Studying
The World’s Wife

EMC ADVANCED LITERATURE SERIES

English
& Media Centre
Credits

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Introduction

The scope of the material

‘Studying The World’s Wife’ is divided into four main sections:

– Before Reading
– Reading the Collection
– After Reading
– Criticism and Sources

Before Reading includes activities on the literary context and the dramatic monologue, placing Duffy’s work in the context of both earlier feminist re-writings of traditional tales and the history of the monologue from Tennyson and Browning onwards.

Reading the Collection provides activities on the individual poems, integrating critical and contextual material into the study of Duffy’s poetic and linguistic techniques, the creation of character and voice, and the exploration of key themes. Recognising that students need to balance detailed knowledge of the individual poems with an appreciation of the whole collection, this section includes activities ‘Looking outwards’, placing each particular poem in the context of the collection as a whole.

After Reading builds on this overview approach encouraging students to range around the collection, developing insights into the collection and the discrete poems.

Throughout the material a wide range of approaches is used, including creative and critical writing, role-play, close analysis, charting, diagrammatic representations and so on.

On the website

A high resolution pdf of the key images used throughout the publication is available to download from the English and Media Centre’s website.

Go to http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk, choose ‘Publications’, then ‘Studying The World’s Wife’.

Ways of using the material

It is not expected that any student will work through all the work on any one poem, nor indeed that all the poems will be studied in the same amount of detail in class. The material in this pack could be used in the following ways:

– in class as individuals, pairs or groups working on the same poem, with selected support from this pack
– in class as individuals, pairs or groups working on different poems, followed by whole class feedback or sharing/expert groups
– whole class work on a key poem followed by individual/pair/group work on related poems
– homework preparation followed by sharing groups
– homework preparation followed by groups teaching their poem to the class.

A Level post-2008

We have chosen to include a range of other related texts, in recognition of the fact that, after 2008, students are likely to be required to study clusters of texts rather than focus exclusively on single texts.
Before Reading

Re-interpreting the world – a feminist agenda

The 1970s and 1980s saw the growth of feminism as a powerful social movement, looking not just at equality at work and political power but at every aspect of culture. One aspect of this was that feminist writers, historians and critics began to re-interpret the world. They did this in a number of ways.

– They put women and women’s perspectives into history, literature and culture.
– They felt that women’s voices were often missing. They saw themselves as writing ‘herstory’ rather than ‘history’.
– They re-wrote what they saw as ‘sexist’ representations of women.
– They took a critical look at language and identified ways in which male and female power relationships were created by, or reflected in, language.

On the pages that follow are four examples of women writers giving a fresh slant to old stories and genres that had followed very set patterns for hundreds of years.

1. **Princess Smartypants** by Babette Cole (1986)

   - Read the extracts from *Princess Smartypants* on page 6, looking carefully at the pictures. If you can, read the whole picture book.
   - Talk about how Babette Cole subverts the typical fairytale in order to give it a feminist slant. You might think about:
     – the roles the characters play
     – the pictures and how the female and male characters are presented in them
     – the use of names
     – the way language is used and what effect this has
     – the way in which conventional fairytale events are turned on their head
     – the way in which the tale ends.
Before Reading

Princess Smartypants did not want to get married. She enjoyed being a Ms.

Then Prince Swashbuckle turned up.

... took her Mother the Queen shopping

... and retrieved her magic ring from the goldfish pond.

Princess Swashbuckle didn't think Princess Smartypants was so smart.

... and he turned into a gigantic warty toad!

So she gave him a magic kiss ...

When the other princess heard what had happened to Prince Swashbuckle, none of them wanted to marry Smartypants ...

Prince Swashbuckle left in a big hurry!

... so she lived happily ever after.
2. ‘Cinderella’ by Anne Sexton (1971)

Read Anne Sexton’s poem ‘Cinderella’, published in 1971, and talk about the ways Sexton tells the story. What makes it different from the original story? What’s interesting or unusual about the style of telling?

