Eurydice

SUMMARY

Ladies, I had died and gone to the underworld (the land of the dead in Greek myth). I was a ghost of my old self, inhabiting no time at all. The underworld was a place where language ended, like a black period, a void where words were forced to stop. And they did stop there; they were all "last words," famous or otherwise. It pleased me thoroughly.

Picture me in that place, inaccessible, beyond the grave. Then imagine my expression in that land of eternal rest—in the one refuge you'd think a woman would have from the type of guy who pursues her, writes poems for her, lingers nearby while she's reading them, claims she's his inspiration, and once pouted for a full 24 hours because she pointed out that he relies on too many vague ideas. Just imagine my expression when I heard him—oh gods!—knocking at the entrance to the underworld.

Orpheus himself: a.k.a. "Big O." Mythical-seeming. With his stringed instrument and a poem to peddle, hoping to win me like an award.

In those days, the culture was different: to men, "Big O" was a legend as far as poetry went. The promotional quote on his book jackets claimed that creatures of all kinds, from aardvarks to zebras, gathered around him when he recited his poems. When they heard his beautiful voice, schools of fish jumped and silent rocks on the ground shed shiny little tears.

What B.S.! (I'd typed up all his poems and blurbs myself, so I ought to know.) And if I got to live over again, believe me, I'd rather tell my own story than be portrayed as a "Dearest," "Beloved," "Dark Lady," "White Goddess," or some other stereotype invented by male writers.

Actually, ladies, I'd rather die than go through that again.

But gods, like publishers, are typically men. And what you've surely heard of my story involves the bargain Orpheus struck with the gods (and/or derives from the book deal he struck with publishers).

He flexed his poetic talent.

The spirits of the underworld started crying. Sisyphus (a mythical king condemned to roll a boulder uphill for all eternity) took a rare break to sit on his boulder. Tantalus (a mythical figure condemned to go hungry and thirsty for all eternity) was allowed to take a beer break. The woman Orpheus's poem was about (me) could barely believe the ridiculous stuff she was hearing.

Whether I wanted to or not, I had to go back to our old life together—me, his wife. I had to appear unwillingly in his figurative language, his different types of poetic stanzas, his various kinds of poems, histories, legends...

Orpheus had been warned that he couldn't turn or glance backward. He had to keep walking—with me following—from the underworld to the upper world that felt like the past to me. He'd been cautioned that if he looked at me once, he'd lose me for all eternity.

So we kept on walking. Both of us were silent.

Ladies, ignore the story you're familiar with. This is how it really happened: I tried everything I could to get Orpheus to turn around (which would send me back to the underworld). What would it take, I wondered, to make him understand that our relationship was over? I was dead, gone, over, resting eternally, expired. I reached my hand out to touch his neck, pleading for him to turn and let me stay in the underworld. But, unfortunately, the purple light of the world up ahead had already grown brighter.

It was a tough uphill trek from death back to life, and the whole way, I tried to will Orpheus to look backward. I was about to steal his poem from his robe when, at last, I had a flash of inspiration. Excited, I stopped walking. He was three feet ahead of me. With a trembling voice, I told him that his poem was masterful and that I wanted to hear him sing it again.

He was wearing a humble smile when he turned around to face me.

Let's see, anything else? I saw he hadn't bothered to shave. I waved goodbye and disappeared.

The wordless dead are such good poets. The living are like people on the shore of a huge lake, under which the dead remain wisely silent.

THEMES

MALE ARROGANCE VS. FEMALE AGENCY

"Eurydice" turns the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice into a satire on how men's arrogance can flatten women's humanity. Unlike the mythical Orpheus—an inspired poet who tragically fails to rescue his bride, Eurydice, from the underworld—Duffy's Orpheus is a terrible poet and husband whose unwanted "rescue" attempt Eurydice thwarts. The poem portrays Orpheus as the epitome of male vanity and entitlement, and Eurydice as thoroughly scornful of his poetry and personality. In fact, Eurydice finally gets rid of him only through a trick that appeals to his ego. By upending the original myth, Duffy's feminist version skewers the kind of misogyny that reduces women to "Muse[s]" for men to flatter and distressed damsels for men to rescue.

The poem reimagines the Orpheus/Eurydice myth as a gender-fueled conflict, with Eurydice as the protagonist and Orpheus as the antagonist. In this retelling, Orpheus isn't a heroic poet who tragically fails to rescue his loving wife from the underworld. He's a "strutt[ing]," pretentious hack whose wife is glad to be rid of him, but who keeps "follow[ing] her" anyway. His desire is all that matters; he refuses to respect or even recognize her wishes. At no point does he see her as an equal; instead, he treats her as an audience, a "prize" to be won, or an unpaid underling (as when she does all his "typing" for him).

Meanwhile, the poem portrays Eurydice as a woman who, through courage and ingenuity, manages to escape a degrading, unfulfilling romantic partnership. Rather than honored and understood, Orpheus's writing makes her feel "trapped" in a set of clichés about women. She even feels physically uncomfortable in his "hover[ing]" presence. His attempt to bring her back from the underworld—whether she "Like[s] it or not"—is controlling and presumptuous, forcing her to wonder how to make her possessive husband "see we were through." Tellingly, when her own "inspiration" strikes, it's in the form of an escape plan, which seems to free her from Orpheus in particular and male domination more broadly.

At every turn, then, Orpheus represents male egotism and sexism at their worst. Clueless, self-absorbed, and lazily entitled, he can't even be bothered to "shave[]" before pursuing his bride! By contrast, Eurydice takes on the hero's role, claiming agency for herself as she outwits male misogyny.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-112

MISOGYNY AND LITERARY CULTURE

"Eurydice" takes aim not only at male arrogance in general but at the misogyny of literary culture in particular. Duffy's version of the Orpheus/Eurydice myth portrays male poets, and the male-dominated literary world, as ridiculously pretentious and misogynistic. In escaping Orpheus, Eurydice symbolically turns her back on this scene and takes control of her own narrative—the one presented in the poem itself.

In Eurydice's view, the culture that worships Orpheus's poetry is deeply biased toward men. She asserts that his legend was created by "Gods" who, "like publishers," are "usually male," and she hints that she had a large and uncredited role in building his reputation (e.g., by doing "all the typing" for him). Her labor, like her voice itself, has been silenced by a culture that doesn't respect women as full, independent human beings. Eurydice also contradicts the ancient legend that Orpheus's poetry charms animals, and she makes clear that it does nothing at all for women! In her telling, his writing appeals only to the damned, and only to damned *men* at that.

The poem further portrays the larger literary world as oppressive and demeaning to women because it prevents women from speaking for, and thereby defining, themselves. When Orpheus tries to retrieve Eurydice from the underworld, she dreads returning to their life together, imagining herself "trapped" once again in his sexist "images, metaphors," etc.

Eurydice then voices—and acts on—a feminist desire to be the author and protagonist of her own story. She declares that if she had her life to live over, she'd want to "speak for myself" rather than appear as a secondary character in male myths. Short of that, she'd "rather be dead"—remain in the underworld—than experience their misrepresentations all over again.

She manages to get rid of Orpheus only by declaring his poem "*a masterpiece*," a strategy that turns his vain delusions against him. Her flattery tricks him into turning and facing her—the one thing "the Gods" have forbidden—thus releasing her back into the underworld. Symbolically, this incident suggests that, for men, literary success (meeting the standards of "the Gods") has often depended on *not* paying attention to women. Meanwhile, for women, creative inspiration often involves withdrawing from sexist men and cultures and establishing separate spaces where they're free to define themselves. In fact, Eurydice *is* finally "speaking for [her]self" in this poem, suggesting that she's successfully reclaimed her story after all.

By satirizing a specific Greek myth, the poem punctures the larger, cultural myth of the male literary genius, implying that it's rooted in misogyny. The poem also mocks the culture(s) that created the myth in the first place, offering women hope for a better alternative. Eurydice's instruction "Girls, forget what you've read" not only introduces her side of the story but urges women to define themselves through a literary tradition of their own.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-24
- Lines 29-66
- Lines 78-81
- Lines 96-109

THE WISDOM AND PEACE OF SILENCE

The poem's heroine, Eurydice, calls her home in the Underworld "a place where language stopped." Rather than finding this silence frightening or frustrating, she prefers it to the world of words and literature—including the supposedly enchanting poetry of Orpheus. Through her skeptical perspective, the poem embraces the wisdom and restfulness of silence, which it associates with the peace of the afterlife. Conversely, it portrays language and literature as

deeply artificial human creations that, like human beings themselves, inevitably fall short of perfection.

