

Anne Hathaway

'Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed...'

(from Shakespeare's will)

The bed we loved in was a spinning world
of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas
where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses
on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme
to his, now echo, assonance; his touch
a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.
Some nights I dreamed he'd written me, the bed
a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance
and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.
In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –
I hold him in the casket of my widow's head
as he held me upon that next best bed

EPIGRAPH SUMMARY

'Item I gyve unto my wife my second best bed ...'

(from Shakespeare's will)

The epigraph is the key to understanding this poem. It's actually a line from Shakespeare's will (how cool is that?). It turns out the only thing he has left for his wife is their second best bed. This may seem like a major insult (couldn't Shakespeare have left her some cash, or maybe even their best bed?), but the poem aims to change all that.

LINES 1-7 SUMMARY

Lines 1-3

The bed we loved in was a spinning world

Of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas

Where he would dive for pearls [...]

Duffy gets right into here, having the speaker, Anne Hathaway, address the issue of the bed immediately. Instead of talking about "the second best bed," Anne refers to it as "the bed we loved in." This undoes our assumptions about Shakespeare's will very quickly. It may be second best, but this bed has seen a lot of love.

So, what do we know about this bed? Well, Anne describes it as "a spinning world" that's filled with all sorts of beautiful and romantic things – "forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas."

Wow, sounds like quite a bed. The important thing to know about this bed is that it's not literally piled high with these too-big-for-a-bed things. Anne is speaking metaphorically; her experiences in bed are so wonderful that she feels as if it's filled with these beautiful sights. The forests and clifftops may be imaginary, but they feel real emotionally.

So, what's with the deep sea diving? Apparently Anne imagines that Shakespeare went diving for pearls in bed. Now, this could just be an extension of the previous fanciful metaphors, but it could also be a metaphor for something more sexual.

Lines 3-5

[...] My lover's words

were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses

on these lips; [...]

Anne continues being super-romantic here with a lovely double metaphor. First, her husband's words are described as shooting stars. Then, these same shooting stars (which are metaphors to begin with) fall to earth like kisses. This is some complex poetic language!

Is it possible that Anne might be competing with her dead husband here? She's talking about Shakespeare's words (which we all know are pretty amazing), but, in the meantime, she does some pretty fancy word footwork of her own. It seems that Shakespeare isn't the only one in the family with a talent for words.

While we're at it, let's take a second to think a little more about Shakespeare. You might remember him best for his plays, but he's also a sonnet guy. Actually, he wrote an extended sequence of sonnets (154 in all). A sonnet is a 14-line poem, often about big themes (and we really mean big themes: Shakespeare's sonnets take on issues such as love, death, immortality, and the power of writing).

What's interesting about Duffy's poem, then, is that it's spoken by Shakespeare's wife, in sonnet form. Duffy appropriates (or borrows/steals) Shakespeare's favorite form for his wife's words. Is this a way of competing with Shakespeare? Or is his wife just honoring him by writing in his favorite form of poetry? It's up for debate.

This poem has a lot of repeated sounds, and it's particularly striking in these lines: we get tons of s's, which makes it sound almost like a whisper. There is also noticeable assonance (repeated vowel sounds) in words like "words" and "earth." There aren't a lot of full rhymes (words that rhyme perfectly, like "eye" and "sky") in this poem, but the whole thing is held together by these other types of repeated sounds.

Lines 5-7

[...] my body now a softer rhyme

to his, now echo, assonance; his touch

a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.

Here, Anne starts using poetic and linguistic terms to talk about her relationship with Shakespeare. We get some fancy terms like "assonance" (a repetition of vowel sounds in words), and also some more basic stuff, like "rhyme" (a repetition of sounds at the ends of words), "verb" (an action word), and "noun" (which names a person, place or thing).

More specifically, she uses all of these poetic terms to describe her and her husband's bodies, and what they do with them in bed. (Things just keep heating up in this poem!)

Their bodies rhyme with each other. They echo each other. Shakespeare's touch is like a verb dancing in a noun. Is that noun Anne's body? We certainly think so.

By using the vocabulary of poetry and writing, Anne links writing with the body, and more specifically, with sex. In this poem, writing is like sex, and sex is like writing: both involve repetitions, forms, nouns, and verbs.

Interestingly, Anne characterizes her body as "softer" than her husband's, embracing a kind of stereotypical femininity. Also in these lines, Shakespeare is more active (he's doing the touching) and Anne, the woman, is more passive (she's the one being touched).

LINES 8-14 SUMMARY

Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.

Lines 8-9

Some nights, I dreamed he'd written me, the bed

a page beneath his writer's hands [...]

Get ready for even more writing metaphors. Anne tells us that she has dreamed that her husband had "written" her.

Maybe she means that he's written about her in one of his sonnets or plays. Or maybe the metaphor is more extreme. Maybe she dreams that he's created her entirely, that she was called into existence by Shakespeare.

