Work

SUMMARY

The woman was able to provide for one child by taking on housework: things like washing dishes and tending to clothes. She had only a single, tiny mouth to feed, requiring just a spoonful of food at a time. Life was wonderful.

In order to provide for two children, the woman had to take on work outside of the home. She planted, carefully tended to, and harvested crops. She then gave birth to twins, meaning she suddenly had four people to care for.

She took on even more work, getting a second job at a pub in order to put food in the pantry and on the table. She was still up to the task; she was capable. But feeding 10 children was an entirely different story.

The woman took a job at a factory, where she had to arrive at dawn and deal with the noise and grease of industrial production. Providing for 50 people meant exhausting physical labor, working through the night, hauling and hoisting heavy things.

When there were a thousand people to care for, the woman constructed roads, and when there were two thousand to care for, she built tall apartment buildings. As cities rose up around her, the number of her children doubled, filling up skyscrapers with people. Then her family grew three times as large.

In order to provide for her ever-increasing children, she dug subway tunnels and train tracks and then operated the trains herself. Her family quadrupled in size, and she made airplanes that flew faster than the speed of sound. She was now the mother of a million people.

So she sold televisions, built computers, and made illegal copies of music and movies to hawk. She worked relentlessly. Every day and every night she toiled away at buying things on the Internet.

When her children numbered a billion, the woman used nets to vacuum up all the fish in the sea. She chopped down trees and put cattle out to pasture. She sold inexpensive fast food and worked 90 hours a week. Her children kept multiplying.

She provided for the entire world. Her tears were the rain that watered the earth, and she used her own teeth as seeds, scattering them over the land to grow more crops. She ran her tongue through rivers to create more fish. Then she grew ill, died, and was buried, her body having been utterly sapped of life by nonstop work.

THEMES

THE RELENTLESS NATURE OF WOMEN'S WORK

"Work" confronts the relentless pressure placed on women to care for those around them. The poem begins with a woman happily taking care of a baby. As her family grows, however, the woman must take on more work in order to "feed" more mouths. Eventually, she's working day and night to support a "billion" people, a clearly impossible task. The woman dies at the end of the poem, having worked so hard that she has nothing left to sustain herself, let alone anyone else. "Work" thus critiques the seemingly endless burdens placed on women's time and energy, as well as the way society often expects women (and particularly mothers) to care for others at their own expense.

The woman is happy enough caring for a single child, presumably because she has some balance in her life. Having only "One small mouth" to feed, the speaker says that the woman's "life was a dream." This suggests that because the woman's responsibilities are proportional to her capacities, she's able to meet them while also enjoying her life.

But as the number of people to feed keeps growing, it becomes clear that her work never ends. In order to feed another child, "she worked outside," where she "sewed seeds, watered, / threshed," etc. More children mean she's forced to take on a "second job in the alehouse" and then a third job at a "factory." She ends up feeding "a thousand," then "millions," and finally "a billion" people.

Obviously, this is too much for one person to handle. The poem is stepping into the world of metaphor here: it links each jump in the number of mouths to feed to a new era of history—from the dawn of agriculture to the industrial revolution, all the way up to the modern age with its "Internet shopping" and "cheap fast food." This suggests that, regardless of humanity's endless innovations and increasing convenience, women remain the ones expected to shoulder the weight of supporting and caring for others. In this way, the poem goes from being about an individual woman to being about the plight of women more generally.

The poem also conflates the woman with the earth itself, suggesting that the historical exploitation of women's labor is akin to humanity's exploitation of the environment. In order to feed "the world," the poem says the woman "wept rain" and "scattered the teeth in her head / for grain." These images suggest the impossible lengths the woman is expected to go to care for others—even to the point of sacrificing her own body.

The woman's offspring take and take from her until she's given all she has to give, and the poem ends with the woman sick and dying as a direct result of this "twenty-four / seven" work. In trying to provide for others all day, every day, the woman is left with no time or energy to care for herself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-12
- Lines 13-20
- Lines 21-28

CAPITALISM, GREED, AND HUMANITY'S EXPLOITATION OF THE EARTH

"Work" can be read metaphorically as a commentary on humanity's relationship to the natural world. Each stanza represents a new era in human history, moving from before the dawn of agriculture to the modern-day, while the woman in the poem represents "Mother Earth." As the population booms and people start exploiting the land for their own profit and convenience, they upend the delicate balance between humanity and nature and began to destroy the very "Mother" they depend on. The earth gives generously, the poem implies, but, eventually, humanity's selfishness and greed will destroy it.

