Medusa

SUMMARY

As I became more and more suspicious and jealous, my hair transformed into grimy, hissing snakes. It was like my own thoughts were wriggling out of my scalp.

My breath, once as fresh as a bride's, became sour and filled my gray lungs with a terrible stench. Now, my mouth and tongue are nasty and vicious, and my teeth have turned into yellow fangs. My tears are deadly, shooting from my eyes like bullets. Are you afraid of me?

You should be scared of me, because I love you—you perfect man, my very own Greek God. I know that you're going leave me and cheat on me, so as far as I'm concerned, you might as well get turned into stone.

I took a quick look at a buzzing bee and it turned into a lifeless gray pebble that fell out of the sky. I took a quick look at a songbird and it turned into crumbly gravel that sprayed down all around.

When I looked at an orange cat, it turned into a brick and broke the bowl of milk it'd been drinking. I looked at a snorting pig and it turned into a giant stone sitting in a pile of crap.

When I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I saw that our toxic relationship had turned me into a monster. I looked at my reflection and saw a dragon. I saw fire pouring out of a mountain's mouth.

And then you show up, with your hard heart and your fighting words, and all the girls you cheated on me with. Didn't I used to be beautiful? Didn't I used to be a young, sweet-scented girl too?

Now just look at me.

THEMES

THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF JEALOUSY AND RAGE

The poem uses the myth of the Medusa—a fearsome, snake-haired woman from Greek mythology who could turn people to stone simply by looking at them—to illustrate the devastating effects of jealousy and rage. The poem reimagines Medusa as a modern wife who suspects her husband of being unfaithful, and charts her transformation from beautiful young bride into a terrifying, murderous monster. This new self, both pitiable and frightening, reveals the destructive potential of anger, bitterness, and suspicion.

It isn't clear how well-founded the wife's jealousy is. What is clear is that she has been completely unraveled by her suspicions. These have "turned the hairs on [her] head to filthy snakes," and she has become "foul mouthed now, foul tongued, / yellow fanged." She hasn't just been transformed into something different, but into something altogether hideous and violent. The speaker isn't proud of this: her disgusted descriptions of her body suggest she's starting to repel even herself. It's thus not always clear whether the reader is meant to pity the speaker or despise her. She is at once relatable in her heartache and a terrifying example of rage left unchecked.

On the one hand, the speaker is clearly suffering. On the other, her grief is dangerous—her tears are like "bullets," and her question to her husband—"Are you terrified?"—seems half pleading, half rhetorical. Does she want to be assured she is not terrifying, that she is still human and lovable? It seems so, yet then she turns around and says, "Be terrified / It's you I love." As much as the speaker hates what she's become, it seems she hates the person who hurt her even more—and would rather he "were stone" than leave her.

As the speaker turns a wide range of innocent creatures into stone—a bee, a bird, a cat, a pig—it becomes clear that her anger isn't just directed at the unfaithful husband. She doesn't seem able to turn it off, and so her jealousy becomes a destructive force. Even if someone wanted to comfort her, how could they? They'd only turn to stone under her furious gaze.

By the end of the poem, it becomes clear that the speaker's fear of being betrayed by the husband has disfigured her. She is no longer recognizable as the person she once was. The speaker looks in the mirror and sees "a Gorgon" (i.e., a hideous woman from Greek myth), "a dragon." Her fury makes her ugly, powerful, dangerous. The poem then ends with another question that might be interpreted as either pleading or rhetorical: "Wasn't I beautiful / Wasn't I fragrant and young?" The speaker again almost seems to want reassurance, to be made to feel human again. Yet these questions are followed by the chilling statement, "Look at me now." It's too late; the damage is done. The speaker has become unrecognizable to herself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

MISOGYNY AND FEMALE SUFFERING

In simply telling this story from Medusa's perspective, this poem implicitly offers sympathy for a character whose very existence suggests misogynist tropes about women, jealousy, and rage. The speaker is a monster, but

if her husband actually betrayed her—and the poem implies that he did—then he's essentially the one who made her that way. In this way, the poem points to how men use and discard women, destroying them in the process, and to the way women often end up paying the price for men's misdeeds.

Much of the poem can be read as playing into old stereotypes about women who have been spurned in love. Early in the poem, for example, the speaker describes her transformation, saying, "My bride's breath soured, stank / in the grey bags of my lungs." The intensity and suddenness of this transformation—from bride to monster—can be read as a subtle criticism of the binaries forced onto women by men. The poem suggests that women are allowed to be either a bride or a monster, a virgin or a whore, good or bad—but nothing more complex than that.

And while the majority of the poem focuses on the hideousness of the speaker, the ending suggests that she isn't to blame for her monstrousness. After staring at her own ugliness in the mirror, the speaker directs her attention to her husband, who has a shield for a heart, a sword for a tongue, and an entourage of girls. This illuminates the husband's misdeeds: he refuses to be vulnerable or take responsibility for the ways he has hurt his wife, he is cruel with his words, and he is unfaithful. The speaker then reminds her husband that she too was once "beautiful," "fragrant," and "young." In other words, she implies that her husband will do to the next woman what he has already done to her: use her and discard her, leaving her to suffer the consequences of his misdeeds.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A suspicion, a ...
... in my mind,

The first lines of "Medusa" immerse the reader in a suffering, jealous mind.

The speaker begins with a dramatic, ominous tricolon: "A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy." The asyndeton here, which puts these words in sequence without a conjunction like "and," means that it's not clear whether these three words describe separate threads in the speaker's thoughts, or whether they are just three ways of describing of a single emotion.

This ambiguity unbalances readers right from the start, and leaves them unsure what's going on in this suspicious, doubting, jealous speaker's mind. Does she herself even know whether these feelings are real, or how they connect to each other? The quick movement between these words suggests that she's trapped in swift, painful feelings.