You always read about it:
the plumber with twelve children
who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.
From toilets to riches.
That story.
Or the nursemaid,
some luscious sweet from Denmark
who captures the oldest son’s heart.
From diapers to Dior.
That story.
Or a milkman who serves the wealthy,
eggs, cream, butter, yogurt, milk,
the white truck like an ambulance
who goes into real estate
and makes a pile.
From homogenized to martinis at lunch.
Or the charwoman
who is on the bus when it cracks up
and collects enough from the insurance.
From mops to Bonwit Teller*.
That story.
Once
the wife of a rich man was on her deathbed
and she said to her daughter Cinderella:
Be devout. Be good. Then I will smile
down from heaven in the seam of a cloud.
The man took another wife who had
two daughters, pretty enough
but with hearts like blackjacks.
Cinderella was their maid.
She slept on the sooty hearth each night
and walked around looking like Al Jolson.
Her father brought presents home from town,
Jewels and gowns for the other women
but the twig of a tree for Cinderella.
She planted that twig on her mother’s grave
and it grew to a tree where a white dove sat.
Whenever she wished for anything the dove
would drop it like an egg upon the ground.
The bird is important, my dears, so heed him.

* A famous department store in New York.

(Cont. over)
Next came the ball, as you all know. It was a marriage market. The prince was looking for a wife. All but Cinderella were preparing and gussying up for the big event. Cinderella begged to go too. Her stepmother threw a dish of lentils into the cinders and said: Pick them up in an hour and you shall go. The white dove brought all his friends; all the warm wings of the fatherland came, and picked up the lentils in a jiffy. No, Cinderella, said the stepmother, you have no clothes and cannot dance. That's the way with stepmothers. Cinderella went to the tree at the grave and cried forth like a gospel singer: Mama! Mama! My turtledove, send me to the prince's ball! The bird dropped down a golden dress and delicate little gold slippers. Rather a large package for a simple bird. So she went. Which is no surprise. Her stepmother and sisters didn't recognise her without her cinder face and the prince took her hand on the spot and danced with no other the whole day.

As nightfall came she thought she'd better get home. The prince walked her home and she disappeared into the pigeon house and although the prince took an axe and broke it open she was gone. Back to her cinders. These events repeated themselves for three days. However on the third day the prince covered the palace steps with cobbler's wax and Cinderella's gold shoe stuck upon it. Now he would find whom the shoe fit and find his strange dancing girl for keeps. He went to their house and the two sisters were delighted because they had lovely feet. The eldest went into a room to try the slipper on but her big toe got in the way so she simply sliced it off and put on the slipper. The prince rode away with her until the white dove told him to look at the blood pouring forth. That is the way with amputations.

Read the poem and talk about the ways in which Liz Lochhead is re-interpreting several different fairytales. What tales are being re-told and in what ways?

They don’t just heal up like a wish.
The other sister cut off her heel
but the blood told as blood will.
The prince was getting tired.
He began to feel like a shoe salesman.
But he gave it one last try.
This time Cinderella fit into the shoe
like a love letter into its envelope.
At the wedding ceremony
the two sisters came to curry favor
and the white dove pecked their eyes out.
Two hollow spots were left
like soup spoons.
Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
ever arguing over the timing of an egg,
ever telling the same story twice,
ever getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.*

That story.

& just when our maiden had got
good & used to her isolation,
stopped daily expecting to be rescued,
had come to almost love her tower,
along comes This Prince
with absolutely
all the wrong answers.
Of course she had not been brought up to look for
originality or gingerbread
so at first she was quite undaunted
by his tendency to talk in strung-together cliché.
‘Just hang on and we’ll get you out of there,’
he hollered like a fireman in some soap opera
when she confided her plight (the old
hag inside etc., & how trapped she was):
well, it was corny but
he did look sort of gorgeous,
axe and all.

(Cont. over)

*A popular series of children’s books about an all-American family, first published in 1904.
4. ‘The Erl-King’ by Angela Carter (1979)

Angela Carter’s collection of short stories, The Bloody Chamber, written in 1979, gives an unusual twist to well-known fairytales. Carter’s work has been a significant influence on later women writers.

