Penelope

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker, Penelope, recalls that she used to look wistfully down the road hoping that her wandering husband, Odysseus, would come strolling back home through the olive groves, whistling for their pet dog (who sat sadly with its head on Penelope's knee, wishing for Odysseus too). After six months of longing, though, Penelope realized that she'd stopped counting the days since Odysseus had disappeared.

Bored, she gathered her sewing kit—and rather than just finding a way to keep herself busy, she discovered her life's work. She began by sewing a picture of a little girl running after a ball beneath a silvery star. She carefully chose the best colors of thread: the right green for the grass, and pinks and greys for the light and shadow in an image of a snapdragon with a bee in its throat. She picked out walnut-colored thread to sew a tree, and felt as if her thimble were an acorn, the seed from which the tree grew onto the cloth.

In the shade of that tree, she embroidered a pair of young lovers like she and her husband once were, finding herself carried away by all the memories of romance and growth she called up as she worked. Finally, she embroidered the young man sailing away into an embroidered sunset.

Later, she remembers, other men came and tried to get her attention, getting in the way of her quiet art-making. So she put them off, behaving like a faithful, mournful widow; she made her embroideries in the daytime and undid them at night. She got into a rhythm, knowing when the real moon would set and she could undo her embroidered moon in the dark.

She kept on making art, using grey and brown thread to make a river, her needle leaping through it like a fish—even though that river couldn't reach the ocean. She was just starting to create a self-portrait: a smiling woman completely contented with herself and her art, no longer waiting for her husband to return. But just then, she heard his familiar footsteps at the door—too late. Without missing a beat, she threaded her needle and prepared to sew on.

THEMES

WOMEN'S ART, CREATIVITY, AND INDEPENDENCE

Through a twist on Homer's *Odyssey*, "Penelope" explores the idea that women's creativity can be a source of power, freedom, and joy.

In Homer's original story, Penelope, the wife of the wandering Odysseus, cleverly uses her artwork to fend off unwanted suitors while she waits for her husband (presumed dead) to come home: she promises she'll choose a new husband when she finishes weaving, but then unravels her work secretly in the night. In Duffy's version of the story, however, Penelope embroiders not because she wants to stay loyal to her husband, but because she falls in love with the work of embroidery!

By the time Odysseus comes home, the poem's Penelope has found so much meaning and freedom in her artwork that she barely looks up from her needle and thread. A tale of wifely fidelity thus turns into a tale of artistic independence. For women artists, the poem suggests, creativity can be liberating and revolutionary.

After "six months" of "look[ing] along the road" to see if Odysseus is coming hope, Penelope picks up a needle and thread in order to "amuse [her]self"—then discovers that she absolutely loves embroidery. That's in part because, through her art, she's able to express and work through her feelings. For instance, she embroiders a picture of a "maiden in a deep embrace / with heroism's boy" that recalls her own youth with her husband and helps her to mourn his disappearance.

More than that, though, she's able to create a whole new world, complete with "sun," "moon," and "rivers." She gets to make every decision about this world, "cho[osing] between three greens for the grass" and deciding exactly where trees will root. Her artwork doesn't just console her, then: it makes her feel powerful!

Penelope's art also helps her to remain independent. Much as she does in the *Odyssey*, this poem's Penelope puts off her suitors by constantly sewing and then unraveling her work, "play[ing] for time." But here, she does this not so she can remain loyal to her husband, but so nothing will take her away from her art. She becomes "self-contained, absorbed, content"—and, importantly, she's "most certainly not waiting." In other words, she's no longer counting on Odysseus to come home, but living her own life. Embroidery thus gives her power in more ways than one. Not only can she control what happens *in* her art, she can control what happens to her *through* her art.

Penelope's creativity becomes the center of her world to the point that, when Odysseus at last returns, she doesn't even look up from her stitching, but aims her thread "surely at the middle of the needle's eye once more"—an image that recalls how Odysseus blinds the one-eyed Cyclops in the *Odyssey*. This allusion suggests that Penelope has become her own hero. She's not just a supporting character, the loyal wife, but the center of her own story.

Women's artwork, the poem thus suggests, can be a source of independence, joy, and power even in sexist and limiting

circumstances. Through the traditionally female art form of embroidery, Penelope makes a meaningful life for herself, becoming the mistress of a domain that's all her own.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

At first, I ...
... on my knees.

