Mrs Sisyphus

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker, the wife of Sisyphus, points out her husband, saying that he's the one over there rolling that rock uphill like a chump. While she's referring to it as a rock, it's actually closer to the size of a church. It didn't bother her *that* much when Sisyphus started with this stone-rolling business. Now, however, it infuriates her. Just look at him, she says—he's a total fool. She's so angry she could attack him with a dagger.

Sisyphus always tells his wife just to remember all the benefits of his work. But what good is a benefit, she yells back, when he doesn't even have the time for a glass of wine or to simply go for a stroll outside? He's a nerd, Mrs. Sisyphus says. People come from all over to stare at him. They think what he's doing is simply eccentric, that he does this to amuse himself. It's really just utter foolishness, in his wife's opinion. He'd be better off howling at the moon, given that the stupid rock just rolls right back down again once he's reached the top of the hill. Yet he insists that he can't shun his duties. Oh, he's perceptive as a bird of prey, his wife says sarcastically—tough as a shark. He can't shun his duties!

And that, Mrs. Sisyphus says, leaves her lying by herself at night, feeling the way Noah's wife must have felt while he was off building the ark; feeling the way Johann Sebastian Bach's wife must have felt. Her voice has been diminished into a screech, she says, and her smile is now more like a contorted sneer. Meanwhile, he's up there on that hill as darkness falls, still devoting everything he has to his work.

THEMES

ABSURD DEVOTION TO WORK

"Mrs Sisyphus" responds to the myth of Sisyphus, an ancient king whose punishment for cheating death was to eternally roll a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down again as soon as he reached the top. Duffy's poem depicts Sisyphus as a workaholic whose exasperated wife, the poem's speaker, is fed up with the way he prioritizes his pointless job over everything else—including their marriage. In this way, the poem illustrates how relentless devotion to work is at once absurd, foolish, and selfish, capable of eroding relationships and the ability to enjoy the "perks" of one's labor.

The version of Sisyphus in this poem is more or less married to his work. His wife says that the "stone" he's "pushing [...] up the hill" is "the size of a kirk." A "kirk" is a church, so perhaps this implies that Sisyphus practically worships the mundane task he's been assigned.

Sisyphus also repeatedly says that he "Mustn't shirk" (or evade) his task, apparently possessed by a sense of unshakeable responsibility. Even that late in the day, in "the deepening murk of the hill, / he is giving one hundred percent and more to his work." In other words, he is so devoted to work that he has nothing left to "give" to anything else—including her!

The speaker clearly feels that Sisyphus's obsession with work isn't worth it. Not only is the work itself pointless, but his ambition is ruining their relationship. Her husband's dedication becomes utterly ridiculous when readers remember that he's just *pushing a rock up a hill*. The speaker says he "might as well bark at the moon," implying that his refusal to admit defeat isn't admirable but *delusional*, tied to his inability to accept failure or recognize what's actually important in life.

Building on this idea, she asks what the point of work "perk[s]" (or benefits) are "when you haven't the time to pop open a cork / or go for so much as a walk in the park?" It seems that work is keeping Sisyphus so busy that he can't even enjoy a glass of wine or a simple outing with his wife. She also describes herself as lying "alone in the dark," reflecting her loneliness as her husband is off at his job.

She then compares herself to other women whose lives have disappeared behind the ambition of their famous husbands. She says she "feel[s] like Noah's wife did / when he hammered away at the Ark," and "like Frau, Johann Sebastian Bach." This work obsession, the poem suggests, is part of a broader, masculine careerism—something that, in this speaker's mind, is at once selfish and ridiculous.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

MASCULINE PRIDE AND WOMEN'S LACK OF CHOICES

Mrs. Sisyphus understands that her husband's delusional pride is to blame for her own unhappiness. His refusal to accept the reality of his situation—that he will never succeed in pushing the rock to the top of the hill—has made him a laughing stock and left his wife "alone in the dark" each night through no fault of her own. It's *his* vanity that has "reduced" her voice "to a squawk," and she resents her inability to separate herself from her husband's misdeeds. In likening her dismal situation to that of the wives of other famous men, Mrs. Sisyphus implies that this intense need to succeed is a traditionally *masculine* trait—one for which women, historically been confined to the home, have often paid the price.

The speaker resents Sisyphus not just for making a joke of

himself, but also for dragging her into his mess. Her entire life, essentially, has been unfairly defined by her husband's choices. (In some versions of the original myth, Sisyphus in fact tricks his wife into playing a role in the scheme that earns him his rock-pushing punishment.)