Her use of the word "grew" also feels rather sinister. Her feelings seem to have their own nasty life, and they're only getting bigger.

This introduction, with its pain, confusion, and urgency, prepares the reader for a new take on the Medusa of the poem's title. This will be a poem that pits misogynistic tropes about women against a more complicated and sympathetic portrayal of a famous female monster.

LINES 3-5

which turned the ...
... on my scalp.

The title of the poem alludes to the Greek myth of the bat-winged, snake-haired monster Medusa, but it isn't until line 3 that the reader discovers the connection between the poem and the myth. Here, the speaker says that her jealousy "turned the hairs on [her] head to filthy snakes." The snake-haired Medusa herself (or someone who identifies with her) is the speaker here. Because Medusa is known for being hideous and dangerous, the speaker is saying that jealousy has turned her into a monster.

She doesn't seem too happy about this transformation—and who would be? Her description of the snakes as "filthy" suggests her disgust. And if those snakes are metaphors for her thoughts, those thoughts seem horrible to carry around: they hiss, spit, and writhe.

Lines 3-5 ("which turned [...] on my scalp") starts some patterns of sound that will come back off and on throughout the poem. One of these devices is alliteration, which can be found in the /h/ sounds connecting "hairs" and "head" in line 3.

Another important device in these lines is sibilance. The hissing repetition of /s/ sounds in "snakes," "thoughts," "hissed," "spat," and "scalp" all evoke the nasty transformation of hair into snakes. Regardless of whether one reads this poem literally (this is actually Medusa speaking) or metaphorically (the speaker is comparing herself to Medusa), the agony of the speaker's transformation into something monstrous here becomes vividly tangible.

LINES 6-9

My bride's breath ...
... yellow fanged.

The second stanza charts the speaker's metamorphosis with vivid sounds: the bouncy alliterative /b/ sounds of "bride's breath" transform into the hissing sibilance of "soured, stank." Harsh words like "soured," "stank," "bags," "lungs," "foul," "tongued," and "fanged" convey the speaker's visceral ugliness. And the consonance of /l/ and /g/ sounds makes the passage feel slow and guttural: for instance, the "grey bags of my lungs"

takes its nasty, moist, heavy feel from all those /g/ sounds.

It's unclear whether the speaker is literally Medusa, or merely *like* Medusa. The poem leaves both possibilities open. Whether literal or metaphorical, the speaker's transformation is awful; she has become hideous and unrecognizable to herself.

Read as a literal depiction of Medusa, the imagery here evokes all the things that make her so memorable a monster. But as a metaphorical description, this transformation points to the constraints of patriarchy, in which women can be either the "bride" or the "foul-tongued" monster, with no choices in between.

The speaker's "suspicion," "doubt," and "jealousy," along with the loss of her "bride's breath," suggests that she's been cast into her nasty new role by a romantic betrayal. In abandoning her for someone new, her husband has forced the speaker into the role of the ugly, unwanted wife.

The poem also leaves open the possibility that this metaphorical transformation has less to do with appearances and more to do with the person the speaker has become inside. Her jealousy has turned her into someone terrible, someone "foul tongued" and "yellow fanged"—not just snake-haired, but rather snake-like herself.

LINES 10-12

There are bullet ...
... Be terrified.

The speaker continues with a metaphor: "There are bullet tears in my eyes." This layered image points to her vulnerability and sorrow, but also suggests how dangerous she has become: she's crying, sure, but her tears are like weapons. Perhaps they've turned to stone—both because everything Medusa looks at turns to stone, and because, metaphorically, the speaker's heart has hardened.

The second stanza ends with the speaker asking her husband if he is terrified. Since the speaker has just described her own terrifying hideousness, the question feels rhetorical, like a dramatic flourish.

At the same time, there is something vulnerable lurking beneath this bravado. Has the speaker's heart hardened, or is she just trying to protect herself? Are her tears really like bullets? Does she want to terrify, or is she afraid of being seen as less than human because of the way her husband has treated her, and because of the way she has reacted? Is she actually, underneath it all, only hoping to be reassured, to be reminded that she is human, that her hurt is valid, that her rage isn't monstrous but justified?

The vulnerability is brief. The third stanza begins with the speaker telling the husband, "Be terrified." The speaker again refuses to play the victim. If she has to choose between being a victim or a monster, she's going to embrace monstrosity.

LINES 13-17

It's you I ...
... you were stone.

The speaker reveals why the husband should be terrified, addressing him in a direct apostrophe and saying "It's you I love." She describes him as a "perfect man"—ironic words considering how cruelly he has hurt and betrayed her. Calling him a "Greek God," she seems to either be in awe of him or mocking his egotism—or perhaps both at once. (For more on this allusion to the Greek gods, see "Allusion" in the Poetic Devices section.)

Yet she refers to him as "her own," vulnerable again. Perhaps she's unable to contain her love for him any more than she can contain her anger at him. She wants him to be terrified so that he cannot hurt her again, so he cannot "stray from home." (Here, the internal rhyme between "betray" and "stray" in line 15 emphasizes his infidelity.)

Once more, the speaker is caught between her vulnerability and her jealous rage. By the end of the third stanza, it seems she has succumbed to her painful feelings, as she declares it would be better for her if the husband were turned into stone. Her transformation from bride into monster is complete: she now fully identifies as the stony-gazed Medusa.

LINES 18-23

I glanced at ...
... spattered down.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker has come into her stony powers. She glances at a bee and it falls to the ground as a pebble. She glances at a bird and it turns into gravel. The anaphora in lines 18 and 21 ("I glanced at a...") makes it seem that wherever the speaker turns her eye, no matter how casually, something turns to stone.