"Penelope," like all the dramatic monologues in Carol Ann Duffy's collection *The World's Wife*, retells a familiar story from the perspective of its once-voiceless female characters. Here, that character is the titular Penelope:

- Penelope was the wife of Odysseus—the legendary hero of *The Odyssey*, a man cursed to wander the seas for 20 years after the Trojan War.
- Penelope was left at home to wait for him, raise their son Telemachus, and fend off the suitors who started sniffing around once the man of the house had been gone a few years.
- Homer's heroine uses her weaving skills to keep those suitors at bay, promising to choose one of them to marry once she finishes a weaving project, then secretly unraveling her work every night.
- This Penelope will also turn to fabric art—but for rather different reasons.

As the poem opens, Penelope remembers the early days of Odysseus's absence. Back then, she says, she spent most of her time gazing down the road and "hoping to see him saunter home." The image makes her sound as loyal as the dog who likewise "mourned" his master at her knee.

These first lines characterize both Penelope and Odysseus. Penelope's fond memory of Odysseus's jaunty "saunter" suggests that she knows and loves her husband—a figure notable for his cool head, cleverness, and general cockiness. If Odysseus were to return home after a long absence, Penelope feels, he'd stroll up just as casually as if he'd ducked out to the corner store, and that's just what she misses about him.

Already, then, the poem's world feels more intimate and personal than sweeping and epic. This will be a right-up-close story of how a woman in Penelope's predicament might really feel and behave.

The poem's informal shape supports that tone. While this poem does use an overarching structure—five stanzas of nine lines apiece—those stanzas are all written in casual, approachable free verse, making Penelope sound as natural as if she were speaking to a friend.

LINES 6-11

Six months of ...
... lifetime's industry instead.

The poem's first lines paint a picture of Penelope that's not so different from Homer's: the loyal, sorrowing wife, who wants nothing more than her husband's return. But along comes a surprise: after "six months of this," she starts to get a little distracted. Listen to her polyptoton here:

> Six months of this
> and then I noticed that whole days had passed
> without my noticing.

The stress on the idea of *noticing* what one hasn't *noticed* might suggest that Penelope feels herself losing her life to grief: she's slipping into a trance, each day like the next. It might also suggest, though, that she's started to move on before she even knows it. She can't spend her whole life waiting for a man who may or may not come back.

So she makes a momentous choice. Gathering up "cloth and scissors, needle, thread" (and notice how the asyndeton there makes these soon-to-be-important materials seem as deceptively matter-of-fact as a grocery list), she prepares to keep herself busy by doing a bit of embroidery. She's astonished to find that this traditional womanly art form (and/or chore) is going to become "a lifetime's industry": her life's work.

Here, again, Duffy builds on and changes Homer's story. The original Penelope was a weaver, not a seamstress. By choosing embroidery for her heroine, Duffy invites readers to think about what it means to be a woman artist.

For most of human history, pretty much all art forms—sculpting, painting, composing, writing—were seen as male domains, skills women couldn't (or at least shouldn't) develop. Fabric arts like weaving, sewing, and knitting, on the other hand, were all a-okay: their association with domestic skills like mending made them suitable for happy homemakers.

Embracing embroidery, then, Penelope is taking a safe, traditionally female path in one way. But as the poem will point out, a safe artistic path can lead to subversive places.

LINES 12-14

I sewed a girl ...
... childhood's bouncing ball.

Penelope's first act as an embroiderer is to sew a "girl" at play beneath a "single star"—an image that bodes well for the "lifetime's industry" she's about to discover. This youthful figure suggests that Penelope is going to be reborn through her art,

beginning a whole new life in which she follows her own metaphorical star, her guiding creative light. The "girl" is both a nostalgic self-portrait and a promise of what's to come.

Besides symbolically suggesting what's happening to Penelope as she begins her work, these lines evoke her sheer pleasure in her materials and her craft. Listen to the sounds she uses:

> I sewed a girl
> under a single star—cross-stitch, silver silk—
> running after childhood's bouncing ball.

All that euphonious alliteration suggests that Penelope feels good as she works; harmonious sound reflects her harmony with her craft. Beyond that, these repeated sounds help readers to imagine both what Penelope is doing and what she's depicting in her embroidery. All those sibilant /s/ sounds (not to mention the delicious assonance and consonance of "silver silk") evoke the quiet hiss of a needle and thread passing through fabric, while the round /b/ of "bouncing ball" mimics the *boing* it describes.

