

Mrs Midas



SUMMARY

The speaker begins by telling the reader that it all started near the end of September. The speaker had poured herself a glass of wine and started to relax (as at the end of a long day), while the vegetables she'd been preparing for dinner were cooking. As the whole kitchen became full of the aromas of the cooking food, it was as though the room itself also seemed to relax. The steam coming from the cooking vegetables seemed like the kitchen's breath, and started to fog up the windows. In order to see out of them, the speaker opened one window, and used her fingers to wipe the steam off the other window as though she were wiping sweat off of a person's forehead. It was then that the speaker saw her husband standing beneath a pear tree in the yard and breaking a small stick in half.

The speaker notes that the garden containing the pear tree extended far away from the house, and as such it was difficult for her to see well. It was the time of evening when the ground, already dark, seems to absorb or consume all the sky's light. Yet even from this distance, the speaker says, she could see that the twig her husband was holding was made of gold. Then, she says, her husband picked a pear off of the tree—it was a particular French variety of pear that they grew, to be exact—and this pear in his hand, she says, looked like a light bulb that had been switched on. Confused, the speaker asks herself whether her husband was hanging small string lights onto the tree.

The speaker's husband then came back inside, and as he did so the doorknobs that he had touched shone. He closed the curtains, unsurprisingly prompting the speaker's mind to make new associations; the appearance of the curtains made her think of the Field of the Cloth of Gold (a historical reference to a meeting of the Kings of England and France where each brought a huge amount of gold fabric to impress the other) and Miss Macready, a character in a British television series who had prominent gold-colored hair. The speaker's husband next sat in a chair as though he was a king sitting on a polished gold throne. He had an expression on his face that was odd, untamed, and arrogant. When the speaker asked him what in God's name was happening, he just laughed.

The speaker served them both dinner, beginning with corn on the cob. Almost at once, she says, her husband spat out the kernels of corn, which now looked like gold teeth that might fill the mouths of rich people. Her husband then picked up and turned over in his hand all the silverware (both his own and hers), before asking her where the wine was. The speaker's hand trembled as she poured him a glass of wine, which was aromatic, dry white wine from Italy. She watched as her

husband raised the glass—which, in turning into gold, looked more like a goblet or the type of cup used for serving wine during Catholic communion—and then drank out of this golden cup.

At this point the speaker started screaming, prompting her husband to drop to the floor on his knees. Once they had both regained their composure, the speaker drank the rest of the wine by herself while she listened to her husband's explanation. She forced him sit across the room and not to touch anything. She also locked the cat in the basement to keep it safe from him and moved the phone away from him too. She didn't protest when he turned the toilet into gold, however. All the same, she couldn't believe what he told her: that he had made a wish.

Okay, the speaker allows, everyone wishes for things. But who, she asks, actually has their wishes come true? She answers her own question: her husband does. She then asks the reader if they know what gold is like. It can't be eaten as food, she says; it has the mineral name "aurum," which also means luster or shine; it is a soft kind of metal; it can't be tarnished; you also can't drink it when you're thirsty. The speaker then explains what happened when her husband tried to light a cigarette: she'd looked at him, totally absorbed in what was happening, as the blue-colored flame danced over the now golden cigarette, which resembled a kind of flower stem or the stem of a glass. She says she told her husband that at least now he could finally quit smoking once and for all.

Describing the progression of the evening, the speaker says that they had to sleep separately, and beyond this, that she leaned a chair against the door of her room to prevent him from coming in because she was so terrified of what would happen. Her husband took the guest room downstairs, which, through his touch, quickly transformed into something resembling the tomb of King Tutankhamun (an ancient Egyptian pharaoh whose tomb contained an enormous amount of gold objects). She goes on to insist to the reader that she and her husband had been crazy about each other back then, in the idyllically happy time leading up to this. They would undress each other quickly, as though they were tearing the wrapping paper off presents or fast food. Now, though, the speaker says, she was afraid of him holding her, since where his embrace might once have been sweet like honey, now it was only like honey in that it would turn her to gold. She feared, too, that if he kissed her it would turn her lips into a golden sculpture.

And the fact of the matter is, the speaker says, that no one can actually live with a heart made out of gold. When the speaker slept that night, she had a dream in which she gave birth to her husband's child and that the child was made out of gold, with golden arms and legs and a tiny tongue like a perfect fastening

of a door. The child's pupils were held in the child's golden eyes as though they were flies trapped in the amber. In the dream, the speaker says, her breast milk burned her because it too was made out of gold. She woke up to sunlight pouring over everything.

Because of all of this, the speaker says, her husband simply had to move out of the house. She says that they had a mobile home or camper of sorts in a remote area in the woods, surrounded by its own cluster of trees. She drove her husband there, she says, at night so that no one could see, and made him sit in the backseat of the car. She then went back home, now seeing herself as a woman who married a greedy idiot who wanted gold. The speaker visited her husband off and on for a while, parking the car well away from where he was and walking the rest of the way.

Describing these visits, the speaker says, it was easy to tell when she was getting near to where he was. She would see fish turned to gold on the grass, and once saw a golden rabbit hanging from a pine tree, like a lovely lemon-colored error. After these first clues, she says, she would see her husband's gold footprints, shining by the riverbed. Her husband had grown thin because he couldn't eat and also delusional; he told her that he could hear the Greek god Pan playing his flute in the trees and told her to listen for it. This, the speaker says, finally made her feel that she could not go on interacting with him.

What bothers the speaker these days, she says, is not her husband's stupidity or greediness, but the fact that he didn't think of her at all when he made his wish. It was, she says, utterly selfish. She eventually sold off all the golden objects in the house and came to the place where she is now. Still, though, she remembers her husband sometimes, thinking of him at particular times of day when the light is a certain way, like in early morning or late in the afternoon. One time, she says, seeing a bowl of apples stopped her in her tracks because of the memories and feelings that it brought up. What she still misses most of all, the speaker says, are her husband's hands—the feel of his warm hands on her skin, his living touch.

published—critiques the erasure of women's experiences. The poem implies the steep cost of such erasure, as the speaker's life is also irrevocably changed when her husband makes a wish that fails to consider her altogether.

Most people who know the myth of King Midas know it as exactly that—a myth about a *king* and what happened to *him*. The poem's title thus immediately calls the reader's attention to what was left out of the original story: the perspective of the king's wife, who would of course have been very much affected by the fact that everything her husband touched turned to gold!

Within the poem, Mrs. Midas herself insists that her husband's wish is based on an act of erasure. "What gets me now," the speaker says, "is not the idiocy or greed / but lack of thought for me." In other words, the speaker understands that in the moment of his wish, her husband wasn't even thinking of her at all; he had effectively erased her from his thoughts. The implication is that, if Mr. Midas *had* thought of his wife and the effects on her, he might not have made the wish in the first place. The poem suggests, then, that this erasure of female experience—or, perhaps more broadly, any experience beyond that of powerful men like the king—is, at least in part, at the root of the harm that follows.

Finally, by telling the story from the wife's point of view, the poem forces the reader to consider the pain she experiences as a result of her husband's actions. The speaker reveals how harmful the whole ordeal has been for her—from her initial fear of being turned to gold herself, to her later sense of loss of her husband and how she still "miss[es] ... his touch." Perhaps most tragically, the speaker details how her husband's foolishness cost her the chance to have a child and become a mother.

These details add depth to the poem's critique of greed and selfishness. The poem isn't *just* about the perils of such qualities, however, but also about the *specific* consequences of failing to consider *women's* experiences, and the way that such experiences have historically been subsumed by powerful men's desires.

By centering Mrs. Midas's perspective and experience, the poem counters this erasure of women's experiences and implies that understanding these experiences is necessary and vital. And since the myth of King Midas is so well-known, the poem implicitly suggests that those very stories foundational to Western culture often leave out the perspectives and experiences of women.

Taken more broadly, then, the poem asks readers to think about what other myths, stories, and versions of history leave out or erase women's perspectives and women's experiences. The poem invites readers to consider what new insights they could gain if everyone's perspectives were accounted for and given equal importance.



THEMES



THE ERASURE OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

Duffy's poem revamps the famous myth of King Midas, with a major shift: the focus of the story is not the king *himself*, but rather his *wife*. The poem thus elevates a perspective that was left out of the original story, revealing how a greedy man's wish sent the life of the woman closest to him into turmoil. While the poem isn't necessarily about women's experiences at large, its very existence—and, indeed, *The World's Wife* as a whole, the collection in which this poem was

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-66

**MATERIALISM AND GREED**

“Mrs Midas” explores the consequences of selfishness and greed. It’s clear that Mr. Midas (the poem’s version of King Midas) thought only of himself in making his wish, which was based on a desire for endless wealth. Ironically, this wish ends up isolating himself from what the poem implies *actually* matters most—love, affection, and meaningful relationships with others and with one’s surroundings. The poem thus presents the desire for material wealth above all else as deeply foolish and destructive, serving only to distance the person who is greedy from all the things that make life meaningful.

After he makes his wish, Mr. Midas turns whatever he touches into gold, which might seem fun at first but actually just turns a lot of objects into useless trinkets. For example, he accidentally turns kernels from freshly cooked corn on the cob into golden nuggets that he must spit out—gold is pretty, the poem implies, but totally useless when it comes to dinner. His wife [metaphorically](#) calls these kernels “the teeth of the rich,” implicitly criticizing the frivolousness and excess of the wealthy.

The king also turns all his cigarettes to gold—which his wife jokes is a healthy consequence (since he’ll no longer be able to smoke), but also robs the king of yet another pleasurable experience. Great riches can’t actually nourish people in any meaningful way, the poem is implying; Mrs. Midas insists that gold “feeds no one” and “slakes / no thirst.”

Eventually, the king even has to move out of the house he shares with his wife and relocate to a “glade” (a remote place in the woods) to prevent him from accidentally turning anyone into a golden statue. Physically, then, his desire for riches literally separates him from the world. His greed also erodes his emotional relationship with his wife, and the poem suggests that they had loved each other and were “passionate” about each other but can no longer be.

The poem also implies that Mr. Midas’s greed leads him to lose his mind and eventually his life. The speaker describes how, on her last visit to see Mr. Midas, he is “thin” (because he can’t eat) and “delirious.” This description suggests that in effect Midas has lost his sanity and his humanity as a result of his own greed.

What’s more, the poem suggests that such greed ends up hurting everyone in its orbit as well. The speaker describes being afraid of her husband’s “kiss that would turn [her] lips to a work of art.” While a work of art is something that is culturally valued (not to mention expensive), in this case the image is frightening, since the speaker realizes that she would literally be turned into an object—something the poem insists is less

valuable than actual life and actual relationships.

Most disturbingly, the speaker realizes that were she to have a child with her husband, this child, too, would be made of gold. She imagines this child in a dream as having “perfect ore limbs” and “amber eyes / holding their pupils like flies”—a description that powerfully captures the poem’s [juxtaposition](#) between material wealth and the value of life. Indeed, the “perfection” of the child is part of what is terrifying, since it would be “perfect” as an object, and “precious” only in the sense of being materially valuable—a horrifying distortion of familial love.

Finally, the poem shows that material greed is antithetical to the beauty and vitality of the natural world. The poem highlights, throughout, what happens when Midas comes into contact with living things: the pear he touches near the beginning of the poem resembles a “lightbulb”; later, in an especially troubling image, a rabbit he has touched “hung from a larch,” or pine tree, like a “beautiful lemon mistake.” These images show that Midas’s greed harms his entire environment, as it saps life and vitality from everything with which he comes into contact. Materialism, the poem makes clear, is incompatible with life itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-66

**RELATIONSHIPS AND LONELINESS**

While the poem explores the very strange outcomes of King Midas’s wish, it also, in a sense, explores a conventional marital relationship—and what happens when one person in the relationship acts in a profoundly selfish way. The poem suggests that within a relationship, one person’s selfishness and failure to truly see the other will eventually lead *both* people to experience isolation and loneliness.

At the opening of the poem, the speaker’s description of this evening in “late September” suggests that it is a typical day in the life of this couple. The speaker is making dinner for both of them, a thoughtful gesture. She also notes that they grew pear trees together, citing a particular French variety of pear. These details suggest that they live a conventional domestic life and have shared interests.

The speaker also suggests that their relationship has been, in many ways, a happy one. She comments on their physical relationship, saying, “we were passionate then,” and describes their early relationship as “those halcyon days,” meaning that they were idyllically peaceful.

The turning point in the characters’ relationship is when Midas makes his wish, which is based on greed. Notably, this moment is highlighted by the speaker looking at her husband, while her husband does not look at her at all—staring instead as the product of his selfish wish. There is a clear contrast here; the

speaker obviously took her husband into account in preparing dinner for both of them, but her husband seems not to see her or even to think of her in this moment, looking only at the gold in his hand. This physical dynamic emphasizes that while the speaker takes her husband's needs into account, he doesn't offer the same courtesy to his wife.

It is striking, too, that the first thing the speaker's husband turns to gold is a twig from a tree that they grew together. Trees are traditionally [symbols](#) of life, and in this case the pear tree is a symbol of the couple's life *together*, since it was something that they grew and cultivated with each other. The husband begins to break this tree apart as he thinks only of himself.

