



University
of Glasgow Scottish Literature
in the Classroom

Poems by Carol Ann Duffy for National 5 and Higher English:

‘Medusa’



Table of Contents

Using the Teaching Materials	3
Context.....	4
Poem overview	4
Author background	4
Publication details	5
Online resources	5
‘Medusa’	6
Medusa	8
Full analysis.....	8
Discussion Prompts	16
Introductory.....	16
Techniques.....	16
Themes	16
Practice Questions.....	17
Connections / Comparisons	19

Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on poems by Carol Ann Duffy. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

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Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

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Context

Poem overview

'The poem is a dramatic monologue told from the perspective of Medusa, a Gorgon from Ancient Greek mythology. The poem explores how feelings of jealousy, suspicion and fear of betrayal transform Medusa into a monster. As her thoughts grow darker Medusa's ability to turn living things to stone reflects her desire to protect herself from anticipated hurt. The poem links emotional pain with physical transformation, showing how destructive feelings can distort a person's sense of self.

Through her retelling, Duffy challenges traditional versions of the myth, which focus on male heroism and female monstrosity. Medusa is portrayed as vulnerable and insecure, particularly in relation to her lover whom she fears will betray and leave her. The poem invites readers to consider themes of love, betrayal, identity, power and the damaging effects of jealousy.



Medusa by Caravaggio (1597).
Public domain.

Author background

Carol Ann Duffy (1955–) is a poet and playwright of Scottish-Irish heritage. The eldest of five children in a Roman Catholic family, Duffy was born in the Gorbals in Glasgow, a working-class area that was undergoing significant change in the postwar period. Although Duffy spent only her early childhood in Glasgow before the family moved to England, she has often spoken about the strong emotional and imaginative impact of her Scottish roots.

Duffy began publishing poetry in her early twenties. In 2009, she became the first woman, the first Scottish-born poet, and the first openly LGBTQ+ writer to be appointed as the UK's Poet Laureate, serving until 2019. Her writing often explores identity, gender, love, memory and power and engages with contemporary social and political issues alongside personal experience.



Image: Carol Ann Duffy.
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Publication details

‘Medusa’ is published in *The World’s Wife* (Picador, 1999), which was shortlisted for the Forward Prize and the T. S. Eliot Prize. The collection reimagines famous myths, historical figures, fairy tales, and cultural icons from the perspectives of the women connected to them. Many of the poems give voice to a wife, lover or female counterpart who is marginalised, silenced or stereotyped in traditional narratives. Through dramatic monologues Duffy challenges familiar stories by shifting the focus away from male heroes to explore how these women might tell their own stories. The collection is important in contemporary feminist literature for its exploration of voice and narrative power. It encourages readers to reconsider how history and myth have traditionally portrayed women and to question whose perspectives have been excluded.

Online resources

[BBC Bitesize](#) provides a revision guide for students on ‘Medusa’.

[Carol Ann Duffy](#) on the Scottish Poetry Library’s website includes a biography, a bibliography of Duffy’s work, and a selection of her poems.

The version of 'Medusa' printed here and published on the [Scottish Poetry Library website](#) is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

'Medusa'

by Carol Ann Duffy

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy
grew in my mind,
which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes,
as though my thoughts
hissed and spat on my scalp. 5

My bride's breath soured, stank
in the grey bags of my lungs.
I'm foul mouthed now, foul tongued,
yellow fanged.
There are bullet tears in my eyes. 10
Are you terrified?

Be terrified.
It's you I love,
perfect man, Greek God, my own;
but I know you'll go, betray me, stray 15
from home.
So better by far for me if you were stone.

I glanced at a buzzing bee,
a dull grey pebble fell
to the ground. 20
I glanced at a singing bird,
a handful of dusty gravel
spattered down.

I looked at a ginger cat,

a housebrick 25
shattered a bowl of milk.
I looked at a snuffling pig,
a boulder rolled
in a heap of shit.

I stared in the mirror. 30
Love gone bad
showed me a Gorgon.
I stared at a dragon.
Fire spewed
from the mouth of a mountain. 35

And here you come
with a shield for a heart
and a sword for a tongue
and your girls, your girls.
Wasn't I beautiful? 40
Wasn't I fragrant and young?

Look at me now.

Medusa

Medusa is one of the most well-known figures in Greek mythology. She was one of three sisters called the Gorgons, but unlike her sisters she was mortal. Medusa is usually described as having snakes for hair and a gaze that could turn anyone who looked directly at her to stone. In early Greek sources, she is presented simply as a dangerous monster. A different version of her story was told by the Roman writer Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, which describes Medusa as a beautiful young woman who is assaulted by a god, Poseidon, in the temple of Athena. The goddess responds to the desecration of her temple by cursing Medusa, which transforms her into a Gorgon.