Part of the fun of art-making, these lines hint, is that the artist gets to enjoy both the process of creation (sewing itself) and the world she creates (the lovely image of the girl and the star). Here, then, Penelope sews herself a fresh start in more than one way.

LINES 15-20

> *I chose between ...*
> *... through umber soil.*

As Penelope sinks deeper into her embroidery, she delights in both her materials and her creative power. Like a little god, she can summon a world out of nothing.

Her imagery in this passage gives readers a sense of the world she's creating—and of her artistic taste:

> I chose between three greens for the grass;
> a smoky pink, a shadow's grey
> to show a snapdragon gargling a bee

The vivid pinks and greens here, heightened by grey shadow, suggest a bright summer landscape. And the image of a personified "snapdragon" with a bee in its throat makes that landscape feel full of cheeky life. Notice, too, that Penelope "cho[oses]" between those "three greens," deciding just how she wants this world to look.

As she starts work on a tree of "walnut brown," she feels as if her thimble (the little metal thumb-guard used to help push the needle through the cloth) is "like an acorn"—a simile that points out the complex relationship between artist and artwork. If that thimble is acorn-like, then Penelope's artwork *takes root* from her hand: the tree that grows on the fabric also, in a sense, grows out of her.

The simile paints a picture of Penelope at work at the same time as it depicts her art itself. Embroidery *does* grow rather like a tree does: the needle pushing up through the fabric might well suggest a sapling sprouting up from the "umber soil."

LINES 21-27

> *Beneath the shade ...*
> *... of the sun.*

The vibrant color and life in the previous lines suggested that Penelope was discovering her own creative power with glee. The outside world might have given her grief, but the world of this embroidery is all her own. Now, she takes her powers a step further, working through her sorrows in autobiographical art.

Beneath the "shade" of the tree she just finished embroidering, she introduces some characters: a "maiden" locked in a "deep embrace / with heroism's boy." That "heroism" suggests that these young lovers are none other than the heroic Odysseus and Penelope themselves. Readers might, however, consider the ways in which this romantic picture evokes young love in general: plenty of head-over-heels young women might see their boyfriends as idealized heroes.

Thinking back on this blissful time as she works, Penelope gets caught up in poignant memories. Listen to her alliteration here:

> and lost myself completely
> in a wild embroidery of love, lust, lessons learnt;

The long, languorous /l/ sound that connects "lost" to "love, lust," and "lessons learnt" suggests that Penelope is luxuriating in the experience of being "lost" in her work. But it also reminds readers that she's making art about a youthful romance (and a husband) that are long-lost, and that the lessons she's learned since then have been sad ones.

Art, here, means that Penelope can relive her past. But it also means she can let it go. In the last phase of this project, she sews Odysseus's disappearance: he "sail[s] away" and disappears in the "loose gold stitching of the sun." That moment of imagery helps readers to imagine Penelope's own loose, free technique, but also suggests that she's letting her memory of Odysseus "loose": moving on with her life.

Penelope's artwork, then, gives her great pleasure and great power. Through it, she can express her feelings in a world of her own design.

The images Duffy uses hint that the poem isn't just talking about one woman's embroidery. Embroidery and weaving are ancient metaphors for storytelling; the images Penelope sews are also *tales*. And her images might as well come from a painting as an embroidery. Penelope's sewing could thus symbolize all kinds of women's art, making her a representative

for all the women who've found freedom and pleasure in creativity—Duffy included!

LINES 28-32

And when the ...
... night unpicked it.

Just as Penelope becomes the queen of her own artistic world, she hits a roadblock: the suitors arrive. Here, the poem takes a sharp turn from Homer's story:

- Readers familiar with the *Odyssey* will remember that Penelope, in her loyalty to Odysseus, held off a horde of unwanted would-be husbands by constantly weaving and unweaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law.
- This Penelope's motives end up being rather different. Remember, in the previous stanza Penelope bid Odysseus goodbye in an embroidery; as far as she's concerned, that part of her life is over. For that matter, her art isn't for a father-in-law; it's for no one but herself.

This Penelope, then, uses her art to put her suitors off, not because she's dedicated to Odysseus, but because she's dedicated to her art! These suitors only "disturb [her] peace," getting in the way of the joy and freedom she's found in her work.