The poem calls attention to the falsehood and inadequacy of language while depicting silence as "wise" and desirable. Its villain is Orpheus, a mythical figure often used to represent poets in general. Its hero, meanwhile, is Eurydice, who describes her silent underworld as a place of "Repose" (relaxation) that "suit[s]" her thoroughly.

Eurydice doesn't want to go back to Orpheus's world of poetry and language, and she feels "safe / from" these things where she is. She portrays Orpheus's language as pompous and unconvincing; listening to it, she can "scarcely believe her ears," and not in a good way (line 59). In fact, her long, unwieldy list of Orpheus's creations, from "octaves and sextets" to "myths," hints that there's something excessive and artificial about words and writing in general—especially compared to the simplicity of silence. (Here, it's important to note that "myths" can mean "lies" as well as "traditional stories.")

After the talentless Orpheus is gone, Eurydice remarks that "The dead are so talented" and praises "the wise, drowned silence of the dead." In short, silence is golden; even the most carefully chosen words look foolish and false beside the total restraint of those who can no longer speak.

Thus, the poem portrays not only the male-dominated literary tradition but also human language itself as inherently flawed. It imagines the silence of death as an almost heavenly relief from the problems of language. Orpheus represents not only men in general (by contrast with women) but also the living in general (by contrast with the dead). His failure to charm Eurydice suggests that language and poetry, like life itself, are a doomed struggle. By contrast, silence, like death, is a kind of peaceful perfection. Fittingly, after Eurydice's tribute to the wisdom of silence, the poem breaks off, as if practicing what it preaches.

While the main target of Duffy's satire is male writers and literary culture, the joke is ultimately on all of humanity, including Duffy herself. Arrogant male poets may be especially ludicrous, the poem suggests, but the flaws of language frustrate and humble us all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-10
- Lines 11-24
- Line 59
- Lines 60-66
- Lines 76-77
- Lines 110-112

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Girls, I was ...
... to an end.

Lines 1-6 introduce the poem's speaker: Eurydice, whose name is the poem's title. Eurydice is a well-known character from ancient Greek mythology, a young woman who dies tragically and winds up in the afterlife, or "Underworld" (line 2).

In the original myth, Orpheus, her loving husband, descends to the underworld in a doomed attempt to bring Eurydice back to life. But Carol Ann Duffy's version of this myth is very different from the original. Rather than a romantic tragedy, it's a feminist satire. It's also a dramatic monologue: a poem whose speaker is a character recognizably different than the poet.

In these opening lines, Eurydice narrates her experience as a ghost to an unidentified group of "Girls." Eurydice could be addressing a group of other dead women, or this could be an apostrophe to female readers/listeners in general. Either way, that first word marks the poem's intended audience—or primary audience, at least—as "Girls" and women. This will be a feminist retelling of a myth that traditionally places a man (Orpheus) in the hero's role. The casual tone sets up an intimacy between speaker and audience, as if Eurydice were confiding the *real* story of her life and death to a gathering of girlfriends.

She describes her post-death "self" as a "shade" or "shadow," following traditional depictions of the afterlife in Greek myth. ("Shade" is a common English translation of the ancient Greek word for spirits in the underworld; it means roughly the same as "ghost.") She also describes the afterlife as a world outside of time: a "nowhen." (Compare the word "nowhere" for place.)

Most importantly, she stresses how *silent* the afterlife is; she calls it "a place where language stopped." Metaphorically, it's "a black full stop"—a period at the end of life's sentence—or a "black hole" that swallows up "words" entirely. Eerie as these comparisons might sound to the reader, Eurydice soon makes clear that she *loves* the silence! She especially treasures it in comparison to the rambling poetry of Orpheus.

Alliteration ("**d**ead and **d**own," "a **sh**ade, / a **sh**adow," "**wh**ere the **w**ords") and repetition ("a **black** full stop, a **black** hole") add spice and emphasis to Eurydice's language. As she tells her story to a group of listeners, real or imagined, these devices help hook the audience's attention.

LINES 7-10

And end they ...
... to the ground.

Lines 7-10 build on the description of the afterlife in lines 1-6, which portrays the "Underworld" as a place "where the words

had to come to an end." Eurydice now adds:

> And end they did there,
> last words,
> famous or not.
> It suited me down to the ground.

That is, the underworld is the place where everyone goes after their "last words," whether those words were "famous" or not. And their last words in life really *are* their last, because the underworld is totally silent. (By playing on the idiom "famous last words," Eurydice may be setting up the appearance of Orpheus, whom she portrays as a kind of celebrity author—a poet *famous* for his *words*.)

While the reader might expect this deathly silence to be spooky, Eurydice feels right at home in it: "It suited me down to the ground." This slightly unusual way of saying "It suited me perfectly" or "It suited me to a T" emphasizes the earthiness of the underworld, a realm that supposedly exists under*ground*. Already, there's a hint of irony in Eurydice's relationship to language. A reader familiar with the original story might expect the wife of Orpheus, the most legendary poet in Greek mythology, to miss "words" at least a little bit. But it turns out she doesn't—and she doesn't miss him, either!

By the end of this first stanza, it's clear that "Eurydice" is written in free verse. In other words, it has no meter or rhyme scheme—though end rhymes will pop up here and there. Its freedom from traditional poetic patterns seems to reflect Eurydice's freedom from "language," poetry, and all their associated burdens.

LINES 11-16

> *So imagine me ...*
> *... would be safe*

After the stanza break at the end of line 10, which functions like a paragraph break, the poem starts to shift from exposition (backstory) into the main action of the narrative. The shift is gradual, however, as Eurydice first provides a little more description and context for her audience. In lines 11-16, she invites her female listeners to "imagine [her]" in the afterlife.

Both "unavailable" and "out of this world" seem charged with multiple meanings:

- Eurydice is literally "unavailable" to the living while she's dead, but this word also seems to connote *romantic* unavailability—especially once she starts to describe death as an escape from her husband, Orpheus. (Also, a common version of the Eurydice myth states that she died while fleeing the god Aristaeus, who was pursuing her sexually.)
- Meanwhile, "out of this world" literally means that she's no longer in the world of the living; but since this expression usually describes something wonderful or amazing, it also hints that she might be *thriving* in the afterlife.

Eurydice again prompts her audience to "picture" her in this "place," which myths traditionally portray as gloomy, but which she associates with infinite security and peace ("Eternal Repose"). Notice that the word "place" has now appeared three times in the first 16 lines (lines 4, 14, and 16). This repetition emphasizes how important the setting is to the poem, and to its main character. Eurydice feels very attached to her "Underworld"; it's a refuge where she feels "safe." The enjambment at the end of line 16 creates a brief moment of suspense: "safe" from *what*? As it turns out, the answer is: from men like Orpheus.

LINES 17-24

> *from the kind of ...*
> *... for abstract nouns.*

Lines 17-24 describe "the kind of a man" Eurydice thought she'd be "safe" from in the underworld. The description clearly refers to her husband, the poet/musician Orpheus, who tries (in the original myth and in this version) to bring her back to the world of the living.

Whereas the Orpheus of myth is a divinely inspired poet, Duffy's Orpheus is a hack. Eurydice remembers him as the kind of pompous, insecure male writer who "follows [his love interest] round / writing poems" and eagerly watches to see how "His Muse" (that is, Eurydice) reacts.

She's filling in the backstory of her own relationship with him, and it seems to have been a troubled romance from the start. The capitalization of "His Muse" makes the phrase sound sarcastic; clearly, Eurydice wasn't happy in this role! Nor was she impressed by his persistent "poems," or his "hover[ing]" around her in hopes of being praised for them. When she gently critiqued him instead, his ego was immediately bruised: he "sulked for a night and a day." Even the flaw she mentioned—"his weakness for abstract nouns"—hints at his grandiose style. Apparently, he's the kind of poet who throws around big, vague concepts (Love, Truth, etc.) rather than observing the world in detail.

Basically, Orpheus is a narcissist and a pest. Eurydice not only dislikes being reduced to his "Muse," she dislikes the love poems she's supposedly inspired him to write.

LINES 25-28

> *Just picture my ...*
> *... at Death's door.*

In line 25, Eurydice again tells her listeners to "picture my face" (as she did previously in line 14). The repetition suggests that something big is about to happen in the story—some surprise that dramatically changed her facial expression. Sure enough,

she receives an unexpected visitor:

> [...] when I heard—
> Ye Gods—
> a familiar knock-knock at Death's door.

The knock is all too "familiar"; just from the sound, Eurydice recognizes that her husband, Orpheus, has come back for her. Her feelings about his arrival are summed up in that interjection "Ye Gods." This is a playful allusion to the gods of Greek mythology, but Eurydice isn't literally summoning them—she's just voicing her exasperation, the way a modern speaker might say, "Oh, God." Readers can practically see her rolling her eyes. The man who "follow[ed] her round" in life (line 18) has followed her all the way down to death.