Yet her unhappiness can't make Sisyphus accept reality. He still thinks himself "keen as a hawk" and "lean as a shark," like an apex predator at the top of his game. He still believes that he might succeed and thus that he "Mustn't shirk" his duty. His wife knows this is a "load of old bollocks," but she doesn't get rewarded for seeing through her husband's delusional vanity. Instead, her "voice [is] reduced to a squawk" and her "smile to a twisted smirk." Sisyphus's obsession with work has not simply robbed his wife of her joy, but turned her into a cliché: the nagging wife. Such stereotypes, the poem implies, are deeply unfair—the fault of selfish, prideful husbands rather than needy, pestering wives.

Yet the speaker can't get free of Sisyphus's narrative; her story is bound up with—and overshadowed by—his. It's not just a Sisyphus problem, either. The speaker compares herself to "Noah's wife" and "Frau, Johann Sebastian Bach," implying that these women were likewise forced to put up with the relentless ambition of their famous husbands. Note, too, how none of these women get first names in the poem, reflecting the ways in which their lives have been subsumed by their husbands'.

Unlike these women, Mrs. Sisyphus isn't married to an accomplished man but to a man who thought he could outsmart the gods and failed. Her life will be forever marked by his notoriety; she will have to live with *his* hubris. The speaker's inability to free herself from the spectacle Sisyphus has made reflects the ways that women's lives (in classical literature as well as much of history) have all too often been defined by the choices of the men around them—choices that often fail to take them into consideration at all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

That's him pushing ...
... with a dirk.

The poem's title lets readers know who the speaker is: the wife of Sisyphus, a king in Greek myth known for his attempts to outsmart the gods and cheat death. When the gods discovered his trickery, Zeus sentenced Sisyphus to an eternity of rolling an enormous boulder up a hill. As soon as Sisyphus neared the top, the boulder would roll back down, thus ensuring he could never actually complete his task. (This is why people refer to difficult yet futile tasks as "Sisyphean"!)

This poem is told from the perspective of *Mrs.* Sisyphus, however (whose name in myth was Merope). And even as the poem draws on ancient myths, its language is distinctly contemporary and conversational—the first hint that Duffy is reinterpreting the story of Sisyphus and Merope to make a point about modern life and work.

The poem itself opens with Mrs. Sisyphus pointing her husband out to an unseen listener nearby, saying, "That's him pushing the stone up the hill, the jerk." Right away, it's clear that she's far from thrilled with her husband's choices! She then uses a simile to compare the "stone" Sisyphus is pushing to a "kirk," or church. This comparison suggests just how enormous this rock is, and it also implies just how devoted Sisyphus is to pushing that rock up the hill. It's as if he *worships* his work or treats it as a holy calling.

He's clearly been at it for a while, too: his wife goes on to say that back when Sisyphus first started with this rock-pushing business, his intense commitment "just used to irk," or mildly annoy, her; now it "incenses," or enrages, her. Perhaps that's because she understands that he's never going to succeed—that the stone he pushes will just keep rolling on down the hill. Having lost patience with his commitment to a pointless task, she calls Sisyphus a "berk" (or a dunce) and adds that she could "do something vicious to him with a dirk" (a dagger). In other words, she's so angry she'd like to attack him with a knife.

This is a violent image, to be sure, but the poem's language keeps things feeling light-hearted. The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't follow a regular meter or a rhyme scheme. That said, it's filled with playful rhymes: in the first stanza, for example, every line ends in a full rhyme ("jerk," "kirk," "irk," "berk," "dirk"). The wealth of sharp, biting /k/ sounds evokes Mrs. Sisyphus's bitter disgust with her husband. The heavy use of single rhyme sound also echoes the repetitive nature of Sisyphus's task. Finally, these are all rather funny sounding, unusual words, and their presence adds to the poem's playful feel.

LINES 6-9

Think of the ...
... in the park?

Sisyphus, the speaker says, attempts to justify his devotion to his work by telling his wife to "Think of the perks"—that is, the benefits. His wife is none too happy with his justification, however. She angrily asks, "What use is a perk [...] when you haven't the time to pop open a cork / or go for so much as a walk in the park?"

Her question is rhetorical, meant to make a point: these supposed "perks" don't matter if they're keeping Sisyphus from experiencing anything in life *other* than work. Also notice the

diacope of "perk"/"perks." This repetition draws attention to how differently Mrs. Sisyphus and her husband see things: he thinks all this endless work is worth it because of the perks that come with the job, whereas she thinks no benefit can possibly make such all-consuming drudgery worthwhile. Sisyphus doesn't even have—or perhaps doesn't even *make*—time to sit and have a glass of wine or even to stroll through the park.

"Think of the perks" also sounds a lot like corporate lingo, reminding readers that the poem is reimagining the myth of Sisyphus in part to comment on the nature of modern-day work. It's also commenting more specifically on traditionally *masculine* ambition and dedication to work over other aspects of life, including family.

The speaker continues to fill the lines with sharp /k/ consonance that evokes her bitterness. The /p/ alliteration ("perks," "perk," "pop," "park") works similarly, suggesting the vehemence with which Mrs. Sisyphus is "shriek[ing]" at her husband. And while the end rhymes are slant ("shriek," "cork," "park"), the sound of the poem's language remains intensely repetitive.