Read the story and talk about the features of Carter’s writing and what she brings to the fairytale genre. You might think about:

- whether she seems to be writing for children or adults
- the roles male and female characters play
- the use she makes of some of the conventions of this kind of fairy tale, such as the woods, the house in the woods, birds, animals, flowers and trees, imprisonment and hair. (Think about fairy tales you know well and how each of these conventions is used differently here. For instance, the symbolic importance of Rapunzel’s hair, as compared with the use of hair here, or the idea of the house in the woods in ‘Red Riding Hood’, as compared with here.)
- the way in which the tale ends.
The lucidity, the clarity of the light that afternoon was sufficient to itself; perfect transparency must be impenetrable; these vertical bars of a brass-coloured distillation of light coming down from sulphur-yellow interstices in a sky hunkered with grey clouds that bulge with more rain. It struck the wood with nicotine-stained fingers, the leaves glittered. A cold day of late October, when the withered blackberries dangled like their own dour spooks on the discoloured brambles. There were crisp husks of beechmast and cast acorn cups underfoot in the russet slime of dead bracken where the rains of the equinox had so soaked the earth that the cold oozed up through the soles of the shoes, lancinating cold of the approach of winter that grips hold of your belly and squeezes it tight. Now the stark elders have an anorexic look; there is not much in the autumn wood to make you smile but it is not yet, not quite yet, the saddest time of the year. Only, there is a haunting sense of the imminent cessation of being; the year, in turning, turns in on itself. Introspective weather, a sickroom hush.

The woods enclose. You step between the first trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the wood swallows you up. There is no way through the wood any more, this wood has reverted to its original privacy. Once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out again for there is no clue to guide you through in perfect safety; grass grew over the track years ago and now the rabbits and the foxes make their own runs in the subtle labyrinth and nobody comes. The trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women in the subtle labyrinth and nobody comes. The trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in the woods and hunt round hopelessly for the way out. Tumbling crows play tig in the branches of the elms they clotted their nests, now and then raucously cawing. A little stream with soft margins of marsh runs underfoot in the russet slime of dead bracken where the rains of the equinox had so soaked the earth that the cold oozed up through the soles of the shoes, lancinating cold of the approach of winter that grips hold of your belly and squeezes it tight. Now the stark elders have an anorexic look; there is not much in the autumn wood to make you smile but it is not yet, not quite yet, the saddest time of the year. Only, there is a haunting sense of the imminent cessation of being; the year, in turning, turns in on itself. Introspective weather, a sickroom hush.

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A young girl would go into the wood as trustingly as Red Riding Hood to her granny's house but this light admits of no ambiguities and, here, she will be trapped in her own illusion because everything in the wood is exactly as it seems.

The woods enclose and then enclose again, like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another; the intimate perspectives of the wood changed endlessly around the interloper, the imaginary traveller walking towards an invented distance that perpetually receded before me. It is easy to lose yourself in these woods.

The two notes of the song of a bird rose on the still air, as if my girlish and delicious loneliness had been made into a sound. There was a little
chickweed sprinkled with nutmeg; he cooks the foliage of shepherd’s purse as if it were cabbage. He knows which of the frilled, blotched, rotted fungi are fit to eat; he understands their eldritch ways, how they spring up overnight in lightless places and thrive on dead things. Even the homely wood blewits, that you cook like tripe, with milk and onions, and the egg-yolk yellow chanterelle with its fan-vaulting and faint scent of apricots, all spring up overnight like bubbles of earth, unsustained by nature, existing in a void. And I could believe that it has been the same with him; he came alive from the desire of the woods.

He goes out in the morning to gather his unnatural treasures, he handles them as delicately as he does pigeons’ eggs, he lays them in one of the baskets he weaves from osiers. He makes salads of the dandelion that he calls rude names, ‘bum-pipes’ or ‘piss-the-beds’, and flavours them with a few leaves of wild strawberry but he will not touch the brambles, he says the Devil spits on them at Michaelmas.

His nanny goat, the colour of whey, gives him her abundant milk and he can make soft cheese that has a unique, rank, amniotic taste. Sometimes he traps a rabbit in a snare of string and makes a soup or stew, seasoned with wild garlic. He knows all about the wood and the creatures in it. He told me about the grass snakes, how the old ones open their mouths wide when they smell danger and the thin little ones disappear down the old ones’ throats until the fright is over and out they come again, to run around as usual. He told me how the wise toad who squats among the kingcups by the stream in summer has a very precious jewel in his head. He said the owl was a baker’s daughter; then he smiled at me. He showed me how to thread mats from reeds and weave osier twigs into baskets and into the little cages in which he keeps his singing birds.