As she tells it, she "wore a widow's face" as if it were a mask, a metaphor that suggests she's using the conventions of loyal, mournful womanhood to buy herself time. Just as her traditionally female art form offers her all kinds of liberating possibilities, her role as a "good wife" here buys her some time and some freedom.

Take a look at the way the poem uses asyndeton in these lines:

> I wore a widow's face, || kept my head down,
> did my work by day, || at night unpicked it.

The lack of a conclusive "and" before the last clause here suggests that this process of doing and undoing becomes an endless circle. Penelope has found a way to keep on making her art, even if she doesn't get to *keep* what she makes.

This isn't a totally gleeful picture of female liberation, then. Penelope doesn't get to share or preserve her work. But she does get to *do* it—and perhaps, the poem suggests, it's the doing that really matters.

LINES 33-39

I knew which ...
... I tried it.

As Penelope sews and unpicks her embroideries over and over, her imagery again delves into the landscape of her art and connects it to the landscape of the outer world. Waiting for the "hour of the dark" when the moon begins to "fray," she could be talking about both the moment when the actual moon sets, allowing her to do her secret unstitching in the darkness, and about undoing an embroidered moon.

She then picks up "grey threads" again, but this time mixes them with "brown" to create a naturalistic river. Once more, her needle takes the form of something in her embroidered world: this time, it becomes a metaphorical "leaping fish" making its way down that river, both creating its environment and immersed in it.

The river she embroiders, Penelope points out, will "never reach the sea." That image of incompletion reminds readers that Penelope has to undo her work every night. However, it also suggests that this process of sewing and unsewing freezes time—much in the same way that art itself can. Stalling by doing and undoing her work, Penelope also finds herself absorbed in a continuous process of art-making that feels as if it could go on forever.

Her parallelism in these lines similarly suggests an ongoing and innovative process. In line 35, she says of the moon, "I stitched it"; in line 39, she says, more generally, "I tried it." That parallel makes it sounds as if she's moving from simply enjoying her craft to experimenting with its limits. Now, her art is making a difference not just to her emotional life, but her outer life: through stitching and unstitching, she gets to have a say in what happens to her.

LINES 39-43

I was picking ...
... outside the door.

Settling into her ongoing process of sewing and unsewing, Penelope finds she's created not just a new life for herself, but a new *version* of herself. As she "pick[s] out the smile" on an embroidered self-portrait, readers imagine, she's smiling herself. She's now the "woman at the centre / of this world," the creator and the inhabitant of her own domain.

Describing herself, she uses some brisk, quiet asyndeton:

> [...] a woman at the centre
> of this world, self-contained, || absorbed, || content,
> most certainly not waiting,

Here, the lack of conjunctions makes her sound as if she's finding one new way after another to describe her self-sufficient enjoyment of life as an artist, savoring each fresh description of herself. Notice, too, that she moves from describing what she *is*—"self-contained, absorbed, content"—to what she most certainly isn't: "waiting."

It's just when she stops waiting that she gets what she was once waiting for:

> [..] I heard a far-too-late familiar tread outside the door.

At last, just when Penelope has completely given up on him, Odysseus is back. In the last lines of the poem, readers will learn what the new "self-contained, absorbed, content" Penelope does with the unexpected return of her "far-too-late" hero.

LINES 44-45

> *I licked my scarlet ...*
> *... eye once more.*

For a moment, the poem hangs in suspense. Penelope has just heard Odysseus's "far-too-late familiar tread" at the door: what will she do now?

The poem answers (and concludes) in two neat lines:

> I licked my scarlet thread
> and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle's eye
> once more.

All of Penelope's new power appears wrapped up in a single image here. On a surface level, this is an image of a woman who's found an independent life in her artwork: she has no need of company, even the company of a once-beloved husband.

But there's even more going on in this moment. Aiming that "scarlet thread" at the "middle of the needle's eye," Penelope mirrors one of Odysseus's legendary feats: the blinding of the Cyclops, the dreadful one-eyed monster who threatens to devour Odysseus and all his crew. The bloody imagery of the "scarlet thread" makes the comparison even more pointed (if you will).

This allusion makes it clear that Penelope isn't just an independent craftswoman now. She's also her own hero, her own monster-slayer, her own trickster. She's the "woman at the centre / of this world"—and art has taken her there.