LINES 10-14

He's a dork. ...
... nearer the mark.

Next, Mrs. Sisyphus calls her husband "a dork." She says that people come from all over just to watch him rolling his boulder up the hill. Notice the alliteration and consonance in line 11:

> Folks flock from miles around just to gawk.

These sounds add intensity and emphasis to the line, suggesting just how much negative attention Sisyphus is garnering and just how frustrated Mrs. Sisyphus is with him over it.

She then says that these people think Sisyphus is just doing this for fun—that "They think it's a quirk, / a bit of a lark." In other words, they think he's either a little eccentric or that he's just trying to make people laugh. ("A bit of a lark" is an idiom meaning something that's done just for a bit of fun.) But Mrs. Sisyphus knows better: Sisyphus takes his job absolutely seriously. She uses two more idioms, saying that calling his work a "load of old bollocks" (or complete nonsense) "is nearer the mark" (or more accurate). Basically, he's delusional and foolish rather entertainingly quirky.

Notice the continued /k/ consonance here, which creates slant rhymes ("dork," "gawk," "quirk"). There is also full rhyme in lines 13-14 ("lark" and "mark"). This insistent use of rhyme suggests that no matter how much Mrs. Sisyphus rails against Sisyphus and his work, nothing is changing—he just continues to roll that boulder back and forth with absolute dedication, even though he's no closer to being finished than he's ever been.

LINES 15-19

He might as ...
... the way down.

So pointless is Sisyphus's work, the speaker continues, that he "might as well bark / at the moon." To "bark at the moon" is an idiom used when someone is wasting their time with a pursuit or protest. Sisyphus's work is about as effective as a dog yapping at an object in the sky.

Nothing will ever come of Sisyphus's efforts, in other words. This is because, Mrs. Sisyphus explains with clear frustration, the stone Sisyphus pushes is "no sooner up / than it's rolling back / all the way down." Note how the enjambment here makes the lines tumble down the page, evoking the trajectory of the boulder itself.

This direct allusion to the mythology surrounding Sisyphus highlights the pointlessness of his work. In the myth, it was Sisyphus's hubris (his belief that he could outsmart the gods) that earned him this particularly tedious punishment. The poem implies that Mrs. Sisyphus isn't just frustrated that Sisyphus is wasting his time on this meaningless job; she's also furious at his delusional arrogance. He refuses to accept the reality of his situation: that the work he spends all his time doing doesn't matter, and that he will never succeed in his task.

LINES 20-24

And what does ...
... Mustn't shirk!

In line 20, Mrs. Sisyphus poses another rhetorical question:

> And what does he say?

Unlike the first question, which was directed at Sisyphus, this one is aimed at the reader. It's as if the speaker knows it's pointless trying to make her case to Sisyphus himself; he's so single-mindedly focused on work that he doesn't seem to notice anything or anyone else. The speaker thus tries to convince the reader of her husband's daftness and of the absurdity of his all-consuming dedication to his task.

Mrs. Sisyphus seems to already know what her husband will say in response to her criticisms: "Musn't shirk," meaning he mustn't avoid his duties. Her tone here becomes mocking as she ironically compares him to "a hawk" and "a shark." These similes imply that Sisyphus sees himself as a ruthless hunter, as someone who's quick, sharp, and nimble in his ambitious pursuits. Given that his wife has already called him a "jerk," "dork," and "berk," it's clear that he is not the savvy worker he believes himself to be!

These similes also subtly allude to the original myth, in which Sisyphus was known for being an extremely clever trickster. Perhaps, then, Mrs. Sisyphus is bemoaning the fact that all his cleverness has only led to his downfall.

The stanza closes with another "Mustn't shirk," this time with an exclamation mark. This emphasizes the repetitive nature of Sisyphus's task and his absurdly enthusiastic dedication to a pointless task. Readers can almost see his wife rolling her eyes, sarcastically muttering, *God forbid he "shirk" his incredibly important job!*

LINES 25-28

But I lie ...
... Johann Sebastian Bach.

In the third stanza, Mrs. Sisyphus turns away from ridiculing her husband and describes her own situation instead. While he's off pushing his stone up a hill day in and day out, she's left "alone in the dark."

This is the most vulnerable moment in the poem: Mrs. Sisyphus implies that beneath her frustration and rage is genuine loneliness because her husband keeps choosing his work over her.

She compares herself to the wife of Noah, the biblical figure who famously built a giant ark when God decided to punish humanity by flooding the earth. Noah's wife, the speaker imagines, must have felt terribly lonely while he worked and worked in preparation for the flood. She also compares herself to the wife of "Johann Sebastian Bach," a famous German composer. All these women, the poem implies, were left behind by their husbands' ambition. They don't even get names in the poem, referred to only in terms of their relationship with the men in their lives.