Eurydice also makes imaginative use of the idiom "Death's door." Normally, "at death's door" is a metaphor meaning "about to die," but here, she describes the portal to the underworld—where Orpheus has come knocking—as a *literal* "Death's door." The phrase "knock-knock," which might remind the reader of knock-knock jokes, adds to the humor of this witty image.

LINES 29-33

> *Him. ...*
> *... as the prize.*

In lines 29-33, Eurydice introduces Orpheus with a mix of hyperbole and sarcasm:

- The word "Him" gets the weight of its own line; at one syllable, it's the shortest line in the poem.
- The next line is almost as punchy: Eurydice calls Orpheus "Big O," likely alluding to the nickname of 1960s rock legend Roy Orbison. (The poem contains a number of anachronistic details and phrases that bridge the gap between ancient and modern times; for example, line 86 refers to a "sell-by date," which wouldn't have existed in ancient Greece!)
- She also calls Orpheus "Larger than life," like a celebrity or a figure from, well, myth.
- Overall, she depicts him as a cross between a rock star and a famous author.

Though comically exaggerated, this depiction makes a certain kind of sense. The Orpheus of Greek myth was a brilliant *bard*: something like a cross between a poet and musician, or a modern singer-songwriter. His instrument was the "lyre," a stringed instrument resembling a zither or small harp. And the word "lyre" is the source of the word "lyric"—as in *lyric poetry*, or *song lyrics*. No wonder Duffy's version of Orpheus is a kind of literary man with rock-star swagger.

Again using modern lingo, Eurydice says that Orpheus has "a poem to pitch," the way an author might pitch a book idea to an editor or agent. He also hopes to win "her as the prize," as if she were a literary award rather than a human being. These details allude to the original myth, in which Orpheus's songs charm Hades (king of the underworld) into letting Eurydice return to the upper world. At the same time, they cast Orpheus as the kind of famous musician or author who hopes his art will seduce fans—and the kind of man who sees women merely as sexual "prize[s]" to be won.

The alliteration in these lines is almost over the top: "Larger"/"life"/"lyre"; "poem"/"pitch"/"prize." It's as if Eurydice is mocking the kinds of poetic devices Orpheus uses or poking fun at poetry itself.

LINES 34-36

> *Things were different ...*
> *... the boy. Legendary.*

Building on the previous stanza, lines 34-36 add more detail about Orpheus's fame. It turns out that he was especially celebrated by his male peers.

"Back then" has a few possible meanings. It might refer to the early period of Orpheus and Eurydice's relationship, or the time when Eurydice was alive, or the height of Orpheus's career. It might also refer to ancient Greece, when the poem is ostensibly set.

But the poem isn't *just* about ancient Greece; Duffy's using a famous Greek myth to comment on modern culture. So "back then" might also evoke a much more recent age—say, the age Duffy grew up in—when the field of literature was heavily male-dominated, and the opinions of "the men" carried more weight than the opinions of their female colleagues.

In any case, "the men" of that period treated Orpheus, or "Big O," as a "Legendary" talent. As far as poetry was concerned—"verse-wise"—they considered him "the boy" (i.e., the man, the greatest). But the mocking nickname ("Big O"), plus the pointed emphasis on the *male* acclaim he received, suggests that Eurydice, as a woman, was much more skeptical of his talent.

LINES 37-44

> *The blurb on ...*
> *... wee, silver tears.*

Eurydice continues to mock Orpheus's inflated poetic reputation. According to her, his "Legendary" status was a product of marketing, not talent. Drawing on details from the original Greek myth, she satirizes the hype surrounding him.

The Orpheus of Greek myth was said to charm all creatures, and even stones, through the power of his song. In Eurydice's telling, the "blurb" (promotional quote) on Orpheus's books claims that the whole gamut of animals, from A to Z ("aardvark to zebra"), gathered around him "when he sang." Her language

seems to poke fun at these hyperbolic claims:

> fish leapt in their shoals
> at the sound of his voice,
> even the mute, sullen stones at his feet
> wept wee, silver tears.

The outlandish details here—the fish jumping ecstatically out of the sea; the stones that are "sullen" until they cry "wee" tears—hint that Eurydice finds the legend surrounding her husband over-the-top and ridiculous. According to her, the legend is based not on eyewitness accounts but on a book-jacket "blurb": a publisher's marketing device. (Blurbs are often written by friends of the author and are notorious for their fawning praise.)

Again, this is a deliberate anachronism; blurbs didn't exist in ancient Greece, nor did print books. The poem is slyly conflating ancient and modern literary cultures in order to point out things they share in common, including misogyny, male arrogance, and poets with overinflated reputations.

The heavy alliteration in this passage ("blurb"/"back"/"books"; "flocked"/"fish"; "side"/"sang"/"sound"/"sullen stones"/"silver"; "wept wee") sounds exaggerated, even excessive, as if to mock the excess of the blurb itself.

LINES 45-50

> *Bollocks. (I'd done ...*
> *... rather be dead.*

Lines 45-50 undercut the pompous "blurb" described in the previous stanza. In an anticlimactic irony, Eurydice reports that the whole blurb was a lie: "Bollocks." Eurydice was the one who'd typed up all of Orpheus's poems, so she was in a position to know that they didn't really have a magical effect on animals. (Her phrasing leaves open the possibility that she typed up the hyperbolic blurb, too, and helped build his exaggerated reputation.)

This detail is another commentary on literary culture, and gender bias more broadly. Over the centuries, many famous male writers—and many not-so-famous ones—have effectively treated their wives and female partners as unpaid assistants. (A well-known example is Vera Nabokov, wife of the novelist Vladimir Nabokov, who was her husband's editor and assistant throughout her career. Find more context here.)

But Eurydice resists this role, just as she does the "Muse" role (line 22). In general, she rejects the subordinate status that Orpheus assigned her, and that many male authors have assigned the women in their lives. Though she's happy in the underworld, she tells her listeners that if she had her life to live "all over again,"

> rest assured that I'd rather speak for myself
> than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White
> Goddess, etc., etc.
> In fact, girls, I'd rather be dead.

Here, Eurydice rejects the stereotypes male writers have often used to depict women. She'd much rather tell her own story—"speak for myself"—than have a male writer reduce her to a love interest, femme fatale, goddess of purity, or other simplistic role.

Here, "Dearest" and "Beloved" evoke a generic love-interest or muse figure, while "Dark Lady" and "White Goddess" allude to the works of two famous male poets: William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and Robert Graves (1895-1985). Critics have often referred to the unnamed female character in Shakespeare's sonnets as "the Dark Lady," while *The White Goddess* is the title of Graves's 1948 nonfiction book about poetry and mythology. (Graves analyzes European poetry as a form of goddess worship and has been accused of reductive sexism, including in his comments about male and female poets.)

Once again, the references seem anachronistic: both Shakespeare and Graves were Englishmen who lived long after the period that spawned ancient Greek mythology. On the other hand, Eurydice may have some knowledge of later history from her vantage point in the afterlife. Regardless, she's criticizing the male bias, and condescending female stereotypes, of the Western literary tradition.

Eurydice adds that she'd "rather be dead" than be shoehorned into men's stereotypes and myths again. This comment reflects her actual choices in the poem: she decides to remain in the underworld rather than follow Orpheus back to life and become "trapped" in his poetry (lines 63-66).

LINES 51-55

> *But the Gods ...*
> *... strutted his stuff.*

Having rejected a tradition of male literature that stereotypes women, Eurydice suggests that her own "tale"—the one familiar from ancient myth—has been warped by male bias.

The statement "what you doubtless know of my tale / is the deal" again links the ancient world of myth with modern literary culture. Primarily, Eurydice means that the part of her story her audience knows best concerns the "deal" Orpheus struck with the gods. (In the traditional myth, Orpheus's music moves Hades, the god of the underworld, to grant him permission to bring Eurydice back to the upper world—on the condition that Orpheus not look back at her during their ascent.) But her simile comparing the ancient "Gods" to modern "publishers" also brings to mind modern *book* "deal[s]."

From Eurydice's point of view, both male "Gods" and male "publishers" prevent women from shaping their own stories. Whether it's her husband deciding her fate by bargaining with

Hades or a male author striking a lucrative publishing deal—presumably to write more stories that center male perspectives—women are left out of the picture. As a result, myths and literature get filtered through, and heavily skewed by, men's perspectives.

Eurydice implies that what her listeners "know of [her] tale" is either a lie or only a partial truth: it's what the male gods and publishers *wanted* to be known. (Notice that "male" even rhymes with "tale" here, as if to emphasize the male bias of traditional stories. The slant rhyme "deal" further links both men and literature with shady dealings.)