Just as the woman happily provides for a single child with a "soup-filled spoon," the poem implies that the earth, too, was once more than happy to provide for human beings. Life was simpler in the beginning; there were fewer people, and those people took only what they needed, resulting in a harmonious relationship between earth and its "children."

Yet as people multiplied, the desire for convenience over sustainability shifted the scales. More mouths to feed meant more wild land converted into fields, factories, and roads. People went from "gather[ing] barley, wheat, [and] corn" to "buil[ding] streets" and "high-rise flats." Humanity's hunger for shiny new products—"TVs," "PCs," "CDs," "DVDs"—stripped the earth of its resources.

As the earth's human population reached "A billion," it became extremely difficult and taxing to meet humanity's needs. People "trawled the seas, hoovered fish, felled trees, / grazed beef, sold cheap fast food." In other words, they devasted their surroundings for their own convenience, and their increasing demands left little behind for the earth to replenish and sustain itself. Eventually "worked, to the bone," the earth had ing left to offer, "sickened," and "died." In this way, the poem reads as a dire warning of the consequences of human greed and exploitation of the planet.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

To feed one, ...
... was a dream.

The poem begins with the speaker describing an anonymous woman, saying that in order "To feed one" child, "she worked from home." There, she "took in washing, ironing, [and] sewing" to make ends meet. With only a single "small mouth [to feed]," the speaker says that the woman's "life was a dream."

The poem suggests that because the woman's "Work" is manageable and leaves her time to actually enjoy her life, she doesn't mind doing it. Her life feels balanced. The fact that she's able to "work[] from home" while caring for a young child also suggests the way that her work fits into her life rather than the other way around.

The poem's nine quatrains (or four-line stanzas) each correspond not only with a segment of this woman's life and work but also with an era of human history. The poem can thus be read as being about a single woman feeding her children while simultaneously working as an extended metaphor for the relationship between human beings and the planet.

In this metaphor, the woman can be thought of as representing "Mother Earth," while her children represent humanity. The opening stanza suggests the beginning of human history, when people lived in small communities, taking only what they needed from the earth. Back then, the poem implies, the earth was happy to provide for her "children."

Notice the use of asyndeton in line 2:

> took in washing, ironing, sewing.

The lack of any coordinating conjunctions between "ironing" and "sewing" indicates that the list isn't meant to be complete. That is, these three tasks—"washing, ironing, sewing"—suggest the *sort* of work the woman generally does to provide for her child. There are other tasks along these lines that she also performs, but the speaker doesn't need to list them all out separately—this short list implies them.

The poem is written in free verse, allowing it to feel natural and conversational. And while it does not follow a set meter or rhyme scheme, it contains plenty of musicality, such as the burst of /oo/ assonance, /s/ alliteration, and /p/ consonance in line 3:

> One small mouth, a soup-filled spoon,

The sounds in this line are harmonious, working together to evoke the simplicity of the woman's life caring for only one child. These smooth sounds also suggest the balanced and proportional relationship between earth and her "children" in the early days of humanity.

LINES 5-8

To feed two, ...
... To feed four,

The woman has a second child, which drives her to find work "outside" the home. There, she "sewed seeds, watered, / threshed, scythed, gathered barley, wheat, corn."

Reading the poem metaphorically, this passage represents the dawn of agriculture. People began to domesticate and control natural resources, leading to more densely-populated communities. Just as the woman quickly goes on to have "Twins," the human population began to increase once people achieved more reliable means of producing food.

Notice the anaphora that bookends this stanza:

> To feed two,
> [...]
> Twins were born. To feed four,

The repetition of "To feed" echoes the first line of the poem and suggests that everything this woman does is to take care of her children. As they increase in number, she must find more ways to meet their needs. This likewise implies that as the earth's human population has increased, more and more of the earth's resources have gone towards sustaining humanity.

There's more asyndeton in lines 6-7, with the omission of any coordinating conjunction between "scythed" and "gathered" and "wheat" and "corn." This speeds the passage up and again suggests that this isn't a *comprehensive* list of the woman's duties, but rather a *sampling* of the sort of things she does to feed her children. Asyndeton also adds to the poem's quick, matter-of-fact tone, suggesting that the woman's life is getting increasingly busy; her responsibilities are now taking up most of her time, but she isn't complaining or fighting against the tide—she is simply racing to keep up.

Notice, too, that this second stanza again exclusively uses end-stopped lines. This makes the poem feel heavy and cumbersome, echoing the weight of the woman's increased responsibilities.