In this metaphor, the bed becomes a page upon which Shakespeare writes Anne. The writing/sex metaphor is extended (the bed is a page, and Anne is the writing on it).

Once again, we have some more stereotypical femininity. Anne imagines that she's the product of someone else's imagination, and not a self-created or self-determined being.

Is Anne a bad feminist? By attempting to set the record straight on her relationship with Shakespeare, she seems to give Shakespeare a whole lot of control. Then again, setting the record straight is a pretty strong and important act in and of itself.

Basically, this poem has a pretty tangled view of the relationship between men and women.

Lines 9-10

[...] Romance

and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.

Surprise, surprise: more references to writing! Anne mentions two genres of playwriting – romance and drama – both of which Shakespeare knew well.

Here's the thing: unlike Shakespeare's plays, which are artificial works of art, Anne's relationship with Shakespeare is real. It's sensuous: their relationship consists of touch, smell, and taste. Other people get to read Shakespeare's words and see his plays, but Anne gets to touch, smell, and taste the man himself. Lucky lady.

While writing and sex seemed pretty much equivalent earlier, here Anne declares that sex is better. Period. Romance and drama (i.e., plays) are fun to see, but in their bed, Anne and Shakespeare get to experience these things for themselves.

Life is better than art, she seems to say.

Lines 11-12

In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
dribbling their prose. [...]

Now that Anne has said her piece on the issue of sex and writing, the second best bed returns to center stage. Anne tells us that their best bed was reserved for guests.

(We already know that she and Shakespeare slept in the second best bed. This seems like a pretty good explanation of what Shakespeare said in his will: the second best bed was their bed, after all.)

To be honest, The best bed seems pretty mundane compared to the second best one. In the best bed, the guests "dozed on / dribbling their prose." Compare this to the drama and romance in Anne and Shakespeare's bed, or to the clifftops and deep sea diving. Which bed would you rather be in?

Anne also continues with her writing metaphors. In the second best bed, there's poetry, drama, and romance. In the best bed, the guests are "dribbling their prose."

Prose is your everyday typical written language. It's what you read and write all the time, in newspapers and novels, in textbooks and in emails (and on Shmoop!). It has no form, the line breaks don't matter, and there's no rhythm. It's the opposite of poetry, which has form, meaningful line breaks and (sometimes) regular rhythms.

Who wants prose when you could have poetry? Amen, Anne.

Since writing is so often a metaphor for sex in this poem, Anne seems to be saying that she and Shakespeare have better sex in their second best bed than the guests do in the best bed. Take that, haters!

Lines 12-14

[...] My living laughing love –

I hold him in the casket of my widow's head

as he held me upon that next best bed.

We know from the epigraph of the poem that Shakespeare is dead when this poem is written – the fuss is over his will, after all. In these lines, though, Anne imagines him as if he's still alive. He's her "living laughing love."

These lovely lines quickly become terribly sad because of the deathly words that follow: casket and widow. Still, even though her husband may be dead, her imagination keeps him alive.

And guess what? More metaphors. Here, she compares her mind to that second best bed. She holds on to the memory of her "living laughing love" just as strongly as her husband held her (physically) while lying in bed.

While there have been a lot slant rhymes (close-but-no-cigar rhymes) and repeated sounds earlier in the poem, there is no formal rhyme scheme. Nothing rhymes perfectly – until these final two lines, that is.

In the last two lines of the poem, we have a wonderfully strong and dramatic rhyme of "head" with "bed." This final couplet provides a beautiful sense of closure to the poem.

Bonus fact: all of Shakespeare's sonnets end with a strong full rhyme like this one. Is Anne referencing her husband's sonnets here? Or has she become empowered over the course of the poem and wants to show off? That's up for debate. Either way, this poem goes out with a bang.

THE BED

Symbol Analysis

The poem begins with an epigraph from Shakespeare's will. It says that the only item that he bequeaths (gives) to his wife, Anne, is their second best bed. While a lot of Shakespeare scholars have interpreted this to mean that Shakespeare didn't love his wife, Duffy totally turns the tables in her poem. Through the voice of Anne, she imagines that this second best bed is a sentimental reminder of the Shakespeares' passionate relationship. The bed, which many scholars interpret as a low blow, becomes a pretty moving symbol of love.