Yet Mrs. Sisyphus's situation is slightly different from that of Noah's wife or "Frau Johann Sebastion Bach": her husband isn't building a humanity-saving boat or composing music that will live on for centuries. He's just a foolish, vain man pushing a rock up a hill over and over again. Making matters worse, he's doing it because he thought he thought he could outsmart the gods.

Not only is Mrs. Sisyphus lonely, then, but she's upset that her reputation will forever be bound up in her husband's senseless decisions. If she's remembered for anything, it will be for *his* arrogance.

LINES 29-32

My voice reduced ...
... to his work.

Sisyphus's actions have "reduced" his wife's voice "to a squawk." In other words, they've made her voice at once quiet and grating, her complaints making her feel like a squawking bird. Her "smile," meanwhile, is not a genuine grin but rather "a twisted smirk." Whatever happiness she once felt has turned to anger and bitterness, and she blames her husband's actions for this change.

Sibilance ("squawk," "smile," "smirk," "voice," "reduced," "twisted") fills these lines with a sinister hiss, evoking just how riddled with resentment Mrs. Sisyphus is.

She concludes the poem by saying that while she stews in the darkness, Sisyphus continues his work "up on the deepening murk of the hill." Even though night is approaching, Sisyphus isn't coming home to be with his wife; he's still "giving one hundred percent and more to his work"—meaning there's nothing left over for her, or for anything else in his life.

Notice that even though Mrs. Sisyphus has been describing Sisyphus at work this whole time, it isn't until the final line of the poem that she actually uses the word "work." It's as though all the relentless /k/ sounds in the poem have been building to this moment, emphasizing that this "work" is the issue at the heart of the poem.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem is a response to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, a king of Corinth known for clever attempts to trick the gods and cheat death. As punishment for his hubris, Zeus condemned Sisyphus to push a boulder up a hill for eternity. As soon as the boulder neared the top of the hill, however, it would roll away again, ensuring that Sisyphus's task was never complete. (The modern adjective "Sisyphean" comes from this myth and refers to a difficult yet futile task.)

The poem picks up after the myth typically ends, with Sisyphus having been "pushing the stone up the hill" for some time. Duffy makes some specific allusions to the myth throughout the poem. In lines 17-19, for example, Mrs. Sisyphus says, "that feckin' stone's no sooner up / than it's rolling back / all the way down."

The poem also briefly alludes to the wives of two other famous men: Noah and Johann Sebastian Bach. In the Bible, God tasks Noah with building a giant ark to save humanity and the animals of earth before God unleashes a vengeful flood upon the world. Johann Sebastian Bach, meanwhile, is an extremely famous 18th-century German composer. The poem references these famous men to expand its point: the poem isn't just about Mrs. Sisyphus, but about the way that women's lives throughout history have so often been overshadowed by their husbands' deeds.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "That's him pushing the stone up the hill, the jerk."
- **Lines 17-19:** "that feckin' stone's no sooner up / than it's rolling back / all the way down."
- **Lines 25-28:** "But I lie alone in the dark, / feeling like Noah's wife did / when he hammered away at the Ark; / like Frau Johann Sebastian Bach."
- **Lines 31-32:** "while, up on the deepening murk of the hill,

/ he is giving one hundred percent and more to his work."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration makes certain moments in the poem sound more playfully musical, and it also adds emphasis to Mrs. Sisyphus's forceful criticism of her husband. Much of this alliteration overlaps with more general consonance, adding yet more intensity to the poem's language.

For instance, in the first stanza, /s/ and /st/ alliteration (along with more general sibilance) suggests that Mrs. Sisyphus is almost *hissing* her criticisms of her husband:

> [...] the stone up the hill, the jerk.
> I call it a stone—it's nearer the size of a kirk.
> When he first started out [...]

Sometimes alliteration helps to call readers' attention to specific words and ideas, as with the /p/ alliteration in lines 6-9 ("perks," "perk," "pop," "park"). The plosive /p/ sounds make Mrs. Sisyphus sound all the more exasperated, and they also highlight the idea that these "perks" shouldn't be replacing the things that make life worth living to begin with—"pop[ping] open" a bottle of wine with one's loved ones or going for "a walk in the park."

In line 11, /f/ alliteration combines with /k/ consonance to emphasize all the negative attention Sisyphus has brought on himself:

> Folks flock from miles around just to gawk.

The fricative /f/ alliteration and the harsh /k/ consonance work together to evoke Mrs. Sisyphus's bitter disgust at what a fool her husband is making of himself.