Lines 7-8 contain both internal and (slant) end rhyme:

> threshed, scythed, gathered barley, wheat, corn.
> Twins were born. To feed four,

All of this rhyme adds intensity to the end of the stanza, where the woman's offspring is again increasing in number, this time even more quickly than before. There's also /f/ alliteration ("feed four"), which likewise adds weight to the end of the stanza, where the balance between the woman's life and her responsibilities seems to be tipping.

LINES 9-12

she grafted harder, ...
... a different kettle,

The woman now has four children to feed, so she takes on a "second job in the alehouse" (or bar/pub). And though working two jobs can't be easy, the speaker says that at this point, the woman is still "game, able." In other words, she's still capable of meeting her responsibilities and eager to provide for her children.

On a metaphorical level, the poem continues to chart the development of human civilization. This stanza suggests that, as a result of people's increased control over the earth's resources through agriculture, communities have begun to grow. As they get larger, they develop common spaces like alehouses.

Notice how anaphora and asyndeton add to the stanza's frenzied pace:

> she grafted harder, second ob in the alehouse,'
> food in the larder, food on the table,
> she was game, able. [...]

The repetition of "food" emphasizes that the woman's primary goal is still feeding her children. And the lack of coordinating conjunctions between clauses makes it clear how quickly she's running back and forth between "job[s]," trying to make ends meet. The internal rhyme between "harder" and "larder" (a pantry) and between "table" and "able" intensifies the language of the passage, evoking the amount of energy the woman is putting into her responsibilities.

The poem's first enjambment occurs across lines 11-12:

> [...] Feeding ten
> was a different kettle,

This adds a burst of momentum to the poem, perhaps suggesting just how quickly things are starting to spin out of control. While the woman may have been "game" and "able" to provide for "four," "ten" is "a different kettle"—an idiom meaning something else entirely. In other words, the woman can't care for "ten" children doing what she's been doing. She's going to have to figure something else out.

LINES 13-16

was factory gates ...
... shift, schlepped, lifted.

The woman starts working at a factory, where she arrives at the crack of dawn and spends her days surrounded by "oil, metal,

noise, machines." Soon enough, she has "fifty" children to feed. The woman starts working nights, undertaking tedious physical labor.

At this point, the poem is clearly veering into the world of metaphor. This new job represents a new age in human history: the beginning of industry, and with it the large-scale production of goods and the mechanization of labor. Technological advances don't improve the woman's life; on the contrary, they just create new, ever-more laborious tasks for her to fulfill.

Notice all the /f/ alliteration and consonance in this stanza:

> was factory gates
> at first light, oil, metal, noise, machines.
> To feed fifty, she toiled, sweated, went
> on the night shift, schlepped, lifted.

These insistent, fricative /f/ sounds evoke the demanding nature of the woman's work. There's plenty of assonance and other consonance in this stanza as well ("oil" and "noise," "sweated" and "went," and"fifty," "shift," and "lifted), which makes the passage sound even more intense.

Once again, asyndeton creates a hectic pace and matter-of-fact tone. Readers get the sense that the woman is frantically trying to keep up with all these hungry mouths; she doesn't have time or energy to question why it's always her that has to feed them.

LINES 17-20

For a thousand ...
... feed more, more,

The woman is trying to feed "a thousand more" people. Metaphorically, her branching out into "buil[ding] streets" and "high-rise flats" suggests the beginnings of urbanization.

As more people move into "Cities" to find work, these cities grow and grow, and when they can no longer grow outwards, they grow upwards. "Skyscrapers" are erected to house all of these new people and jobs. The population continues to boom. Humanity's uncontrollable desire for "more" of everything starts to take its toll on both the woman and the earth.

Anaphora evokes the speed with which the human population is now multiplying:

> For a thousand more, she built streets,
> for double that, high-rise flats. [...]

Where it once took an entire stanza for the woman's single child to turn into two, now the population is "doubl[ing]" with every line.

Notice all the /d/, /b/, /r/, /l/, and /p/ consonance and /oo/ assonance in lines 18-20:

> [...] Cities grew,
> her brood doubled, peopled skyscrapers,
> trebled. [...]

The lines are densely packed with repetitive sounds just as these cities are packed with people. The flurry of sounds also suggests that things are getting out of control.

The epizeuxis at the end of this stanza ("more, more,") suggests that there's no end in sight to all this growth and demand for more from the woman and the earth. No longer are people just trying to feed themselves and take care of their communities; instead, the earth is being pillaged for corporate profit and for the convenience of people who seem to think its resources are as infinite as their greed.