The poem goes on to show the impact of Midas's selfishness on the couple's relationship. Soon after Midas makes his wish, the speaker realizes that he can't be anywhere near her because everything he touches turns to gold. This is, in effect, the end of their early passionate physical relationship, since the speaker realizes that she will become a gold statue if he touches her.

While in the poem this is a practical realization (the speaker realizes she would literally become an object), it also demonstrates the dwindling of passion and profound hurt that can result from one person's selfishness. The speaker also realizes that they won't have children together, and then that he has to move out. In other words, her husband's selfishness has robbed them both of the possibility of having a family together.

After Mr. Midas moves out, the speaker says that "at first, [she] visited at odd times," but she and her husband become increasingly estranged, as he becomes "delirious." Ultimately, the poem shows that Midas's selfishness ends his relationship with his wife, as she can no longer bear being close to him.

Finally, the poem makes clear that both characters experience isolation and loneliness as a result of Mr. Midas's actions. The last time Midas is seen within the poem, he seems to be completely within his own mind. He is isolated not just from his wife, but from reality as a whole.

Mrs. Midas also seems to feel a lasting sense of loss and loneliness. She describes, at the end of the poem, thinking of her husband and "miss[ing] most ... his touch." This suggests that even over the passage of time, she still experiences loneliness and longing. Each person, then, is ultimately lonely and isolated as a result of Midas's selfishness—though it is Mr. Midas, the poem suggests, who is the most profoundly isolated, as he is lost to the world and to himself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 21-30
- Lines 37-54

- Lines 61-66



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

*It was late ...
... snapping a twig.*

The poem's title lets the reader know that this poem is based on the Greek myth of King Midas, who was granted a wish that everything he touched would turn to gold. However, as the title makes clear, this poem will be about Mrs. Midas—the wife of King Midas, and a perspective not told in the original story. Also note that it's not *Queen* Midas—a clue that the poem won't take place in the ancient past, unlike the myth, and that it will be reimagined in a typical domestic setting.

The opening lines of the poem then establish that setting clearly. "It was late September," the speaker says, placing the poem in a time of year on the cusp of winter. Symbolically, this season suggests that the speaker and her husband, too, are at the end of their blissful early days and about to enter a period of loss.

The speaker's descriptions of her immediate surroundings and her [diction](#) (such as the contemporary phrase "unwind"), meanwhile, let the reader know that this poem is set in a modern context. "I'd just poured a glass of wine," the speaker says, "begun / to unwind, while the vegetables cooked." These lines suggest that the speaker and her husband live a conventional, domestic, middle-class life; it is an ordinary evening in late September, and Mrs. Midas is making dinner.

At the same time, several aspects of the opening lines introduce an element of strangeness into the poem:

- First, the speaker [personifies](#) the kitchen, saying that it "filled with the smell of itself" and, like her, "relaxed," while "its steamy breath / gently blanch[ed] the windows." This long sentence, which extends over three lines, enacts what the speaker describes, a moment of relief after a long day.
- These lines also introduce moment of humor, a [pun](#), since the steam is said to "blanch" (which means both to turn white and to lightly cook) the windows of the kitchen. The personification of the kitchen suggests that not everything is as it appears, or that something, within this world, is slightly off.
- The speaker then heightens this sense of strangeness as she continues to personify her surroundings: she says that because the windows were fogged over with steam, she opened one and "wiped the other's glass like a brow," as though the window were a person's forehead.

From the outset, then, the poem establishes a sense of normalcy or conventional life, and an element of strangeness, as the inanimate kitchen seems to be alive. These opening descriptions, which are rendered conversationally, almost casually, give way to a single sentence in the stanza's last line: "He was standing under the pear tree snapping a twig." Several aspects of this line are notable:

- First, it is the first line in the stanza that is also a complete sentence, and the first line without a [caesura](#), or pause, setting it apart from the preceding lines.
- Second, it is the first moment in the poem where the speaker mentions a "he." Although the reader might intuit that this is Mr. Midas, the speaker's husband, the speaker doesn't say this directly; this absence of a formal introduction establishes a kind of intimacy with the reader, as though the speaker is describing these events to herself.
- Third, the actions of this man in the garden are markedly different from the speaker's actions. Where she seems to be in harmony with her environment, he is "snapping a twig" off "the pear tree"—breaking apart a living thing.

Finally, taken in total, these lines convey a powerful sense of whom, within this relationship, is seen. To "see" another means, literally, to observe them; yet it also means to recognize and understand who they are, to value them. Within this opening moment of the poem, it is the speaker who looks out into the yard and sees her husband; he, however, does not look at her or see her at all. This dynamic will be important in the poem as a whole.

LINES 7-12

*Now the garden ...
... in the tree?*

The speaker begins to realize that something is strange. In lines 7-8 ("Now the garden ... the sky") she describes how it is difficult to see her husband from her vantage point, since "the garden was long and the visibility poor" and it was the time of evening when "the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky."

This [imagery](#) creates suspense in the poem, as the reader, along with the speaker, tries to figure out what's happening. At the same time, it introduces a powerful [juxtaposition](#) between darkness (the dark of the ground) and light (the last light in the evening sky). The speaker also subtly [personifies](#) the earth, as she says that it "seems to drink" that remaining light; this personification imbues the landscape with agency and vitality.

Despite the difficulty seeing, the speaker says, she can tell that the twig in her husband's hand "was gold." Then, she says, "he plucked / a pear from a branch," notes, "we grew Fondante

d'Automne," and says, describing the pear, that "it sat in his palm, like a lightbulb. On." Although this description of the husband picking a pear happens quickly in the poem, it conveys several things at once:

- First, the speaker lets the reader know that she and her husband grow pear trees together; fruit trees often [symbolize](#) life and regeneration, since they bear new fruit each spring. (They can also, of course, symbolize temptation, as in the Biblical fruit tree in the Garden of Eden.) Within the poem, the tree can be read as a kind of representation of the couple's living relationship, something that they grew with each other. At this moment in the poem, then, the reader realizes that the speaker's husband isn't just breaking a twig and pear off of any tree; he is in essence breaking apart the tree the couple grew together, and implicitly starting to break apart their relationship.
- Secondly, the [allusion](#) to Fondante d'Automne—a particular variety of French pear often cultivated in Britain—is relevant as well. The French name means "melting of autumn," a reference to the sweetness of the pear. Within the poem, though, this also alludes to the sense that the couple, too, are at a turning point in their relationship, about to enter a kind of emotional winter.
- Finally, the type of pear can be read as a class marker, since it suggests that the couple have enough money to cultivate a well-regarded variety of French tree. This implicitly lets the reader know that this couple doesn't really need more gold; the husband's wish is based on greed, not need.

The speaker's [simile](#), comparing the pear to a "lightbulb. On," is also important. Where the speaker had previously described the garden as a whole as alive and even personified (drinking the light from the sky), here the speaker watches as her husband turns a living thing into an object—and an object, no less, that also generates light, but artificially.

Here, then, the poem subtly [juxtaposes](#) two important elements in the poem, as it places side by side the beautiful, subtle, natural light of late evening and the harsh, artificial light of a light bulb. The poem emphasizes this juxtaposition by the shift in sentence length and syntax, as the long sentences that started the stanza shift to the single-word sentence, "On."

The end of the stanza shows the speaker continuing to try to figure out what is happening. "I thought to myself," she says, "Is he putting fairy lights on the tree?" This refers to the string lights that people often hang on their trees or in their gardens. Yet the word "fairy" here also has a dual meaning, as it suggests some kind of magic or otherworldly element at play.

LINES 13-18

*He came into ...
... started to laugh.*

As the speaker continues to describe what she observes her husband doing, the sentences become shorter, more truncated. “He came into the house,” the speaker says, “The doorknobs gleamed. / He drew the blinds. You know the mind:” The simplified syntax of these first three sentences (subject, verb, indirect object), the [anaphoric](#) repetition of “he,” and the rhyme of “blinds”/ “mind” convey the speaker’s internal experience, a kind of state of shock as she records, step by step, what she is seeing.

Interestingly, at this moment in the poem the speaker doesn’t directly say that each object turns to gold; instead, she describes the transformations indirectly. First, she notes that the doorknobs “gleamed.” Then, when she describes her husband closing the blinds or curtains, she says, “I thought of / the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready.”

The Field of the Cloth of Gold refers to the location of a 1520 meeting between the Kings of England and France; each king brought an enormous amount of gold and gold fabric to impress each other.

The name “Miss Macready,” meanwhile, could [allude](#) to Sharon Macready, a character in a 1960s British television series called *The Champions*. The character, played by Alexandra Bastedo, had notable blonde or golden hair. (Another interpretation of “Miss Macready” is that it is a private reference, as in the speaker recalling a teacher, Miss Macready, who taught her about the Field of the Cloth of Gold.)

Here, then, the speaker lets the reader know what is happening by telling the reader what associations came up for her. This is important because, along with the phrase “You know the mind” (which addresses the reader directly), these allusions bring the reader into the speaker’s train of thought, as though the reader is with the speaker in this moment of the story.

They also introduce an element of humor in the poem, as the speaker references a historical event and then, in one reading, a television character. At the same time, the speaker’s allusions subtly show the way in which cultural stories (whether from history or pop culture) influence the way people think and understand situations. Since the poem itself is based on a cultural story—the myth of King Midas—the speaker’s use of allusions implicitly shows the power that these narratives have over the way people think and view the world.

The speaker then references the poem’s framing story directly in line 16, as she says, “He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne.” Here, the speaker compares her husband to a king (and implicitly to King Midas). But it is also just as important that he is *not* a king, only “like” a king. This [simile](#), then, reminds the reader of the underlying story or myth, while it also shows the fundamental ridiculousness of Mr. Midas, who

is imitating a king but not truly one.

“The look on his face,” the speaker goes on, “was strange, wild, vain.” This description of Mr. Midas’s expression shows his arrogance and conceit, building on the image of him sitting in a chair as though it is a throne. At the same time, the [asyndeton](#) of the phrase “strange, wild, vain” conveys that something has been started that can’t be stopped, as each word follows from the next without conjunctions, and the list implicitly could go on forever.

The speaker, then, seems to attempt to disrupt this progression, as she asks, at the end of the stanza, “What in the name of God is going on?” This question shows the speaker trying to understand the situation, to make sense of it. However, her husband doesn’t answer her, he only “laugh[s].”

LINES 19-24

*I served up ...
... golden chalice, drank.*

In the fourth stanza, the speaker goes on to recount the unfolding of this evening and what happens when she serves dinner to them both. “I served up the meal,” she says, the simple syntax and brief sentence recalling the short sentences (“He came into the house. The doorknobs gleamed.”) at the start of stanza 3.

Then, the speaker describes what happens when her husband attempts to eat “corn on the cob”: “Within seconds,” she says, “he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.”

- “The teeth of the rich” is a [metaphor](#) for the corn kernels, which now, since Mr. Midas has come into contact with them, resemble gold teeth. This [image](#) is funny, but it also has a powerful meaning; the speaker’s husband, who can now turn everything into gold, is rich, yet the metaphor shows him losing his teeth, which suggests both aging and a loss of his physical strength.
- At the level of its [imagery](#), then, the poem connects Mr. Midas’s wish, and the greed underlying it, with a profound loss of life and vitality.

At the same time—just as in stanza 2, when the poem [juxtaposed](#) the natural light in the garden with the artificial light of a light bulb—this image subtly juxtaposes the natural yellow color of corn (which is edible and nourishing) with the yellowish tint of gold, which in this case makes Mr. Midas *unable* to eat.

Yet Mr. Midas, within this scene, seems oblivious to the harmful implications of his wish; the speaker says that he simply “toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives, the forks.” Here, the speaker describes her husband playing with the silverware as he turns it all to gold, picking up both his own and his wife’s spoons. Just as the previous image was both comical and meaningful, this image implies that Mr. Midas’s wish will

affect everything and everyone around him, but that he sees this all as a kind of game.

The speaker, by contrast, is notably fearful. She says that her hand was “shaking” as she poured him a glass of wine, described as “a fragrant, bone-dry white from Italy.” The description “bone-dry” is [ironic](#) and darkly comic; usually a wine being “dry” indicates it is of good quality, but here the comparison to bones makes the moment also terrifying.

The description of the wine, like that of the pear tree, can also be read as an indicator of class. This couple, the poem makes clear, are used to having expensive things, and Mrs. Midas isn't immune to wanting these things. Yet her husband now can longer even enjoy these things, since he turns them all to gold.

In the last line of the stanza, the speaker describes her husband drinking the wine. As in the previous description of Mr. Midas's expression as “strange, wild, vain,” this description uses [asyndeton](#); the words “glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank” omit connecting words between them. In doing so, the list enacts the inevitable transformation that the glass undergoes before Mrs. Midas's eyes.

This sense of inevitable change is also heightened by the [alliteration](#) of /g/ sounds and [consonance](#) of /l/ sounds in “glass,” “goblet,” and “golden,” which connect these words together and to the word “gold.”

Finally, this description shows the way in which Mr. Midas's wish takes him, in effect, out of his present life. A glass or wine glass is a thing of the present, but a goblet is usually associated with the past, as is a “golden chalice,” a kind of traditional cup used for the Eucharist. Here, though, the idea of Mr. Midas taking the Eucharist is ironic, given that the wine is turning, not into the blood of Christ as is believed in Catholicism, but into inanimate gold.