Finally, in lines 29-30, more /s/ alliteration brings the poem's imagery to life. The speaker says that her voice has been "reduced" to a mere "squawk," the harsh, shrieking noise of a bird, and her "smile" to a bitter "smirk." The hissing sounds here once again suggest the speaker's disgust and distaste.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "stone"
- **Line 2:** "stone," "size"
- **Line 3:** "started"
- **Line 6:** "perks"
- **Line 7:** "perk"
- **Line 8:** "pop"
- **Line 9:** "park"
- **Line 11:** "Folks," "flock"
- **Line 13:** "lark"
- **Line 14:** "load," "mark"
- **Line 15:** "might"
- **Line 16:** "moon"
- **Line 17:** "stone's," "sooner"
- **Line 21:** "shirk"
- **Line 23:** "shark"
- **Line 24:** "shirk"
- **Line 29:** "squawk"
- **Line 30:** "smile," "smirk"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance adds musicality and emphasis to the poem, and it also helps to evoke Mrs. Sisyphus's anger and frustration.

Most of the consonance here is built around the sharp /k/ sound, which ends most of the poem's lines and creates an abundance of full and slant rhymes: "jerk," "kirk," "irk," "berk," "dirk," "cork," "dork," "quirk," "gawk," "mark," "bark," "back," etc. This harsh sound piles up throughout the poem, reflecting the relentless nature of Sisyphus's task and his wife's ever-growing resentment and frustration.

There are a couple of instances of consonance *other* than the overbearing /k/ sounds, however. Listen to the hissing sibilance and crisp /t/ sounds of "voice reduced to a squawk / my smile to a twisted smirk," for example, which lend this description of the speaker's bitterness and appropriately biting, nasty tone.

Elsewhere, consonance brings the poem's descriptions to life. Note, for example, how the plosive /p/ consonance in line 8 ("pop open") evokes the sound of a bottle of wine being uncorked. And the mixture of assonance and consonance in the phrase "load of old bollocks" calls readers' attention to this idiom, which the speaker is using to call her husband's endeavor complete and utter nonsense. The lolling /l/ and round /o/ sounds slow the line down, drawing out Mrs. Sisyphus's disdain.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "That's," "stone," "jerk"
- **Line 2:** "call," "stone," "size," "kirk"
- **Line 3:** "first started," "just," "irk"
- **Line 4:** "incenses," "absolute," "berk"
- **Line 5:** "dirk"
- **Line 6:** "perks"
- **Line 7:** "perk," "shriek"
- **Line 8:** "pop," "open," "cork"
- **Line 9:** "walk," "park"
- **Line 10:** "dork"
- **Line 11:** "Folks," "flock," "from," "gawk"
- **Line 12:** "think," "quirk"
- **Line 13:** "lark"
- **Line 14:** "old," "bollocks," "mark"

- **Line 15:** “well,” “bark”
- **Line 16:** “moon”
- **Line 17:** “feckin,” “stone's,” “sooner”
- **Line 18:** “back”
- **Line 19:** “down”
- **Line 21:** “shirk”
- **Line 22:** “keen,” “hawk”
- **Line 23:** “lean,” “shark”
- **Line 24:** “shirk”
- **Line 25:** “lie,” “alone,” “dark”
- **Line 27:** “he,” “hammered,” “Ark”
- **Line 28:** “Sebastian,” “Bach”
- **Line 29:** “voice,” “reduced,” “squawk”
- **Line 30:** “smile,” “to,” “twisted,” “smirk”
- **Line 31:** “up,” “deepening,” “murk”
- **Line 32:** “work”

DIACOPE

The poem uses diacope three times. First, in lines 1-2, the speaker repeats the word "stone":

> That's him pushing the stone up the hill, the jerk.
> I call it a stone—it's nearer the size of a kirk.

The speaker is simply revising her previous statement here, calling attention to the "stone's" size (it's more like a church than a simple rock). The repetition makes the speaker sounds casual and conversational, as though she's speaking to the reader in real-time.

The two other moments of diacope emphasize the repetitive nature of Sisyphus's work. In lines 6-9, for example, Mrs. Sisyphus describes an exchange between her and her husband:

> Think of the perks, he says.
> What use is a perk, I shriek,

The repetition of "perk[s]" draws attention to the fact that Mrs. Sisyphus and her husband have very different ideas about what constitutes a "perk." To Mrs. Sisyphus, it doesn't matter how good Sisyphus's job benefits are if they are keeping him from enjoying even the most basic pleasures life has to offer!

And in lines 21 and 24, the repetition of Sisyphus's phrase "Musn't shirk" emphasizes how single-minded he is: all he can think about is his work duties.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “stone”
- **Line 2:** “stone”
- **Line 6:** “perks”
- **Line 7:** “perk”
- **Line 21:** “Mustn't shirk”
- **Line 24:** “Mustn't shirk”

ONOMATOPOEIA

Several instances of onomatopoeia make the speaker's frustration sound all the more lively and vivid. In line 8, for example, the word "pop" evokes the sound of a bottle of wine being opened—a sound many people associate with socializing and relaxation, two parts of life that are just as essential as work.