Yet this power feels less like an ability and more like a curse: who would want to turn a "buzzing bee" or a "singing bird" into stone? The speaker's whole world seems to be crumbling. Things that were once beautiful and pleasing have lost their charm; everything is grey and lifeless, turned to "dusty gravel."

The sonic devices in this stanza reflect the speaker's state of mind. There is again a harsh consonance of /g/ and /d/ sounds. Instead of the sounds of "buzzing" and "singing," there is the sound of a "**d**ull **g**rey pebble" and a "han**d**ful of **d**usty **g**ravel" hitting the "**g**roun**d**." The parallelism between the two sentences in this stanza follows the new pattern of the speaker's life: everywhere she looks, lively, purposeful creatures become heavy and still. The reader might even interpret this passage as a metaphor for the lifelessness of depression.

LINES 24-29

I looked at ...

... heap of shit.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker continues to turn things into stone by looking at them. By now, however, her petrifying stare feels a little more intentional: she is no longer "glancing" but "looking." This suggests that the speaker is becoming intentionally destructive in her jealousy and rage. In trying not to be a victim, she has accepted her role as a monster.

The things she turns to stone get bigger and bigger, from a bee to a bird to a cat to a pig, and the stones themselves swell from mere pebbles to boulders. It's as if she is discovering that she can turn *anything* into stone.

Consonance is still present in this stanza, although the specific sounds have changed: note the harsh /k/ sounds in "looked," "cat," "house brick," and "milk." The words here become harsh and aggressive themselves as well; the "heap of shit" in line 29 reflects the "foul mouth" of the speaker, whose anger is systematically destroying the world that she knew.

There's something exhausting about the pileup of creatures she has turned to stone. Medusa seems to just be getting started; there's the sense that she has no intention of stopping at cats and pigs.

LINES 30-35

I stared in ...
... of a mountain.

The pattern of anaphora and parallelism established in the fourth and fifth stanzas continues in the sixth—only this time, the speaker "stares" instead of "glancing" or "looking." And rather than staring at the world around her, she stares at herself in the mirror.

The mirror shows the speaker as "a Gorgon" (the kind of snake-haired creature that Medusa and her sisters were) and "a dragon." While dragons and Gorgons are two different kinds of beast, they're both angry, powerful, and spiteful. Dragons are also said to "jealously" guard their hoards of gold, protecting their treasure. Perhaps the speaker's dragonish jealousy of her "perfect" husband is present in this image, too.

There's also an allusion here to Medusa's defeat. In the Greek myth, the only way to see Medusa without turning to stone is to look at her in a mirror, rather than straight on. It was a mirrored shield that finally allowed the hero Perseus to behead Medusa. Perhaps the speaker feels the sight of herself in the mirror as its own kind of defeat: she stares at her awful reflection through the lens of "love gone bad."

Finally, the speaker describes fire shooting from "the mouth of a mountain." This could be an extension of the speaker's image of herself as a dragon, but it could also be a third metaphor: perhaps she has become a volcano. The image of a mountain spewing fire into the air from a terrible "mouth" evokes her own rage and frustration (and her "foul mouth" in the second stanza). In her rage she is unstoppable. She is not a victim but a powerful, dangerous force of nature. She is something to be feared—even by herself.

LINES 36-39

And here you ...
... girls, your girls.

In the second-to-last stanza, the speaker directly addresses her cheating husband. "And here you come," she says, implying that he is just now entering her line of sight. If she looks at him, everything in the poem suggests, he too will turn to stone. But he comes protected "with a shield for a heart / and a sword for a tongue."

This imagery echoes the speaker's description of herself as a Gorgon or a dragon. The husband, it seems, is prepared to do battle with her, to cut her down. In the mythology of monsters and monster-slayers, the monster plays the role of evil, the monster-slayer of good. This is another nod to the roles women are forced to occupy in the patriarchal imagination. Despite the fact that it is the husband's unfaithfulness that turned the speaker into a monster, he still gets to play the hero.

The metaphors here—the heart as a shield and the tongue as a sword—point to the husband's cruelty. Not only is he unfaithful, he's unkind, defensive and mean in ways that go beyond the infidelity itself. The use of parallelism in lines 37-39 ("with a shield [...] your girls") creates a crescendo, climaxing with a parade of girls the husband seems almost to flaunt. The epizeuxis of "your girls, your girls" conveys the speaker's exhaustion: it's as if she's seen this all before.

The speaker's husband was indeed unfaithful, but his infidelity isn't even the worst of it by now. His cruelty, almost more than his infidelity, has the power to destroy the speaker.

LINES 40-42

Wasn't I beautiful ...
... at me now.

At the end of the poem, the speaker briefly becomes vulnerable again, asking, "Wasn't I beautiful? Wasn't I fragrant and young?" There is a beseeching quality to these questions, as if the speaker wants to be reassured that she was indeed beautiful, that she was indeed young, and sweet, and deserving of love.

There's also something ominous here. As she sees the new girls, the ones meant to replace her, she knows that the same fate awaits them: eventually her husband will grow tired of them and discard them like he discarded her.

These questions are rhetorical. The speaker *knows* she was young and desirable, and that's the point—it didn't matter. The husband tired of her anyway. His parade of girls isn't evidence that she was somehow lacking, but proof that in a man's world, he can do whatever he wants, and she will have to pay the price for it. The questions are almost meant more for the reader than for the husband: the poem asks its audience to consider

whether the speaker's rage is so very monstrous, or whether it might be completely justified.

The poem ends with a deceptively simple statement: "Look at me now." This line seems to be addressed to both the husband and the reader, to differing effects.

To the husband, the speaker seems to be saying "Look what you've done," asking him to take responsibility. Of course, if the speaker really is Medusa, that look will turn him to stone! So the line asks the husband to acknowledge the way in which he has destroyed his former love, and at the same time is a command that he be destroyed.

