

THE WORLD'S WIFE

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I turned to this collection during the first lockdown of 2020 when there was still a lot of uncertainty. I think that lockdown definitely gave us all a chance to re-evaluate the relationships we have with other people (regardless of their nature). We have come a long way from times when marriage was not an option for women if it is what their families desired for them. Whilst marriage is still a very common and economised relationship, we have certainly shown an evolution of sorts in how relationships are formed, maintained and also ended. Around 42% of marriages end in divorce currently.

Carol Ann Duffy takes us on an adventure around the world, providing a new perspective on some of the wives of the world's most renowned men, like Mrs Darwin, or even the mythological character of Medusa who I have come to know as a fantastic example of a woman scorned. But first, the character who opens this collection is Little Red Riding Hood with the poem 'Little Red Cap'.



Rather than retelling the story that we have grown up with, Duffy forges a relationship between the Wolf and Red. Red allows herself to be led 'deep into the woods, / away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place'. In this sense, marriage could be 'the dark tangled thorny place' that Duffy creates within the world of her poetry. We could then see the role of the wife as almost alien to the world that we know as a child, this institutional relationship being confusing and relatively confining.

The role of the wife and marriage was historically initiated as a trade, the female body becoming an object that men could sell for a pretty penny. However, Little Red Riding Hood allows this relationship between herself and the wolf to happen in order to exact her revenge on the beast that killed her grandmother. So, we could view Red as a modern woman, pursuing a relationship to benefit herself rather than a man.

The shorter poem 'Mrs Darwin' reads as a funny anecdote. Mrs Darwin says that 'something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of / you.' Duffy gives us a glimpse into the relationship between Charles Darwin and his wife. Whilst this poem is shorter than some of the others in this collection, I find that it reminds me of the relationship between my own parents, making fun of each other and enjoying each other's company. Obviously, Duffy is suggesting that Mrs Darwin's observation fuelled Darwin's theory of evolution and we could see this as an example of a



supportive relationship in which Charles was able to develop his life-altering theory. On the other hand, we could see this as Duffy presenting another woman in an unhappy relationship that made a snide comment about the man she is married to.

'Medusa' is the poem that resonated with me the most as I have always been interested in Greek Mythology. Duffy creates relationship between Medusa and Poseidon and presents a different angle to us. Within the world of Duffy's poetry, Medusa and Poseidon are in a romantic relationship that has 'soured' and rotted through Poseidon's adulterous nature.

Medusa has become a monster through this relationship, becoming 'foul mouthed now, foul tongued, / yellow fanged.' When in an unhealthy relationship, we can become monstrous versions of ourselves. This type of relationship does not necessarily have to be romantic either.

The role of the wife is something that retained a central position concerning the conversation about women and marriage. Within 'Mrs Icarus' Duffy once again takes on a satirical stance, creating an almost universally applicable scenario that most could relate to. She recounts:

I'm not the first or the last
to stand on a hillock
watching the man she married
prove to the world
he's a total, utter, absolute, Grade A
pillock.

Duffy manipulates the myth of Icarus' ambition and uses it to heighten the role of an exasperated woman. Duffy however, places 'Mrs Icarus' in a contemporary space, allowing a woman that otherwise would have no voice from her time period an inner monologue, observing her husband's ambition and internally calling him out for being an idiot.

In most relationships, we sometimes have to watch our partners make a fool of themselves or just unintentionally screw up.

The final poem of this collection leaves a lot of food for thought. Firstly, the title 'Demeter' has some interesting connections regarding mythology; Demeter is the goddess of the harvest, so we could see Duffy as positioning Demeter as *the World's Wife*.

She could be the ultimate representation of the role of the wife, mirroring the life cycle of romantic relationships from beginning to end. Within this poem, Demeter is not defined or overruled by a husband, but instead she is defined by her role as a mother which could be viewed as her defiance against the cultural expectations of a woman.

Without her daughter Demeter is left in a 'cold stone room', but as soon as her daughter returns to her, 'the air softened and warmed as she moved,

the blue sky smiling, none too soon,
with the small shy mouth of a new moon.' Persephone's return promises new life and growth for Demeter, her relationship with her daughter proving to be an incredibly strong bond that renews her marriage to the world, allowing it to once again flourish.

The seasonal changes are, according to myths, influenced by Demeter's sense of loss when her daughter resides with her husband in the underworld. Maybe Duffy chose to focus on Demeter's role in

Persephone's marriage to illustrate the varying dynamics of relationships as they are not always smooth sailing.

Duffy gives us an insight to various relationships within her collection, allowing us to see the potential of what marriages can become. The poems I have focused on primarily give voice to fictional women whose stories have been passed down and overshadowed throughout history. Duffy breaks this cycle and has instead created a satirical collection that is incredibly relatable; we have all been in relationships with people that have infuriated us or have even brought out the worst in us. Furthermore, Duffy moves past the boundaries of how marriage is perceived as an institution, highlighting that not all relationships are healthy and permanent.