Medusa is most famous for her encounter with the hero Perseus, who is usually depicted in the idealised image of a heroic warrior. Sent on a mission to kill her, Perseus receives help from the gods, including a mirrored shield from Athena. By looking at Medusa's reflection instead of directly at her, Perseus is able to cut off her head without being turned to stone. He uses Medusa's head as a powerful weapon before giving it to Athena.

Contemporary feminist retellings of Medusa often reinterpret her not as a monster, but as a victim of injustice whose transformation reflects trauma, rage and survival.



Image: Perseus with the Head of Medusa (1545)
by Benvenuto Cellini. Photo by Dimitris
Kamaras.
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Full analysis

Form and structure

The poem is written as a dramatic monologue, giving the speaker direct access to Medusa's thoughts and emotions. Although mostly in free verse, the poem's use of rhyme and slant rhyme throughout creates a subtle rhythm and connects key words or ideas. Irregular stanza lengths and line breaks reflect the obsessive, spiralling nature of Medusa's jealousy and suspicion.

The form and structure mirror the controlled chaos of the speaker's mind, highlighting her psychological tension and emotional instability. This tension is created through the clash between Medusa's lingering love and her consuming jealousy and paranoia. Her thoughts appear increasingly fragmented and unstable as they move between desire and fear of betrayal. The abrupt shifts in imagery reflect a mind that cannot settle, reinforcing the sense of internal conflict and emotional volatility.

Speaker

The speaker is Medusa from Greek mythology, reimagined as a jealous and emotionally distressed woman. In this version of her story, her transformation into a monster is presented not as a curse but as the result of growing suspicion and insecurity within a romantic relationship.

She is portrayed as deeply in love but also fearful of betrayal. Her jealousy gradually consumes her, affecting both her physical appearance and the world around her. Throughout the poem, she shifts between anger, bitterness, vulnerability and sadness. At times she sounds threatening and confrontational; at others she seems hurt and insecure.

By the end of the poem, the speaker appears self-aware, recognising what she has become. This portrayal makes her a more complex and human figure rather than simply a mythical monster.

Lines 1–5

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy
grew in my mind,
which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes,
as though my thoughts
hissed and spat on my scalp.

The opening stanza focuses on Medusa's psychological state, showing how private insecurity mutates into outward monstrosity.

The first line opens with a tricolon ('A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy'), highlighting how her feelings accumulate and intensify. The commas slow the rhythm, mirroring the gradual growth of her negative thoughts.

Line 3 introduces the physical transformation associated with Medusa. The adjective 'filthy' conveys corruption and moral decay, suggesting that jealousy contaminates her identity.

The simile 'as though my thoughts / hissed and spat on my scalp' links the snakes directly to Medusa's thoughts, reinforcing the idea that her monstrous nature originates internally. The use of sibilance echoes the sound of snakes, creating a sinister auditory effect.

Lines 6–8

My bride's breath soured, stank
in the grey bags of my lungs.
I'm foul mouthed now, foul tongued,

Stanza 2 focuses on physical and sensory imagery to show the effect of jealousy on Medusa's body and character.

'Bride' evokes purity and romance, which is undermined by sensory imagery of smell ('soured, stank') that suggests decay and bitterness. The metaphor 'grey bags of my lungs' dehumanises her, implying lifelessness and moral corrosion.

Repetition of 'foul' emphasises Medusa's self-awareness of her transformation. 'Foul' carries a double meaning: unpleasant in smell and morally corrupt. This reflects how jealousy has affected both her speech and character. 'Now' signals change – it implies that she was once different and creates a contrast between past and present. Her monstrosity is not innate but has developed over time.

Lines 9–11

yellow fanged.
There are bullet tears in my eyes.
Are you terrified?

The description of Medusa as ‘yellow fanged’ works on two levels. As a metaphor, it suggests that she has become poisonous and aggressive: ‘yellow’ is a symbol of jealousy and sickness, while ‘fanged’ implies danger. In terms of imagery, the same description suggests that she is beginning to resemble a snake herself. This shows how her jealousy is not only internal but also physically transforming her body into something monstrous.

‘Bullet tears’ is a violent metaphor, implying that Medusa’s sadness is weaponised – her emotions wound rather than invite sympathy.

The direct question ‘Are you terrified?’ shifts the tone dramatically. The second-person address confronts both her lover and the reader, creating a threatening effect. It also suggests that Medusa’s sense of identity now depends on external validation, as she seeks confirmation of her transformation through the fear of others. This implies that her monstrous self is partly constructed through how she is perceived by the world around her.