On the other hand, the final line also seems to be addressed to the reader, a commentary on what happens when men use women and throw them away. The speaker could be asking for empathy, or demanding that the reader consider the cost of misogyny. She might also be admitting that her jealousy and rage have completely consumed her, that she bears no resemblance to the person she used to be.

This final line is thus both pitiable and powerful: a reflection on the double-edged sword of the Medusa's pain and rage.

SYMBOLS

STONE

Stone symbolizes the negative consequences of jealousy and rage in the poem—namely, isolation and loneliness. In Greek mythology, Medusa could turn men to stone simply by looking at them. This poem turns that mythology on its head a little, as the speaker's ability to turn everything around her into stone feels less like a superpower and more like a curse. It offers her a chance for revenge, sure, but that revenge turns the world around her into lifeless statues. Her rage is understandable, yet it's not making her feel any better; on the contrary, it *literally* makes her more alone.

It also makes the speaker herself more hard-hearted. Her tears are bullets, something that can kill whoever stands in its way—and, in doing so, destroy any chance of comfort. Think about it: given that they're a means of expressing pain, tears often elicit sympathy. Yet Medusa's tears are deadly weapons. In essence, then, stone represents the lethal force of the speaker's rage but also the void left by "love gone bad," the way that anger and vengeance hurt the speaker herself as much as anyone else by closing her off from the world and the opportunity for healing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "There are bullet tears in my eyes"
- **Line 17:** "So better be for me if you were stone."
- **Lines 18-29:** "I glanced at a buzzing bee, / a dull grey pebble fell / to the ground. / I glanced at a singing bird, / a handful of dusty gravel / spattered down. / I looked at a ginger cat, / a housebrick / shattered a bowl of milk. / I looked at a snuffling pig, / a boulder rolled / in a heap of shit."

SNAKES

Snakes in the poem symbolize the speaker's her suspicions, doubts, and jealousies. These feelings are like snakes in that they're "filthy" and venomous, terrifying and grotesque, capable of lashing out to poison everything around the speaker.

The speaker compares the snakes directly to her thoughts in lines 4-5, when she says that it was "as though [her] thoughts / hissed and spat on [her] scalp." This implies that the speaker is repulsed by her own thoughts—or, more accurately, she imagines her *thoughts* behind repulsed by the *speaker* herself. The speaker thus seems fully aware that her jealousy and suspicions are no good for her, that they've transformed her into a repulsive monster. At the same time, the snakes reflect how those thoughts and feelings have taken on a venomous life of their own, ready to strike at and poison whoever dares to come near.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy / grew in my mind, / which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes / as though my thoughts / hissed and spat on my scalp."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem contains many direct allusions to the Greek myth of Medusa. For instance, line 3 ("which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes") and lines 18-29 ("I glanced at [...] heap of shit") refer to the most well-known aspects of Medusa: her snaky hair and her stony gaze.

In fact, allusion is so central to the poem that it isn't entirely clear whether the reader is meant to interpret the speaker as a modern Medusa herself, or just as someone who identifies with Medusa. The poem can be read either way (or both ways at once!), but the reader's choice may influence the meaning of other, more subtle allusions.

For instance, the speaker addresses the husband as her own "Greek God." This may allude to a version of the myth by the poet Ovid, in which the god Poseidon seduces (or perhaps rapes) Medusa in Athena's temple. Athena, enraged at the desecration of her temple, punishes Medusa by turning her hair

into snakes. This interpretation fits in with the poem's theme of women being forced to pay for men's misdeeds: after all, Poseidon isn't punished, only Medusa is.

However, the line might also be metaphorical. The speaker may be admitting that she worshiped the husband, adored him, which makes his betrayal even worse. Perhaps it's also a little ironic: the speaker may be hinting at the husband's egotistical cruelty, as the Greek gods were known for being arrogant and capricious, punishing mortals for sport.

Near the end of the poem, the speaker looks at herself in the mirror, seeing the monster she has become. The mirror is another important part of Medusa's mythology, as looking at her with a mirror is the only way to see her without being turned to stone. In fact, Medusa is eventually defeated by the hero Perseus when he uses a mirror to sneak up on her and behead her. In this way, the mirror alludes to the mythical Medusa's downfall, and thus to the speaker's as well.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 8-17
- Lines 18-32

ALLITERATION

Alliteration ramps up the poem's emotion and momentum. Contrasting flavors of alliteration often mark moments of transformation in the poem as well. For instance, early in the poem, the back-to-back alliteration of "My bride's breath soured, stank" marks the sudden transformation from bride to monster: the plump /b/ slides abruptly into a hissing /s/.

Long runs of similar alliteration also emphasize the depth of the speaker's misery. A little later in the stanza, /f/ alliteration on "foul mouthed," "foul tongued," and "yellow fanged" makes it sound like the speaker is spitting her words in disgust.

Later, the speaker addresses her husband as her own "Greek God." The alliteration alongside the capitalization elevates the husband, revealing the power he has over the speaker.

Alliteration falls away in the later stanzas of the poem, with only two exceptions. In line 18, the speaker "glance[s] at a buzzing bee." That strong /b/ evokes the bee's liveliness—something the speaker soon silences with her stony gaze. And towards the end of the poem, /m/ alliteration in "Fire spewed / from the mouth of a mountain" draws attention to the relationship between the alliterative words: the speaker's mouth has become a volcano, spewing fiery rage.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "hairs," "head"
- **Line 5:** "spat," "scalp"
- **Line 6:** "bride's," "breath," "soured," "stank"
- **Line 7:** "bags"
- **Line 8:** "foul," "foul"
- **Line 9:** "fanged"
- **Line 10:** "tears"
- **Line 11:** "terrified"
- **Line 14:** "Greek," "God"
- **Line 17:** "So," "better," "be," "stone"
- **Line 18:** "glanced," "buzzing," "bee"
- **Line 20:** "ground"
- **Line 21:** "glanced"
- **Line 22:** "dusty"
- **Line 23:** "down"
- **Line 35:** "mouth," "mountain"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance adds intensity, momentum, and emphasis to the poem. The poem relies on sibilance, a specific form of consonance, in particular to build a sinister atmosphere.