As part of his dealings with the gods, Orpheus shows off his poetry: "strut[s] his stuff." Again, there's an implied comparison to a modern author—a strutting, vain, male author—showing off his work in hopes of landing a big publishing deal.

LINES 56-59

The bloodless ghosts ...
... believe her ears.

This stanza (lines 56-59) is an unusual one. It's the poem's only rhyming quatrain, and all four lines rhyme:

> The bloodless ghosts were in tears.
> Sisyphus sat on his rock for the first time in years.
> Tantalus was permitted a couple of beers.
> The woman in question could scarcely believe her ears.

There are sporadic rhyme pairs elsewhere in the poem: for example, in lines 52-53 ("male"/"tale"), lines 61-62 ("life"/"wife'), and lines 76-77 ("walked"/"talked"), which form a standalone couplet. But this is an unusual, prominent rhyme cluster in what is mostly a free verse poem. Why does it appear all of a sudden?

A possible clue comes in the previous line: "Orpheus strutted his stuff." This stanza describes the reaction to his poetry performance. Although the male inhabitants of the underworld seem impressed, Eurydice doesn't: listening to his poetry about her, "The woman in question could scarcely believe her ears." The surrounding context (including the jaded stanza that follows) implies that she can't believe how *bad* it is, not how *good* it is. Meanwhile, the sudden outburst of quadruple rhyme is paired with a total lack of meter. In English, non-metrical rhyming poetry is often considered corny and clumsy. So this rhyming stanza might be a way of illustrating how bad a poet Orpheus is!

Still, he has his fans. His poetry moves the "bloodless ghosts" of the underworld to "tears," as if they suddenly feel like full human beings again. It also relieves the torment of two famous characters from Greek mythology: "Sisyphus" and "Tantalus," both of whom the gods condemned to punishment in the afterlife. Sisyphus was sentenced to roll a boulder up a hill forever (each time he reached the top, it rolled back down), while Tantalus was sentenced to go hungry and thirsty forever (*tantalized* by food and water that kept moving out of his reach). According to Eurydice, Orpheus's poetry magically gives both men a break from their eternal torture: Sisyphus gets to "[sit] on his rock," while Tantalus gets to have "a couple of beers."

It's important to notice, though, that Sisyphus and Tantalus are both *men*. Orpheus's poetry may amaze and enchant them, but Eurydice—"The woman in question"—seems completely immune to its charms. As Orpheus "strut[s] his stuff" for the underworld, the wife he's writing about and trying to win back remains unmoved.

LINES 60-66

Like it or ...
... histories, myths...

Following the poetry recital in the previous stanza (lines 56-59), this one (lines 60-66) jumps forward slightly in the narrative. It's implied that, even though Eurydice wasn't impressed, Orpheus's poetry moved "the Gods" (including Hades, king of the underworld). They agreed to let him take her back to the upper world, even though she has no desire to go. Because the whole poem is an allusion to a famous myth, Eurydice (or Duffy) trusts readers to fill in this part of the story for themselves; she doesn't narrate the gods' response directly.

Instead, Eurydice expresses her disgust that, "Like it or not," she "must follow him back." Notice that the "it" in "Like it or not" could refer to Orpheus's poetry as well as the obligation to "follow him." Again, it doesn't matter whether she thinks Orpheus has any talent or not, or whether she really *wants* to return to her old "life" with him. She "must" go back, because her husband and the (mostly male) gods have taken charge of her fate. She's considered "Orpheus' wife" in a culture where women have little to no independence.

What Eurydice particularly dreads is becoming the subject of Orpheus's poems again. She has no desire to be, as she puts it,

> [...] trapped in his images, metaphors, similes,
> octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets,
> elegies, limericks, villanelles,
> histories, myths...

Clearly, she doesn't feel flattered by, or even accurately represented in, Orpheus's writing. Instead, she feels "trapped" in its gendered stereotypes—the kind she listed earlier in line 49 ("Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess, etc., etc."). From poetic devices ("images, metaphors, similes") to stanza forms ("octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets") to poetic genres and forms ("elegies, limericks, villanelles") to other genres ("histories, myths"), every aspect of his writing seems to flatten and reduce her rather than reflecting her true self.

By extension, Orpheus's writing seems to stand in for an entire literary tradition that stereotypes and misrepresents women. It's no accident that the list in lines 63-66—whose length may reflect the tedious excesses of Orpheus's work—ends with the word "myths." After all, the Orpheus/Eurydice story *began* as a myth, and the speaker of "Eurydice" feels that the ancient, male-biased version of the tale got everything wrong. As a woman speaking to an audience of "Girls," she's now telling her own story to correct the record and express her true self.

LINES 67-72

He'd been told ...
... was the past.

Lines 67-72 cover some familiar details from the original Orpheus/Eurydice myth. They describe the bargain Orpheus struck with "the Gods."

In the most common ancient version of the tale, Hades and Persephone (the king and queen of the underworld) agree to let Orpheus take Eurydice back to the world of the living. There's just one catch: as the couple climbs back toward daylight, Orpheus has to walk in front of Eurydice and can't glance back at her. Otherwise, she'll have to return to the land of the dead.

All this remains true in Duffy's poem; it's just Eurydice's attitude that's different. Rather than looking forward to resuming her life with Orpheus, Eurydice is content to remain in the underworld. For her, life in "the upper air" feels like "the past": something she's finished with and has cut all ties with. She resents Orpheus's attempt to drag her back to a marriage that never really satisfied her in the first place. She also seems to bristle at having to walk "right behind him," as if she were subservient.

LINES 73-77

He'd been warned ...
... Nobody talked.

Lines 73-75 finish summarizing Orpheus's bargain with the gods:

> He'd been warned
> that one look would lose me
> for ever and ever.

That is, the gods had warned Orpheus that if he looked back at Eurydice even once during their ascent to the upper world, Eurydice would return to the underworld forever. Again, this is a standard element of the Orpheus/Eurydice myth.

Lines 76-77 describe the pair's climb in a brief, standalone stanza:

> So we walked, we walked.
> Nobody talked.

Eurydice is comfortable with silence, as she makes clear in the poem's first and last stanzas. Yet the silence here seems ominous and tense—even if Eurydice might prefer it to talking. It seems like the silence of a couple who no longer have anything to say to each other. In fact, Eurydice will indicate in the next stanza that she considers their relationship over ("we were through," line 83). It's also telling that Orpheus, whose specialty is words, can't seem to find any words at this moment. Clearly, the relationship he's trying to save is doomed even before he breaks his bargain with the gods.

The repetition of "we walked" makes the couple's wordless trudge sound especially long and tedious. Alliteration ("we walked, we walked") and end rhyme ("walked"/"talked") add a little extra punch to this grimly funny couplet.

LINES 78-83

Girls, forget what ...
... we were through?

In lines 78-83, Eurydice directly addresses her listeners again. Her tone is confiding, as if she's sharing the secret truth about her marriage with a group of girlfriends.

On one level, "Girls, forget what you've read" simply means that Eurydice is now telling *her* side of a famous story and that her audience should dismiss whatever previous, distorted versions they've encountered. On another level, this line might be urging female readers to dismiss male-biased myths, literature, and history in general. Either way, Eurydice asserts her authority as a narrator and presents her version of events as definitive: "It happened like this."

In the original myth, Orpheus's turning to look at Eurydice is a reflexive, loving impulse with tragic consequences. In Eurydice's version, however, impulse has nothing to do with it: she does "everything in [her] power / to make him look back." She *wants* to be separated from him forever, because to her mind, the two of them are "through": he just doesn't "see" it yet. The man who used to "follow[] her round / writing poems" (lines 18-19), and who has followed her down to her underworld sanctuary, now expects *her* to follow *him* back to their life together. But she has other plans!

In Eurydice's telling, then, Orpheus's turning to face her—thus triggering their permanent separation—has a symbolic element. It represents a facing of the *truth*: the truth that their marriage is over, and perhaps never worked in the first place. But for now, as the two of them climb toward the upper world, Orpheus is still in denial.

LINES 84-91

I was dead. ...
... purple to grey.

Having declared that she and Orpheus "were through" by the time he tried to bring her back to life, Eurydice now stresses

that she had accepted death completely. To drive the point home, she calls herself a list of synonyms for "dead" (lines 84-86):

> I was dead. Deceased.
> I was Resting in Peace. Passé. Late.
> Past my sell-by date…

A couple of these synonyms are playful: "Passé" (French for "past") usually means "out of fashion" in English, while "Past my sell-by date" describes an expired product. (It's also another comic anachronism, since manufactured products with sell-by dates didn't exist in ancient Greece.)