In line 15, Mrs. Sisyphus says that Sisyphus "might as well bark / at the moon" rather than keep doing his pointless, mind-numbing work of rolling a stone up a hill endlessly. The word "bark" is another (albeit subtle) example of onomatopoeia, since it actually *evokes* the sound it is describing, the sound of a dog yapping pointlessly at something that doesn't even know it exists.

And in line 29, Mrs. Sisyphus says that her "voice" has been "reduced to a squawk." The word "squawk" itself sounds like the surprised or indignant cry a bird makes. The word's use here evokes Mrs. Sisyphus's harsh frustration, and it might also suggest that there's something dehumanizing about Sisyphus's treatment of his wife. What's more, women who criticize their husbands or order them around are often said to "henpeck" them—a gendered term this "squawk" calls to mind. It's as if Mrs. Sisyphus realizes that Sisyphus's actions have turned her into a caricature: the constantly nagging wife rather than a person with a "voice" that matters.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** “pop”
- **Line 15:** “bark”
- **Line 29:** “squawk”

SIMILE

Similes help to bring the poem to life for readers. For instance, in line 2, Mrs. Sisyphus says that the "stone" Sisyphus rolls endlessly "up the hill" is "nearer the size of a kirk"—that is, it's almost the size of a church. This simile not only emphasizes just how *big the* stone is, but it also suggests Sisyphus's almost religious devotion to work. Sisyphus, the simile implies, practically *worships* his futile task.

In lines 22-23, Mrs. Sisyphus compares her husband to two different animals, saying that he is "keen" (or perceptive) "as a hawk" and "lean" (or tough) "as a shark." Note the parallelism here as well: the grammar of these phrases is the same ("blank as a blank"), in turn emphasizing the similarity between these comparisons. In both cases, Mrs. Sisyphus is comparing her husband to a smart, powerful predatory animal. While it's possible that she's being earnest (Sisyphus was quite clever in

the original myth), it's more likely that she's being sarcastic, mocking the way Sisyphus sees himself. He thinks his dedication to his work is proof of his "keen" mind and "lean" body when in fact he is just making a fool of himself.

Mrs. Sisyphus also uses similes to compare her situation to that of "Noah's wife" and the wife of "Johann Sebastian Bach." Noah here refers to the biblical figure who saved humanity and animals from the great flood in Genesis, and Bach is a renowned 18th-century composer. These similies imply that Mrs. Sisyphus's situation isn't unique; there have been plenty of women whose lives and stories have been subsumed by their famous husband's deeds.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I call it a stone—it's nearer the size of a kirk."
- **Lines 22-23:** "keen as a hawk, / lean as a shark"
- **Line 26:** "feeling like Noah's wife did"
- **Line 28:** "like Frau Johann Sebastian Bach."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Rhetorical questions highlight Mrs. Sisyphus's complete and utter exasperation with her husband. In lines 7-9, for example, she directs a question at Sisyphus that clearly isn't meant to be answered:

> What use is a perk, I shriek,
> when you haven't the time to pop open a cork
> or go for so much as a walk in the park?

Mrs. Sisyphus asks this question in order to a point: that perks don't matter if you never get to use them! Sisyphus is too tied to his job to actually enjoy the supposed perks of his labor.

Mrs. Sisyphus poses a second rhetorical question later in the stanza, this time aimed at the reader/audience. After she describes the "stone [...] rolling back / all the way down" every time Sisyphus pushes it up the hill, she says, in utter frustration, "And what does he say? / Musn't shirk—". The rhetorical question here implies that Mrs. Sisyphus has been going through this for quite a while: if she were to bring up her frustrations, she knows exactly what her husband would say.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "What use is a perk, I shriek, / when you haven't the time to pop open a cork / or go for so much as a walk in the park?"
- **Line 20:** "And what does he say?"

COLLOQUIALISM

"Mrs. Sisyphus" uses several colloquialisms and modern idioms. These make the poem feel more casual and conversational, as though Mrs. Sisyphus is ranting off the cuff. Using these very modern phrases also reminds readers that the poem is using the myth of Sisyphus to comment on the nature of *modern* work.

Many of the colloquialisms in the poem come from the UK, where Duffy herself is from. "Dirk," for example, refers to an old kind of Scottish dagger. "Berk," meanwhile, is British slang for a fool. And while "kirk" can refer to any church, it's usually used to talk about the Church of Scotland. All these Briticisms make for a humorous contrast between the poem's mythical subject and its very casual language: the ancient Sisyphus gets cut down to size, treated like any other Brit rather than a legendary figure.