"Penelope" thus concludes on a note of inspiration, defiance, and power. Women's art, this poem suggests, can give them a proud independence even in the most restrictive, sexist situations. The image of the scarlet thread piercing an "eye" suggests that such power might also give women subversive strength, making them dangerous to an unsuspecting status quo.

SYMBOLS

SEWING

Needlework is an art form with a feminist history: women have long used sewing and embroidery to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that might otherwise have been taboo. Penelope's sewing plays just this role here—and because it's so strongly associated with women, it also symbolizes women's creativity in general. The narrative pictures Penelope embroiders might just as easily suggest the work of a woman painter, novelist, or poet.

Through images of a traditionally female art, the poem thus suggests that women's art in particular can be subversive and liberating.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-27
- Lines 32-42
- Lines 44-45

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"Penelope" is one big allusion to Homer's *Odyssey*, the ancient Greek tale of the clever Odysseus's wanderings after the Trojan War. Penelope, Odysseus's patient and loyal wife, is a relatively minor character in that story. By foregrounding Penelope here, Duffy suggests that women often get short shrift in classic art—and that it therefore behooves them to make art of their own.

In the original tale, Penelope cleverly uses her skill as a weaver to fend off a crowd of suitors during Odysseus's long absence. Faithful to her husband and unwilling to give up on his return, she tells the suitors that she'll marry one of them as soon as she's done weaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law—then unweaves each day's work every evening when they're not looking.

In Duffy's version of the tale, Penelope sews and unpicks her embroideries, not so that she can wait for Odysseus, but so she can buy herself more time to sew! Her dutiful "widow's face" is just a cover for her desire to dedicate herself to her own artistry.

That idea gets even clearer when Odysseus returns home at last. But this "far-too-late" return doesn't even make Penelope look up from her work. Instead, she "lick[s her] scarlet thread" and pokes it right through "the middle of the needle's eye." This image of a pierced eye alludes to one of Odysseus's own feats: the gory blinding of the terrible Cyclops, a carnivorous one-eyed monster. Through her creativity, then, Penelope has become her own capable, clever hero; she doesn't need Odysseus around anymore.

The poem's allusions to the *Odyssey* (and its transformation of that old story) suggest that women's creativity can give them subversive power and freedom. Not only does Penelope get to

tell her own version of her story, she gets to embroider a whole new life for herself.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "At first, I looked along the road / hoping to see him saunter home / among the olive trees, / a whistle for the dog / who mourned him with his warm head on my knees."
- **Lines 28-32:** "And when the others came to take his place, / disturb my peace, / I played for time. / I wore a widow's face, kept my head down, / did my work by day, at night unpicked it."
- **Lines 39-45:** "I was picking out / the smile of a woman at the centre / of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content, / most certainly not waiting, / when I heard a far-too-late familiar tread outside the door. / I licked my scarlet thread / and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle's eye once more."

SIMILE

The poem's single simile evokes Penelope's delight in her creative powers.

When Penelope begins to embroider, the images she produces feel like parts of her. The first picture she makes is of a "girl" standing "under a single star"; this image of a youthful figure blessed by the heavens is a neat image of her own newfound creativity.

That creativity, she realizes, means that she's both a character and a creator in her own artistic world. Sitting down to sew a tree, she says that her thimble is "like an acorn / pushing up through umber soil." In this simile, she becomes part of the landscape she's depicting: her thimble is the acorn from which the tree she's embroidering grows. But she's also the *god* of this landscape, creating something new out of thin air and raw thread. Part of the joy of artistry, this simile suggests, is getting to be both inside and in charge of one's own little world.

This simile is also just plain vivid, accurately noting the similarity between the way that embroideries and plants grow: needle and thread push up from beneath the fabric just as the shoot that will become an oak tree pushes up from beneath the soil.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "my thimble like an acorn / pushing up through umber soil."

IMAGERY

Vibrant imagery helps readers to share Penelope's relish of her embroidery.

Penelope's descriptions of her artwork are laden with colors. She makes a star from "silver silk," a bright "snapdragon" from "smoky pink" thread accented with "shadow's grey"; the tree she embroiders, appropriately enough, is "walnut brown." These rich, earthy colors conjure up the bright, hot, fertile summer world of Penelope's imagination: she's clearly a careful observer of nature, equally relishing sunlight and shade.