Lines 12–17

Be terrified.
It’s you I love,
perfect man, Greek God, my own;
but I know you’ll go, betray me, stray
from home.
So better by far for me if you were stone.

The imperative statement ‘Be terrified’ is abrupt and commanding. It establishes a threatening tone and shows Medusa’s attempt to assert power. This contrasts with the claim that follows, ‘It’s you I love’, which exposes vulnerability beneath the menace.

Another tricolon appears (‘perfect man, Greek God, my own’), this time idealising her lover. The hyperbolic phrase ‘Greek God’ alludes to Medusa’s mythological world and elevates the lover to divine status. This implies both admiration and unrealistic expectation. The possessive phrase ‘my own’ signals obsession and desire for control.

The conjunction ‘but’ introduces doubt. The verb triplet and rhyme (‘go’, ‘betray’, ‘stray’) reinforces a sense of inevitability, conveying Medusa’s spiralling fear of abandonment.

The comparative phrase ‘better by far’ implies that, for Medusa, petrifying her lover is preferable to being betrayed. This shows how jealousy distorts love into possessiveness.

Lines 18–23

I glanced at a buzzing bee,
a dull grey pebble fell
to the ground.
I glanced at a singing bird,
a handful of dusty gravel
spattered down.

Stanzas 4 to 6 demonstrate Medusa's power through a clear repeated structure that mirrors the inevitability of her curse. Each transformation is contained within a triplet, creating a controlled, almost mechanical rhythm:

- the first line presents something living and active;
- the second line shows the immediate transformation;
- the third line completes the action.

A glance is brief and casual, suggesting that destruction happens effortlessly. The verbs 'buzzing' and 'singing' emphasise vitality, while the nouns 'pebble' and 'gravel' belong to a semantic field of lifelessness. The adjectives 'dull', 'grey' and 'dusty' continue the imagery of decay and colourlessness seen earlier in the poem.

The short third lines of each triplet feel heavy and final, echoing the downward movement of falling stone. The repeated downward imagery, emphasised by slant rhyme ('ground' and 'down'), suggests not just death but loss of energy and joy.

Lines 24–29

I looked at a ginger cat,
a housebrick
shattered a bowl of milk.
I looked at a snuffling pig,
a boulder rolled
in a heap of shit.

The verb shift from 'glanced' to 'looked' suggests a more deliberate, sustained gaze. This suggests Medusa's power – or anger – is strengthening.

Domestic imagery ('ginger cat' and 'housebrick') grounds the poem in everyday life rather than myth. 'Shattered' introduces sudden violence, while the suggestion of spilt milk symbolises spoiled innocence or domestic breakdown.

'Snuffling' suggests the pig is preoccupied and unaware of danger. The crude phrase 'heap of shit' creates a jarring, almost shocking tone, reflecting the speaker's increasing bitterness and self-disgust.

There is a noticeable escalation in the scale of the transformations: pebble → gravel → housebrick → boulder. This mirrors the intensifying emotional weight of Medusa's jealousy.

Lines 30–35

I stared in the mirror.
Love gone bad
showed me a Gorgon.
I stared at a dragon.
Fire spewed
from the mouth of a mountain.

Stanza 6 shifts the focus from external victims to herself, with Medusa turning her destructive gaze on herself. The repetition of 'I stared' suggests an increased sense of intensity and confrontation, while 'the mirror' implies Medusa reflecting on what she has become.

The line break in lines 32 and 33 ('Love gone bad / showed me a Gorgon') isolates the cause of her transformation: corrupted love. The phrase sounds colloquial, as if bitterness has become commonplace. 'Gorgon' alludes directly to Medusa, marking the moment where metaphor becomes identity. She does not just resemble a monster; she recognises herself as one.

The imagery escalates into the mythic and elemental. The dragon metaphor amplifies her monstrosity, while the volcanic imagery suggests uncontrollable natural violence. The verb 'spewed' conveys force and lack of restraint, mirroring the eruption of her emotions. The volcanic imagery suggests a primal, pre-human force, as if Medusa's rage operates on a geological scale beyond human control. This links her transformation to something ancient and element rather than merely personal.

Fire contrasts with the earlier stone imagery, introducing another destructive element. This suggests that her jealousy is both petrifying and explosive.

Lines 36–38

And here you come
with a shield for a heart
and a sword for a tongue

The poem addresses the lover again. The casual tone ('And here you come') implies the lover's nonchalance and contrasts sharply with the speaker's emotional state. He arrives oblivious to the pain, fear and jealousy that consume her, as if his actions are inconsequential. This highlights the imbalance in the relationship: Medusa is consumed, while he remains emotionally detached and carefree.