LINES 21-24

she dug underground, ...
... to millions now,

In order to feed exponentially more people, the speaker says, the woman "dug underground, tunneled, / laid down track, drove trains." More people hasn't meant more helping hands—just more to do. When "Quadruple came," the speaker says, "she built planes, outflew sound." By the end of the stanza, the woman is "Mother to millions."

This stanza charts the technological innovations in transportation (trains, subways, airplanes) that have made the world more connected than ever before. People can get places faster than ever, yet this doesn't result in life slowing down or the woman's workload easing. Rather than *meeting* humanity's needs, these lines suggest, technology seems to only invent new ones.

Once again, the poem is packed with repetitive sounds that make it feel all the more frantic and overwhelming. Listen in particular to the internal slant rhymes of "trains," "came," "planes" and of "underground," "down," sound," and "now." The poem's language is unrelenting in its intensity, in turn conveying the unrelenting nature of the woman's work. Overlapping sounds evoke the woman's frantic struggle to keep up with her now absurdly disproportionate responsibilities.

LINES 25-28

she flogged TVs, ...
... at Internet shopping.

The poem shifts into the modern era. The woman "flog[s]" (or sells) of "TVs, / design[s] PCs, rip[s] CDs, [and] burns" (or copies) "DVDs." This image evokes vendors who hawk illegally copied DVDs and CDs by the side of the road or in street markets. The speaker also says that the woman "slogged" (or worked continuously) "at Internet shopping." She's either searching for good deals or shipping these products cheaply across the world.

All of this advanced technology doesn't lighten the woman's

workload. On the contrary, it just makes it possible for her to devote every waking minute to her work. She now works "night and day."

Metaphorically, this stanza coincides with the rise of electronics and mass production on a global scale. Thanks to the advent of the internet, people can shop from the comfort of their own homes without having to consider the working conditions that allow them to purchase objects so cheaply and receive them so quickly. So far removed from the origins of these objects, people don't have to think about the impact their consumption has on the earth, whose resources are being rapidly depleted.

Assonance (the long /ee/ sounds in "TVs," "PCs," and so on) and asyndeton (the lack of coordinating conjunction between "ripped CDs" and "burned DVDs) lend rhythm and speed to this stanza, suggesting how rampant all this mindless consumption has become.

LINES 29-32

A billion named, ...
... offspring swelled. She fed

The woman now has a "billion" children to feed. To provide for all these mouths, she "trawl[s] the seas," a reference to the extremely destructive practice of dragging nets across the ocean floor to scoop up fish (and anything else that gets in the nets' way). She "hoover[s] fish," sucking them up as though with a vacuum. She "fell[s]" (chops down) "trees" and puts cows out to "graze[]" pastures. But her "90-hour [work] week" only results in the continued "swell[ing]" of her "offspring." That is, the more she does for them, the more they ask of her.

The poem is now working on several levels. It's the story of a single woman racing to feed her children by taking on whatever "work" she can find. Her tale is also the story of women in general throughout history, who have shouldered the responsibility of caring for others at their own expense. And on a metaphorical level, it's the story of how human beings have demolished the earth's resources.

Thick alliteration, consonance, and assonance ratchet up the poem's intensity:

> she trawled the seas, hoovered fish, felled trees,
> grazed beef, sold cheap fast food, put in
> a 90-hour week. Her offspring swelled. She fed

Additionally, asyndeton (the lack of coordinating conjunction between "sold cheap fast food" and "put in a 90-hour week") continues to evoke the speed with which the woman and the earth are both careening towards utter devastation. The current demands on women and on the earth simply aren't sustainable, the poem implies.

LINES 33-36

the world, wept ...
... fingers twenty-four seven.

The woman continues to feed "the world," even though doing so has clearly become unsustainable. Long gone are the days when she could simply take on a little extra work; now, her tears become the "rain" that nourishes the ground, he "teeth" the seeds for "grain." These metaphors suggest that the woman has to essentially sacrifice her own life in order to continue providing for her children. This likewise implies that the earth is being exploited to the point of collapse. If humans aren't able to curtail their endless hunger, they will devour every last thing the earth has to offer until there's nothing left.

The poem ends with the woman "sicken[ing]" and dying. Note that her death doesn't even warrant its own sentence; her labor is so taken for granted that she dies mid-sentence, seemingly unnoticed:

> [...] swam her tongue in the river to spawn,
> sickened, died, lay in a grave, worked, to the bone,

The quick, casual way that the speaker delivers this information (due in part to asyndeton, the lack of coordinating conjunctions between clauses) speaks to how utterly unappreciated this woman is, and how meaningless her death is in a world that doesn't value her. Society has made her completely replaceable. Likewise, people treat the earth as if its resources were infinite when in fact they aren't. The ending of the poem implies that the earth, too, will perish if people don't find a way to live more sustainably.