The first stanza uses quite a bit of sibilance as it introduces the snakes that are Medusa's most recognizable trait. The /s/ and /sh/ sounds in "suspicion," "jealousy," "snakes," "thoughts," "hissed," "spat," and "scalp" all echo snaky slithers and hisses.

This sibilance spills over into the second stanza as well with the words "soured" and "stank," and in fact appears throughout the entire poem. For example, take lines 21-23:

> I glanced at a singing bird,
> a handful of dusty gravel
> spattered down.

The sibilance in the poem creates a hushed, sinister atmosphere that never lets the listener forget who they're dealing with: a snake-haired monster.

There are, of course, other kinds of consonance in the poem as well. For instance, the /g/ consonance in phrases like "the grey bags of my lungs" evokes the speaker's transformation with heavy, ugly, guttural sounds.

These heavy /g/ sounds reappear in the last few stanzas, connecting words such as "gone," "Gorgon," and "dragon" in lines 31-33. It also threads through the second-to-last stanza, connecting the words "girls" and "fragrant." Here, consonance links "girls" with taste and smell—implying that the husband might like to gobble them up, just as he chewed up his wife and spat her out. These sounds cast him in a predatory light, making the reader wonder who in this scenario is the real monster.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "suspicion," "jealousy"

- **Line 3:** “hairs,” “head,” “snakes”
- **Line 4:** “thoughts”
- **Line 5:** “hissed,” “spat,” “scalp”
- **Line 6:** “bride’s,” “breath,” “soured,” “stank”
- **Line 7:** “grey,” “bags,” “lungs”
- **Line 8:** “foul,” “foul,” “tongued”
- **Line 9:** “yellow,” “fanged”
- **Line 10:** “bullet,” “tears”
- **Line 11:** “terrified”
- **Line 14:** “perfect,” “Greek,” “God”
- **Line 15:** “betray,” “stray”
- **Line 17:** “So,” “better,” “be,” “stone”
- **Line 18:** “glanced,” “buzzing,” “bee”
- **Line 19:** “dull,” “grey”
- **Line 20:** “ground”
- **Line 21:** “glanced,” “singing,” “bird”
- **Line 22:** “handful,” “dusty,” “gravel”
- **Line 23:** “spattered,” “down”
- **Line 24:** “looked,” “cat”
- **Line 25:** “housebrick”
- **Line 26:** “bowl,” “milk”
- **Line 27:** “looked”
- **Line 28:** “boulder,” “rolled”
- **Line 31:** “gone”
- **Line 32:** “Gorgon”
- **Line 33:** “stared,” “dragon”
- **Line 34:** “spewed”
- **Line 35:** “mouth,” “mountain”
- **Line 39:** “girls,” “girls”
- **Line 41:** “fragrant”

ASSONANCE

Assonance works alongside consonance to create moments of intensity throughout the poem.

The second stanza, for instance, uses two assonant slant end rhymes. The first is between "lungs" and "tongued" in lines 7 and 8, and the second is between "eyes" and "terrified" in lines 10 and 11. The heavy /uh/ sound of "lungs" and "tongued" suggests the gross wetness of the speaker's monstrous new body. And the long /i/ assonance between "eyes" and "terrified" is both musical and meaningful: those "eyes," with their stony powers, might well leave the husband "terrified"!

There's also connective assonance between the /ow/ sounds of "foul mouthed," as if the speaker's rage has become indistinguishable from the mouth it spews from.

Similarly, long /oh/ assonance in the third stanza makes poignant connections between the words "own," "go," "home," and "stone." Two of these words, "own" and "home," recall the one-time connection between the speaker and her husband; the other two, "go" and "stone," speak to the terrible loss of that connection.

Assonance also makes thematic connections between "ground" and "down" in lines 20 and 23 and "pig" and "shit" in lines 27 and 29, drawing readers' attention to the "foul" consequences of the speaker's power. And at the poem's end, sinister assonance and consonance link "Gorgon" and "dragon": two variants on the same monstrous theme.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “my,” “mind”
- **Line 7:** “grey,” “lungs”
- **Line 8:** “foul mouthed now, foul,” “tongued”
- **Line 10:** “my,” “eyes”
- **Line 11:** “terrified”
- **Line 12:** “terrified”
- **Line 14:** “own”
- **Line 15:** “go,” “betray,” “stray”
- **Line 16:** “home”
- **Line 17:** “be,” “me,” “stone”
- **Line 19:** “pebble fell”
- **Line 20:** “ground”
- **Line 23:** “down”
- **Line 27:** “snuffling,” “pig”
- **Line 28:** “boulder,” “rolled”
- **Line 29:** “in,” “shit”
- **Line 32:** “Gorgon”
- **Line 33:** “dragon”
- **Line 35:** “mouth,” “mountain”
- **Line 38:** “tongue”
- **Line 41:** “young”

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton appears right from the start of this poem. The very first line uses it: "A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy." The asyndeton here makes these different emotions spring up one after the other like the snakes they'll become in line 3.

Another dramatic moment of asyndeton shows up in line 14, where the speaker calls her husband "perfect man, Greek God, my own." The lack of commas here makes this sound like a desperate pile-up of endearments: a painful moment of longing in the midst of the speaker's misery and rage.