- Epigraph: The quote from Shakespeare's will provides us with the context we need to understand the poem. For more on this, check out what we have to say in the "In a Nutshell" section.
- Lines 1-3: Anne tells us that the bed was more than just a bed. It's a "spinning world," and it's filled with all kinds of beautiful and amazing things – forests, clifftops, and even the sea. She's speaking **metaphorically**; it's not like these things are actually in bed with her! Still, the bed is a place of magic for Anne.
- Lines 8-10: Here, Anne creates another **metaphor** by saying that the bed is like a page upon which her husband has written her. (She is the writing and the bed is the page.) Since her husband was Shakespeare, it makes a lot of sense that she'd use a writing metaphor. What's interesting about this is that it seems like Anne is admitting that she herself is a product of Shakespeare's imagination. Strange, right?
- Lines 11-12: These lines are the crux of the bed scenario. Anne explains that she and Shakespeare reserved the best bed for their guests, and took the second best one for themselves. So, the will is not an insult after all. It's a reminder of the good times she and her husband had in that second best bed. She puts it this way: she and Shakespeare have had poetry, romance and drama in the second best bed, while the guests are just left "dribbling their prose." (We all know that poetry, romance, and drama are a lot more fun than prose!) We have a sneaking suspicion that Anne is alluding to sex here: let's just say she has no complaints about her husband's performance in bed.
- Lines 12-14: This is the saddest part of the poem. Anne tells us that she will hold onto the memory of her dead husband just as he once held her while lying in that second best bed. The bed becomes a **symbol** of her enduring love for him.

WRITING

Symbol Analysis

This poem is as much about writing as it is about love. Duffy uses a constant stream of writing metaphors to characterize Anne's relationship with Shakespeare. This is no surprise: Shakespeare was a writer after all. Still, though Bill may have been a writer, Anne Hathaway probably wasn't. In the poem, Anne appropriates (or borrows) Shakespeare's mode of communication for her own purposes by using the sonnet, a form popularized by Shakespeare through his 154-poem sonnet sequence. So in Duffy's poem, Shakespeare isn't the only writer in the family.

- Lines 3-5: Duffy makes a double **metaphor** here. Shakespeare's words are shooting stars, and they are also kisses that fall upon Anne's lips. Words become real objects out there in the world that Anne can see and feel.
- Lines 5-7: Get ready, get set, more metaphors! Anne's **diction** (or word choice) here – "rhyme," "echo," "**assonance**," "verb," "noun" – is very writing-focused. These are all poetic devices and parts of speech used by writers, but once again, Anne makes these words come to life; this time, she links this poetic vocabulary to the body. It's almost like we can reach out and touch the "softer rhyme's in the poem.
- Lines 8-9: Anne tells us that she's dreamed that Shakespeare has written her; maybe she imagines that she's a character in one of his plays, or maybe that he has created her completely out of his imagination. Both are interesting images.
- Lines 9-10: In these lines, Anne references some of the genres in which Shakespeare wrote – romance and drama – and says that the real-life version is better, more sensuous. Rather than seeing a play about lovers, she gets to touch, smell, and taste hers.
- Lines 11-12: We find out here that the best bed is reserved for guests. While Anne and her husband may be stuck in the second best bed, it seems a lot more fun than being in the best one. In the best beds, the guests are "dribbling their prose." Anne and Shakespeare, on the other hand, have poetry, romance, and drama. Anne seems to be slyly telling us that her sex life is much more exciting than that of her guests. They're stuck with prose, while she has poetry.

ANALYSIS: FORM AND METER

Sonnet, Dramatic monologue

Duffy's "Anne Hathaway" is a sonnet spoken in the voice of Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife. Because Duffy imagines the speaker as one distinct character, we can call this poem a dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue doesn't have to follow any set form, it just has to be spoken in the voice of a specific persona, real or imagined.

"Anne Hathaway" does have a form, though. It's a sonnet! It follows the most basic sonnet rule: it has fourteen lines. But that's pretty much it – otherwise, it breaks a lot of rules. For example, it has no formal rhyme scheme and its meter is only roughly iambic pentameter.

Side note: iambic pentameter is a fancy way of explaining the consistent *da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum* (yep, five times!) rhythm of the lines. A perfect example is line 5 of Shakespeare's [Sonnet 116](#).

O no! It is an ev-er fix-ed mark (sonnet 116, line 5, where the italics show the stress)

Compare this to a line from Duffy's poem:

drib-bling their prose. My liv-ing laugh-ing love – (12)

Close, but no cigar!

Duffy definitely takes a lot more liberty with the form than Shakespeare does. But her poem does include what is perhaps the signature Shakespearean sonnet feature: the couplet. Duffy's sonnet, like all of Shakespeare's, ends with a strong couplet (a pair of rhyming lines). Adds a nice punch, we think.

If you're interested in learning more about sonnets, check out what we have to say about them in our [poetry glossary](#). If you want to know more about Shakespeare's sonnets in particular, we've got some handy [study guides](#) just waiting for you.

ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

Anne Hathaway was Shakespeare's wife. Although we don't know too much about her, we do know what Shakespeare left for her in his will: their second best bed. While a lot of Shakespeare scholars assume that this was a sign that Shakespeare didn't love her, Duffy interprets the will differently in the poem. The second best bed in "Anne Hathaway" is a symbol of love and devotion.