LINES 25-30

*It was then ...
... believe my ears:*

Stanza 5 marks a turning point in the poem, as the speaker starts to *react* to what is happening: “It was then that I started to scream,” the speaker says. Her husband, meanwhile, “sank to his knees” on the floor.

Notably, this is the only moment in the poem that shows Mr. Midas (in falling to his knees) negatively reacting to his wish and its outcome. However, the poem leaves ambiguous whether he is upset because of what is happening, or because he has just drunk wine that is turning to gold in his stomach.

Interestingly, too, the syntactical structure of this sentence (“He sank to his knees”) matches the structure of earlier sentences like “He came into the house” and “He drew the blinds”; the [anaphora](#) of “he” further links these sentences together. The simplified, repetitive syntax of these sentences suggests a kind of detachment on the part of Mr. Midas, as

though he too has become a kind of object devoid of feeling. At the same time, it conveys Mrs. Midas's shock, as she explains what has happened step by step.

Finally, the speaker says that both of them regained composure and that she drank the remainder of the wine while listening to him explain. She then lists a series of actions that she undertook to protect herself, their cat, and their possessions.

Notably, these “I” sentences recall the short, simple sentences that previously described Mr. Midas's actions. The syntax, then, aligns the two characters, yet it also calls attention to what is *different* in their behavior: while Mr. Midas is changing everything around him, Mrs. Midas is withdrawing and attempting to *protect* everything—except for the toilet, which, she says, she “didn't mind,” since a gold toilet would presumably work just as well as an ordinary one! This parallel syntactical structure also works to create a kind of [parataxis](#) between the sentences, a structure in which all things in a list are given equal weight, as though all of Mr. and Mrs. Midas's actions are on an equal plane.

The final sentence in this list: “I couldn't believe my ears:” also matches the preceding sentences in its structure. Interestingly, where the previous parallel structure of the sentences conveyed a kind of parataxis, that parataxis becomes [ironic](#) here, as the speaker not believing her ears is aligned, in its sentence structure, with the less important “I moved the phone.” In a way, the parataxis of the sentence structure enacts what the poem describes, as anything and everything, within the poem, is equalized, as it is changed into the same substance of gold. This last sentence in the stanza shows the potential harm of such equalization, since the speaker's reactions, and her husband's harm to their relationship, is obviously of more importance than the phone and the toilet.

Finally, it is notable that this stanza ends mid-sentence, with the colon that follows “ears.” Every other stanza in the poem is full-stopped, and while this stanza is [end-stopped](#) through its punctuation, it also creates a more urgent transition to stanza six, in which the full story and implications of Mr. Midas's wish become clear.

LINES 31-36

*how he'd had ...
... smoking for good.*

In the sixth stanza, the speaker turns to address the reader more directly as she reflects on the implications of what her husband has done. After explaining that her husband told her “he'd had a wish,” the speaker says: “Look, we all have wishes; granted.” The [colloquial](#) “look,” gives these lines a conversational feel, and, as the speaker goes on, it seems as though she is turning away from her husband to engage instead with the reader. “But who has wishes granted?” she asks [rhetorically](#), and answers herself, “Him.”

These lines make use of a [pun](#), as the speaker repeats “granted” with two different meanings:

- In the first instance she uses “granted” as a concession, in the sense of, “Okay, fine, we all make wishes.”
- Then, she uses “granted” in its sense of granting a wish, making it come true.
- This pun creates a kind of circularity in the language, as the speaker attempts to make sense of what has happened.

Then, when the speaker answers herself “Him,” the one-word sentence recalls the earlier one-word sentence in the poem, “On.” (used to describe the pear that looked like a lit lightbulb in his hand). This abrupt answer works comically in the poem, but it also [juxtaposes](#) with the long sentence that follows, as the speaker asks the reader to consider what gold is really like.

“Do you know about gold?” the speaker asks the reader. She then offers a list of descriptions: “It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes no thirst.” This list, like previous lists that described the husband's actions, makes use of [asyndeton](#), as it omits conjunctions between the items in the list. The first and last items (“feeds no one” and “slakes no thirst”) mirror each other, as the speaker points out that gold can't be eaten or drunk. In the middle, the speaker lists qualities of the metal itself; it has luster, is considered a soft metal, and can't be tarnished.

Notably, this sentence makes use of [parataxis](#). Its list-like structure suggests that everything in the list is of equal meaning and weight. In this way, it echoes the parallel structure of the previous short sentences in the poem, which similarly enacted the equalizing of everything the speaker recounted.

As before, the parataxis here serves to point out what's wrong with this equalizing approach, as the technical qualities of the metal (the fact, for instance, that it can't be tarnished) are clearly less important than the fact that if everything one touches turns to gold, one won't be able to eat or drink! The speaker's use of parataxis, then, is [ironic](#), as it enacts what is happening around her while also pointing out how ludicrous and harmful this equalization is.

After turning to address the reader in these lines, the speaker continues to describe her husband's actions, as he tries to “light a cigarette.” She says she watched as the “blue flame” of the lighter or match “played on its luteous stem.” The word “played” recalled the description of Mr. Midas “toy[ing]” with the silverware as he turned it all to gold, conveying the sense that he still sees this all as a kind of game. “Luteous” means yellow-colored, since the cigarette is now gold.

Meanwhile, the speaker's description of the cigarette as a kind of “stem” is ironic. Since a stem is usually associated with a flower or plant, the comparison of the cigarette to a living thing

is [paradoxical](#), and even more so now that it has become a gold object.

This comparison subtly shows the ways in which the world within the poem has been turned upside down, as living things are turned to objects, and objects are compared to living things. The stanza concludes with the speaker remarking drily to her husband that at least he'll finally be able to give up smoking, since it is impossible to smoke gold.

LINES 37-42

*Separate beds. in ...
... work of art.*

The poem's seventh stanza reveals the implications of Mr. Midas's wish for the couple's relationship. In doing so, it gives the reader a better understanding of what their relationship was like, prior to this—and what will now be lost.

“Separate beds,” the speaker says at the start of the stanza. This two-word sentence recalls the earlier one-word sentences of “On” and “Him”; it conveys the abruptness with which the speaker is coming to different realizations, including the realization that she and her husband will need to sleep separately.

“In fact,” the speaker goes on, “I put a chair against my door, near petrified.” Here, the speaker explains that she is so afraid of being turned to gold that she needs to lean a chair against the door to stop him coming in. The phrase “near petrified” conveys her terror, but is also a [pun](#), as “petrified” means to be extremely scared, but it also means to be turned to stone.

Mr. Midas, she goes on to say, “was below, turning the spare room / into the tomb of Tutankhamun.” Here, the speaker [alludes](#) to the Egyptian pharaoh King Tutankhamun, whose tomb was discovered in 1922 and was full of an extraordinary amount of gold. This allusion also has another layer that is important: the tomb of Tutankhamun was said to carry a curse that would affect anyone who broke into it. There is a sense, then, that Mr. Midas himself is cursed, since he has broken into another way of being, and one that is wrong. The [image](#) also conveys Mr. Midas, in a way, creating his own tomb, the ending of his own life, as he turns everything around him to gold.

The speaker then explains more about the couple's relationship, and what will be lost. “You see,” she says, “again addressing the reader, “we were passionate then, / in those halcyon days.” “Halcyon” means idyllically happy, so the speaker makes clear that prior to this happening, she and her husband were happy together and passionate about each other. She goes on to say that in this time they would “unwra[p] each other, rapidly, / like presents, fast food.”

This [simile](#), which conveys the couple's passion for each other and their physical relationship, is comical. At the same time, it is meaningful within the poem, since what the speaker compares both she and her husband to are not living things, but

objects—presents or fast food that can be “unwrapped.” This simile, then, suggests that there may already have been an element of objectification (in which a person is viewed not as a human being, but as an object) within the relationship.

Also, since both fast food and wrapped presents are things associated with contemporary culture, the speaker’s comparison implicitly critiques these aspects of materialism within culture—while also showing how materialism can pervade relationships: the speaker and her husband viewing each other as presents or fast food is only, after all, a few steps away from them both being objects made out of gold. At the same time, though, the comparison shows what is lost as a result of the husband’s wish, as the couple will lose this “halcyon” period of their relationship.

“But now,” the speaker concludes, “I feared his honeyed embrace, / the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.” The adjective “honeyed” has a double meaning. It suggests that the speaker experienced her husband’s embrace as sweet, but honey is also gold colored, communicating how now that embrace would turn the speaker to gold. And, as the speaker goes on to explain, if he kissed her, her lips would become gold sculpture, a “work of art” resembling the golden mask of Tutankhamun himself.

LINES 43-48

*And who, when ...
... the streaming sun.*

As the poem moves into its eighth stanza, the speaker shows how truly terrifying her husband’s wish is. Again, the speaker communicates the events of this evening and night with wit, but the humor belies the poem’s underlying tone as the speaker realizes what could happen if she stays with her husband.

First, she asks, “who, when it comes to the crunch, can live / with a heart of gold?” Again, the speaker uses a [pun](#) here, as “heart of gold” usually means that someone is good or pure in their intentions. In this case, though, the speaker shows that it is untenable to live with such a heart, if that heart is not a living thing but an inanimate object.

“That night,” she continues, “I dreamt I bore / his child,” and then offers a horrifying vision of this child. The dream child, she says, had “perfect ore,” or golden, “limbs,” and “its little tongue” was “like a precious latch,” or the fastener on a door. The supposed “perfection” of this object-child only heightens how terrifying the image is, as the child’s tongue, which would in a living child be used to speak, is now compared through a [simile](#) to what keeps a door shut.

The full implications of this image are revealed in what follows, as the speaker describes the child’s “amber eyes / holding their pupils like flies.” Amber, in its liquid state, is known to catch insects, which are then essentially mummified (like Tutankhamun) within it. Here, the speaker imagines that this

golden child’s eyes are like this type of amber, and the eyes’ pupils are compared, through a [simile](#), to dead flies.

The outcome of Mr. Midas’s wish, this dream [image](#) reveals, is not just ridiculous and harmful to the phone, the silverware, and his own food. The outcome of his wish is an image of death, in which a child is turned into an object even before it is born, and the “precious[ness]” of its body only emphasizes its inanimate state.

“My dream milk,” the speaker goes on, “burned in my breasts” since it too was turned to gold. Then she says, “I woke to the streaming sun,” the image of “streaming” sunlight recalling the burning flow of breastmilk, both, within this context, the color of gold. Everything, the speaker reveals at this moment, has acquired the same horrifying quality, as the sunlight of waking day recalls the reality of her nightmare.

LINES 49-54

*So he had ...
... off, then walking.*

Because of all of this, the speaker says at the start of stanza 9, “he had to move out.” She explains that they had a kind of mobile home or camper in the woods, in “a glade of its own,” a clearing in the trees, and she drove him there at night so no one could see, while “He sat in the back.”

The syntax of “He sat in the back” echoes the earlier simple structure and [anaphora](#) of sentences that described Mr. Midas’s actions, such as “He came into the house” and “He drew the blinds.” Here, though, something has changed, as the speaker is not just watching her husband’s behavior but taking action, driving him away from the house and making him sit away from her.

“And then I came home,” the speaker says, “the woman who married the fool / who wished for gold.” It is notable that after the longer and more detailed descriptions that came before, this description of the speaker driving her husband away from the house, and then coming back home, happens quickly, in only a few lines. This shift in the pacing of description, and the speaker’s description of her husband as “the fool / who wished for gold,” suggests that the speaker has undergone an internal shift, a separation or cutting off from her husband and his behavior. She is no longer, the poem implies, expending so much energy or emotion on him.

At the same time, the [assonance](#) of /o/ sounds in “own,” “home” and, with slight variation, “gold” shows the ways in which the speaker’s reality is still determined by her husband’s actions. The “glade of its own,” where he is now, is still connected through its sounds to the speaker going “home” and to her husband’s wish. This assonance shows the persistence of some kind of connection in the relationship, and the ongoing impact of Mr. Midas’s wish on the speaker.

The speaker acknowledges this ongoing connection and impact

when she says that “[a]t first,” during this new period of time, she “visited, odd times / parking the car a good way off, then walking.” Yet even here, the speaker seems reluctant, detached, visiting him as though out of obligation. The preceding dream, the poem suggests, was a turning point for the speaker, as she chooses her own life and vitality and begins to disconnect from her husband and where his wish will take him.

LINES 55-60

*You knew you ...
... the last straw.*

In the penultimate stanza of the poem, the speaker describes the ending of her relationship with Mr. Midas, and how far gone he is from himself and the world. Addressing the reader, she says that when she would visit him and walk toward where he was, “You knew you were getting close.” This was because, as she explains, there were golden fish in the grass, and once, a rabbit hanging from a pine tree like “a beautiful lemon mistake.”

These [images](#) show that as Mrs. Midas gets closer to where her husband is, everything is turned to gold, including trout from the river. The image of the “hare” or rabbit, though, is particularly disturbing, suggesting an underlying violence within everything that has occurred. When the speaker describes the rabbit as a “beautiful lemon mistake,” she [juxtaposes](#) the physical beauty of this golden rabbit with the horrifying reality of it hanging from the “larch,” or coniferous tree. This juxtaposition heightens a contrast that has built in the poem up to this point, between the beauty of the living, natural world and the supposed beauty of expensive material objects made out of gold. In this case, the “beauty” of the rabbit only emphasizes the troubling quality of the image, which is also an image of death.