The over-the-top, insistent quality of the list helps convey Eurydice's exasperation. It's as if she's saying, I was *obviously* dead, so why couldn't Orpheus see "we were through"? (These lines might also be alluding to a very famous comedy sketch: Monty Python's "Dead Parrot," which features an exasperated speaker rattling off synonyms for "dead.")

The following lines (87-91) are more poignant, as Eurydice "stretch[es] out [her] hand" to Orpheus in a desperate attempt to communicate her wishes. Still trying to make him turn around, she "touch[es] him once / on the back of the neck" and either says or thinks, "*Please let me stay*." But Orpheus gives no sign of hearing her, and the two keep climbing toward the upper world as the light "sadden[s] from purple to grey." This metaphor, or personification of the light, reflects Eurydice's own sadness, as well as her preference for death and gloom over life and daylight. To her, surroundings seem sadder the less dark they become!

LINES 92-98

> *It was an ...*
> *... when inspiration finally struck.*

Lines 92-98 continue to express Eurydice's frustration, which ends in a sudden burst of "inspiration." As she trudges toward the upper world with Orpheus, she grows more and more desperate to escape. The word "schlep" (meaning a laborious trudge) has a blunt, folksy ring to it, undermining the loftiness of the original myth. In the ancient Greek version of the story, this climb "from death to life" is hopeful and redemptive—at least until the tragic twist at the end. Here, it's a giant pain in the neck.

Frustrated, Eurydice tries "will[ing]" Orpheus to turn around, as if by telepathy or magic—but of course, that doesn't work. She considers "filching" (stealing) "the poem / out of his cloak," hoping that will startle or anger him enough to make him turn around. But then she's "struck" by a better idea: an "inspiration."

This word choice is key, as in the original myth, Orpheus is the one whose poetry is divinely *inspired*. In this modern, ironic retelling, Orpheus has no creative talent, but Eurydice has a sudden flash of creativity—one that helps her outwit Orpheus.

LINES 99-103

> *I stopped, thrilled. ...*
> *... hear it again…*

After Eurydice's flash of "inspiration" (line 98), she "stop[s]" short, "thrilled" by her plan of escape (line 99). Orpheus is "a yard in front" of her on their climb to the upper world (line 100). She then puts her plan into action (lines 101-103):

> My voice shook when I spoke -
> *Orpheus, your poem's a masterpiece.*
> *I'd love to hear it again…*

With the exception of "*Please let me stay*" (line 90), this is the only directly reported speech in the poem. Even in the case of "*Please let me stay*," it's not clear whether the line is spoken aloud; if it is, Orpheus seems not to hear and doesn't respond. Eurydice's voice may be shaking here because it's rusty from disuse—though it could also be from excitement, fear, or some other cause.

What she says is a lie: she thinks his poem is anything but a masterpiece, and she has no desire to hear it again. But it's a crafty, effective lie; it appeals to Orpheus's vanity and gets the result Eurydice wants. The fact that her insincere flattery is so effective aligns with the poem's skeptical stance toward language in general. Eurydice finds "words" dissatisfying and artificial, especially compared to silence, which "suit[s]" her completely (lines 6 and 10). Her "inspiration" is to use language the way Orpheus does: artificially. In a sense, she turns the poet's weapon against him. By doing so, she's able to return to the silent underworld and escape the burdens of language altogether.

LINES 104-109

> *He was smiling ...*
> *... and was gone.*

Lines 104-109 narrate the climactic moment in the Orpheus/Eurydice story. As in the original myth, Orpheus breaks his bargain with the gods by turning to look at Eurydice before they've reached the upper world. But in the original, he turns out of fear that she isn't following him—that the god of the underworld, Hades, has played a trick on him. Here, he turns because Eurydice has tricked him with flattery. The moment is charged with irony:

> He was smiling modestly,
> when he turned,

In context, it's clear that the "modest[y]" of his smile is fake! He's smiling out of self-satisfaction, and "look[ing]" at her only

because she's appealed to his vanity. The moment is loaded with symbolism: he looks at her in hopes of seeing his false self-image confirmed, but instead, he's forced to face the reality that the relationship is over.

And what does she see in *his* face? She comments only, "I noticed he hadn't shaved." Even though he's followed her to the underworld in a grandiose attempt to rescue her—whether she likes it or not—he hasn't bothered to clean himself up first. (Presumably, she likes his face better when it's clean-shaven: something that, as her husband, he might be expected to know.) The implication is that, even in the smallest ways, he places his own desires and preferences above hers.

Rather than disappearing with a tragic, lingering goodbye, she "wave[s] once and [is] gone." Again, the language here is comically unsentimental, expressing her desire to be rid of Orpheus for good. (However, waving once is different than not waving at all, so she does pay *some* tribute to his efforts.)

LINES 110-112

The dead are ...
... of the dead.

At first glance, the poem's final stanza (lines 110-112) seems like a *non sequitur*. That is, it sounds jarringly unrelated to the previous lines. However, it doesn't come out of nowhere. It circles back to themes explored in the first stanza, and more subtly throughout the poem: the failures of language and the joy and wisdom of silence.

According to Eurydice, "the dead" are more "talented" than human writers or speakers could ever be, because they're "wise" enough to stay quiet.

Figuratively, then, living people are like visitors to a "lake" shore, while the dead in their underworld are like "drowned" figures beneath that lake. No matter what the living people say, their words will always fail in some respect, because language is an artificial creation that can't map perfectly onto reality. On the other hand, the dead never fail, because they say nothing at all. In that sense, they have an advantage over Orpheus—or any living writer/speaker, including Carol Ann Duffy herself!

In the end, Eurydice suggests that, whatever poetry may or may not have to offer, silence is golden. Appropriately enough, she breaks off after the phrase "silence of the dead," and the poem itself falls silent.

SYMBOLS

THE UNDERWORLD

The "Underworld" (line 2) serves mainly as the poem's setting, but it also has a symbolic role in the poem. Just as in ancient Greek mythology, the underworld of "Eurydice" is the abode of the dead, a separate, eternal realm located beneath the world of the living. Accordingly, it symbolizes death and the timelessness of eternity (as opposed to the time-bound nature of human life).

This is why, for example, Eurydice refers to the underworld as "nowhen" (line 3)—a timeless state, like the placelessness of *nowhere*—and calls the trek from the underworld to the upper world "an uphill schlep / from death to life" (lines 92-93).

But in this telling, the underworld also represents the *silence* and *peacefulness* of death, especially in contrast with the noisiness of language. For Eurydice, in fact, it's a refuge from language. She stresses how relieved she is to be in this place "where the words had to come to an end."

In her view, the silence of death seems to mock the excesses and artificiality of language—including literature. The poem unfavorably compares Orpheus, an ancient symbol of poetry itself, with the "talented" dead, who are relieved from the burdens of language and know better than to say anything at all.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-10:** "Girls, I was dead and down / in the Underworld, a shade, / a shadow of my former self, nowhen. / It was a place where language stopped, / a black full stop, a black hole / Where the words had to come to an end. / And end they did there, / last words, / famous or not. / It suited me down to the ground."
- **Lines 11-19:** "So imagine me there, / unavailable, / out of this world, / then picture my face in that place / of Eternal Repose, / in the one place you'd think a girl would be safe / from the kind of a man / who follows her round / writing poems,"
- **Lines 26-28:** "when I heard— / Ye Gods— / a familiar knock-knock at Death's door."
- **Lines 67-72:** "He'd been told that he mustn't look back / or turn round, / but walk steadily upwards, / myself right behind him, / out of the Underworld / into the upper air that for me was the past."
- **Line 91:** "But already the light had saddened from purple to grey."
- **Lines 92-93:** "It was an uphill schlep / from death to life"
- **Lines 110-112:** "The dead are so talented. / The living walk by the edge of a vast lake / near the wise, drowned silence of the dead."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem is framed as an extended allusion to the ancient Greek myth of Eurydice and Orpheus. The basic story goes like this:

- Orpheus is a famous poet and musician, whose lyre-playing and singing is so amazing that the natural world moves about in response. He marries Eurydice, but she's bitten by a snake not long after and dies.
- The distraught Orpheus travels to the underworld to bargain with Hades (the king of the underworld) and retrieve his wife. Hades, moved by Orpheus's talent and grief, offers a deal: Orpheus can bring Eurydice back to the land of the living, so long as he doesn't turn around to look at her as they walk out of the underworld.
- The couple almost makes it, but, at the last moment, Orpheus turns around. In some versions of the myth, he turns around because he's lost faith; in others, he's so happy to glimpse the exit that he turns around to celebrate with his wife.
- Either way, Eurydice disappears, lost to him forever.