'Shield' and 'sword' allude to the classic myth: Perseus uses these tools both to protect himself and kill Medusa. By pairing the shield and sword together, the poem mirrors this dual function: just as Perseus's weapons have a protective and an offensive role, the lover arrives emotionally armoured and verbally wounding.

Lines 39–41

and your girls, your girls.
Wasn't I beautiful?
Wasn't I fragrant and young?

The repetition of 'your girls' emphasises Medusa's jealousy and the threat of other women, underlining her fear and possessiveness.

The final two rhetorical questions ('Wasn't I beautiful? / Wasn't I fragrant and young?') reveal vulnerability beneath the anger. The past tense highlights loss, suggesting that betrayal and her consequent transformation have stripped away her youth and desirability. The questions combine regret, accusation and longing, exposing the emotional depth behind her monstrous exterior.

The questions also suggest a gendered anxiety around ageing, as Medusa measures her worth through youthful beauty, and fears being replaced by younger 'girls' her lover now

desires. This implies that her monstrosity is not only mythical but also socially constructed through patriarchal expectations of female beauty and ageing.

Line 42

[Look at me now.](#)

The imperative 'Look' mirrors the repeated imagery throughout the poem ('I glanced', 'I looked', 'I stared'), but here the dynamic is reversed. The speaker directs attention to herself rather than observing. It forces the lover – and, implicitly, the reader – to confront the consequences of Medusa's emotional and physical metamorphosis.

This line can be read in multiple ways:

- A declaration of identity: Medusa demands recognition that she is no longer the young, beautiful woman she was. This reading emphasises both vulnerability and defiance – a confrontation of the reality of who she has become.
- A literal and metaphorical threat, alluding to the myth whereby anyone who looks as Medusa turns to stone. The imperative becomes weaponised, emphasising Medusa's control and vengeance.
- An invitation to witness her pain and isolation. It asks the reader to consider the emotional toll of betrayal and self-perception distorted by jealousy.
- A tone of vindication or defiant assertion, echoing the idiomatic expression 'look at me now', where a speaker forces recognition of their transformation. This adds a sense of social confrontation, as if Medusa is addressing those who have doubted or wronged her.

Structurally, the short stark line is a dramatic close. It leaves the reader with a sense of confrontation as well as a reflection of Medusa's internal pain and self-recognition.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What do you know, or what can you find out about, the mythical character Medusa? Why might Duffy choose Medusa as the speaker of this poem?
- What mood or atmosphere is created in the first stanza? How is this mood or atmosphere established?
- How does the speaker's relationship to her lover shape your impression of her character?
- How does the poem make you feel about the character of Medusa?
- What role does myth play in shaping the story told in the poem?

Techniques

- How does the structure of the poem reflect the speaker's mindset?
- Identify examples of violent imagery. What do they suggest about the speaker?
- Why do you think Duffy chose to write the poem in the first person?
- How does the poem use metaphor and imagery to show the speaker's transformation?
- What effect do questions and imperative statements have on the tone of the poem?

Themes

- How are love and desire connected to revenge and violence in the poem?
- How does the speaker's fear of betrayal shape her actions?
- What does the poem suggest about the impact of jealousy on a person or a relationship?
- How does the poem challenge the traditional view of Medusa as purely a monster?
- In what ways does the poem suggest that identity can be shaped by emotions like fear or rage?

Practice Questions

National 5

Look at lines 1–10.

By referring to two examples of language, explain what we learn about the speaker's transformation. (4 marks)

Look at lines 11–17.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the poet creates a threatening atmosphere. (2 marks)

Look at lines 18–35.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet creates a sense of power and destruction. (4 marks)

Look at lines 36–42.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the poet creates a sense of bitterness. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem by Duffy, show how the poet explores powerful emotions. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that Carol Ann Duffy's 'Medusa' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'Originally'
- 'Mrs Midas'
- 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class'
- 'Havisham'
- 'Before You Were Mine'

Higher

Look at lines 1–17.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language creates an unsettling atmosphere. (4 marks)

Look at lines 17–35.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys a sense of threat. (4 marks)

Look at lines 36–42.

Analyse how the poet's use of language creates an effective conclusion. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and at least one other poem by Carol Ann Duffy, discuss how the poet uses imagery and/or symbolism to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Poems that Carol Ann Duffy's 'Medusa' might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- 'Originally'
- 'Mrs Midas'
- 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class'
- 'Havisham'
- 'Before You Were Mine'

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.