Even her husband’s “footprints,” the speaker says, were gold, “glistening next to the river’s path.” Again, this description is beautiful, but it is also troubling, showing that he is turning even the earth into an object wherever he comes into contact with it. Finally, the speaker describes her husband himself and what he has become. He “was thin, / delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan / from the woods.” Here, the speaker shows how her husband has lost his sanity as a result of his wish, and will inevitably lose his life, since he can neither eat nor drink.

Notably, too, at this point the character of Mr. Midas—who is based on the King Midas of Greek mythology—imagines that he is within the world of a Greek myth, since he thinks that he can hear the “music of Pan,” a Greek god known for living in the forest and playing a flute.

That world of myth, the speaker finally suggests through this description, is not the real world, though it can wreak havoc on reality, just as her husband making a mythological wish has destroyed the reality of their relationship. Mr. Midas, though, still seems oblivious to the harm he has caused. Completely within his own world, his own imaginary reality, he tells his wife

to “listen” for the music too. And “that,” the speaker says, “was the last straw.”

The one-word sentence “Listen” echoes the other one-word sentences in the poem (“On” and “Him”) both of which describe her husband and his actions. Implicitly, these one-word sentences over the course of the poem suggest that Mr. Midas has not only left behind his humanity and sanity in making his wish; he has also lost some aspect of human language, of communication. It is his wife, after all, who has the capacity to narrate this story for readers.

Finally, the speaker’s [colloquial](#) remark “That was the last straw,” emphasizes how far she is now from her husband, as she still inhabits a daily, grounded, ordinary reality—and addresses a reader who does, too.

LINES 61-65

*What gets me ...
... stopped me dead.*

In lines 61-65 of the closing stanza (“What gets me ... stopped me dead”), the speaker reflects on what still bothers her about her husband’s wish, and where she is now. “What gets me now,” she says of her husband’s wish, “is not the idiocy or greed / but lack of thought of me. Pure selfishness.”

Here, the speaker reveals what has been implicit in the poem all along: not only did her husband not look toward her when he made his wish (as she watched him through the kitchen window); he didn’t think of her at all. In effect, this means he had erased her from his thoughts, just as Mrs. Midas’s perspective was erased from and left out of the original myth. This act of erasure, the poem shows, is in a way at the root of Mr. Midas’s wish and all the harm that follows, since if he had thought of the impact on his wife he might not have made the wish in the first place.

The speaker then notes that she “sold / the contents of the house and came down here.” The “here” isn’t specified, but implicitly the speaker has moved somewhere else altogether where she now lives her own life by herself. There is an element of [irony](#) in these lines, as presumably when the speaker sold “the contents of the house” that included the objects her husband had turned into gold; all of his gold, then, ended up with her, and she ultimately used it to forge her own life.

Still, though, the speaker acknowledges a lasting sense of loss, sadness, and loneliness she experiences as a result of this whole experience. “I think of him in certain lights,” she says, “dawn, afternoon, / and once a bowl of apples stopped me dead.” These lines show that the speaker still in some ways misses her husband, yet they also reveal an undercurrent of something else.

If the speaker thinks of her husband only in “certain lights” that means that, the rest of the time, she is free from thinking about him. And the [colloquial](#) “stopped me dead,” which means that

seeing this bowl of apples arrested the speaker emotionally because they somehow reminded her of her husband, also has another meaning, since, as a [pun](#), it also implies a state of being “petrified” or “stopped dead” by being turned into an object, or gold. In other words, these lines reveal that the speaker feels a lasting sense of loss, but that she also carries the lasting effects of the harm and fear her husband’s greed and objectification have caused her.

LINES 65-66

*I miss most, ...
... skin, his touch.*

Finally, in the last two lines of the poem, the speaker says, “I miss most, / even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch.” These closing lines are [ironic](#), given that it was Mr. Midas’s touch—transformed by his wish—that made him most harmful and dangerous. Yet what the speaker notes is that she misses his “warm,” living touch, his human touch. It was this humanity, this warmth, that her husband lost when he made his wish, the speaker suggests.

It is notable that here, when the speaker describes her husband’s touch, she makes use of [asyndeton](#). The list “his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch” omits connecting words. This syntactical structure recalls earlier instances of asyndeton in the poem, which previously were always used to describe her husband’s actions and its consequences. For example, the list “glass, goblet, golden chalice” described her husband at dinner, and the speaker’s horrifying vision of having his child included the list “its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue / like a precious latch, its amber eyes.”

Previously, these instances of asyndeton served to emphasize the inevitable progression of Mr. Midas’s actions and their consequences, the sense of a nightmare unfolding step by step. Here, though, the speaker’s use of asyndeton emphasizes a kind of longing; the feeling here is both gentle and resigned, as the speaker seems to accept the ongoing nature of her reality and the consequences for her.

It is worth commenting, lastly, on the tone of these closing lines and of the poem as a whole. Outside the context of the framing myth, the poem could be read as a kind of analog for any contemporary woman watching her husband or partner be consumed by materialism and greed until he finally becomes unrecognizable to her. The speaker’s tone, which is by turns witty, dark, sad, and bemused, conveys her lasting humanity and the ways in which her experience is relatable to women dealing with similar situations. In the end, then, the poem suggests, it is not the speaker who is truly alone in her experience, but her husband, and all others who value wealth over the relationships that give life meaning.



SYMBOLS



GOLD

The most important [symbol](#) in “Mrs. Midas” is gold. Gold symbolizes wealth—the highest degree of wealth. Within the poem’s contemporary context, the gold also symbolizes material objects within a capitalist consumer society. Mr. Midas’s greed for gold can be read as symbolizing materialism and consumerism.

In a way, Mr. Midas turning objects and living things into gold also represents the process of commodification, by which any natural element becomes, within a capitalist system, viewed as a commodity: something that can be *bought* or *sold* to bring the owner wealth.

The poem also plays with other meanings of gold. For instance, when the speaker notes that it is impossible to live with a heart of gold, she makes a [pun](#) on the idea that having a “heart of gold” means to have a heart that is pure and good. This idea of gold representing purity and the sacred (as in the golden chalice) becomes [ironic](#) in the poem, when the objects and living things that are turned into gold lose their true meaning, value, and vitality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** “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?”
- **Line 13:** “The doorknobs gleamed.”
- **Lines 14-16:** “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.”
- **Line 20:** “Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.”
- **Line 24:** “golden chalice”
- **Lines 32-34:** “Do you know about gold? / It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes / no thirst.”
- **Lines 34-35:** “I gazed, entranced, / as the blue flame played on its luteous stem.”
- **Line 39:** “the tomb of Tutankhamun.”
- **Lines 41-42:** “his honeyed embrace, / the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.”
- **Line 44:** “heart of gold”
- **Lines 45-48:** “his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue / like a precious latch, its amber eyes / holding their pupils like flies. My dream milk / burned in my breasts.”
- **Lines 55-58:** “Golden trout / on the grass. One day, a hare hung from a larch, / a beautiful lemon mistake. And then his footprints, / glistening next to the river’s path.”



THE PEAR TREE

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker watches her husband take “a pear from a branch” of a tree the couple had grown together. Trees are often [symbolic](#) of life and growth, and within the poem the pear tree symbolizes the couple’s life that they have grown and cultivated together. When Mr. Midas breaks the twig and pear off of this tree, this thus symbolizes his beginning to break apart their relationship.

At the same time, the pear tree, as a fruit tree, is a powerful symbol within a Christian context. The pear tree [alludes](#) to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, from which Eve picks the forbidden fruit. According to the Biblical story, this disobedience to God and picking of the fruit precipitates the fall from grace, as Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise.

The fruit thus also can be thought of as symbolizing temptation or desire. In the poem, notably, it is not the woman who takes the fruit from the tree, but her husband, Mr. Midas. This shift asks readers to consider the original story and the gender stereotypes implicit in it, in which Eve is viewed as responsible for the original sin of humanity. Yet the poem also reflects the Biblical story in certain ways, since Mr. Midas’s picking of this pear and arrogance and greed, set into motion everything that follows, including the loss of his happy life and his expulsion from this “paradise.”

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** “He was standing under the pear tree snapping a twig.”
- **Lines 9-10:** “And then he plucked / a pear from a branch.”



THE LIGHT BULB

When Mr. Midas first picks the pear from the tree, the speaker sees it “s[it] in his palm, like a lightbulb. On.” Often, light bulbs turning on (for instance, in a cartoon) [symbolize](#) sudden insight or awareness, as when a character gets an idea. In the poem, then, the lit-up light bulb represents Mr. Midas’s sudden granting of his wish, a sort of gained ability or capacity as he realizes he can change everything to gold.

Yet the poem also transforms this conventional symbol. At the moment in the poem when the pear resembles the light bulb, the speaker has also just described the natural light of evening, “the way / the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky.” This image of the glow of light at dusk, and the earth as dynamically “drink[ing]” the light, contrasts with the static, artificial light the pear light bulb generates. Mr. Midas’s “insight,” then, is revealed to be a kind of false illumination.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** “it sat in his palm, like a lightbulb. On.”



THE CORN/GOLD TEETH

When Mr. Midas comes into the house and begins to eat dinner, the speaker says that after she serves him corn on the cob, “[w]ithin seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.” Here, the teeth are a [metaphor](#) for the corn, as the corn kernels come to resemble gold teeth once Mr. Midas comes into contact with them.

The gold teeth are also, however, [symbolic](#). While they symbolize wealth (by suggesting the ability to get gold fillings), the symbol is rendered in such a way that Mr. Midas appears to be *losing* wealth in losing the teeth. The wealth they represent is excessive to the point of being harmful. Also, teeth often symbolize physical strength, health, and vitality. In this image, the loss of teeth symbolizes the loss of Mr. Midas’s natural strength, and the inevitable end of his life, as he is no longer able to eat or drink.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** “Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.”



THE GOLDEN CHALICE

In the poem, the speaker describes her husband asking for a glass of wine, and how she watches as “he picked / up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.” This list, as the ordinary wine glass transforms into something that looks like a goblet, then a chalice, enacts the inevitable change that all objects will now undergo when Mr. Midas touches them.

The golden chalice is also a [symbol](#). A chalice usually refers to a cup used for the Eucharist, to serve wine during Catholic communion. Within Christian tradition, this chalice (often gold in Catholic mass) symbolizes the original chalice, also called the Holy Grail, that Christ drank from at the Last Supper.

Within the poem, then, the golden chalice is [ironic](#), since the wine Mr. Midas drinks turns not into sacred blood (as in Catholic thought) but into gold, a reflection of his greed and selfishness. The chalice also suggests that Mr. Midas is at his own Last Supper (as in fact he is). This only heightens the irony of the image, since Midas, far from sacrificing his own life as an act of selflessness, is driven only by his own self-interest and attachment to the material world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** “then watched / as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.”



THE CHILD

In a particularly terrifying moment of the poem, in which the full implications of Mr. Midas's wish are revealed, the speaker has a nightmare in which she has a child with her husband, but the child is made out of gold. The speaker's description of this dream-child is truly horrifying, as the child's tongue is compared to the "latch" of a door, and its eyes are compared to amber in which the pupils, like flies, have been trapped and died.

At a more literal level, this stillborn child [symbolizes](#) death, and the incompatibility of excessive greed and selfishness with the continuation of life. This dream represents the moment at which Mrs. Midas cannot continue to live with her husband, since she sees that he will only bring her death.

As a child made out of gold, though, the child in this dream also symbolizes the Christian image of the "golden child," the Christ child, whose birth was believed to redeem humanity. Here, though, the child being turned into gold is monstrous and distorting. This nightmare image, then, symbolizes a kind of reversal of Christ's birth, the opposite of redemption, and as the poem continues to play with and rework traditional Christian narratives, it suggests that, in this story, there is no redemption possible.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 44-47:** "I dreamt I bore / his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue / like a precious latch, its amber eyes / holding their pupils like flies."



THE GLADE

When the speaker decides that Mr. Midas "had to move out," she drives him to a "glade" in "the wilds," where they have a "caravan," or camper. In essence, what the speaker means is that the couple has a campsite somewhere in the woods, where Mr. Midas will now go to live.

This idea of the glade, though, is also [symbolic](#). A glade is a clearing in the woods; the word comes from the Middle English "glad," which also meant "shining." Clearly, there is nothing glad or happy about the situation in the poem (though Mr. Midas, within his own world, seems oblivious to how much harm he has caused), but the sense of this place as "shining" makes sense, given that Mr. Midas will turn it into shining gold.

Most importantly, this movement in the poem represents a kind of banishment or exile, building on the symbolism of the pear tree and Mr. Midas's picking of the fruit. As a result of his wish and his actions, Mr. Midas is banished from his life to a place outside it, just as Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden.

[Paradoxically](#), in going to a remote natural place, it almost seems as though Mr. Midas goes to the Garden of Eden in going

to this "glade." But when he gets there, he eventually loses his mind, suggesting that his version of paradise (which includes his wish coming true) is untenable.

Finally, it is notable that, unlike the Biblical account, Mrs. Midas is not banished with her husband. She can come back to the house and choose what to do. Ultimately, though, she too leaves their house moves somewhere else by the poem's ending, suggesting that she experiences a kind of indirect exile as a result of her husband's actions. After all, she too has lost their previous life together.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 49-50:** "So he had to move out. We'd a caravan / in the wilds, in a glade of its own."