When she turns her hand to autobiography, sewing pictures of her and her husband Odysseus's youthful love story, her imagery also suggests how she's working through her feelings in her art. The embroidered Odysseus, like the real one, can't (or won't) stick around forever; he "sail[s] away / into the loose gold stitching of the sun." That "loose" stitching evokes both Penelope's own wild, free technique and her sense that, through her art-making, she's finally able to set Odysseus "loose," letting go of her hope he'll return.

Perhaps the poem's most telling moment of imagery, though, appears in its last lines. Here, Penelope licks a "scarlet thread" and "aim[s] it surely at the middle of the needle's eye once more." This allusion to one of Odysseus's feats (the blinding of the Cyclops, a one-eyed monster echoed in that one-eyed needle) feels all the more pointed because that thread is scarlet: Penelope, given strength and independence by her art, is no longer afraid to *draw* blood (pun intended)!

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "a whistle for the dog / who mourned him with his warm head on my knees."
- **Lines 12-13:** "I sewed a girl / under a single star—cross-stitch, silver silk—"
- **Lines 16-20:** "a smoky pink, a shadow's grey / to show a snapdragon gargling a bee / I threaded walnut brown for a tree, / my thimble like an acorn / pushing up through umber soil."
- **Lines 26-27:** "then watched him sail away / into the loose gold stitching of the sun."
- **Lines 36-38:** "Grey threads and brown / pursued my needle's leaping fish / to form a river that would never reach the sea."
- **Lines 44-45:** "I licked my scarlet thread / and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle's eye once more."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps to create the poem's music and atmosphere.

For instance, as the speaker describes her first embroideries, dense alliteration evokes her pleasure in her artwork. Listen to the sounds here:

> I sewed a girl
> under a single star—cross-stitch, silver silk—
> running after childhood's bouncing ball.

The sibilant /s/ alliteration here (and especially the drawn-out /sil/ of "silver silk") evokes the sounds of sewing: the quiet slip of a threaded needle passing through cloth. The round /b/ of "bouncing ball," meanwhile, sounds pretty bouncy itself. These sounds suggest both what the speaker is depicting in her art and what her art itself sounds and feels like.

And listen to her euphonious sounds as she goes on describing her work:

> I chose between three greens for the grass;
> a smoky pink, a shadow's grey
> to show a snapdragon gargling a bee

Once again, there's sibilant alliteration here: interweaving /s/ and /sh/ sounds. The stronger, harder /g/ sounds form a pleasant contrast. The plain pleasure of these harmoniously repeated sounds helps readers to share in Penelope's delight.

Alliteration helps to conjure up some of her more poignant moments, too. When she embroidered a picture of her young self and Odysseus in a "deep embrace," for instance, she remembers that she:

> [...] lost myself completely
> in a wild embroidery of love, lust, lessons learnt;

The long /l/ sound here feels luxuriant and delicious—but also connects "love" and "lust" to the word "lost." Penelope's lost in her work, but she has also lost the husband she memorializes in her sewing (or so she has begun to think).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "sewed"
- **Line 13:** "single star," "stitch," "silver silk"
- **Line 14:** "bouncing ball"
- **Line 15:** "greens," "grass"
- **Line 16:** "smoky," "shadow's," "grey"
- **Line 17:** "show," "snapdragon," "gargling"
- **Line 20:** "up," "umber"
- **Line 25:** "love, lust, lessons learnt"
- **Line 26:** "sail"
- **Line 27:** "stitching," "sun"
- **Line 28:** "place"
- **Line 29:** "peace"
- **Line 30:** "played"
- **Line 31:** "wore," "widow's"
- **Line 32:** "work"
- **Line 40:** "centre"
- **Line 41:** "self," "contained," "content"
- **Line 42:** "certainly"
- **Line 43:** "far," "familiar"
- **Line 44:** "scarlet"
- **Line 45:** "surely"

ASSONANCE

Rich assonance gives the poem music and helps to create its stylish moments of rhyme.

For instance, listen to the vowel sounds Penelope uses as she remembers how she used to sit waiting for Odysseus to come home:

> At first, I looked along the road
> hoping to see him saunter home

That long /oh/ sound sounds rather like a long "oh!" of grief and longing.