The poem's first idiom then pops up in like 13: the speaker says that people who come to "gawk" at Sisyphus repeatedly rolling his boulder up the hill think his task is nothing more than "a bit of a lark." This idiom describes something that is done for giggles—in other words, they don't realize how seriously Sisyphus takes his work! To them, it seems like he's just showing off or having fun. His wife then says that "A load of old bollocks is nearer the mark." This line contains two idioms: "A load of old bollocks," another Briticism, refers to something that is complete and utter nonsense, while "nearer the mark" just means more accurate or closer to the truth.

In fact, she continues, "He might as well bark / at the moon." This is yet another idiom, and it means to do some to no effect or to protest in vain. In other words, no matter how many times Sisyphus rolls that boulder up the hill, it will always roll right back down before he reaches the top. His task is pointless.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the jerk"
- **Line 2:** "the size of a kirk"
- **Line 4:** "the absolute berk"
- **Line 5:** "vicious to him with a dirk"
- **Line 13:** "a bit of a lark."
- **Line 14:** "A load of old bollocks is nearer the mark."
- **Lines 15-16:** "He might as well bark / at the moon—"
- **Line 17:** "that feckin' stone's"

VOCABULARY

Kirk (Line 2) - A church (often used to refer specifically to the Church of Scotland).

Irk (Line 3) - Annoy or bother.

Incenses (Line 4) - Infuriates.

Berk (Line 4) - A fool.

Dirk (Line 5) - A kind of dagger (historically associated with Scotland).

Perk (Lines 6-7) - A job benefit.

Pop open a cork (Line 8) - Open a bottle of wine.

Gawk (Line 11) - Stare.

Lark (Line 13) - A light-hearted joke or something done for fun.

A load of old bollocks (Line 14) - A British idiom to describe absolute nonsense.

Nearer the mark (Line 14) - Closer to being true or accurate.

Feckin' (Lines 17-19) - *Feckin'* (or fecking) is a British expression that can be used in place of a swear word (similar to "freaking" or "flipping" in American English). In this case, it expresses the speaker's exasperation.

Shirk (Line 21, Line 24) - Avoid or evade a task or duty.

Keen (Line 22) - Perceptive.

Noah's wife (Line 26) - Noah was a biblical figure who, with God's permission, built an ark to save humanity and animals from a flood God sent to punish human beings for their wrongdoings. His wife is unnamed in the Bible.

Ark (Line 27) - In the Bible, the large boat Noah built to save humans and animals from God's flood.

Frau Johann Sebastian Bach (Line 28) - This is referring to the wife of the famous 18th-century German composer, Johann Sebastian Bach.

Murk (Line 31) - Darkness or gloom.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mrs Sisyphus" consists of 32 lines of free verse, broken into three stanzas of varying lengths. The poem doesn't follow any traditional form (such as a sonnet or villanelle). Instead, it feels loose and conversational. Visually, the lines get shorter and shorter throughout the second stanza before stretching out at the start of the third. This subtly mirrors the repetitive nature of Sisyphus's task: the poem's movement from long lines to short lines and back to long lines evokes the way he pushes his stone up the hill only for it to roll back down.

The poem is also a dramatic monologue, the speaker (the titular Mrs. Sisyphus) seeming to point her husband out to some unnamed listener nearby ("That's him," she says at the poem's start). This adds to the poem's intimacy, as it sounds like Mrs. Sisyphus is speaking directly to the reader.

METER

This is a free verse poem and as such it doesn't use a regular meter. Its language feels distinctly contemporary, reflecting the fact that Duffy is using an ancient myth to comment on modern work and relationships. The lack of meter also keeps things sounding immediate and conversational, as though the speaker is relaying her frustration to readers in real-time.

RHYME SCHEME

"Mrs Sisyphus" doesn't have a steady rhyme scheme. That said, the poem is overflowing with end rhymes and even some internal rhymes—they just don't follow a specific, predictable pattern. The lack of rhyme *scheme*, like the lack of meter, keeps the poem sounding surprising and fresh throughout.

The intense use of rhyme *itself*, meanwhile, adds insistent, inescapable music to the poem that evokes both Mrs. Sisyphus's frustration and her husband's steadfast devotion to his work.

In the first stanza, for example, every line ends in a perfect "erk" sound: "jerk," "kirk," "irk," "berk," "dirk." As a result, the lines feel intensely repetitive. The sharpness of all those /k/ sounds evokes the speaker's growing outrage; it almost sounds as if she is spitting out the poem's words, disgusted by both Sisyphus and the situation he's put her in.

The speaker uses /k/ and /rk/ sounds throughout the next stanzas as well. This consonance creates both full and slant rhymes between (and sometimes within) lines, as with "cork," "park" and "dork" in lines 8-10:

> when you haven't the time to pop open a **cork**
> or go for so much as a walk in the **park**?
> He's a **dork**.

The relentlessness of these sounds in the poem evokes Sisyphu's relentless devotion to his relentless task, as well as his wife's bitterness.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is the wife of Sisyphus, a mythical Greek king. Sisyphus thought he could outsmart the gods and cheat death. As punishment for his trickery, Zeus, the king of the gods, sentenced Sisyphus to push a boulder up a hill only for it to immediately roll back down, over and over again.