THE BOWL OF APPLES

At the very end of the poem, the speaker recounts continuing to miss her husband at certain times of day and certain moments. "Once," she says, "a bowl of apples stopped me dead." The phrase "stopped me dead" is a kind of dark [pun](#), playing on the idea of her husband stopping *everything* dead by turning it to gold, and taking its life away.

The bowl of apples is also [symbolic](#). The fruit refers back to the pear tree, that symbol of biblical forbidden fruit, and her husband's picking of the pear and turning it to gold. In this case, the apples symbolize the ongoing cost of her husband's choice, and a state of ongoing loss or exile.

Yet it is notable that in this moment, in this image, the apples also seem completely ordinary, just a bowl of apples on this woman's table. The speaker is by herself, not banished with her husband, and the poem implicitly suggests that she might pause for a moment by the apples, but then keep going. Unlike the Biblical story, then, the woman in this case is neither responsible for the fall from grace, and nor does she bear the brunt of its consequences. She is affected by it, but not entrapped within its mythology.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 65:** "once a bowl of apples stopped me dead."



POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

There are several important [allusions](#) in the poem. Most significantly, the title—and by extension the poem as a whole—alludes to the mythological King Midas, a figure in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. King Midas was granted a wish that everything he touched would turn to gold. In the original story,

he regretted this wish when he realized that he could neither eat nor drink, and Dionysus released him from the wish by having him bathe in a river.

The poem, however, changes the way in which this story is told. The primary focus of the poem is not the king—or, in this case, Mr. Midas—but his wife. The allusion, then, serves to point out how women’s perspectives were left out of the original myth. It provides a familiar framework that the poem reimagines within a contemporary context and from Mrs. Midas’s point of view.

Within the poem, the speaker also makes a number of allusions. Soon after her husband has made his wish, when she watches him close the curtains, she says:

You know the mind; I thought of
the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready.

This first allusion, the Field of the Cloth of Gold, refers to 1520 meeting between King Henry VIII of England and King Francis I of France; both kings brought a huge amount of gold fabric to the summit to impress each other. The “Field of the Cloth of Gold” is also the name of a painting depicting this meeting. That the speaker refers to a story about Henry VIII is particularly important. Henry VIII is known for being excessive, violent, and self-interested; this particular allusion then, subtly aligns Mr. Midas with these qualities.

The allusion to “Miss Macready” contrasts with the first allusion in that it is less directly clear. The name could allude to the character Sharon Macready, a figure in a British television series, *The Champions*, that aired in the 1960s; the character had notable gold-colored hair. However, since the speaker refers to *Miss Macready*, this could be a private reference; perhaps the speaker is alluding to a schoolteacher, Miss Macready, who taught her about the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Either way, the speaker illustrates that this is how “the mind” works—by connecting present experience to past experience, and to stories and history that one has been taught.

Later, the speaker says that her husband is “turning the spare room / into the tomb of Tutankhamun.” Here, the speaker alludes to King Tutankhamun, or King Tut, a pharaoh of ancient Egypt whose tomb, which contained a huge amount of gold, was discovered in 1922. The reference works comically here, but it is also symbolically important, since the speaker implies that her husband is creating his own tomb, burying himself in gold that will ultimately be worthless to him.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker says that when she visited her husband in the remote place where he has gone to live, he is “thin / delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan / from the woods.” Pan was a Greek god, identified with forests and wild areas, who was depicted as playing a flute. This allusion is humorous, since it shows that Mr. Midas, based on the mythological King, now imagines that he actually *inhabits*

this mythological world, since he believes he can hear another figure from myths. It also, though, highlights how far Mr. Midas has departed from his own reality.

Importantly, all of these allusions show both the speaker and her husband thinking about their situation through the vocabulary of cultural stories, myths, and narratives, ranging from history, to pop culture, to mythology. In this way, the poem implies that myths and stories play a powerful role in shaping the way the speaker and her husband—and by extension, readers as well—see and understand the world.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** “Field of the Cloth of Gold,” “Miss Macready”
- **Line 39:** “tomb of Tutankhamun”
- **Line 59:** “music of Pan”

IMAGERY

The poem uses [imagery](#) that is both recognizable and surreal, conveying a familiar world made strange. For example, in the opening stanza, the image of the speaker pouring a glass of wine and cooking vegetables for dinner seems totally ordinary. Yet this image becomes subtly transformed when the speaker [personifies](#) the kitchen, saying that it, like her, “relaxed, its steamy breath / gently blanching the windows.” This image conveys the steam from the vegetables fogging up the windows, turning them white, yet it also suggests that the speaker experiences the kitchen, and this domestic space, as dynamic and alive.

Meanwhile, the imagery that surrounds Mr. Midas shows the opposite, as, after his wish, he turns all things that are living into gold objects. For instance, the pear that he picks looks like “a lightbulb. On.” He “turn[s] the spare room / into the tomb of Tutankhamun.” And when he goes to live in a remote place in the woods, he turns even the animals there (the trout from the river and a rabbit) into gold.

The imagery, then, works to [juxtapose](#) the two characters, as Mrs. Midas, the speaker, seems in harmony with her surroundings and her environment, while Mr. Midas has a destructive effect on everything around him. When he turns objects to gold, he makes them incongruous, odd, as in the artificial lightbulb or the frightening “mistake” of the rabbit, turned to gold and hanging from a tree.

The most disturbing sequence of imagery in the poem is in the speaker’s narration of her dream of having a child with her husband. This child, made of gold, is the inverse of a real child; it is inanimate, unable to utter sounds or words, “precious” in the sense only of its material value, and its eyes, unseeing, resemble “amber ... holding their pupils like flies.” This image, then, shows how incompatible Mr. Midas’s greed and materialism are with everything that is truly precious in life.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** “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.”
- **Lines 9-11:** “And then he plucked / a pear from a branch. – we grew Fondante d’Automne – / and it sat in his palm, like a lightbulb. On.”
- **Lines 19-20:** “For starters, corn on the cob. / Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.”
- **Lines 34-35:** “I gazed, entranced, / as the blue flame played on its luteous stem.”
- **Lines 38-39:** “He was below, turning the spare room / into the tomb of Tutankhamun.”
- **Lines 44-47:** “That night, I dreamt I bore / his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue / like a precious latch, its amber eyes / holding their pupils like flies.”
- **Lines 55-58:** “Golden trout / on the grass. One day, a hare hung from a larch, / a beautiful lemon mistake. And then his footprints, / glistening next to the river’s path.”

REPETITION

The poem uses elements of [repetition](#) throughout to create different effects. For example, the speaker repeats the words “pear” and “twig” in stanzas 1 and 2. This repetition highlights the first instance that she sees her husband turn something into gold, as both the twig and pear transform in his hand. It also emphasizes how something familiar turns strange before her eyes, since the “pear” and “twig,” when they reappear in the second stanza, are inextricably changed.

Perhaps the most notable instances of repetition in the poem are the repetition of “he” and “him” (describing Mr. Midas) and the repetition of the word “gold” and its variant “golden.” The repetition of both of these words connect Mr. Midas with the impact that he has, as he turns everything around him to gold. Notably, the speaker also uses other descriptors to indicate things have been turned to gold (she describes the doorknobs, for instance, as “gleaming,” and describes the transformed curtains by way of an allusion to the Field of the Cloth of Gold). The repetition of “he,” however, feels almost relentless. The word appears within phrases, but it also appears [anaphorically](#), as in, “He came into the house,” “He drew the blinds,” and “He sat in that chair.”

This relentless repetition of “he,” highlighted by the anaphora, suggests that Mr. Midas’s actions and presence are, in a sense, relentless, as he alters everything around him. The word also, as the beginning of many sentences describing Midas’s actions, suggests Mr. Midas’s self-absorption and narcissism, indicating that he sees everything as radiating out from him, reflecting him, as gold would literally reflect through its luster and sheen. Finally, though, the word shows the speaker’s ultimate detachment from Mr. Midas, since she describes him, not as her

husband, but simply as “he,” a destructive male presence.

The poem revisits and transforms its use of repetition in the closing line, when the speaker says that she still misses “his hands, his warm hands on my skin.” Here, the repetition of “hands”—specifically [diacope](#)—shows what has been lost through the relentless materialism of Mr. Midas’s wish: his living presence, affection, and capacity for connection.

Another striking moment of repetition is specifically an example of [antanaclasis](#) and creates a [pun](#): the word “granted” repeats with two different meanings. The speaker first says, “we all have wishes; granted,” meaning something like, “okay, I concede we all have wishes.” Then, she asks “But who has wishes granted?”—meaning, “Who has wishes come true?” This repetition, because the word repeats with a different meaning, works in a way like rhyme, since it creates sound echoes and even a feeling of circularity within the poem.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** “He,” “pear,” “twig”
- **Line 9:** “twig,” “gold”
- **Line 10:** “pear”
- **Line 13:** “He”
- **Line 14:** “He”
- **Line 15:** “Gold”
- **Line 16:** “He”
- **Line 18:** “He”
- **Line 21:** “He”
- **Line 22:** “He”
- **Line 24:** “he,” “golden”
- **Line 25:** “He”
- **Lines 31-32:** “Look, we all have wishes; granted. / But who has wishes granted?”
- **Line 32:** “gold”
- **Line 34:** “He”
- **Line 38:** “He”
- **Line 44:** “gold”
- **Line 49:** “he”
- **Line 53:** “gold”
- **Line 55:** “Golden”
- **Line 58:** “He”
- **Line 66:** “hands,” “hands”

SIMILE

[Similes](#) appear throughout the poem, most notably to highlight the poem’s [juxtaposition](#) between inanimate material objects and living things.

In the opening stanza, the speaker describes wiping the steam off of a window “like a brow,” [personifying](#) the window by comparing it to a person’s forehead. This simile introduces an element of strangeness in the poem, as the window is implicitly compared to a human face. Yet it also shows Mrs. Midas relating to the world around her in ways that are caring and

attentive, as though everything around her is alive. Mr. Midas, on the other hand, does the opposite. When he picks a pear, it looks “light a lightbulb,” conveying a sense of artificiality and hollowness.

Later, when the speaker dreams about having her husband’s child, the baby is terrifyingly imagined as having a tongue “like a precious latch,” and eyes that resemble amber, in which the pupils are “like flies.” The first simile in this description conveys closure, since a latch is a fastener on a door, while the second simile depicts death and entrapment—flies trapped within liquid amber that hardens over time. All of these similes indicate that Mr. Midas’s wish and its consequence lead to artificiality, death, and enclosure.

The two other similes in the poem are also worth noting. First, in stanza 3, the speaker says that Mr. Midas sat in a chair “like a king in a burnished throne.” This simile works comically, since it alludes to the original myth (in which Midas was actually a king). It also, though, highlights the essential arrogance and foolishness of Mr. Midas, since he sits in the chair as *though* he is a king, but isn’t truly one.

Finally, when the speaker reflects on her relationship with her husband and how they were passionate about each other, she says, of their physical relationship, that they would “unwra[p] each other, rapidly, / like presents, fast food.” This image of the couple undressing each other, and the simile the speaker uses to describe it, is somewhat funny. Yet within the context of the poem, it is also troubling and telling.

Here, the speaker shows that to some degree the couple already *did* view each other as objects (presents or fast food). She suggests that there was an element of materialism and objectification in their relationship to begin with, even before her husband took it to such extremes. This simile implicitly critiques the materialism of modern culture and how it can pervade relationships, suggesting that within such a context, Midas’s wish is not that far-fetched to imagine.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** “So I opened one, / then with my fingers wiped the other’s glass like a brow.”
- **Line 11:** “it sat in his palm, like a lightbulb. On.”
- **Line 16:** “He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne.”
- **Lines 40-41:** “unwrapping each other, rapidly, / like presents, fast food.”
- **Lines 45-47:** “its little tongue / like a precious latch, its amber eyes / holding their pupils like flies.”

METAPHOR

The poem includes several [metaphors](#) that highlight the difference between how the speaker and her husband view, relate to, and affect the world around them.

First, at the start of the poem, the speaker says that the kitchen where she is making dinner “relaxed, its steamy breath / gently blanching the windows.” Here, the speaker [personifies](#) the kitchen, comparing it metaphorically to a person who, like her, has the capacity to breathe and become calm. This metaphor indicates that the speaker views her environment as dynamic, with its own agency and life.

Conversely, the other metaphors in the poem show Mr. Midas turning everything he touches into objects. For example, when he tries to eat corn on the cob, the speaker says, “within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.” The “teeth of the rich” are a metaphor for the corn kernels, which, once Mr. Midas has come into contact with them, resemble gold teeth. This metaphor highlights how useless gold ultimately is, since Mr. Midas can’t eat it. It also implicitly connects greed and acquisition with the loss of physical health and vitality, since the image subtly conveys a sense of Mr. Midas spitting out his own teeth.

Two other metaphors in the seventh stanza work similarly, when the speaker says that Mr. Midas is “turning the spare room / into the tomb of Tutankhamun,” and fears his “kiss that would turn [her] lips to a work of art.” In the first metaphor, the speaker means that her husband is turning everything in the spare bedroom into gold, since the tomb of Tutankhamun, an ancient Egyptian pharaoh, is known for having been filled with gold objects. The metaphor, however, also shows the true implications of Mr. Midas’s wish. The opposite of having a room where friends or loved ones could stay, Mr. Midas’s selfishness and greed, this metaphor indicates, will lead him to be shut off from the rest of the world and will inevitably lead to his death.