The reader can also find asyndeton in lines 6 ("soured, stank"), 8-9 ("I'm foul mouthed now, foul tongued, / yellow fanged"), and 15-16 ("but I know you'll go, betray me, stray / from home")—all moments that create a feeling of accumulating misery, happening so fast there's not even time to pause for an "and."

And in lines 18-20, asyndeton shows how quickly and easily the speaker turns the world around her to stone:

> I glanced at a buzzing bee,
> a dull grey pebble fell

to the ground.

Here, there seems to be no time at all between the glance and the transformation. Wherever the speaker's gaze falls, she can see only stony lifelessness.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy"
- **Line 6:** "soured, stank"
- **Lines 8-9:** "I'm foul mouthed now, foul tongued, / yellow fanged."
- **Line 14:** "perfect man, Greek God, my own;"
- **Lines 15-16:** "but I know you'll go, betray me, stray / from home."
- **Lines 18-23:** "I glanced at a buzzing bee, / a dull grey pebble fell / to the ground. / I glanced at a singing bird, / a handful of dusty gravel / spattered down."
- **Lines 24-29:** "I looked at a ginger cat, / a housebrick / shattered a bowl of milk. / I looked at a snuffling pig, / a boulder rolled / in a heap of shit."

PARALLELISM

There's plenty of parallelism in this poem right from the very first line: the speaker launches the reader right into her feelings of distrust with "A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy." The lack of coordinating conjunction (such as "and") and the anaphora of these phrases ("A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy") creates a sense of momentum. This illustrates the frenzied pace of the speaker's thoughts, and how quickly her doubts have turned to (literal or metaphorical) snakes on her head.

The speaker relies on these parallel sets of three more than once. In lines 8-9, for example, she says, "I'm foul mouthed now, foul tongued, / yellow fanged." The emphasis here is on the repeated word, "foul" and on the unpleasantness of repeated /f/ and /l/ sounds. The parallelism again contributes to a sense of things getting carried away. The speaker goes from being "foul mouthed" (which might just mean she's cursing a lot, as angry people sometimes do), to "yellow fanged," which is more evocative of the terrifying creature she's become.

Parallelism continues to build momentum in lines 18-29 ("I glanced at [...] heap of shit.") as the speaker turns one thing after another into stone. Notice the identical construction of the two phrases in lines 24-29, for instance—both of which begin with the words "I glanced at a," followed by a description of an airborne creature in the midst of making noise, which then becomes "a" bunch of something stony that falls from the sky:

I glanced at a buzzing bee,
a dull grey pebble fell
to the ground.
I glanced at a singing bird,
a handful of dusty gravel
spattered down.

Parallelism makes the pattern easy to spot; it doesn't take long for the reader to figure out that when the speaker looks at something, it will become lifeless and stony.

Yet this pattern is disrupted in the sixth stanza: while there is still parallelism present between lines 30 ("I stared in the mirror.") and 33 ("I stared at a dragon."), the lines in *between* are not parallel. Unlike the bee, the bird, the cat, and the pig, the speaker cannot simply turn herself to stone. Instead, she must look at the "Gorgon" / "dragon" she's become. This, in turn, underscores the way her rage isolates her from the surrounding world.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 8-9
- Line 14
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 18-23
- Lines 24-29
- Line 30
- Line 33
- Line 36
- Lines 37-39
- Lines 40-41

REPETITION

There are a few different kinds of repetition at play in this poem. The first is diacope. There's a good example of this in line 8 with the word "foul": "I'm foul mouthed now, foul tongued." This quick repetition insists on that foulness, doubling down on the horror of the speaker's transformation.

Epistrophe turns up in lines 11 and 12 ("Are you terrified? / Be terrified." By ending both lines with the word "terrified," the poem emphasizes the speaker's frightening presence. The switch from a question to a statement across the stanza break also has a powerful effect: the speaker goes from seeming vulnerable to seeming quite sure of herself, of the damage she hopes to inflict.

The most frequent form of repetition in the poem is anaphora, which is also of course part of the poem's broader use of parallelism (discussed separately in this guide). Anaphora helps to create a sense of evolution and momentum throughout the poem as certain phrases repeat and then change, repeat and then change. This happens in stanzas 4-6 ("I glanced at [...] of a mountain"), as the speaker moves from glancing to looking to staring. Each phrase repeats twice before the speaker progresses to a more intense form of looking, as if she is beginning to embrace her awful power.

The last kind of repetition in the poem is epizeuxis, and it

appears just once, in line 39: "and your girls, your girls." By repeating the phrase "your girls" back-to-back without interruption, the speaker conveys her exhaustion and misery. There's a sense that this has all happened before, that the husband has flaunted his dalliances time and again, that she is worn out by his disregard for her feelings. The repetition also make the reader feel the moment's importance. After all, the speaker was once a girl as well. It's clear the husband views these endless "girls" as disposable, easy to replace.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy"
- **Line 8:** "foul mouthed," "foul tongued"
- **Line 11:** "Are you terrified?"
- **Line 12:** "Be terrified."
- **Line 18:** "I glanced at a buzzing bee,"
- **Line 19:** "a dull grey pebble"
- **Line 21:** "I glanced at a singing bird,"
- **Line 22:** "a handful of dusty gravel"
- **Line 24:** "I looked at a ginger cat,"
- **Line 25:** "a housebrick"
- **Line 27:** "I looked at a snuffling pig,"
- **Line 28:** "a boulder"
- **Line 30:** "I stared in the mirror."
- **Line 33:** "I stared at a dragon."
- **Line 37:** "a shield for a heart"
- **Line 38:** "a sword for a tongue"
- **Line 39:** "your girls, your girls"
- **Line 40:** "Wasn't I"
- **Line 41:** "Wasn't I"

METAPHOR

Metaphor is slippery in this poem: many of the metaphors here can be read literally if one interprets the speaker as Medusa herself, and not just as someone *identifying* with her. For example, in the first stanza, when the speaker says that jealousy "turned the hairs on [her] head to filthy snakes," perhaps she's feeling her thoughts as metaphorically poisonous and disgusting—or perhaps jealousy and suspicion literally make Medusa grow her snaky hair!