His kitchen shakes and shivers with birdsong from cage upon cage of singing birds, larks and linnets, which he piles up one on another against the wall, a wall of trapped birds. How cruel it is, to keep wild birds in cages! But he laughs at me when the doves to flutter softly, crooning as they come, down upon his shoulders, those silly, fat, trusting woodies with the pretty wedding rings round their necks. He makes his whistles out of an elder twig and that is what he uses to call the birds out of the air – all the birds come; and the sweetest singers he will keep in cages.

The wind stirs the dark wood; it blows through the bushes. A little of the cold air that blows over graveyards always goes with him, it crisps the hairs on the back of my neck but I am not afraid of him; only, afraid of vertigo, of the vertigo with which he seizes me. Afraid of falling down.

Falling as a bird would fall through the air if the Erl-King tied up the winds in his handkerchief and knotted the ends together so they could not get out. Then the moving currents of the air would no longer sustain them and all the birds would fall at the imperative of gravity, as I fall down for him, and I know it is only because he is kind to me that I do not fall still further. The earth with its fragile fleece of last summer’s dying leaves and grasses supports me only out of complicity with him, because his flesh is of the same substance as those leaves that are slowly turning into earth.

He could thrust me into the seed-bed of next year’s generation and I would have to wait until he whistled me up from my darkness before I could come back again.

Yet, when he shakes out those two clear notes from his bird call, I come, like any other trusting thing that perches on the crook of his wrist. I found the Erl-King sitting on an ivy-covered stump winding all the birds in the wood to him on a diatonic spool of sound, one rising note, one falling note; such a sweet piercing call that down there came a soft, chirruping jostle of birds. The
clearing was cluttered with dead leaves, some the colour of honey, some the colour of cinders, some the colour of earth. He seemed so much the spirit of the place I saw without surprise how the fox laid its muzzle fearlessly upon his knee. The brown light of the end of the day drained into the moist, heavy earth; all silent, all still and the cool smell of night coming. The first drops of rain fell. In the wood, no shelter but his cottage.

That was the way I walked into the bird haunted solitude of the Erl-King, who keeps his feathered things in little cages he has woven out of osier twigs and there they sit and sing for him.

Goat’s milk to drink, from a chipped tin mug; we shall eat the oatcakes he has baked on the hearthstone. Rattle of the rain on the roof. The latch clanks on the door; we are shut up inside with one another, in the brown room crisp with the scent of burning logs that shiver with tiny flame, and I lie down on the Erl-King’s creaking palliasse of straw. His skin is the tint and texture of sour cream, he has stiff, russet nipples ripe as berries. Like a tree that bears bloom and fruit in the same bough together, how pleasing, how lovely.

And now – ah! I feel your sharp teeth in the subaqueous depths of your kisses. The equinocial gales seize the bare elms and make them whizz and whirl like dervishes; you sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream. The white moon above the clearing coldly illuminates the still tableaux of our embracements. How sweet I roamed, or, rather, used to roam; once I was the perfect child of the meadows of summer, but then the year turned, the light of the end of the day drained into the moist, heavy earth; all silent, all still and the cool smell of night coming. The first drops of rain fell. In the wood, no shelter but his cottage.

He strips me to my last nakedness, that knapsack of straw that covered me entirely; we are like two halves of a seed, enclosed in the same integument. He should like to grow enormously small, so that you could swallow me, like those queens in fairy tales who conceive when they swallow a grain of corn or a sesame seed. Then I could lodge inside your body and you would bear me.

The candle flutters and goes out. His touch both consoles and devastates me; I feel my heart pulse, then wither, naked as a stone on the roaring mattress while the lovely, moony night slides through the window to dapple the flanks of this innocent who makes cages to keep the sweet birds in. Eat me, drink me; thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden, I go back and back to him to have his fingers strip the tattered skin away and clothe me in his dress of water, this garment that drenches me, its slithering odour, its capacity for drowning.