Duffy's "Eurydice" preserves some broad elements of this myth, but radically changes its details, tone, and emphasis. In Duffy's version, Orpheus is an arrogant, talentless bard (singer/poet). Eurydice has no respect for him and no desire to return to their married life together. She also disdains the male-dictated standards that secured his literary reputation in the first place. During their ascent to the upper world, Orpheus turns back not because he's excited about daylight but because Eurydice tricks him, puffing up his ego so that he'll look at her and separate them forever.

In other words, Duffy's version is a feminist satire. It turns Eurydice—a passive victim in the original myth—into a clever protagonist who laughs off Orpheus's glorious reputation and takes charge of her own fate.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-112

IRONY

As a satirical retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, the whole poem is drenched in irony. In the original myth, Orpheus and Eurydice are a loving couple separated tragically twice over; in Duffy's version, Eurydice wants to be rid of Orpheus forever. For anyone familiar with the original version, then, just about everything in Duffy's version overturns expectations.

Within this broader setup, a few particularly ironic moments stand out. In lines 37-46, for example, Eurydice punctures Orpheus's reputation for magical poetic brilliance:

> The blurb on the back of his books claimed
> that animals,
> aardvark to zebra,
> flocked to his side when he sang,
> fish leapt in their shoals
> at the sound of his voice,
> even the mute, sullen stones at his feet
> wept wee, silver tears.
> Bollocks. (I'd done all the typing myself,
> I should know.)

In other words, Orpheus treated his wife as an unpaid assistant, relying on her to do the thankless "typing" work while basking in literary acclaim. (Many wives of famous male authors have done this kind of labor in real life, receiving little or no credit in the process.) As a result, Eurydice knows exactly how ordinary and un-magical his poems are. It's even possible that she wrote the flattering "blurb" herself!

Another sharply ironic moment comes in lines 55-59, as Orpheus shows off his supposed poetic prowess:

> Orpheus strutted his stuff.
> The bloodless ghosts were in tears.
> Sisyphus sat on his rock for the first time in years.
> Tantalus was permitted a couple of beers.
> The woman in question could scarcely believe her ears.

While other (male) denizens of the underworld pause in wonder, Eurydice isn't impressed at all. The phrase "could scarcely believe her ears" looks ambiguous at first—is Orpheus's poetry unbelievably *good* or *bad*?—but the next stanza clears up all doubt. She has no desire to be "trapped" in his poetry, because she hates it!

Yet another example comes when Eurydice tricks Orpheus into turning around (lines 101-106). Again, in the context of the original myth, it's ironic that she's trying to do this at all. Rather than eagerly following her husband, she's sabotaging the effort that's supposed to reunite them. But the phrasing adds an extra jolt of irony:

> My voice shook when I spoke -
> *Orpheus, your poem's a masterpiece.*
> *I'd love to hear it again...*
> He was smiling modestly,
> when he turned,
> when he turned and he looked at me.

Eurydice knows he can't resist this appeal to his ego; in fact, puffing up his vanity might be the only thing guaranteed to make him notice her. As a result, the phrase "smiling modestly" stands out as especially ironic. This is clearly a *false* modesty: he's smiling because Eurydice's praise has gone to his head, making him feel like a brilliant and special poet.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-46:** "The blurb on the back of his books claimed / that animals, / aardvark to zebra, / flocked to his side when he sang, / fish leapt in their shoals / at the sound of his voice, / even the mute, sullen stones at his feet / wept wee, silver tears. / Bollocks. (I'd done all the typing myself, / I should know.)"
- **Lines 80-81:** "I did everything in my power / to make him look back."
- **Line 91:** "But already the light had saddened from purple to grey."
- **Lines 101-106:** "My voice shook when I spoke - / Orpheus, your poem's a masterpiece. / I'd love to hear it again… / He was smiling modestly, / when he turned, / when he turned and he looked at me."

REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of words and phrases, many of which are important to its structure or themes. For example, the speaker repeatedly addresses a group of "Girls" or women (lines 1, 50, and 78). This may be an apostrophe to female readers/listeners in general, or Eurydice may be telling her story to a specific gathering; either way, the repetition hints at the poem's feminist themes by emphasizing that the speaker's intended audience is female.

Words related to death and finality also haunt the poem throughout. The word "dead" occurs five times, and "death" and "Death's" occur once each. "Stop" and "stopped" both appear in the first stanza, and "end" appears twice. These repetitions not only highlight the poem's setting—the "Underworld" or afterlife—but also underscore how much the speaker *likes* death. In fact, she prefers it to life with Orpheus. (She even calls herself several synonyms for "dead" in lines 84-86, as if to drive the point home.)

The poem also includes two examples of epizeuxis, or immediate repetition of phrases. In line 76, Eurydice says, "we walked, we walked," emphasizing the tediousness of her trudge with Orpheus. In lines 105-106, she recounts that Orpheus was smiling "when he turned, / when he turned and looked at me." Here, the repetition highlights the most crucial moment in the story: the moment when Eurydice tricks Orpheus into breaking his promise to the gods, ensuring that the two of them will be separated forever.

Finally, the poem includes several examples of anaphora. Three of these involve the same first-person pronoun: "I was"/"I was" in lines 84-85, "I" in lines 95-96 and 99; and "I" in lines 108-109. It's no coincidence that these examples show up in the second half of the poem. As Eurydice gains more agency and takes control of her fate, she begins more and more lines and sentences with "I."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Girls,," "dead"
- **Line 4:** "place," "stopped"
- **Line 5:** "a black," "stop," "a black"
- **Line 6:** "words," "end"
- **Line 7:** "end"
- **Line 8:** "words"
- **Line 14:** "picture my face," "place"
- **Line 16:** "place"
- **Line 19:** "poems"
- **Line 25:** "picture my face"
- **Line 27:** "Gods"
- **Line 28:** "Death's"
- **Line 30:** "Big O."
- **Line 33:** "poem"
- **Line 36:** "Big O"
- **Line 50:** "girls,," "dead"
- **Line 51:** "Gods"
- **Line 67:** "He'd been"
- **Line 73:** "He'd been"
- **Line 75:** "ever," "ever"
- **Line 76:** "we walked, we walked."
- **Line 78:** "Girls,"
- **Line 84:** "I was," "dead"
- **Line 85:** "I was"
- **Line 93:** "death"
- **Line 95:** "I"
- **Line 96:** "I," "poem"
- **Line 99:** "I"
- **Line 102:** "poem's"
- **Line 105:** "when he turned,"
- **Line 106:** "when he turned"
- **Line 108:** "I"
- **Line 109:** "I"
- **Line 110:** "The dead"
- **Line 112:** "the dead"

APOSTROPHE

The poem's speaker, Eurydice, repeatedly addresses an audience she refers to as "Girls" (see lines 1, 50, and 78). The poem's conversational tone raises the possibility that this audience is actually present; for example, Eurydice might be telling her story to a gathering of female spirits in the afterlife. But since the situation is never made clear, it's equally possible that she's addressing girls or women in general, wherever they may be. In other words, her whole monologue might be an apostrophe to an imagined female audience.

Either way, the casual familiarity of Eurydice's tone creates an intimacy between speaker and reader (or speaker and listener). After all, for women, "Girls" can be an affectionate way of addressing fellow women of any age. Moreover, Eurydice's attempts to involve her audience in the drama—"imagine me,"

"picture my face," "Just picture my face" (lines 11, 14, 25)—give the impression that she has a really juicy story to tell. As a mythical figure, in fact, she expects that her audience is partly familiar with her story already ("what you doubtless know of my tale," line 53).

Ultimately, Eurydice isn't just addressing other women; she's *appealing* to women to believe her version of events. In lines 78-79, she urges:

> Girls, forget what you've read.
> It happened like this -

In other words, the poem's apostrophe is more than a storytelling device: it becomes a kind of outreach or plea to readers (even those of other genders). Don't trust the way men have framed my story, Eurydice seems to say; in fact, be skeptical of male authors and narratives in general.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Girls, I was dead and down / in the Underworld, a shade, / a shadow of my former self, nowhen."
- **Lines 11-28:** "So imagine me there, / unavailable, / out of this world, / then picture my face in that place / of Eternal Repose, / in the one place you'd think a girl would be safe / from the kind of a man / who follows her round / writing poems, / hovers about / while she reads them, / calls her His Muse, / and once sulked for a night and a day / because she remarked on his weakness for abstract nouns. / Just picture my face / when I heard— / Ye Gods— / a familiar knock-knock at Death's door."
- **Line 50:** "In fact girls, I'd rather be dead."
- **Lines 53-54:** "and what you doubtless know of my tale / is the deal."
- **Lines 78-79:** "Girls, forget what you've read. / It happened like this -"

ALLITERATION

Several passages of the poem use heavy alliteration, usually for emphasis and/or comic effect. In lines 1-3, for example, /d/ and /sh/ alliteration help grab the reader's (or listener's) attention as the speaker, Eurydice, begins her tale:

> Girls, I was dead and down
> in the Underworld, a shade,
> a shadow of my former self [...]