Sisyphus's wife's name in myth was Merope. She was one of the Pleiades, a group of seven sisters whom Zeus transformed into stars (this is where the real Pleiades cluster gets its name!). According to some myths, her star is faintest in the group because Merope hid her face in shame for marrying a mortal.

Merope is never actually named in the poem, however, which is part of the point: her story has been overshadowed by that of her more famous husband. But here, she gets a chance to speak for herself about how his choices have affected her life.

Merope presents Sisyphus as a fool who takes "his work" too seriously. She calls his job a "load of old bollocks" (or complete nonsense), and she calls him a "dork" for "giving one hundred percent and more" to his tedious, pointless task. She clearly

resents the way he prioritizes his job over their relationship, lamenting how she "lie[s] alone in the dark," lonely and frustrated, while he's out all night pushing his boulder up the hill.

Merope, here, feels as though she's had to pay a great price for her husband's pride. She says that her "smile" has been turned into "a twisted smirk" and that her "voice" has been "reduced to a squawk," suggesting that Sisyphus is to blame for her bitter unhappiness.

SETTING

Mrs. Sisyphus opens the poem by pointing out her husband to an unnamed listener: "That's him pushing the stone up the hill," she says, which means the poem takes place close enough to this hill to see Sisyphus in action.

Beyond that, the setting is vague. The poem doesn't reveal where this "hill" is or what it looks like. In the original myth, Sisyphus's punishment took place in the underworld, but the poem makes no reference to this. Instead, the use of British and Scottish slang ("berk," "bollocks," etc.) suggests that Duffy has planted this tale in the contemporary UK. Mrs. Sisyphus speaks as though her husband were a modern office worker: he boasts about the "perks" of the job and is too busy to "pop open a cork" (i.e., open a bottle of wine) "or go for so much as a walk in the park." All this casual, colloquial language implies that the poem is using an ancient myth to comment on the nature of work and relationships in the present.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is among the most acclaimed and high-profile poets in the contemporary UK. Born in Scotland in 1955, she became the UK's first female poet laureate in 2009 and served in the position for the next 10 years.

"Mrs Sisyphus" was published in 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. Pilate, Queen Kong, Circe, Frau Freud, Mrs. Aesop, and Pygmalion's Bride. In witty, conversational language, *The World's Wife* examines the ways that women's stories have been ignored or overlooked by history and literature.

This particular poem draws from the Greek myth of Sisyphus, a king famous for trying to outsmart the gods and cheat death. Zeus punished Sisyphus for his trickery by forcing him to roll a boulder up a hill for all of eternity. Merope, the figure who narrates this poem, is much less well-known. She was one of the Pleiades, a group of seven sisters whom Zeus turned to stars. According to some versions of the myth, Merope was the faintest of these stars because she hid her face in shame after marrying the mortal Sisyphus. (Probably not coincidentally, Merope is also the name of the witch in the *Harry Potter* series who falls in love with the mortal Tom Riddle!)

"Mrs Sisyphus" is written as 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, Merope), and they are often addressed to an audience other than the reader. Other famous dramatic monologues include Duffy's "Circe" and "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning.

Duffy was also 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.

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.

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 acting not only Duffy's romantic partner but also as her mentor. Henri was persistently unfaithful, and it is likely that this formative relationship influenced some of the themes of *The World's Wife*.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Listen to a Reading of the Poem — A lively performance of the poem by Elizabeth Whittome for Cambridge University. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amYaELwRY7o)
- A Look at the Poet's Life — An introduction to the poet's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-

duffy)

- A History of the Dramatic Monologue — An overview of the dramatic monologue (a form Duffy often turns to in her poetry) and how it has been used over time. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ferWxPUN3ig)
- A Review of The World's Wife — Author Jeanette Winterson reviews Duffy's fifth collection of poetry, in which "Mrs Sisyphus" appeared. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/jeanette-winterson-on-carol-ann-duffys-the-worlds-wife)
- An Introduction to the Myth of Sisyphus — A breakdown of the mythology surrounding Sisyphus, including how his wife, Merope, played into his scheme to cheat death. (https://www.greekmyths-greekmythology.com/the-myth-of-sisyphus/)
- Who Was Frau Johann Sebastian Bach? — An interesting article about Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, who may have written some of his most famous pieces. (https://www.classicfm.com/composers/bach/news/magdalena-cello-suites-goldberg-variations/)
- The World's Oldest Story — Check out an article on the Pleides star cluster, and how the myth of "Seven Sisters" might date back 100,000 years. (https://theconversation.com/the-worlds-oldest-story-astronomers-say-global-myths-about-seven-sisters-stars-may-reach-back-100-000-years-151568)

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
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Midas
- Originally
- Prayer
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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