Note the strange syntax, or word order, of these final lines:

> sickened, died, lay in a grave, worked, to the bone,
> her fingers twenty-four seven.

The poem ends with another reference to the woman's work. Even in death, then, the woman doesn't seem to be at rest; the final phrase "her fingers twenty-four seven" seems to imply that a woman's work *never* ends. Perhaps the poem is suggesting that all this exploitation will continue regardless of the woman's sacrifice. This ending implicitly argues for a different way of life, one that is more respectful not only of women's capacities but also of the planet's.

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

"Work" is overflowing with assonance, which—along with the related devices of alliteration and consonance—calls attention to important moments and generally ramps up the intensity of the poem's language.

In fact, these sonic devices often overlap. Take line 3, where there's /oo/ assonance, /s/ alliteration, and /p/ consonance:

> One small mouth, a soup-filled spoon,

The sounds of the line blend together, evoking the simplicity and ease of the woman's life when she was caring for a single child.

As the woman's work intensifies, however, so do the poem's sounds. Listen to lines 7-11, for instance:

> [...] gathered barley, wheat, corn.
> Twins were born. To feed four,
> she grafted harder, second job in the alehouse,
> food in the larder, food on the table,
> she was game, able. [...]

Though the poem doesn't follow a steady rhyme scheme, the combination of assonance and consonance creates many full or slant internal rhymes. Here, note the full rhymes between "corn" and "born," "harder" and "larder," and "table" and "able," as well as a slant end rhyme between "corn" and "four."

Again, these emphatic sounds seem to multiply along with the woman's children. In lines 22-23, listen to the shared long /ay/ sounds of "trains," "came," and "planes" (with "trains" and "planes" again creating an internal rhyme). There's then another slant end rhyme between "sound" and "now" in lines 23-24.

The sounds only grow *more* intense in stanzas 7, where incessant long /ee/ assonance ("TVs, / designed PCs, ripped CDs, burned DVDs) evokes the endless nature of the woman's work. And this sound continues into stanza 8:

> she trawled the seas, hoovered fish, felled trees,
> grazed beef, sold cheap fast food, put in
> a 90-hour week. [...]

Note, too, the /f/ alliteration and consonance here ("fish," "felled," "fast food," "beef"), as well as the internal rhyme of "seas" and "trees." Overall, these sounds feel relentless, thereby suggesting humanity's seemingly unstoppable greed and exploitation of the earth.

In the last stanza, /ay/ assonance ("lay in a grave"), /s/ alliteration ("scattered," "swam," etc.), /w/ alliteration ("world, wept") and an internal rhyme between "rain" and "grain" adds intensity to the imagery of the woman sacrificing herself for her children.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "soup," "spoon"
- **Line 7:** "corn"
- **Line 8:** "born," "four"
- **Line 9:** "harder"
- **Line 10:** "larder," "table"
- **Line 11:** "game," "able"
- **Line 14:** "oil," "noise"
- **Line 15:** "toiled," "sweated," "went"
- **Line 16:** "shift," "schlepped," "lifted"
- **Line 18:** "that," "high-rise," "flats," "grew"
- **Line 19:** "brood"
- **Line 22:** "trains," "came"
- **Line 23:** "planes," "sound"
- **Line 24:** "now"
- **Line 25:** "TVs"
- **Line 26:** "PCs," "CDs," "DVDs"
- **Line 27:** "stopping," "slogged"
- **Line 28:** "shopping"
- **Line 30:** "seas," "trees"
- **Line 31:** "beef," "cheap"
- **Line 32:** "week"
- **Line 33:** "rain"
- **Line 34:** "grain"
- **Line 35:** "lay," "grave"

REPETITION

The poem uses various kinds of repetition to emphasize the relentless, punishing nature of the woman's work.

Much of this repetition is more specifically anaphora, as the speaker repeats the phrase "To feed" at the start of multiple clauses. Each time, the number of people the speaker must feed increases: "To feed one," "To feed two," "To feed four," "To feed fifty," and so on. This parallelism hammers home the endless nature of the woman's work—she just keeps feeding and feeding—as well as the way that this work continues to explode in scope.

The speaker repeats variations on this phrase as well, in "Feeding ten / was a different kettle" and "She fed // the world." These repetitions are an example of the device polyptoton, and they again emphasize just how much of the woman's time and energy is spent providing for and nourishing others.