Later on, as she gets caught up in her embroidery, musical assonance evokes her excitement:

> I chose between three greens for the grass;
> a smoky pink, a shadow's grey
> to show a snapdragon gargling a bee
> I threaded walnut brown for a tree,

The interplay of /oh/ and /ee/ sounds here just plain pleases the ear. The /ee/ sounds, in particular, even resolve into one of the poem's occasional neat end rhymes, suggesting that Penelope is starting to find order and purpose in her work as well as delight.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "road"
- **Line 2:** "hoping," "home"
- **Line 5:** "mourned," "warm"
- **Line 9:** "thread"
- **Line 11:** "industry," "instead"
- **Line 13:** "silver silk"
- **Line 15:** "chose," "three greens"
- **Line 16:** "smoky," "shadow's"
- **Line 17:** "show," "bee"
- **Line 18:** "tree"
- **Line 20:** "up," "umber"
- **Line 21:** "shade"
- **Line 22:** "maiden," "embrace"
- **Line 26:** "sail away"
- **Line 28:** "take," "place"
- **Line 30:** "played"
- **Line 31:** "face," "down"
- **Line 32:** "day," "unpicked"
- **Line 34:** "fray"
- **Line 35:** "stitched"
- **Line 36:** "Grey," "brown"
- **Line 37:** "needle's leaping"
- **Line 38:** "sea"
- **Line 39:** "tried"

- **Line 40:** "smile"
- **Line 42:** "waiting"
- **Line 43:** "late," "door"
- **Line 45:** "more"

ASYNDETON

At different moments, asyndeton helps to give Penelope's voice a measured, cunning, or rapturous tone.

The first time asyndeton turns up, it gives shape to a practical list:

> I sorted cloth and scissors, || needle, || thread,

Without any conjunctions, these words sound rather like a shopping list: a practical recital of all the tools one needs to do a bit of embroidery. This ordinary list of ordinary objects gives no hint that Penelope is about to discover a whole new life.

When asyndeton appears again, though, Penelope's tone has changed markedly. She describes making a star from "cross-stitch, || silver silk" with professional relish; she lingers over "a smoky pink, || a shadow's grey" as she chooses threads. Now, asyndeton suggests that Penelope is taking a moment to consider one beautiful thing after another, enjoying her materials and her skill.

Finally, toward the end of the poem, asyndeton conjures up Penelope's satisfaction with her own cleverness. Describing how she fended off a host of pushy suitors, she says:

> I wore a widow's face, || kept my head down,
> did my work by day, || at night unpicked it.

Here, there's a sense that each of these actions is a separate, important step in an ongoing process. Without a closing "and," these actions could just about form a circle: no sooner has Penelope unpicked her work at night than she's putting on her mask-like "widow's face" again.

Under this regimen, she is "self-contained, || absorbed, || content, || / most certainly not waiting"—a final stretch of asyndeton that treats each of these delicious new feelings like a new color of thread to be held up and admired.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "scissors, needle, thread,"
- **Line 13:** "cross-stitch, silver silk"
- **Line 16:** "a smoky pink, a shadow's grey"
- **Line 25:** "love, lust, lessons learnt"
- **Lines 31-32:** "I wore a widow's face, kept my head down, / did my work by day, at night unpicked it."
- **Lines 41-42:** "self-contained, absorbed, content, / most certainly not waiting,"

VOCABULARY

Saunter (Line 2) - Stroll—especially cheerfully, casually, or jauntily.

A lifetime's industry (Line 11) - In other words, the work of a lifetime, a kind of labor worth living for.

Cross-stitch (Line 13) - A type of embroidery.

Snapdragon (Line 17) - A kind of flower (see it here).

Umber (Line 20) - A deep, rich reddish-brown.

Tread (Line 43) - Way of walking.

Scarlet (Line 44) - A deep red color.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Penelope," like most of the poems in Duffy's collection *The World's Wife*, is a monologue spoken in the voice of its title character. The poem is built from five stanzas of nine lines apiece. Aside from that, there's not too much regular structure here: Penelope speaks in flexible free verse, with no meter or steady rhyme scheme. These choices make her voice sound natural and conversational, as if readers were really listening to her describing how her life changed when she took up embroidery.

However, flashes of rhyme give this tale of artistic liberation some artful flair—and remind readers that the poem, like the embroidery it describes, is the work of a craftswoman.

METER

"Penelope" is written in free verse, with no set meter. That choice helps to make Penelope's voice feel natural and immediate. As she tells the tale of her development from mourning wife to liberated artist, she speaks to the reader as if to a friend; the poem's unpredictable rhythms help to evoke her feelings.