Similarly, the speaker fears that if her husband kisses her, she will turn into a gold statue, her lips resembling the lips on a gold sculpture. This metaphor shows that even a “work of art,” with all of its value, means nothing compared to the true value of life and relationships. It also implicitly suggests that if the speaker stays with Mr. Midas, she too will be entombed, since the image of the gold lips recalls the gold mask of King Tutankhamun, which was essentially a gold sculpture of his face.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** “The kitchen / filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath / gently blanching the windows.”
- **Line 20:** “Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.”
- **Lines 38-39:** “He was below, turning the spare room / into the tomb of Tutankhamun.”
- **Line 42:** “the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.”

PUN

“Mrs Midas” is notably witty. Although the story the speaker recounts is dark, even tragic, considering the loss that she has undergone, there is also an element of dry humor throughout. One way this humor is conveyed is in the use of [puns](#).

For example, in the opening stanza, the speaker describes the steam from the cooking vegetables as “gently blanching the windows.” To blanch is to turn white (as steam would fog up a window). But blanching is also a way of cooking, in which vegetables are quickly steamed. This pun introduces humor and playfulness into the poem. At the same time, though, it immediately lets the reader know that multiple meanings are afoot, and that a familiar word can change upon closer inspection.

As the poem progresses, the speaker continues to use puns, and in these later instances they serve to emphasize even more this tension between familiarity and strangeness. For instance, in stanza six, the speaker says, “Look, we all have wishes; granted.” Then she asks, “But who has wishes granted?” This question is [rhetorical](#), since no one has all their wishes granted. Here, too, the speaker puns on the multiple meanings of the word “granted”; the word can mean a concession, as in, “Okay, fine, we all have wishes.” But it can also mean that the wish comes true. The pun (which is based on a type of repetition known as [antanaclasis](#)) highlights the gap between the speaker’s sense of reality and boundaries and her husband’s arrogance. It also subtly conveys a level of transformation, as a familiar word becomes, before the reader’s eyes, defamiliarized.

This sense of the familiar becoming unfamiliar continues in the next two stanzas. When the speaker says that she and her husband have to sleep separately, she explains that she is “near petrified.” This means that she is very afraid. Yet the word “petrified” can also mean that something is turned to stone. The speaker, here, recognizes that she is “*near* petrified,” or very near to being turned into a gold object.

In the next stanza, the speaker asks another rhetorical question, when she demands, “And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live with a heart of gold?” The phrase “heart of gold” means that someone has a pure heart or good intentions. Here, though, the speaker makes this familiar phrase unfamiliar, as she imagines what it would be like to literally have a gold heart.

Finally, at the poem’s end, the speaker says that “once a bowl of apples stopped [her] dead.” What she means here, presumably, is that something familiar (a bowl of fruit) suddenly made her stop and think of her husband. Also, though, the speaker puns on the idea of being “stopped dead,” in the sense of losing her life by becoming a gold statue.

By using familiar words and phrases in unusual ways and calling attention to the multiple meanings of a single word or phrase, the poem includes moments of wit. Also, though, and perhaps

more importantly, it enacts at the level of language the experience of transformation and change that the speaker describes, and how, in the face of such stunning selfishness and greed, everything familiar becomes strange.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** “its steamy breath / gently blanching the windows.”
- **Lines 31-32:** “we all have wishes; granted. / But who has wishes granted?”
- **Lines 37-38:** “I put a chair against my door, / near petrified.”
- **Lines 43-44:** “And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live / with a heart of gold?”
- **Line 65:** “once a bowl of apples stopped me dead.”

IRONY

One way in which the poem transforms and reimagines the traditional myth of King Midas is that this version makes use of [irony](#). Rather than simply telling the myth in a straightforward way, the speaker shows what is [paradoxical](#), self-destructive, and finally ironic about Midas’s wish and its implications.

Throughout the poem, the speaker makes clear that Mr. Midas is essentially oblivious to his actions and the harm he is causing. Even while his wife is upset and distraught, for example, he has an expression on his face that is “strange, wild, vain,” suggesting that he is caught up in his own arrogance and greed. The reader, however, along with Mrs. Midas, can see how Mr. Midas truly is and what the consequences of his actions are. Because the reader has greater awareness than Midas, this is a form of [dramatic irony](#).

The most far reaching irony in the poem is the fact that Midas’s wish for material wealth ends up robbing him of the things that make life valuable and desirable. His greed leads to his emotional and spiritual poverty. His supposedly good fortune of having his wish fulfilled results in his downfall.

Other types of irony occur in this retelling of the myth. For instance, in the original myth, King Midas is finally released from his wish by Dionysus; he is allowed to get free of the wish by bathing in a river. In this poem, Mr. Midas, too, ends up by a river—but there is no suggestion that he will become free of his wish or its implications. Instead, he seems vaguely ridiculous, thinking that he hears the “music of Pan,” and unaware that he is simply losing his mind.

Finally, it is ironic that despite the harm Mr. Midas causes his wife through his greed, she ultimately ends up with the house, and the money. At the end of the poem the speaker says that she “sold / the contents of the house and came down here,” presumably to the place where she lives now. This means that ultimately, though Mr. Midas thought he was benefiting himself, he only destroyed himself, and his greed (indirectly, and in

certain ways) benefitted his wife.

These elements of irony in the poem give the reader greater depth and insight into the nature of greed and its depictions in the original myth. In this real world, the poem suggests, there are consequences for one's actions; one isn't simply released from such harmful choices. Also, the poem makes it clear that Mr. Midas is, above all else, essentially foolish, since his wife and the reader of the poem are far more aware.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "The look on his face was strange, wild, vain."
- **Line 20:** "Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich."
- **Lines 32-53:** "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. / Separate beds. in fact, I put a chair against my door, / near petrified. He was below, turning the spare room / into the tomb of Tutankhamun. You see, we were passionate then, / in those halcyon days; unwrapping each other, rapidly, / like presents, fast food. But now I feared his honeyed embrace, / the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art. / And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live / with a heart of gold? That night, I dreamt I bore / his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue / like a precious latch, its amber eyes / holding their pupils like flies. My dream milk / burned in my breasts. I woke to the streaming sun. / So he had to move out. We'd a caravan / in the wilds, in a glade of its own. I drove him up / under the cover of dark. He sat in the back. / And then I came home, the woman who married the fool / who wished for gold."
- **Lines 57-60:** "And then his footprints, / glistening next to the river's path. He was thin, / delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan / from the woods."
- **Lines 62-63:** "I sold / the contents of the house and came down here."

PARATAXIS

One especially notable aspect of the poem is its syntax. The poem makes use of both long and very short sentences, often in close proximity to each other. This creates emphasis, paces the poem, and makes the poem sound like a spoken utterance with natural variation.

Within the sentences, the poem makes particular use of [parataxis](#). The speaker's sentences are often quite short and blunt, and their order could be swapped around without a tangible shift in meaning. This gives the whole tale a straightforward, matter-of-fact quality. The speaker doesn't spend time getting overly elaborate in her descriptions, not does she allow herself much sentiment. Instead, she presents

the reader with the facts of the story. Take lines 13-14:

He came into the house. The doorknobs gleamed.
He drew the blinds. ...

The pace here feels steady, repetitive, as though the speaker is trying to keep everything in control—perhaps because she doesn't want to spiral into the emotional consequences of her husband's actions, or perhaps enough time has passed that she has grown detached from the horror she once witnessed. A similar tone arises thanks to the use of parataxis in lines 28-30:

I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone.
The toilet I didn't mind. ...

The simple, straightforward tone turns the final item in the list—the toilet—into a punchline. The first two items evoke some building panic, as the speaker certainly wouldn't want her means of communication or pet to be turned to gold; the sudden mention of the toilet being something she's okay with then strikes the reader as a funny twist at the end of this section of build up.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "He came into the house. The doorknobs gleamed. / He drew the blinds."
- **Lines 29-30:** "I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone. / The toilet I didn't mind."

ASYNDETON

In addition to [parataxis](#), the poem also makes use of the related device of [asyndeton](#) to create its straightforward, matter-of-fact tone.

For example, in line 21, the speaker lists off the things her husband is transforming into gold:

He toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives, the forks.

The lack of conjunction between "the knives, the forks" creates a sense of building momentum and inevitability to the transformations that are happening. When the speaker watches her husband drink wine in line 24, she turns to asyndeton again. She describes the transformation the wine glass undergoes: "glass, goblet, golden chalice." Here, the omission of connecting words again highlights the inevitable change of the glass from one thing into another, until it eventually resembles a "chalice" used in communion—[ironic](#), given that Mr. Midas's wine turns, not into sacred blood, but into undrinkable, material gold. Asyndeton works in the poem, then, to highlight the change that everything will undergo when Mr. Midas comes into contact with it.

In the poem's closing, asyndeton appears again in a slightly different way, when the speaker says:

... I miss most,
even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his
touch.

Here, the omission of connecting words again suggests a kind of development. But in this case, rather than tracking the change of the wine glass into gold, and the development of the wish's harmful consequences, asyndeton highlights the lingering loss and sadness the speaker feels, as what she truly misses is her husband's humanity and what that meant to her.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "strange, wild, vain"
- **Line 21:** "the knives, the forks"
- **Line 24:** "glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank"
- **Lines 33-34:** "aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes / no thirst"
- **Lines 41-42:** "But now I feared his honeyed embrace, / the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art."
- **Lines 44-47:** "I dreamt I bore / his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue / like a precious latch, its amber eyes / holding their pupils like flies."
- **Lines 53-54:** "I visited, odd times, / parking the car a good way off"
- **Lines 58-59:** "He was thin, / delirious; hearing"
- **Line 66:** "his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is written in [free verse](#), with a very conversational tone throughout. Sentences and phrases often don't come to an end with the end of a line, with their meaning instead spilling regularly across the lines breaks and coming to rest in the middle of the following line. This creates a great deal of [enjambment](#) in the poem that, in certain moments, lends it a feeling of forward momentum.

In the first stanza, for example, lines 1-3 are enjambed. This creates a sensation of smoothness, with the speaker's preparation of dinner feeling natural and calm. It is only when she opens the window to see her husband that [end-stop](#) enters the poem, creating a jarring interruption in the previous flow that foreshadows what is to come:

... 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.

Throughout the poem, the speaker uses this unpredictable

mixture of enjambment, end-stopped lines, and [caesura](#) to manage pacing—pushing the poem forward and then stopping it in its tracks. This variation also simply keeps the poem from feeling too strict or constructed, because most of the stanzas include a combination of end-stopped lines and instances of enjambment. For example, in the second stanza, the first and third lines are enjambed while the rest of the lines are end-stopped. This balance creates a sense of variation in the pacing, and also makes the poem sound like a natural spoken utterance.

At the same time, the fact that the poem starts out with this degree of balance between end-stopped and enjambed lines calls attention to stanzas that are almost *entirely* end-stopped or almost entirely-enjambed. Notably, stanzas 3 ("He came into the house ... He started to laugh.") and 4 ("I served up the meal ... drank."), which are driven by the speaker's observations of her husband's actions as he turns everything around him to gold, contain a predominance of end-stopped lines; only one line in each of these stanzas is enjambed. This emphasis on end-stops heightens the sense of Mr. Midas stopping everything around him as he turns it into gold.

It is also notable, then, when the eighth stanza ("And who ... streaming sun.") is almost entirely enjambed—except for its closing line. This stanza, importantly, is a turning point in the poem, as the speaker describes her nightmare of having her husband's child, and the baby being made out of gold. This nightmarish vision cascades over the stanza, with the single sentence that describes the dream extending over four lines. In this instance, the enjambment highlights the terror of the speaker's realization of the true implications of her husband's greed.

Finally, all of the stanzas except one are also end-stopped, concluding with the end of a sentence. This creates a feeling of measured pacing in the poem, conveying the sense that the speaker is recounting this experience now that she is on the other side of it and relatively detached from it. This pacing is important to the poem, suggesting that despite the harm and loss she has experienced, the speaker has also lived through this, and can now tell the story.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "begun / to"
- **Lines 2-3:** "kitchen / filled"
- **Lines 3-4:** "breath / gently"
- **Lines 7-8:** "way / the"
- **Lines 9-10:** "plucked / a"
- **Lines 14-15:** "of / the"
- **Lines 23-24:** "watched / as"
- **Lines 26-27:** "wine / on"
- **Lines 27-28:** "sit / on"
- **Lines 33-34:** "slakes / no"
- **Lines 38-39:** "room / into"

- **Lines 43-44:** "live / with"
- **Lines 44-45:** "bore / his"
- **Lines 45-46:** "tongue / like"
- **Lines 46-47:** "eyes / holding"
- **Lines 47-48:** "milk / burned"
- **Lines 49-50:** "caravan / in"
- **Lines 50-51:** "up / under"
- **Lines 52-53:** "fool / who"
- **Lines 55-56:** "trout / on"
- **Lines 59-60:** "Pan / from"
- **Lines 61-62:** "greed / but"
- **Lines 62-63:** "sold / the"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) occurs throughout, creating music in the poem while also creating levels of meaning and connections between words. For example, in the opening stanza, the long /i/ of "wine" is echoed in "unwind," connecting the speaker's experience of relaxing after a long day to her environment and the wine she is drinking. This connection suggests, at the level of its sounds, that the speaker is integrated with her environment, her inner world connected to her outer one.