There's more anaphora in line 10, again calling readers' attention to the idea that this woman's central role is to provide sustenance for others:

> food in the larder, food on the table,

The repetition of "food" echoes her frenzied attempts to keep up with ever-increasing demands on her time and energy. The repetition in lines 17-20 has a similar effect:

> For a thousand more, she built streets,

for double that, high-rise flats. Cities grew,
her brood doubled, peopled skyscrapers,
trebled. To feed more, more,

This repetition conveys the fact that as soon as the woman has provided for one group, more people arrive; she can barely keep up with the demands of a population that just keeps growing and growing. And epizeuxis ("more, more,") suggests that there is no end in sight—the human population keeps growing, people keep exploiting the earth, and women keep being expected to pick up the slack.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "To feed"
- **Line 5:** "To feed"
- **Line 8:** "To feed"
- **Line 10:** "food," "food"
- **Line 11:** "Feeding"
- **Line 15:** "To feed"
- **Line 17:** "For"
- **Line 18:** "for," "double"
- **Line 19:** "doubled"
- **Line 20:** "To feed," "more, more,"
- **Line 32:** "fed"

ASYNDETON

The poem is bursting with asyndeton. This device speeds up its language, helping to convey the way that the women's responsibilities quickly pile up and spiral out of control.

The device first appears in line 2:

took in washing, ironing, sewing.

The lack of coordinating conjunction between "ironing" and "sewing" suggests that the list is not meant to be an exhaustive depiction of the woman's responsibilities; it's implied that in *addition* to "washing, ironing, [and] sewing," there are undoubtedly *other* tasks of a similar nature that the woman performs. The quick, incomplete list simply gestures to the *kind* of work the woman takes on in order "to feed" her child.

As the poem goes along, however, these lists get longer and more frequent. Take a look at stanza 4, for instance:

was factory gates
at first light, oil, metal, noise, machines.
To feed fifty, she toiled, sweated, went
on the night shift, schlepped, lifted.

The woman's tasks just keep piling up. The lack of any conjunctions between tasks suggests that the woman is running from one job to the next, with no down time in between to recharge or tend to her own needs.

As the woman's struggle becomes more obviously metaphorical, asyndeton echoes the speed with which society has changed and how utterly overworked both women and the planet have become. Take a look at lines 32-36:

[...] She fed
the world, wept rain, scattered the teeth in her head
for grain, swam her tongue in the river to spawn,
sickened, died, lay in a grave, worked, to the bone,
her fingers twenty-four seven.

Once again, there are no coordinating conjunctions between one clause and the next. As a result, the poem passes from the woman's endless work to her death without missing a beat. This suggests that the woman's/earth's death is the inevitable outcome of such relentless exploitation.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 9-11
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 18-20
- Line 20
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 22-23
- Lines 25-26
- Lines 29-32
- Lines 32-36

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The relationship between the woman and her ever-increasing "offspring" can be read as an extended metaphor for the relationship between the earth and humanity.

Interpreted this way, the poem charts the development of civilization itself:

- At the beginning of the poem, the woman "work[s] from home," happily taking care of a single child. This suggests a time early in history when small communities of people lived in relative harmony with the earth, taking from their environment only what they needed in order to sustain themselves.
- By the second stanza, the woman is "work[ing] outside." Her tasks suggest the beginning of agriculture, when people "sewed seeds, watered, / threshed, scythed," and "gathered" in order to feed themselves more reliably. At this point, people

began to domesticate natural resources. Communities grew and started to live closer together, leading to the creation of "alehouses" (bars) and other common spaces.
- Next comes the dawn of industry: revolutions in technology and increasing demands for convenience lead to the creation of factories, which can produce items quickly and efficiently. Yet all this technology doesn't lighten the woman's load; on the contrary, it has simply made it possible for the woman to work more—to take on "the night shift," toiling day in and day out.
- Industrialization leads to the urbanization of society as more people move to cities in search of work. Streets are paved, and huge skyscrapers are constructed to house people and businesses. Now, the woman (and the earth, in this metaphor), really starts to feel the strain of humanity's endless desire for "more, more."
- The poem then enters the modern era of mass production on a global scale. Products are made quickly and cheaply. Thanks to "internet shopping," people can order things from the comfort of their own homes and have them shipped across the world at record speed. It has become easier and easier for people to take from the earth without regard for the earth's capacities, the poem implies.
- To keep up with the demand for "more," humanity starts devasting the earth: cutting down trees, sucking fish out of the oceans, and grazing cattle for the purpose of "cheap fast food."