In fact, the entire poem can be read as literal, or as an extended metaphor in which this speaker is *like* Medusa: spiteful, violent—and terribly lonely. To be a Medusa is to be a person who really *can't* have company or consolation. After all, everything she looks at turns to stone.

There are also smaller moments of metaphor in the poem, such as in line 7, when the speaker describes the "grey bags of [her] lungs." Those foul grey bags suggest that even the air the speaker breathes has become foul to her, lying like rotten food at the bottom of worn-out sacks. And when the speaker says she "stared at a dragon" in the mirror, that fire-breathing monster conveys her sense of her own ugliness and rage—and maybe her power as well.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-5
- Line 7
- Lines 8-10
- Line 14
- Lines 18-35
- Lines 37-38

IMAGERY

Imagery is the bridge between the literal and the metaphorical in this poem. Regardless of whether one interprets the speaker as an actual Gorgon or only a woman who sees herself reflected in Medusa's story, the imagery paints a picture the reader can see and feel. Whether the snakes on her head are real or imagined, for instance, the reader sees how "filthy" they are and hears them "hiss[ing]."

Later in the poem, the imagery follows the speaker as she petrifies bigger and bigger creatures: a "buzzing bee" becomes "a dull grey pebble," a "singing bird" becomes "a handful of dusty gravel." The vivid descriptions of the thing being transformed are just as important as the transformation itself.

For example, rather than just turning a pig into a boulder, the speaker turns a "snuffling" pig into a boulder which "roll[s] / in a heap of shit." The lively snuffler ends up as an inert rock, covered in filth. This imagery shows how the speaker projects her anger and frustration onto the world around her. It's hard to tell whether the speaker is purposely destructive, or if she's miserably trapped in a depression that makes everything look lifeless. The ambiguity allows the reader to decide for themselves: is the speaker a victim or a monster? Neither? Both?

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-5
- Lines 6-10
- Lines 18-39

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains two rhetorical questions, one near the beginning and one right at the end. The first appears in line 11, when the speaker asks, "Are you terrified?" At this point in the poem, it's not yet clear that the speaker is addressing her husband. Her question thus seems to be posed more generally to the reader, asking them a question—aren't I a horrific vision?—that doesn't need to be answered.

On the other hand, the question doesn't have to be read as rhetorical at all. There's a hint of something genuine here: the speaker's "bullet tears" are weapons, but she's also crying! The

speaker may be obviously monstrous, but she's also vulnerable, and badly hurt. Perhaps her question has an edge of hope in it: hope that her audience might recognize her not just as a monster, but as a woman.

The question at the end of the poem—"Wasn't I beautiful / Wasn't I fragrant and young?"—works in the same way. There is real vulnerability here, real hurt. The speaker wants to be reassured that she was in fact human, and deserving of love. But at the same time, the question implies its own answer: yes, she was just as beautiful and young as that parade of "girls" the husband flaunts.

The point here is that, in a world where men decide who is worthy of love and attention, she finds herself powerless in the face of younger, more fragrant faces. And the injustice of patriarchy means that those girls, too, will meet her fate one day.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Are you terrified?"
- **Lines 40-41:** "Wasn't I beautiful / Wasn't I fragrant and young?"

VOCABULARY

Greek God (Lines 13-14) - As the husband in this poem is never named, this might be an allusion to a specific deity from Greek mythology—or just a way of showing that the speaker of the poem worships and adores her husband.

Gorgon (Lines 31-32) - A female monster from Greek mythology, who had snakes for hair and could turn men to stone by looking at them. Medusa was one of the Gorgons.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Medusa" is broken into eight stanzas. The second through seventh are sestets (stanzas comprised of six lines), while the first is a quintet and the eighth is a single line. The poem is a dramatic monologue, meaning that the speaker is addressing someone specific. In this case, she's speaking to the husband who has betrayed her.

The poem doesn't use any conventional forms (for example, it's not a sonnet or villanelle), but develops organically, with a mixture of line lengths. The last, single-line stanza is comprised of only four words, providing a dramatic punch to its double-meaning ending.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't stick to any patterns of meter or rhyme. This keeps the poem feeling casual and unpredictable—perhaps placing the listener on edge, unsure what this dangerous speaker will say next.

While the poem doesn't use meter in any conventional sense, there are subtle moments where syllable counts affect the rhythm. For example, lines 37-39:

> with a shield | for a heart
> and a sword | for a tongue
> and your girls, | your girls."

It's subtle, but lines 37 and 38 set up an expectation with the use of parallelism (the use of similar grammatical structures). Both lines are six syllables long, and both lines contain two stressed syllables in the same places in the line (the third and sixth syllables); technically speaking, the lines are made up of two anapests (poetic feet that go da-da-DUM).

However, line 39 disrupts the pattern; it only has five syllables, so the second stress falls a beat earlier (the first foot is again an anapest, but the second is an iamb: da-DUM). The effect is that this line has more of an impact than the two which came before it. It seems that the husband's "girls" are a more painful blow to the speaker than his "shield" of a heart or his swordlike tongue.

Similarly, in the last three lines of the poem, lines 40-41 ("Wasn't I beautiful [...] fragrant and young?") are all either six or seven syllables long, and are also linked by parallelism and by the fact that they are questions. This allows line 42, the final line of the poem, to land with even more punch, as it deviates from the pattern established by the prior lines. It is shorter, it doesn't have a parallel grammatical structure. And it isn't a question, but a bare, grim statement—or a command.