The first stanza has other moments of assonance as well, particularly in its first three lines—which are also all [enjambéd](#). As a result, the poem opens with a musical, gentle feel that suggests the speaker's domestic tranquillity before her husband makes his wish. Note the short /ih/ and /eh/ sounds as well in these lines, as well as the soft [consonance](#) of /f/, /l/, and /s/ sounds:

... The kitchen
filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy
breath
gently blanching the windows. ...

Assonance combines with consonance in a few moments throughout the poem to make internal rhymes, or slant rhymes, as well. Take the shared sounds of "blinds" and "mind" in line 14, creating a moment of intense musicality as the speaker transitions into her internal thoughts. Later, the shared long /ee/ sound of "scream" and "knees" connects the speaker's horror to her husband's actions.

To that end, assonance often works throughout the poem to link words together and create meaning. For instance, in stanza 7, the long /oo/ sound of "room" repeats in "tomb," indicating that the room where Mr. Midas is, is already, in a certain sense, a tomb, or will soon become one, since it reflects his destructive actions. Then, when the speaker describes the couple's physical relationship, she remarks that they would "unwra[p] each other rapidly." The short /a/ sounds (as well as the consonant /r/ and /p/) sounds connect these words together, giving emphasis to

what the speaker describes.

In line 42, the short /ih/ sound of "kiss" bounces off that of "lips," creating a disconcerting moment of musicality as the speaker describes being turned into a golden statue. The sound of this moment itself is pleasing, is "a work of art."

The following stanza also involves a great deal of assonance, as well as consonance and, once again, flowing enjambment. The effect is that the speaker's nightmare feels all the more vivid and immediate to the reader, through rhyming phrases like "bore"/"ore" and "eyes ... like flies"—each of which lend a sing-song, nursery rhyme feel that is out of step with the horror being described.

There are many other moments of assonance in the poem; we've highlighted some especially evocative ones in this entry.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wine"
- **Line 2:** "unwind," "kitchen"
- **Line 3:** "filled," "with," "smell," "itself," "breath"
- **Line 4:** "gently," "blanching," "windows"
- **Line 14:** "blinds," "mind"
- **Line 25:** "scream," "knees"
- **Line 38:** "room"
- **Line 39:** "tomb," "Tutankhamun"
- **Line 40:** "unwrapping," "rapidly,"
- **Line 42:** "kiss," "lips"
- **Line 44:** "bore"
- **Line 45:** "ore," "limbs," "its," "little"
- **Line 46:** "eyes"
- **Line 47:** "like," "flies"

CONSONANCE

Like [assonance](#), [consonance](#) works in the poem to create patterning and music, to connect words and their meanings with each other, and to contrast words and their meanings.

In the first stanza, for example, thick consonance and assonance work together to bring the poem's imagery to vivid life for the reader, evoking the speaker's calm, sumptuous surroundings before her husband's wish unravels their lives. Note the many /w/, /k/, /s/, /f/, /l/, /t/, /n/, and /b/ sounds throughout, which also weave in and out of assonance to create a rich soundscape:

... 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.

The final line of the stanza brings in clearly consonant /p/, /r/, and /d/ sounds as well, the plosive and guttural consonants imbuing the stanza with a sudden harshness that subtly suggests the way that the speaker's husband disturbs her domestic peace:

He was standing under the pear tree snapping a twig.

Later, when the speaker has a nightmare about having a golden child with her husband, the stanza is filled with sharp /k/ and /t/ sounds, plus popping /p/ and /b/ sounds. These lend the stanza an air of harshness that is appropriate considering the speaker is talking about a nightmare. The /l/, /s/, and /m/ sounds, though less harsh, plus the strong assonance on short /ih/ and long /i/ sounds create another stanza that is rich with sound, to the point of being almost overwhelming:

... it comes to the crunch, can live
with a heart of gold? That night, I dreamt I bore
his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue
like a precious latch, its amber eyes
holding their pupils like flies. My dream milk
burned in my breasts. I woke to the streaming sun.

Again, we've highlighted some particularly striking of consonance in this guide. The poem is brimming with shared consonant sounds throughout, however, which overall add to its intense musical and the richness and beauty of its language.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wine"
- **Line 2:** "unwind," "while," "cooked," "kitchen"
- **Line 3:** "filled," "smell," "itself," "relaxed"
- **Lines 3-4:** "its steamy breath / gently blanching"
- **Line 4:** "windows," "So," "one"
- **Line 5:** "with," "fingers wiped," "brow"
- **Line 6:** "was standing," "pear," "tree," "snapping," "twig"
- **Line 43:** "comes," "crunch," "can"
- **Line 44:** "dreamt," "bore"
- **Line 45:** "child," "perfect," "ore," "limbs," "its," "little," "tongue"
- **Line 46:** "like," "precious," "latch," "its," "amber"
- **Line 47:** "holding," "pupils," "like," "flies," "My," "dream," "milk"
- **Line 48:** "burned," "my," "breasts," "woke to," "streaming," "sun"

ALLITERATION

The poem uses [alliteration](#) to add to the poem's general musicality and to give certain moments particular emphasis. Overall, the poem is very musical and poetic sounding, despite not having a set [rhyme scheme](#) or meter. This is because of the

rich patterning of sound created through [consonance](#), [assonance](#), and alliteration. The final of these is a particularly striking device, one that makes certain lines all the more memorable.

One particularly notable instance of this occurs when the speaker watches her husband attempt to drink a glass of wine. She says that she "watched / as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank." Here, hard /g/ sounds repeat in "glass," "goblet," and "golden," and connect what happens to the wine glass to other descriptors of gold in the poem (such as "gleamed" and "glistening"). At the level of its sounds, the list registers what will inevitably happen to the glass once Mr. Midas touches it; it is in some sense, the poem suggests, the same (since it has retained the letter /g/ at the beginning of the word), but also inextricably changed.

Similarly, describing the dream she has had of having a child made of gold, the speaker says, "My dream milk / burned in my breasts. I woke to the streaming sun." The alliterative /b/ sounds in "burned" and "breasts," and /s/ sounds in "streaming" and "sun" make each of these images integrated and also connect them to each other. Implicitly, the golden breast milk the speaker imagines having, that would burn her, is reflected in the image of streaming, golden sunlight when she wakes up. This is the moment, the speaker makes clear, that makes her realize her husband has to move out. It is the moment, the alliteration suggests, when she realizes that her nightmare is actually her waking reality.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "smell," "steamy," "breath"
- **Line 4:** "blanching"
- **Line 9:** "plucked"
- **Line 10:** "pear"
- **Line 11:** "palm," "like," "lightbulb"
- **Line 15:** "Miss Macready"
- **Line 19:** "corn," "cob"
- **Line 22:** "where," "wine"
- **Line 24:** "glass, goblet, golden"
- **Line 25:** "started," "scream," "sank"
- **Line 28:** "his hands," "himself"
- **Line 39:** "tomb," "Tutankhamun"
- **Line 41:** "fast food," "feared"
- **Line 45:** "limbs," "little"
- **Line 46:** "like," "latch"
- **Line 48:** "burned," "breasts," "streaming," "sun"
- **Line 52:** "woman"
- **Line 53:** "wished"
- **Line 55:** "getting," "Golden"
- **Line 56:** "grass," "hare hung," "larch"
- **Line 57:** "lemon"
- **Line 58:** "glistening"
- **Line 64:** "lights," "late"

- **Line 65:** “miss most”
- **Line 66:** “his hands,” “his,” “hands,” “his”



VOCABULARY

Midas () - “Midas” refers to King Midas of Greek and Roman mythology; stories about King Midas were included in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. According to the original legend, King Midas was granted a wish that everything he touched would turn to gold. He regretted this wish when he nearly starved to death, and the god Dionysus released him from the wish. In the poem, “Midas” is the last name of the speaker, Mrs. Midas, who is implicitly the wife of the legendary king. However, the speaker of the poem is an ordinary woman in the present, and her husband doesn’t seem to actually be a king; neither is he released from the consequences of his greed and selfishness.

Fondante d’Automne (Line 10) - A type of French pear tree that has been cultivated in Britain since the Victorian era. The name means, in translation, “Melting of Autumn,” referring to the sweetness of the pear and the fact that it ripens in September or October. Within the poem, the name indicates that the couple is relatively well-off, since they can grow this type of pear tree. At the same time, the name of the pear is also *symbolic*, suggesting that the couple is coming to the end of the “summer,” or happy time of their relationship, and about to enter an emotional state of winter.

Field of the Cloth of Gold (Line 15) - The name given to a place where King Henry VIII of England and King Francis I of France held a summit, or meeting, in the summer of 1520. The location of the meeting was later referred to as the “Field of the Cloth of Gold” because each king’s party brought an enormous amount of gold fabric (in the form of tents, flags, and other items) to impress each other. Within the poem, the speaker says that when her husband closes the blinds, or curtains, this reminds her of the “Field of the Cloth of Gold,” since the fabric of the blinds has turned to gold.

Miss Macready (Line 15) - There are two possible interpretations of the name “Miss Macready.” The name can be read as an *allusion* to Sharon Macready, in character in the British television series *The Champions* that aired in the 1960s. Sharon Macready had prominent blonde (gold-colored) hair. However, since the speaker refers to “Miss Macready,” the name can also be interpreted as a kind of private reference; it could be that the speaker is referring to a “Miss Macready” who she knew personally, such as a schoolteacher who taught her about the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

Vain (Line 17) - To be vain means to be conceited, to have an overly high opinion of oneself. The word can also mean that something is useless or futile. In a way, both meanings are relevant in the poem. After making his wish, Mr. Midas has a

look on his face that is “strange, wild, vain”; he clearly thinks he has exceeded normal human capabilities in having his wish come true and is oblivious to the foolishness and destructiveness of his actions. At the same time, Mr. Midas’s wish is ultimately in vain: he thinks that he is becoming wealthy and powerful, but by the end of the poem he has lost everything.

Chalice (Line 24) - A type of goblet, traditionally used to drink wine. It is also the name for the type of cup used during Catholic or Christian communion, to hold the Eucharist. In the poem, the fact that Mr. Midas’s wine glass turns into a chalice is ironic. The word indicates that his glass has turned to gold, but his actions, and their outcome, are far from sacred.

Aurum (Line 33) - The Latin word for gold, and also the name for the chemical compound that is gold. It also refers to the luster or shine that gold has.

Untarnishable (Line 33) - If something is untarnishable, that means it can’t be tarnished or lose luster or color over time. Gold is famous for being untarnishable. The word is often connected to gold’s value, but in the poem, it is also somewhat *ironic*, since the fact that gold is untarnishable seems irrelevant in the face of all of the harm that Midas’s wish causes.

Slakes (Line 33) - To “slake” means to alleviate or quench, especially in connection with thirst. The word is somewhat archaic, not commonly used in contemporary speech. Its use in the poem calls attention to the contrast between the poem’s modern context and the archaic origins of the myth.

Luteous (Line 35) - Yellow-colored, and specifically yellow with a tinge of green or brown. The word comes from the Latin *lutum*, the name for a plant that was used for dying things yellow. In the poem, the speaker says that her husband’s cigarette, since it has been turned to gold, has a “luteous stem”; the description suggests that the cigarette is gold (but perhaps with the brown tint of nicotine) while also comparing the cigarette-object to a living plant.

Tomb of Tutankhamun (Line 39) - The Tomb of Tutankhamun, also known as the Tomb of King Tut, is the tomb of an ancient Egyptian pharaoh that was discovered in 1922 and is known for having been filled with a remarkable amount of gold objects; the King himself was encased in a gold coffin and sarcophagus. Legends also said that there were curses around the tomb that would affect anyone who broke into it. All of these associations are important in the poem, as the speaker’s husband turns everything in the “spare room” into gold, but also implicitly creates his own tomb and his own curse.

Halcyon (Line 40) - Perfect and idyllically happy. *Ironically*, the word also means “golden,” in the sense of “golden days,” or “perfect days.” The word is usually used to describe a time that is passed.

Ore (Line 45) - Any naturally occurring mineral (including gold, copper, silver, iron, etc.) that is mined and used in some way.

Latch (Line 46) - A fastener or clasp, as on a door or the closure of a box. It is used to hold something closed.

Caravan (Line 49) - A British term for a camper or mobile home.

Glade (Line 50) - A clearing in the woods. The word dates back to the Middle English “glad” which also meant “shining,” and referred specifically to a clearing that was filled with sunlight. The word might also be connected to the Old English word that eventually became “yellow” in contemporary English. In the poem, then, Mr. Midas goes to live in a remote place in the woods, but also one that is overlaid with meanings connected to gold and the color gold.

Larch (Line 56) - A type of tree, like a pine tree. Unlike most pine trees, however, which are coniferous and retain their needles all year round, larches turn yellow (a color close to gold) and lose their needles in the fall. The word could be interpreted [symbolically](#) in the poem, as Mr. Midas, at the moment the larch is referenced, is “thin” and “delirious,” on the verge of losing his life.