The desire for convenience and profit comes at the expense of sustainability, and, eventually, the woman/earth is spent. The extended metaphor culminates in the final stanza of the poem, which suggests that if humanity continues to take and take from the earth, the earth will "sicken[]" and "die."

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

ALLITERATION

Alliteration works just like assonance in "Work": it adds music and intensity to the poem's language, in turn emphasizing the relentless nature of the woman's work. Listen to lines 21-24, for example:

> she dug underground, tunnelled,
> laid down track, drove trains. Quadruple came,
> multiplied, she built planes, outflew sound.
> Mother to millions now,

The sounds just keep piling up, in turn conveying the way the woman's week seems to never end.

Frequent consonance adds to the effect. Just listen to how many sounds are reacted within words in those same lines:

> she dug underground, tunnelled,
> laid down track, drove trains. Quadruple came,
> multiplied, she built planes, outflew sound.
> Mother to millions now,

The lines are brimming with /d/, /n/, /l/, /t/, /r/, and /p/ sounds. This onslaught of consonance conveys the overwhelming nature of the burdens placed on this woman.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "soup," "spoon"
- **Line 6:** "outside," "sewed seeds"
- **Line 7:** "scythed"
- **Line 8:** "feed four"
- **Line 13:** "factory"
- **Line 14:** "first"
- **Line 15:** "feed fifty"
- **Line 16:** "shift, schlepped"
- **Line 21:** "tunnelled"
- **Line 22:** "track," "trains," "Quadruple came"
- **Line 24:** "Mother," "millions"
- **Line 27:** "stopping," "slogged"
- **Line 30:** "fish," "felled"
- **Line 31:** "fast food"
- **Line 32:** "offspring swelled"
- **Line 33:** "world, wept," "teeth"
- **Line 34:** "swam," "tongue," "spawn"
- **Line 35:** "sickened"

VOCABULARY

Threshed (Lines 6-7) - To *thresh* is to remove the grain or seeds from a plant.

Scythed (Lines 6-7) - To *scythe* something is to cut it with a scythe, which is a long, curved blade used for cutting grass or wheat.

Grafted (Line 9) - *Grafting* is slang for working, with the implication that the work is dishonest, illegal, or corrupt.

Alehouse (Line 9) - A pub or tavern.

Larder (Line 10) - A pantry or storeroom.

A different kettle (Lines 11-12) - This is a reference to the phrase "a different kettle of fish," meaning something else entirely (i.e., "a whole new ballgame").

Schlepped (Lines 15-16) - Hauled or lugged.

Brood (Line 19) - Offspring.

Trebled (Lines 19-20) - Multiplied by three.

Flogged (Line 25) - Sold.

Slogged (Lines 27-28) - To labour over a long period of time.

Trawled (Line 30) - To *trawl* is to fish by dragging a large net over the bottom of a body of water.

Hoovered (Line 30) - Sucked up (as with a Hoover vacuum cleaner).

Felled (Line 30) - Chopped down.

Spawn (Line 34) - Produce offspring.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Work" consists of 36 lines of free verse, broken up into nine quatrains (four-line stanzas). Otherwise, the poem uses free verse, meaning it doesn't have a regular meter or rhyme scheme.

These quatrains essentially chart the development of human civilization and thus suggest that the poem can be read as a commentary on the exploitation of the earth:

- Stanza 1 suggests the early days of humanity, when people lived in small communities in harmony with the land.
- Stanza 2 represents the dawn of agriculture, when people started taming the land in order to feed larger groups.
- Stanza 3 represents the industrial revolution and the beginning of factory work.
- Stanza 4 and 5 represent the subsequent urbanization of society and the development of densely populated cities.
- Stanza 6, 7, and 8 represent the modern era of cheap mass production, the birth of the internet, and factory farming.
- Stanza 9 then leaps into the future, when the earth will no longer have enough to sustain both humanity and itself and will die.

METER

As a free verse poem, "Work" doesn't follow a set meter. This is true for most contemporary poetry and for Duffy's poems more specifically. In "Work," the lack of meter allows for more natural and conversational rhythms to emerge. In this way, the poem feels not just more modern, but more realistic and intimate as well. It *sounds* the way people actually speak.

RHYME SCHEME

"Work" is a free verse poem, so it doesn't use a rhyme scheme. This keeps the poem's language sounding natural and modern.

That said, the poem does contain frequent internal and end rhymes. Listen to the rhyme between "corn" and "born" in lines 7-8, for example:

> threshed, scythed, gathered barley, wheat, corn.
> Twins were born. [...]

