

## 24 Mrs Midas

By Carol Ann Duffy, 1999

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ✦ To make inferences about characters.
- ✦ To comment on writers' presentation of characters, using evidence from the text.
- ✦ To explore writers' techniques.

### CONTEXT

In Greek mythology, King Midas was a man who was granted a wish: everything he touched turned to gold (see Extract 7). This poem, written by Carol Ann Duffy, explores the story of Midas from the point of view of his wife. Mrs Midas is sad as her husband can no longer do basic things such as eat or drink. He also can't touch his wife as, if he does so, she will turn to gold. The poem is set in modern times rather than long ago, which makes it comical. Carol Ann Duffy is a very famous British poet who was born in 1955. This poem is from an anthology called *The World's Wife*, where Duffy retells traditional myths from the point of view of the men's forgotten wives.



▲ 'King Midas with his daughter' by Walter Crane

Mrs Midas is cooking. Duffy has used personification to describe the steam going on the windows.

Duffy describes the first time Mrs Midas sees her husband touch something which turns to gold.

It was late September. I'd just poured a glass of wine, begun to unwind, while the vegetables cooked. The kitchen filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath gently blanching the windows. So I opened one, then with my fingers wiped the other's glass like a brow. He was standing under the pear tree snapping a twig. Now the garden was long and the visibility poor, the way the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky, but that twig in his hand was gold. And then he plucked a pear from a branch. – we grew *Fondante d'Automne* – and it sat in his palm, like a lightbulb. On. I thought to myself, Is he putting fairy lights in the tree?

Duffy uses a rhetorical question to describe the confusion Mrs Midas is feeling at present.

Mrs Midas is thinking about a history lesson she had at school about kings who exchanged cloths of gold

She is starting to panic because everything is turning into gold. Her husband just laughs.

Midas cannot eat as his food is turning to gold.

He came into the house. **The doorknobs gleamed.**  
 He drew the blinds. You know the mind; I thought of  
**the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready.**  
 He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne.  
 The look on his face was strange, wild, vain. I said,  
**What in the name of God is going on? He started to laugh.**  
 I served up the meal. For starters, corn on the cob.  
**Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.**  
 He toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives,  
 the forks.  
 He asked where was the wine. I poured with **a shaking hand**  
 a fragrant, bone-dry white from Italy, then watched  
 as **he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.**  
 It was then that I started to scream. He sank to his knees.  
 After we'd both calmed down, I finished the wine  
 on my own, hearing him out. **I made him sit**  
**on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself.**  
 I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone.  
**The toilet I didn't mind.** I couldn't believe my ears:  
 how he'd had a wish. Look, we all have wishes; granted.  
 But who has wishes granted? Him. **Do you know about gold?**  
**It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes**  
**no thirst. He tried to light a cigarette; I gazed, entranced,**  
**as the blue flame played on its luteous stem. At least,**  
**I said, you'll be able to give up smoking for good.**

The doorknobs are gleaming because they have turned into gold.

Mrs Midas' hand is starting to shake because she is afraid of her husband.

The glass Midas is drinking from and its contents turn to gold, which means he cannot drink.

Mrs Midas doesn't let her husband touch anything as she doesn't want anything else to turn into gold.

She discusses the disadvantages having gold: it doesn't feed anyone or provide drink.

Duffy uses humour here. Mrs Midas doesn't mind having a gold toilet.

Midas has to give up smoking as his cigarettes turn to gold too.

## GLOSSARY

**Fondante d'Automne:** a type of pear

**Aurum:** the Latin word for gold

**Slakes:** satisfies

**Luteous:** the colour of the flame

**Halcyon:** a happy time in the past

## SKILLS FOCUS

- ✓ Understand and summarise events in the poem.
- ✓ Analyse Duffy's use of language.
- ✓ Explore the character of Mrs Midas.

## LOOK CLOSER

- 1 Read the poem again. Now copy and fill in the table below summarising what happens in each stanza. The first stanza has been done for you.

Stanza	Summary
1	It is late September. Mrs Midas is cooking and watching her husband who is in the garden.
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

- 2 Now use your table to draw a storyboard of the entire poem. You will need to have six boxes on your storyboard, one for each of the events you just identified.
- 3 Copy and complete the table below analysing some of the language features that Duffy uses in the first part of the poem and how this makes the reader feel.

Vocabulary	Language feature	How does this make the reader feel?
The kitchen filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath gently blanching the windows	Personification	
He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne.	Simile	
then watched as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.	Three part list	
I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone. The toilet I didn't mind.	Humour	

Vocabulary	Language feature	How does this make the reader feel?
Look we all have wishes; Granted. But who has wishes granted? Him. Do you know about gold?	Rhetorical questions	

**FAST FINISHERS**

Analyse the language features that Duffy uses later on in the poem.

**NOW TRY THIS**

- 1 Using the information in this part of the poem, write a diary entry for Mrs Midas. How does she feel about her husband? You may start your diary like this:

*Dear Diary,*

*My husband is such a greedy fool! You won't believe what he has just done ...*

Make sure that you write using first person narrative and that you use paragraphs when writing your diary.

**FAST FINISHERS**

Duffy has set this poem in the modern day, using a conversational, chatty style. This makes it funnier and also makes us feel empathy towards Mrs Midas.

Choose another poem that you have studied in this anthology. Retell it from a modern perspective. Before you write your new poem, think about:

- ★ the point of view that you are going to use
- ★ the language devices you will include
- ★ the structure of your poem.

- 2 Do you think that Mrs Midas is right to be angry with her husband? As a class, prepare a debate about this. Half of the class agree that Mrs Midas should be angry. The other half of the class disagree. Your teacher will decide who has won the debate.

**PRACTICE QUESTION**

Read the poem again. How has Duffy used language to explore the character of Mrs Midas? Write at least three paragraphs in response. Here are some sentence starters to help you with your first paragraph:

- ★ Firstly, Duffy uses ...
- ★ For example, she writes ...
- ★ This makes the poem interesting because ...

[8 marks]