For instance, listen to what happens when Penelope begins her embroidery:

> I sorted cloth and scissors, needle, thread,
> thinking to amuse myself,
> but found a lifetime's industry instead.
> I sewed a girl

After a sequence of longish lines, Penelope's first creative act is just four words long. That short, sharp, simple line suggests her

wonder at her newfound creativity. It only takes a few words for her to start a whole new life for herself—an idea reflected in the "girl" she sews, a girl who seems a lot like a young version of herself, a fresh beginning.

RHYME SCHEME

While there's no steady rhyme scheme in "Penelope," scattered moments of rhyme help to create drama.

For example, take a look at what happens when Odysseus finally returns at the end of the poem:

> when I heard a far-too-late familiar tread outside the door.
> I licked my scarlet thread
> and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle's eye
> once more.

Both the end rhyme of *door* and *more* and the internal rhyme of *tread* and *thread* underscore Penelope's dramatic transformation. Once a heartsore, mourning widow, she now has so rich a creative world of her own that her husband's return barely registers! Nothing, this last rhyme emphasizes, will keep Penelope from her own work now.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a version of Penelope, Odysseus's patient wife in Homer's *Odyssey*. In Homer's tale, Penelope is a weaver who uses her skills to hold unwanted suitors at bay while she waits for her wandering husband to come home. She promises the suitors that she'll marry one of them as soon as she's done weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, but secretly undoes her work every night.

This poem's Penelope is different in several important regards:

- she's an embroiderer, not a weaver, making pictures rather than a practical object;
- she's making art for herself, not for a male relative;
- and she's keeping suitors at bay, not because she's loyal to Odysseus, but because she's loyal to her art!

This Penelope is thus a woman artist finding independence, power, and joy through her creativity. Once she discovers that she can embroider whole worlds of her own, she's "most certainly not waiting" for her husband anymore: she's living her own life.

SETTING

While readers can guess that this poem takes place in Ithaca—the Greek island where Homer's Penelope was queen—the really important landscape here is the one inside Penelope's imagination. As she embroiders trees, flowers, animals, and an evolving series of self-portraits, Penelope makes her inner world into art. Her embroideries reflect what's happening to her: when she begins to embroider, for instance, the first picture she makes is of a young "girl," a vision of herself starting out on a whole new life as an artist. Her artwork becomes a place of its own, a kingdom over which she alone rules.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Scottish-born Carol Ann Duffy (1955-present) is the first (and so far, the only) woman to serve as Poet Laureate of the UK. A working-class writer and an out lesbian, she brought fresh air and new perspectives to a laureateship historically dominated by (mostly) straight, white, middle-class men.

This poem is one of many in arguably her most famous collection, *The World's Wife* (1999), that reflects on the joys and difficulties of being a creative woman in a sexist world. The poems in *The World's Wife* are monologues in the voices of mythological and historical women from Medusa to Frau Freud to Mrs. Midas. Giving these silent figures their own say, Duffy offers feminist critiques of myth, history, and literature.

In her fondness for dramatic monologues, Duffy follows in the footsteps of writers like Robert Browning, but she also fits into the contemporary poetry scene around her. Margaret Atwood, for example, has used the form for similar feminist purposes. Duffy is also one of many 20th-century poets to embrace free verse. She sees herself as a descendent both of more recent free verse poets like Sylvia Plath and of Romantics like John Keats. In turn, she has influenced (and championed) writers like Alice Oswald, Kate Clanchy, and Jeanette Winterson.

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 in corners of working-class life often neglected by the literary world, reflects the tumultuous political world in which she came of age.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with Duffy — Watch an interview with Duffy in which she discusses her election as Poet Laureate and the importance of women's poetry. (https://youtu.be/wnt5p1DGD9U)
- Penelope in the Odyssey — Learn more about the fictional character Duffy gives voice to in this poem. (https://www.greeklegendsandmyths.com/penelope.html)
- Duffy's Recent Work — Read an article in which Duffy discusses her Pandemic Poetry project, an effort to offer artistic comfort in troubled times. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/20/carol-ann-duffy-leads-british-poets-coronavirus-imtiaz-dharker-jackie-kay)
- Duffy's Influence — Read an article by novelist Jeanette Winterson on her love of Duffy's poetry. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/jeanette-winterson-on-carol-ann-duffys-the-worlds-wife)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Duffy's life and work at 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
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Darwin
- Mrs Midas
- Mrs Sisyphus
- Originally
- Prayer
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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