We may never get to know the real Anne Hathaway, but we get to know a fictionalized version of her through Duffy's work. She's a talented writer herself, and

she appropriates (or borrows) a lot of Shakespearean stuff for her own sonnet. She's also a very sensuous woman, and recounts her passionate experiences with her husband in great detail. And like Shakespeare, Anne loves metaphors. (Can you tell?) For example, she describes her husband's words as kisses that fall to earth like shooting stars. Now that's poetry!

Anne is not at all angry about Shakespeare's will, but she certainly does want others to understand their relationship. This poem is a rebuttal to all those people who think that Shakespeare didn't love his wife, and it's straight from the horse's mouth. Duffy's Anne is basically saying to them: he loved me, I loved him, we had awesome sex, and I'll always cherish our second best bed. So mind your own business and don't go nosing around in other people's wills.

ANALYSIS: SETTING

Where It All Goes Down

While the setting of "Anne Hathaway" is not specified, we like to imagine that Anne is actually speaking to us from that second best bed that we've heard so much about. The bed is probably in Stratford-upon-Avon, a town in the south of England where Anne and Shakespeare lived (though Shakespeare spent much of his time in London).

When you read the poem, imagine Anne reading her poem aloud to you in a dark room on this small but momentous bed, almost as if the existence of the bed is proof enough of Shakespeare's love for her. We bet that this is what Duffy is going for in "Anne Hathaway."

ANALYSIS: SOUND CHECK

This sonnet is pretty quiet. There are a lot of s sounds (in words like kisses, stars, and softer), and we can almost picture Anne whispering the poem to us across a dark and quiet room; or, even better, two lovers whispering sweet nothings to each other in bed.

While the poem has a lot of repeated sounds, it doesn't properly rhyme until the final couplet (two line pair) that ends the poem. After a lot of almost-rhymes throughout the poem, Anne rhymes her end-words perfectly: head and bed. You can't help but say these lines louder. There's something incredibly satisfying about this final, strong, rhyme. Even though it's a pretty quiet poem up until this point, these lines beg to be enunciated clearly and perfectly, simply because of the rhyme.

ANALYSIS: WHAT'S UP WITH THE TITLE?

The poem "Anne Hathaway" is spoken by, that's right, Anne Hathaway. Using the speaker's name as the title lets us know right away that Carol Ann Duffy, the poet, is not the one speaking. Instead, she's imagining the poem as spoken by a fictionalized version of a real historical figure (that means Anne Hathaway was a real lady, but Duffy is clearly giving her a particular personality here.)

"Anne Hathaway" comes from a collection of Duffy's poems titled *The World's Wife*. In this collection, Duffy imagines the voices of many women (both real and imagined) who didn't have the opportunity to speak for themselves, or who were overshadowed by their husbands. She writes, for example, about Mrs. Darwin, Mrs. Freud, and Odysseus's wife, Penelope. Anne Hathaway is just one of the many women who get the final say through Duffy's poetry.

ANALYSIS: CALLING CARD

Carol Ann Duffy is one of those writers who's a little obsessed with the fact that she's a writer. She just loves writing about writing (and sometimes even writing about writing about writing). Writing is one of her favorite metaphors for love (and for sex) and it appears across a number of her poems. Of course, Carol Ann Duffy didn't invent writing about writing. In fact, this motif is all over Shakespeare's sonnets, where he often comments that he will immortalize his beloved through his poetry. If you write it down, it's forever. In "Anne Hathaway," Duffy immortalizes Anne in the same way. She gives the fictionalized Anne a chance to speak for herself. And when she has this chance, what does she write about? Writing and love. It seems that Duffy's Anne and Shakespeare made a good pair after all

THEMES

THEME OF LOVE

"Anne Hathaway," like many sonnets, is about love and all those nice things that come along with it: sex, passion, and of course poetry. It's a message to the world from Shakespeare's wife that she and her husband were very much in love, despite the way other people might interpret his will. Their love is beautiful, romantic, sexy; sounds like a pretty good relationship to us.

THEME OF LITERATURE AND WRITING

"Anne Hathaway" is a poem about writing as much as it is a poem about love. Duffy compares sex to writing throughout the poem; sometimes it's even hard to figure out which she's talking about. Shakespeare is considered by many people to be the greatest writer ever, but in this poem, it's his wife Anne who's got the skills.

THEME OF TRUTH

In "Anne Hathaway," Carol Ann Duffy wants to set the record straight about Anne Hathaway and Shakespeare's relationship. People tend to interpret Shakespeare's will to mean that he didn't love his wife. This seems to frustrate Duffy, so she writes a poem that imagines a totally different point of view. In doing so, she questions the assumptions that we all make about other people's lives. Is it really possible to know the truth of someone else's relationship?