RHYME SCHEME

"Medusa" has no rhyme scheme, and only uses rhyme sporadically. Almost all of its rhymes are slant or near rhymes, meaning that they don't have identical sounds, but simply similar ones. For example, in lines 8-9 ("I'm foul mouthed [...] yellow fanged."), there is an end rhyme between "tongued" and "fanged." This rhyme isn't perfect because the vowel sounds in the middle of the words don't match (a perfect rhyme with "fanged," for instance, would be "hanged"). However, because of the /g/ and /d/ consonance, the endings are similar enough that the reader feels an echo between the two words.

Other examples of slant end rhymes in the poem are "eyes" and "terrified" in lines 10 and 11, "own," "home," and "stone" in lines 14, 16, and 17, "ground" and "down" in lines 20 and 23, and "Gorgon" and "dragon" in lines 32-33.

These moments of almost-but-not-quite rhyme might reflect the speaker's feelings of alienation from her former self. Perhaps she no longer "rhymes" with her husband, or with the young bride she once was; her life has fallen out of joint.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem can be read either as a modern version of Medusa herself, or as a married woman who identifies with Medusa's situation as a hated and hateful monster. Either way, she is someone whose husband has betrayed her.

This betrayal has brought out the worst in her, leaving her full of rage and eager to turn her husband to stone. But at the same time, there is still a part of her that wants to be reassured that there's still a chance for her, that she hasn't really been discarded and turned into this awful creature. Despite her rage, the speaker is sympathetic—mostly because her rage is justified! The indifference of the husband in the face of her pain is also monstrous, yet he is not hated for it. She is the one who must pay the price for his misdeeds.

SETTING

The setting for this poem is largely in the speaker's mind (and the speaker's mirror). The poem focuses on the mental state of the speaker, who is both bereft and furious. All of the things that might be read as physical descriptions in the poem—hair turning to snakes, the buzzing bee and singing bird, the ginger cat and the snuffling pig—can all be equally interpreted as metaphor.

In other words: the speaker could very well be a modern Medusa looking at her surroundings and turning things to stone. But she could also just be a woman whose thoughts are so soured that it *feels* like everything has turned to stone. She doesn't see a pig but "a boulder rolled / in a heap of shit." She doesn't see herself in the mirror, but rather "a Gorgon," "a dragon." In other words, she doesn't feel like herself anymore; her lover's betrayal has completely stripped her of her former sense of identity. With her loss of identity comes a loss of the world as she knew it. The newly stony landscape around her reflects this inner tragedy.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Medusa" was published in Carol Ann Duffy's fifth poetry collection, *The World's Wife* (1999). In this collection, Duffy writes from the viewpoints of the wives, sisters, and female contemporaries of famous and infamous men. Some of her characters include Mrs. Pilate, Queen Kong, Mrs. Sisyphus, Frau Freud, Circe, Elvis's Twin Sister, and Pygmalion's Bride. In witty, conversational language, *The World's Wife* subverts the traditional male perspective, examining instead the ways that women have been denied the full breadth of their humanity.

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

This poem in particular, of course, also draws from the Greek myth of Medusa, which has seen countless iterations and interpretations throughout history. In early depictions, Medusa was beautiful woman with flowing hair that attracted the lustful attention of men; other times she was depicted as a hideous monster with snaky hair and eyes that could turn men to stone. She has been portrayed as both mortal and immortal, victim and villain. In some tellings, she was seduced by the god Poseidon in the temple of the goddess Athena; in others, she was taken by force. Either way, Medusa was punished for defiling the temple by being turned into a monster whom men would come to fear. Perhaps the most well-known aspect of her story is her defeat, when the famous Greek hero Perseus used a mirror to sneak up on her and decapitate her, thus securing his *own* place in history.

It wasn't until the 20th century and the rise of feminist theory that Medusa became subject to a more critical lens. Since then, she has become a common symbol of female rage and power, and it is through this lens that Duffy wrote this poem.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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

By the 1990s, when this poem was written, third-wave feminists began more actively seeking to upend patriarchal norms altogether—and with them, the treatment of the straight, white, male perspective as the model for all human experience. "Medusa" exemplifies this aim, adding nuance to and garnering sympathy for a character typically treated as nothing more than monstrous. While pointing out the devastating effects of jealousy, the poem implicitly critiques the broad societal rejection of angry women as irrational "Gorgon[s]." It gives physical manifestation to women's rage upon being mistreated and betrayed (and, the poem implies, cast aside for a younger model).

It's also worth considering the poem within the context of Duffy's own relationship with poet Adrian Henri. She and Henri began a relationship when Henri was 39 and Duffy was 16; they lived together for 10 years, with Henri being not only

Dufffy's romantic partner but also her mentor. Henri was persistently unfaithful, and it is likely that this formative relationship is at the heart of some of the core themes in *The World's Wife*.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Another Poem From "The World's Wife" — Listen to Duffy herself as she reads and discusses another poem from "The World's Wife." This one comes from the perspective of another mythological character: the wife of King Midas. (https://youtu.be/mVOiBNtupWs)
- A Short Biography of Duffy — Read a brief introduction to Carol Ann Duffy from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- Images of Medusa — Take a look at the many different ways Medusa has been portrayed throughout history. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6VqJUmZLI0)
- Feminist Retellings In 'The World's Wife' — Read an essay on the subversive poetry collection that "Medusa" comes from. (https://www.thecuriousreader.in/features/carol-ann-duffy-the-worlds-wife/)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://youtu.be/qDWzLftOzAw)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Before You Were Mine
- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Mrs Midas
- Originally
- Prayer
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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