The Music of Pan (Line 59) - This refers to the Greek God Pan, who was thought to inhabit the woods and to play a type of flute. In the poem, the word comically connects the present-day Mr. Midas with the world of Greek mythology, where his character originated. Yet it does so to show how far-removed Mr. Midas now is from his own reality and his own present.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of 11 sestets (six-line stanzas), all except one of which concludes with the end of a sentence. (The exception to this is the fifth stanza, which ends with a colon, as the speaker says, “I couldn’t believe my ears:” and then goes on, in stanza 6, to explain what her husband has told her.)

The regular form of the poem creates a sense of the story unfolding in a measured way, as though the speaker is walking the reader (and perhaps herself) through what has happened, step by step. This sense of regularity contrasts with the story itself, which is at once surreal, ridiculous, and disturbing. The form, then, highlights what is unmanageable and *irregular* within the story. At the same time, the regularity of the form suggests that the speaker is now, to some degree, free or detached from everything that has occurred, since she is able to recount it in this way.

Notably, the poem is also a persona poem and a dramatic monologue. The title establishes the speaker as the wife of the mythological King Midas. However, the poem diverges from some aspects of a traditional persona poem, since “Mrs Midas” is recast in a contemporary context, and the speaker seems to be married not to an actual king but to an ordinary, if

remarkably selfish, man. Also, “Mrs Midas” wasn’t actually a character in the original myth, since the original story left out any women’s perspectives.

This use of persona and reimagining of the myth points out to readers that women’s experiences were left out of the original story, and of many myths foundational to Western culture. At the same time, the contemporary feel of the poem makes Mrs. Midas’s experience relatable to many readers, so that the myth within the poem can be read as a kind of metaphor for many women’s experiences of being erased by their husband’s or partner’s greed and selfishness.

METER

As a [free verse](#) poem, “Mrs Midas” has no set meter. While this is the norm in contemporary poetry, the absence of meter is also significant; throughout, with its [colloquial](#) speech and direct address to the reader, the poem has the feel of a casual conversation, as though Mrs. Midas is talking naturally and simply recounting what has occurred.

In lieu of meter, the poem uses other strategies to manage music, pacing, and meaning. For example, throughout the poem the speaker shifts back and forth between longer and shorter sentences. These shifts give increased emphasis (what could be thought of as a kind of metrical “stress”) to the one-word sentences that occur, but also to the longer sentences as they accrue over the course of lines. Essentially, at the level of its syntax, the poem makes use of pattern and variation, which are also fundamental elements of meter.

The poem also creates another kind of musical emphasis through its varied [diction](#). For instance, consider the following moment in the sixth stanza:

But who has wishes granted? Him. Do you know
about gold?
It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes
no thirst. ...

Here, the speaker shifts from a direct, colloquial address to the reader, to a one-word sentence (“Him.”), to another direct address. The monosyllabic words in “Do you know about gold?” then give way to a list of more complex and Latinate words: “aurum, soft, untarnishable.”

These swerves in diction, which register both at the level of sound and meaning, work much as meter might work in a traditional poem—to create patterns and then divergences from those patterns at key moments. In doing so, the speaker brings together a contemporary, witty account of her experience with words that are evocative, even strange to the ear, and the poem connects the everyday and mundane with the magical.

RHYME SCHEME

“Mrs Midas” has no set [rhyme scheme](#). However, it still is a very musical poem. It makes use of [assonance](#), [consonance](#), [alliteration](#), [internal rhyme](#) and [slant rhyme](#) throughout, creating sound echoes, music, and meaning.

For example, in the first stanza, “wine” in line 1 (“It was late...begun”) finds a slant rhyme in “unwind” in the line that follows. Similarly, in stanza 2, the word “long” in the phrase “Now the garden was long” is echoed in the sound of “Fondante d’Automne” (the name of the type of pear tree that the couple have grown).

As the poem progresses, each stanza makes use of at least one internal rhyme, slant rhyme, or instance of assonance that approaches slant rhyme. In stanza 3, “blinds” almost exactly rhymes with “mind”; similar sounds repeat in stanzas 4 and 5, with “mine”/ “wine” and then “wine”/ “mind.”

Stanzas 7 and 8 include more internal rhymes, with “room”/ “tomb” and “eyes”/ “flies.” In these instances, the sound echoes work powerfully to connect the words together, as the “spare room” where Mr. Midas is quickly turns into something resembling a “tomb” (foreshadowing the end of Mr. Midas’s life), and in the speaker’s nightmarish vision of her unborn child, the child’s eyes resemble amber in which flies are trapped, connecting the life of the unborn child, if the speaker stays with her husband, to an image of death and decay.

The last three stanzas of the poem make use of instances of assonance that approach slant rhyme. In stanza eight, the /o/ sound in “own” is echoed (with slight variation) in “home” and “gold.” In stanza nine, the short /a/ sound of “grass” and “path” is reflected in “Pan” (suggesting that Mr. Midas is on a path out of reality, since he claims he hears the music of the Greek god Pan). Finally, in the last stanza, the /o/ sound of “sold” is reflected by “bow” and then, inexactly, in the word “most” in the poem’s penultimate line.

Since the poem as a whole has a conversational, colloquial quality, these internal rhymes, slant rhymes, and instances of assonance create a level of patterning and music without making things feel overly strict or constructed. At the same time, they create subtle layers of meaning. For instance, the speaker describes her husband closing the “blinds,” or shutting out the natural light (implicitly shutting out both nature and natural illumination or insight). Then, this /i/ sound repeats in “mind,” “mine,” and “wine,” as the speaker reflects on the way that her mind works, and calls attention to the idea of possession and ownership (through thinking about what is truly “mine,” and noting the expensive wine that the couple have purchased). These sound echoes, then, reflect and complicate the implicit themes of the poem.

Finally, the poem’s sound echoes, slant rhymes, and internal rhymes ask the reader to consider how even the most ordinary words—and implicitly, the most ordinary things—can be,

through repetition and variation, radically transformed in meaning.



SPEAKER

The speaker of “Mrs Midas” is, as the title indicates, Mrs. Midas, the wife of King Midas, the character in Greek mythology who was granted a wish to have everything he touched turn to gold. In the poem, though, Mrs. Midas seems not to be married to a king, but to a more ordinary middle-class man; Mrs. Midas, the poem makes clear, is an ordinary woman who lives in a contemporary world.

Although the poem doesn’t specify the speaker’s age, Mrs. Midas’s dream about having a child suggests that she was a younger woman when her husband had his wish granted. And while the poem doesn’t state the couple’s nationality, some clues (such as the speaker thinking of Miss Macready, which may be an [allusion](#) to a character from a British television series, as well as the Field of the Cloth of Gold, a historical event connected to King Henry VIII) indicate that they are British.

There are also some important clues about how Mrs. Midas, at least at the beginning of the poem, relates to material objects. She seems to enjoy fine wine (her description of the Italian wine suggests she gave it some consideration), she cultivates French pear trees, and she says she “didn’t mind” the toilet getting turned to gold. All of these details suggest that Mrs. Midas doesn’t object to expensive things, and actually enjoys them. She is not immune, the poem implies, to the kind of materialism that goes so awry in Mr. Midas’s wish, yet Mrs. Midas also seems more measured in her approach.

Throughout the poem, Mrs. Midas narrates what has happened with a kind of wry humor and wit, and at times a sort of detached bemusement. Yet this stance belies the deeper undercurrents of feeling in the poem, such as the horror Mrs. Midas experiences in imagining having a child made out of gold, and the quiet sense of loss and sadness that pervades the poem as the speaker observes her husband becoming more and more unrecognizable to her through his selfishness. This range of feeling makes Mrs. Midas relatable as a human being, to many ordinary readers and women who might see themselves and their own experiences in hers.



SETTING

Both time and place are important to the setting of “Mrs Midas.” First, it is important to note that the poem is set in a contemporary context. Details like Mr. and Mrs. Midas having a phone and toilet make it clear that this story does not take place in ancient Greece, as the original myth did, but in a world recognizable to readers in the present. This invites readers to

imagine this story unfolding in their own lives, and to consider how the myth and its implications are relevant today. The poem also takes place at a time after all this drama has passed; Mrs. Midas is telling the story having already gone through it all, which perhaps explains her rather detached tone.

Apart from the time frame, there are three locations in “Mrs Midas”: the house and garden where Mr. and Mrs. Midas live at the beginning of the poem; the “glade” in the woods that Mr. Midas eventually inhabits; and the new, unidentified setting that Mrs. Midas has moved to by the end of the poem.

At the start of the poem, several clues suggest that Mr. and Mrs. Midas live in a conventional, middle to upper-class house. Mrs. Midas describes making dinner in the kitchen (the dinner includes some expensive Italian wine) and looking out the window to see what her husband is doing in the garden, where he is standing under a pear tree they have planted.

It is notable that in the first few stanzas of the poem, Mrs. Midas is inside, while her husband is outside. If their house represents a kind of conventional life, at the start of the poem Mr. Midas is already moving away from this, and when he comes inside, he wreaks havoc on everything he touches. As the poem progresses, Mr. Midas has to move to a place even further removed from society; he goes to live in a “caravan,” or camper, in the woods.

It would be wrong, though, to think that this placement of the characters suggest that Mr. Midas is in some way closer to nature and the natural world. In fact, after making his wish he represents a kind of opposition to nature, since he turns every living thing he touches into gold. In a way, then, the setting in the poem works somewhat ironically. It shows how Mr. Midas has left behind his own life because of his greed, and how he has become dangerous to society. At the same time, the natural settings emphasize how *unnatural* Mr. Midas, and his greed, actually are.

Finally, by the end of the poem, Mrs. Midas says she has sold the contents of the house and moved “down here,” to a new, unidentified location that is entirely her own. This progression to a new setting shows that Mrs. Midas can no longer inhabit the conventional house and way of life she and her husband inhabited before; neither can she live in some remote area away from society. The poem implies that, after everything she has been through, she has to find a new way to live.

as a whole explores traditional myths and stories, reimagining them from a woman’s point of view.

Both “Mrs Midas” as an individual poem, and the collection in its entirety, can be considered what is known as Feminist Revisionist Mythology. In this movement, which dates back to the 1960s and continues to the present day, writers take a feminist approach to fairy tales, religious stories, and myths. They rewrite these stories to center and explore women’s perspectives that have previously been erased and disregarded, and to critique the ways in which many foundational stories in Western culture normalize violence against women. Duffy’s work in this vein connects her to earlier poets such as [Sylvia Plath](#) and [Anne Sexton](#) writing in the 1960s, [Muriel Rukeyser](#)’s work in the 1970s, and such contemporary poets as [Alicia Ostriker](#), [Eleanor Wilner](#), and [Alice Notley](#).

Feminist Revisionism is connected to related movements in Postmodern and Feminist literary theory. In these movements, scholars have sought to interrogate and examine the patriarchal values often underlying ways of thinking about literature: for example, the Romantic vision of the poet as an inspired man, for whom a woman is only a source of passive inspiration.

Duffy’s own career highlights the necessity of her feminist approach. When she became Poet Laureate of the U.K. in 2009, she was the first woman and the first openly LGBTQ poet to hold the position, despite the fact that the office had existed since the 17th century. In fact, [Duffy said that she only chose to accept the Laureateship because no woman had ever held the position before](#), and because she wanted to support the visibility of other women writers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While “Mrs Midas” explores the erasure of women’s experiences, and the harm that this erasure causes, it also explores the consequences of greed and materialism. Notably, the poem was written in the aftermath of what is known as the Reagan Era in the U.S. and Thatcherism in the U.K., movements led by former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and former U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. These eras are known for their materialism, belief in free-market values, and emphasis on individual profit at the expense of the public good. For example, both Reagan and Thatcher are known for their cuts to public services in the name of private ownership and profit.

This context is important for the poem, which examines the cost of individual greed and excessive materialism through the framework of Midas’s wish. Such materialism, the poem makes clear, is antithetical to a society that values the well-being of all living things, and will have long-lasting consequences for the society as a whole.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

“Mrs Midas” was included in Carol Ann Duffy’s fifth collection of poetry, *The World’s Wife*, which was published in 1999. Like “Mrs Midas,” which rewrites the myth of King Midas to explore a woman’s perspective left out of the original, *The World’s Wife*



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poet Reads Her Poem](#) – Listen to Carol Ann Duffy talk about *The World's Wife* and read "Mrs Midas" aloud at the 2013 Singapore Writers Festival. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVOiBNtupWs>)
- [Biography of Carol Ann Duffy](#) – Read more about Carol Ann Duffy's life and work at the Poetry Foundation website. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- [The Original Myth of King Midas](#) – Read the original myth of King Midas, part of Ovid's *Metamorphose*. (<https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph11.htm#485520963>)
- [Feminist Revisionist Mythology](#) – Read more about the movement to rewrite and reimagine traditional myths, stories, and fairy tales from a feminist perspective in this article from the World Heritage Encyclopedia. (http://community.worldheritage.org/articles/eng/Feminist_revisionist_mythology)
- [Interview with Carol Ann Duffy](#) – Watch an interview Carol Ann Duffy from the day she became Poet Laureate of the UK. In the interview, Duffy discusses what it means

to be the first woman and first openly LGBTQ writer to be Poet Laureate, and why she considers poetry to be the "music of humanity." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnt5p1DGD9U>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- [Education For Leisure](#)
- [In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)
- [War Photographer](#)



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