferWxPUN3ig)

- A Review of The World's Wife — A Guardian review written of Duffy's fifth collection of poetry, in which "Mrs. Lazarus" was published, by the writer Jeaneatte Winterson. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/jeanette-winterson-on-carol-ann-duffys-the-worlds-wife)
- The Poet'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
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- In Your Mind
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Aesop
- Mrs Darwin
- Mrs Midas
- Mrs Sisyphus
- Originally
- Penelope
- Prayer
- Recognition
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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