There's another rhyme between lines 9-10:

> she grafted harder, second job in the alehouse,
> food in the larder, [...]

And as the poem approaches its final moments, the rhymes become even more frequent. Listen to line 26:

> designed PCs, ripped CDs, burned DVDs.

Lines 30-34 are also brimming with full and slant rhymes (plus more general assonance and alliteration):

> she trawled the seas, hoovered fish, felled trees,
> grazed beef, sold cheap fast food, put in
> a 90-hour week. Her offspring swelled. She fed
> the world, wept rain, scattered the teeth in her head
> for grain, [...]

The poem is extremely musical, and all these rhymes add intensity to the speaker's language. The fact that they're not arranged in any particular *pattern*, meanwhile, keeps things feeling flexible, unpredictable, and free.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a woman and a mother. At the beginning of the poem, she has one child whom she's happy to "feed." When she has more children, however, she's forced to take on additional, increasingly taxing work.

As the number of her children "multiplies" to unmanageable proportions, so too do her responsibilities. The poem suggests that her "offspring" take and take from her, leaving her no time or energy to care for herself. Eventually, she dies, having been "worked, to the bone." The woman comes to represent not a single person but women in general and throughout history, implying that society has long expected women to care for those around them at their own expense.

The poem can also be read as an extended metaphor for humanity's relationship to the earth. In this metaphor, the woman represents Mother Earth, who is generous and "able" to care for her "children" in the beginning but cannot sustain humanity's greed and exploitation.

SETTING

The poem's setting spans all of human history. It begins with the woman caring for a single child from "home" before moving into the fields, then into an "alehouse" (a bar), an industrial factory, and a crowded city (complete with underground subway tracks, enormous skyscrapers, and people hawking illegal CDs and DVDs). Towards the end of the poem, the setting expands to encompass the depths of the ocean that people trawl and the forests they cut down.

The vast, ever-growing setting reflects the idea that woman's labor has been exploited throughout time, from the dawn of agriculture to the modern age, across the world. The poem's swiftly expanding scope also reflects the way that the growth of human civilization has led to the increasing devastation of the planet.

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.

Duffy published "Work" in her 2003 collection *Feminine Gospels*. This collection explores the lives of women both historical and imagined, including Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, Marilyn Monroe, and Princess Diana. Like Duffy's earlier collection *The World's Wife*, *Feminine Gospels* is known for its distinctly feminist themes, wit, and embrace of everyday, colloquial language.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy's poetic career took off during the age of Margaret Thatcher, whose long tenure as Prime Minister of the UK was marked by class struggle, poverty, and the dismantling of post-war welfare institutions. Thatcher rose to power in the aftermath of the turbulent 1970s, and her libertarian economics and conservative social policies (as well as her prominent role as the first woman Prime Minister of the UK) made her a divisive and much-reviled figure. Many working-class people took a particular dislike to Thatcher for her union-busting and her failure to support impoverished families in industrial fields like coal mining.

Perhaps in response to a growing social conservatism, the '70s and '80s in England were also marked by a rise in feminist consciousness. Books like Susan Faludi's *Backlash* examined the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which society was reacting against the women's movement, and third-wave feminism, focused on identity and political power, began to emerge out of the second-wave feminism of the '60s.

Duffy's work, with its interest in women's inner lives and areas of female experience often neglected by the literary world, reflects the tumultuous political world in which she came of age.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Guardian Book Review of Feminine Gospels — Elaine Feinstein takes a close look at Duffy's 2002 collection, in which "Work" was published. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/14/featuresreviews.guardianreview)
- An Introduction to Duffy's Life and Career — A biography of the poetry from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- The Exploitation of Women in Today's Global Workforce — A Human Rights Watch article discussing the various ways in which female workers continue to be undervalued and even abused. (https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/08/how-women-are-exploited-todays-global-workforce)
- The Impact of Human Exploitation of the Earth — A Natural History Museum article explaining how human consumption is impacting the earth, what people can do about it, and what will happen if no action is taken. (https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2019/december/humans-are-causing-life-on-earth-to-vanish.html)
- Duffy on Her Role as Poet Laureate — An interview with Duffy in which she discusses the importance of her responsibility as the first woman and LGBTQ+ poet laureate of the United Kingdom. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnt5p1DGD9U)

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 Aesop
- 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

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*Work.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 May 2022. Web. 13 Jun 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Work.*" LitCharts LLC, May 25, 2022. Retrieved June 13, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/carol-ann-duffy/work.