Now the crows drop winter from their wings, invoke the harshest season with their cry. It is growing colder. Scarcely a leaf left on the trees and the birds come to him in even greater numbers because, in this hard weather, it is lean pickings. The blackbirds and thrushes must hunt the snails from hedge bottoms and crack the shells on stones. But the Erl-King gives them corn and when he whistles to them, a moment later you cannot see him for the birds that have covered him like a soft fall of feathered snow. He spreads out a goblin feast of fruit for me, such appalling succulence; I lie above him and see the light from the fire sucked into the black vortex of his eye, the omission of light at the centre, there, that exerts on me such a tremendous pressure, it draws me inwards.

Eyes green as apples. Green as dead sea fruit. A wind rises; it makes a singular, wild, low, rushing sound.

What big eyes you have. Eyes of an incomparable luminosity, the numinous phosphorescence of the eyes of lycanthropes. The gelid green of your eyes fixes my reflective face. It is a preservative, like a green liquid amber; it catches me. I am afraid I will be trapped in it for ever like the poor little ants and flies that stuck their feet in resin before the sea covered the Baltic. He winds me into the circle of his eye on a reel of birdsong. There is a black hole in the middle of both your eyes; it is their still centre, looking there makes me giddy, as if I might fall into it.

Your green eye is a reducing chamber. If I look into it long enough, I will become as small as my own reflection, I will diminish to a point and vanish. I will be drawn down into that black whirlpool and be consumed by you. I shall become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty. I have seen the cage you are weaving for me; it is a very pretty one and I shall sit, hereafter, in my cage among the other singing birds but I – I shall be dumb, from spite.

When I realized what the Erl-King meant to do...
to me, I was shaken with a terrible fear and I did not know what to do for I loved him with all my heart and yet I had no wish to join the whistling congregation he kept in his cages although he looked after them very affectionately, gave them fresh water every day and fed them well. His embraces were his enticements and yet, oh yet! they were the branches of which the trap itself was woven. But in his innocence he never knew he might be the death of me, although I knew from the first moment I saw him how Erl-King would do me grievous harm.

Although the bow hangs beside the old fiddle on the wall, all the strings are broken so you cannot play it. I don't know what kind of tunes you might play on it, if it were strung again; lullabies for foolish virgins, perhaps, and now I know the birds don't sing, they only cry because they can't find their way out of the wood, have lost their flesh when they were dipped in the corrosive pools of his regard and now must live in cages.

Sometimes he lays his head on my lap and lets me comb his lovely hair for him; his combings are leaves of every tree in the wood and dryly susurrate around my feet. His hair falls down over my knees. Silence like a dream in front of the spitting fire while he lies at my feet and I comb the dead leaves out of his languorous hair. The robin has built his nest in the thatch again, this year; he perches on an unburnt log, cleans his beak, ruffles his plumage. There is a plaintive sweetness in his song and a certain melancholy, because the year is over – the robin, the friend of man, in spite of the wound in his breast from which Erl-King tore out his heart.

Lay your head on my knee so that I can't see the greenish inward-turning suns of your eyes any more.

My hands shake.

I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair as he lies half dreaming, half waking, and wind them into ropes, very softly, so he will not wake up, and, softly, with hands as gentle as rain, I shall strangle him with them.

Then she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change back into young girls, every one, each with the crimson imprint of his love bite on their throats.

She will carve off his great mane with the knife he uses to skin the rabbits; she will string the old fiddle with five single strings of ash-brown hair.

Then it will play discordant music without a hand touching it. The bow will dance over the new strings of its own accord and they will cry out: 'Mother, mother, you have murdered me!'

Reflecting on the four re-tellings

For each re-telling, discuss which of the following statements you find most useful and illuminating.

1. The tale presents a female perspective.
2. The female character shows many traits normally associated with masculinity.
3. The tale is a battle of the sexes.
4. The tale isn't quite what one would expect of a feminist story.
5. The tale challenges one's expectations.
6. The tale is simplistic, offering clearcut ideas about male and female behaviour.
7. The tale works on a range of different levels, beyond simply turning a fairy tale on its head.
8. The tale takes the typical qualities of a fairy tale and makes them even stronger and more vibrant.
9. The tale is about real women and their feelings, rather than make-believe.
10. At the heart of the tale is an exploration of female sexuality.