Alliteration also features heavily in lines 31-33, as Eurydice introduces Orpheus:

> Larger than life.
> With his lyre
> and a poem to pitch, with me as the prize.

Since Eurydice is clearly mocking "Big O" here, the /l/ and /p/ alliteration seems to heighten the mockery. It's as if she's using exaggerated poetic effects to ridicule a poet she considers talentless. The alliterative overkill continues in the next stanza:

> Big O was the boy. Legendary.
> The blurb on the back of his books claimed [...]
> even the mute, sullen stones at his feet
> wept wee, silver tears.

In lines 84-86, meanwhile, percussive /d/ and /p/ sounds underline Eurydice's insistence that she "was dead." The emphasis becomes comically over-the-top (in fact, it might be a winking allusion to a famous Monty Python comedy sketch):

> I was dead. Deceased.
> I was Resting in Peace. Passé. Late.
> Past my sell-by date...

The alliteration in the poem's closing lines ("living"/"lake"; "drowned"/"dead") ends the poem on a similarly emphatic note. In particular, it accentuates the final word in the poem—"dead"—as if to maximize the contrast between this ringing syllable and the deathly silence that follows.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dead," "down"
- **Line 2:** "shade"
- **Line 3:** "shadow"
- **Line 6:** "Where," "words"
- **Line 14:** "picture," "place"
- **Line 31:** "Larger," "life"
- **Line 32:** "lyre"
- **Line 33:** "poem," "pitch," "prize"
- **Line 36:** "Big," "boy"
- **Line 37:** "blurb," "back," "books"
- **Line 40:** "side," "sang"
- **Line 43:** "sullen stones"
- **Line 44:** "wept wee," "silver"
- **Line 84:** "dead," "Deceased"
- **Line 85:** "Peace," "Passé"
- **Line 86:** "Past"
- **Line 111:** "living," "lake"
- **Line 112:** "drowned," "dead"

METAPHOR

The poem uses colorful metaphors and similes to bring Eurydice's world of death to life. In the first stanza, for example, the speaker describes the "Underworld" (the mythical land of the dead) as:

> [...] a place where language stopped,
> a black full stop, a black hole
> where the words had to come to an end.

To evoke the idea of a wordless afterlife, Eurydice compares the underworld first to a "black full stop" (a period at the end of a sentence), then to a "black hole" that swallows up language the way black holes in outer space seem to swallow light. The speaker circles back to a similar metaphor at the end of the poem:

> The living walk by the edge of a vast lake
> near the wise, drowned silence of the dead.

This image plays on the idea of the underworld as a realm beneath the earth. Here, it's as if the dead are under*water*, "drowned" into "silence." (Recall the conventional metaphor *drowned out*, meaning muffled by noise.)

The poem contains other morbid metaphors, too. As Eurydice uses a variety of synonyms to emphasize that she's "dead," she calls herself "Past my sell-by date" (line 86), thus comparing herself to an expired product. A few lines later (line 91), she reports that "the light had saddened from purple to grey" as she ascended to the upper world. Ironically, the underworld atmosphere strikes her as growing sadder the *less* dark it gets! That she's happier in the gloom than in the daylight underscores how much she prefers death to life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "It was a place where language stopped, / a black full stop, a black hole / Where the words had to come to an end."
- **Line 10:** "It suited me down to the ground."
- **Line 86:** "Past my sell-by date…"
- **Line 91:** "But already the light had saddened from purple to grey."
- **Lines 111-112:** "The living walk by the edge of a vast lake / near the wise, drowned silence of the dead."

VOCABULARY

The Underworld (Lines 1-2) - The abode of the dead in Greek mythology. Traditionally imagined as a realm under the earth or at the far edge of the sea.

Shade (Line 2) - A ghost; a spirit without a body.

Nowhen (Line 3) - Not belonging to any time, or existing outside of time; not having a temporal location. (Compare "nowhere," meaning not having a physical location.)

Full stop (Line 5) - A period; the punctuation mark "." Metaphorically, the end of something.

Black hole (Lines 5-6) - An object in outer space (created by a collapsed star) whose gravity is so powerful that even light can't escape it. Metaphorically, a void or point of no return.

Down to the ground (Line 10) - Completely; to a T.

Eternal Repose (Lines 14-15) - Eternal rest; death.

His Muse (Line 22) - The nine Muses were ancient Greek goddesses of artistic and scientific inspiration. Colloquially, a person who inspires an artist is said to be the artist's "muse." The term has often been gendered, with the "muse" label applied to women who interest male artists romantically as well as inspire them creatively. (The capital letters here—"His Muse"—suggest that Eurydice's using the term with heavy sarcasm.)

Weakness for (Line 24) - Special fondness for or bias toward.

Abstract nouns (Line 24) - Nouns describing states and qualities that are impersonal, theoretical, or not directly available to the senses; for example, nouns like "justice" or "despair" rather than nouns like "apple," "sunlight," etc.

Ye Gods (Line 27) - An old-fashioned interjection similar to "Good God!"

Death's door (Line 28) - The idiom "at death's door" means "about to die." Here, Eurydice plays with this expression, describing the entrance of the Underworld as a literal "Death's door."

Big O (Line 30, Line 36) - The speaker's sarcastic nickname for Orpheus, a famous poet/musician in ancient Greek mythology. Possibly a joking reference to singer-songwriter Roy Orbison (1936-1988), who was nicknamed "The Big O." There may also be an implied sexual joke (O = orgasm). In other words, Eurydice is mockingly describing Orpheus as a kind of egotistical rock star or ladies' man.

Lyre (Line 32) - A stringed instrument used by ancient Greek bards, including the mythical figure of Orpheus.

Pitch (Line 33) - To offer an idea or creative work for acceptance/publication. Eurydice imagines the ancient bard Orpheus "pitching" his poems the way a modern author might pitch a book idea to agents or editors.

Verse-wise (Lines 35-36) - As far as poetry is concerned.

Blurb (Line 37) - A flattering quote (usually by a reviewer or fellow author) featured on a book jacket for promotional purposes.

Shoals (Line 41) - Schools or large groups of fish.

Sullen (Line 43) - Sulky; brooding; gloomily quiet.

Bollocks (Line 45) - A mildly vulgar, usually British expression meaning "B.S.!" or "Nonsense!"

Dark Lady (Line 49) - An allusion to the unnamed woman who features in many of Shakespeare's sonnets. Critics have traditionally called this figure "the Dark Lady." By extension,

Eurydice is referring to the nameless and/or secondary roles women often play in literature written by men.

White Goddess (Line 49) - An allusion to a figure described by poet Robert Graves in *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948). Graves's study, which was influential in its time, discusses a mythical "White Goddess" of birth, love, and death who supposedly inspires male poets in muse-like fashion. Again, Eurydice is referring to stereotyped male depictions of women throughout the history of literature.

Doubtless (Line 53) - Undoubtedly.

The Deal (Lines 53-54) - An allusion to the bargain Orpheus strikes in the standard version of the Orpheus/Eurydice myth. Moved by Orpheus's music, Hades and Persephone (king and queen of the underworld) allow him to take Eurydice back to the upper world on one condition: that he not look back at her as they ascend.In this context, Eurydice is also referring to the *book* deals authors strike with "publishers" (see line 51). She's skeptically comparing Orpheus's bargain with the gods to the lucrative deals "male" publishers arrange with overrated male authors (line 52).

Bloodless ghosts (Line 56) - The spirits of the dead who inhabit the "Underworld" of Greek myth (referenced in line 2). Spirits in the underworld lacked strength and substance and would not typically have been able to cry.

Sisyphus (Line 57) - A famous character in Greek mythology. A wicked king in life, Sisyphus was condemned in death to roll a boulder up a hill for all eternity. Each time he reached the top, the boulder rolled back down. His punishment took place in Tartarus, a hell-like region of the underworld.Here, the poem imagines Sisyphus magically getting a break from his torment, thanks to Orpheus's supposedly enchanting poetry.

Tantalus (Line 58) - Like Sisyphus (line 57), Tantalus is a Greek mythological character known for his divine punishment in the underworld. Tantalus was sentenced to stand in water beneath fruit-tree branches; both the water and the fruit moved away each time he tried to eat or drink, so that he went hungry and thirsty for all eternity.Again, the poem imagines Orpheus's poetry delighting and soothing the (male) inhabitants of the underworld—even the suffering Tantalus gets a break! Eurydice, meanwhile, remains unimpressed.

