

ANNE HATHAWAY INTRODUCTION

In A Nutshell

First, let's get one thing straight. This poem is not about Anne Hathaway, movie star extraordinaire. It's about Shakespeare's wife. She was named Anne Hathaway, too.

Now that we've got that all cleared up, here's a little context that might help you understand "**Anne Hathaway**" the poem. When Shakespeare died, the only thing that he left for his wife in his will was their "second best bed." Yup, that's right. Not the best bed. The second best bed.

This information has driven Shakespeare scholars nuts. Some assume that this was a monumental diss to Anne, that the will was a sign that he didn't love her, that they had a loveless marriage. Would you be happy if the only thing your spouse left you upon his death was the second best bed? We think not. But other scholars have come up with alternative theories. It's possible that Renaissance legal codes would automatically leave some of the estate to a man's widow. Or perhaps Shakespeare had planned for his children to support his wife after his death. No one knows for sure.

The Anne of the poem wants to dispel the idea that her husband didn't love her. She says that the second best bed was the bed that they slept in, made love in, wrote poetry in. (The best bed was reserved for guests, she says.) For the Anne of [Carol Ann Duffy](#)'s 1999 poem, the second best bed is a memento of love, not a symbol of hate or disrespect. Basically, this poem is a (soft) slap in the face to all who suppose that the Shakespeares didn't love each other.

In her poem, Carol Ann Duffy speaks in the voice of Anne Hathaway herself. It makes sense that Duffy wants to give a voice to this otherwise silenced woman because Duffy herself is known as a feminist. Oh, and she's also the Poet Laureate of the UK, which is a pretty big deal, especially because she's the first woman *ever* to hold that post. Other people to have the title have been Edmund Spenser, John Dryden, and Lord Tennyson – recognize those names? Like we said: pretty big deal.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Everyone loves some good gossip – even Shakespeare scholars. We all like to talk about other people, their relationships, their problems. It's just what we do.

"Anne Hathaway" is a good reminder for us that sometimes gossip is just gossip. We may know what Shakespeare wrote in his will, but we will never understand the complexity of his relationship with his wife. That's just how it is. Let's not judge, this poem says. What seems like a bad relationship may actually be a wonderful one. We might all do well to keep our noses out of other people's business (and their wills).

The title of this poem is crucial because it lets us know that the poem is spoken by Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway. The epigraph, then, is a little piece of history:

it's from Shakespeare's will, and tells us that the only item that he left for his wife in his will was their "second best bed."

Title

Anne Hathaway

- The title is pretty important in this poem: it tells us that Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, is the speaker. For more context on Anne Hathaway, check out our discussion in "In a Nutshell."

SUMMARY

Anne Hathaway begins the poem by describing that second best bed mentioned the epigraph. She imagines that the bed is a "spinning world," filled with fanciful and beautiful things, like castles and clifftops. She describes Shakespeare's words as shooting stars, and then compares her and her husband's bodies to a whole bunch of poetic words like rhymes and echoes. And just to make it a little weirder, she tells us that she sometimes dreamed that he had written her, the same way he had written his plays. They had *real* romance and drama, though.

Finally, to clear things up, Anne says that their guests slept in their best bed, while she and her husband used second best one. (How generous.) Now, her husband lives on in her memory: she holds him in her mind, the same way he held her on their second best bed

Epigraph

'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. For more context on the will and its

interpLines 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).
- relations, check out what we have to say in "In a Nutshell."

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.

• Form and Meter

- 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...

• 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 ass...

• Setting

- 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 Strat...

• 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 b...

Anne Hathaway Themes

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...

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. Shak...

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.

"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.

Questions About Love

1. What is the relationship between love and writing in the poem?
2. Why does Duffy use so many metaphors to describe Anne and Shakespeare's relationship? What do metaphors have to do with love?
3. Who has the power in this relationship? Is this a marriage of equals? What is the relationship between love and power?
4. After reading the poem, have your thoughts about the meaning of Shakespeare's will changed? Do you think that he and Anne were really in love?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

"Anne Hathaway" convincingly argues that Anne Hathaway and Shakespeare were really in love.

"Anne Hathaway" shows that Anne really loved Shakespeare, but the only word we have from Shakespeare himself is his will. We can't be sure that he loved Anne the way that she loved him.