Images, metaphors, similes (Line 63) - Images, metaphors, and similes are poetic devices. Imagery is descriptive language that engages the senses; metaphors are figurative comparisons (e.g., "His smile was a ray of sunshine"); similes are figurative comparisons made using "like," "as," or similar words (e.g., "His smile was like a ray of sunshine').

Octaves, sextets, quatrains, couplets (Line 64) - Types of poetic stanza. Octaves have eight lines, sextets (or sestets) six, quatrains four, and couplets two.

Elegies, limericks, villanelles (Line 65) - Poetic genres and forms. Elegies are poems of mourning; limericks are a type of short, rhyming, usually comic poem in anapestic meter; villanelles are a type of 19-line rhyming poem with a double refrain.

Passé (Line 85) - Outdated; no longer fashionable or current. Here used as a synonym for "dead."

Late (Line 85) - Here meaning "dead," as in "the late Eurydice."

Sell-by date (Line 86) - A date stamped on a product to let consumers know when it is no longer fresh. A product that's "past its sell-by date" has expired. Here, Eurydice uses this phrase as another synonym for "dead."

Schlep (Line 92) - A laborious walk or trek.

Willed (Line 95) - Tried to make something happen by sheer force of will.

Filching (Line 96) - Stealing.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Eurydice" is a free verse poem containing lines and stanzas of mixed length.

The shortest line in the poem is one syllable: "Him" (line 29). The longest is 21 syllables: "than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess, etc., etc." (line 49; "etc." is pronounced "et cetera"). The stanzas cover a similarly wide range: the shortest are one line apiece (lines 50 and 55), while the longest is 18 lines (lines 11-28).

These variations break the poem's extended narrative into organic-seeming units, arranged according to the flow of the narrative rather than some arbitrary scheme. In other words, these units are more like prose *paragraphs* than conventional stanzas.

This style suits the casual tone and satirical approach of the poem, which, in many ways, pokes fun at poetry itself. It also reinforces the conceit that Eurydice is telling her story, in a loose and conversational way, to a casual group of listeners.

Although the poem has no meter or rhyme scheme, it does contain occasional rhyme, which adds an extra element of playfulness and surprise to an already funny dramatic monologue. In fact, one four-line stanza (lines 56-59) contains a quadruple rhyme ("tears"/"years"/"beers"/"ears"), even though it doesn't follow any kind of meter. It's no accident that this stanza describes *Orpheus's* poem. In English-language poetry, rhyme without meter is often considered amateurish and clunky—so Eurydice may be suggesting, here, that Orpheus's supposedly brilliant verse is really a bunch of doggerel.

METER

"Eurydice" is a free verse poem, so it doesn't have a meter. Its

lack of a regular rhythm or conventional form reflects its skeptical, satirical stance toward traditional poetry. (Especially poetry that has come out of the male-dominated Western tradition.) Readers can hear this skepticism in lines 48-49, for example, as Eurydice rejects male poets' simplistic portrayals of women:

> [...] rest assured that I'd rather speak for myself
> than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White
> Goddess, etc., etc.

Readers can hear it in lines 63-65 as well:

> [...] to be trapped in his images, metaphors, similes,
> octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets,
> elegies, limericks, villanelles [...]

For this speaker, traditional poems and poetic forms are a "trap[]" that have historically boxed in women's voices. Finding an original form for her own narrative, and avoiding the strictness of meter, seems to be part of her strategy for escaping that trap.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Eurydice" has no set rhyme scheme. However, it does contain sporadic end rhymes, which add liveliness to the poem's comic narrative. Examples include "life"/"wife" in lines 61-62, "walked"/"talked" in lines 76-77 (a standalone rhymed couplet), "Late"/"date" in lines 85-86, "stay"/"grey" in lines 90-91, "schlep"/"step" in lines 92 and 94, and the light rhyme on "talented"/"dead" in lines 110 and 112 (the poem's final line).

The looseness and casualness of this rhyming reflects the poem's cheeky attitude toward traditional poetry. Eurydice doesn't see herself as a Serious Poet like Orpheus, but it's as if, by turning a rhyme now and then, she's showing that she can use his poetic tools whenever she wants.

The most prominent rhyming comes in lines 56-59, a quatrain in which all four lines rhyme: "tears"/"years"/"beers"/"ears." This stanza follows the line "Orpheus strutted his stuff" (line 55), so it's describing the impact of *Orpheus's* poetry. The sudden heavy rhyming, combined with the lack of meter, sounds clunky and jarring—so it may be meant to capture the way Orpheus's "stuff" sounds.

SPEAKER

"Eurydice" is a dramatic monologue, meaning that its speaker is a character separate from the poet. It's voiced by Eurydice, a well-known figure from Greek mythology. However, Duffy's portrayal of this character departs sharply from tradition.

In the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Eurydice dies from a snake bite while fleeing from a god who was lustfully pursuing her. Her husband, the poet/musician Orpheus, descends to the underworld (the abode of the dead) in hopes of bringing her back to the upper world of the living. The king and queen of the underworld grant his wish, on the condition that he walk ahead of Eurydice and not look back at her till both are safely in the upper world. But at the last minute, Orpheus doubts that she's really behind him, glances back, and dooms her to return to the land of the dead.

In Duffy's feminist version, Eurydice is very happy in the silence of the underworld ("It suited me down to the ground"). She's especially glad to be rid of Orpheus, whose arrogant personality and pompous poetry she hates. She has no desire to return to the upper world with him, and at the last minute, she tricks him into glancing backward so that she can stay behind (lines 96-109). She's now telling her story, on her terms, to an audience of unidentified "Girls."

At the same time, she's deflating the legend surrounding Orpheus (whom she mockingly calls "Big O"), and rejecting the female stereotypes ("Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady," etc.) that populate the male-dominated literary tradition. Rather than letting men define her, she's taken control of her own narrative, along with her own life (or death).

SETTING

The setting of the poem is "the Underworld" (line 2) of Greek mythology. Generally, the ancient Greeks imagined the underworld as an invisible realm beneath the earth, where the "shade[s]," or ghosts, of the dead congregate in the afterlife. This realm was also called Hades, after the god who ruled over it. In the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus descends to the underworld while he's still alive, on a failed quest to rescue his dead wife, Eurydice.

Duffy's depiction of this setting has some traditional elements, including dim lighting (the "purple" mentioned in line 91) and the presence of "bloodless ghosts" (line 56). It particularly emphasizes the *silence* of the dead (lines 4-10):

> It was a place where language stopped,
> a black full stop, a black hole
> Where the words had to come to an end.
> And end they did there,
> last words,
> famous or not.

However, just as the poem features unorthodox portrayals of Orpheus and Eurydice, it also puts its own spin on the underworld. For example, it invents a moment of relief for two famous underworld figures from Greek myth. One is Sisyphus,

condemned to roll a boulder eternally up a hill; the other is Tantalus, condemned to go hungry and thirsty while food and water remained just out of his reach. In lines 57-58, Orpheus's song interrupts their torment:

> Sisyphus sat on his rock for the first time in years.
> Tantalus was permitted a couple of beers.

The fact that Eurydice has to *describe* this underworld to her listeners, in the past tense (see line 1), suggests that she may not be there anymore. But it's not clear who her listeners are, and it's not clear where else she (or her ghost) might be.

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.

"Eurydice" is one of many poems in her collection *The World's Wife* (1999) that reflects on the joys and difficulties of being a 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. By giving these largely silent figures their own say, Duffy offers feminist critiques of myth, history, and literature.

"Eurydice" critiques the sexism of the literary world, and Western literature, in particular. It reflects on an age ("back then," line 34) when "publishers" (lines 51-52) tended to elevate male poets above their equally talented female peers, and when male writers often reduced the women in their professional orbits to sexualized "Muse[s]" (line 22) or unpaid assistants (see line 45: "I'd done all the typing myself"). At the same time, it depicts a female hero (Eurydice) thwarting the misogyny around her and taking control of her own story.

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 (including in "Eurydice," though this poem playfully sprinkles in some end rhyme). 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 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

- Hadestown — Clips from the award-winning Broadway musical "Hadestown," a reimagining of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfNHgSsammc&ab_channel=theatermania)
- The Poem Aloud — A reading/adaptation of "Eurydice." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjXqsGGGnVg)
- Orpheus and Eurydice — A summary of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Orpheus-Greek-mythology)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a short biography of Carol Ann Duffy at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- An Interview with the Poet — An interview with Duffy after her appointment as Poet Laureate of the UK. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnt5p1DGD9U)
- Duffy on Writing — Carol Ann Duffy discusses her creative process and advice for writers. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNIacr3cXfU)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Anne Hathaway

- Before You Were Mine
- Circe
- Death of a Teacher
- Demeter
- Education For Leisure
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- In Your Mind
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Aesop
- Mrs Darwin
- Mrs 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
- Work

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