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“That’s him pushing the stone up the hill”
Contemporary Versions of the Sisyphus Myth

Introduction

“That’s him pushing the stone up the hill,” the speaker of Carol Ann Duffy’s “Mrs Sisyphus” states at the beginning of the poem. She depicts the activity for which Sisyphus is notorious. According to ancient mythology, the gods sentence Sisyphus to rolling a boulder up a hill in the underworld. Shortly before Sisyphus reaches the peak, the rock always becomes too heavy for him and rolls down the slope again. The exertion and futility of this work have been perpetuated in the proverbial “Sisyphean task,” which signifies an exhausting and fruitless endeavour. Punished for some offence against the gods, the culprit Sisyphus suffers eternal agony.

As has been noticed, ancient mythology and literature as a source for poetic inspiration have seen a revival in recent decades. Nina Kossman’s anthology Gods and Mortals. Modern Poems on Classical Myths (2001), for instance, collects more than 300 twentieth-century poems by authors from all over the world; Deborah DeNicolao’s collection Orpheus and Company. Contemporary Poems on Greek Mythology (1999) more specifically features over 180 poems by American authors from the late twentieth century. Ovid, in particular, saw a revival in After Ovid. New Metamorphoses (1994), edited by Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, and Tales from Ovid (1997), written by Ted Hughes. With regard to the Ovidian transformations, Hofmann and Lasdun point out that “the stories have direct, obvious and powerful affinities with contemporary reality. They offer a mythical key to most of the more extreme forms of human behaviour and suffering, especially ones we think of as peculiarly modern” (xi). Scholarly interest in the re-awakened enthusiasm for the classics has also been sparked (e.g. Harrison, Storey, Taplin). Surprisingly, this recent turn to ancient literature stands in stark contrast to the decreasing number of people who can read the classical languages and thus to the diminishing knowledge people have of the stories in their original versions (Harrison 1).

The Sisyphus myth is a case in point. First, Hofmann and Lasdun’s comment on the contemporary relevance of the Ovidian stories is also (perhaps even more so) applicable to Sisyphus’ fruitless labour after his death. Second, the ancient Sisyphus tradition is richer than the above introduction to his underworld experience implies. The intriguing nature of Sisyphus’ posthumous punishment has later on overshadowed and even obliterated any awareness of stories about his experiences in life. By shedding some light on the original Sisyphus myth, I will briefly illustrate that, while Sisyphus’ eternal labour seems to be a one-dimensional story about a perpetrator punished for his misdeeds, ancient mythology in fact draws a multi-faceted, complex and ambiguous picture of Sisyphus. Subsequently, I will analyse a selection of recent engagements with Sisyphus which were published around the turn of the millennium and which thus illustrate the recent interest in ancient mythological characters: Duffy’s “Mrs Sisyphus” from The World’s Wife (1999) and the cycle of Sisyphus poems in the first section of Stephen Dunn’s collection Local Visitations (2003). I will show that ambiguity is a crucial characteristic of the original Sisyphus myth, of its reception in later years and also of the manner in which contemporary poetry seizes upon the character. While both Dunn and Duffy employ ambiguity strategically in the production process (see the “Ambiguity Model” introduced in Winkler), they do so in different manners and to different effects. Their poems were chosen for the analysis because they illuminate the fundamental ambiguity of the Sisyphus character while also indicating that this ambiguity can take diverse forms. Dunn focuses on Sisyphus’ own ambivalent experience of his life, Duffy portrays Sisyphus as an ambiguous character who is both hero and anti-hero. In the first case, the character displays an ambivalent attitude towards his situation; in the second, readers develop an ambivalent view of the character.
Sisyphus: An ambiguous hero

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus is the founder and first king of Corinth. He is widely known as an extremely clever man (in some sources he is the father of wily Odysseus, the quintessential trickster), whose intellectual superiority allows him to outwit both human beings and Olympian gods. Sisyphus is an ambiguous character, for he uses his superior mental capacities either for good purposes or bad ones: “Der Frevler ist nicht ohne den intelligenten Schelm, der intelligente Schelm nicht ohne den Frevler zu denken” (Seidensticker and Wessels, “Nachwort” 232). For instance, Sisyphus outwits his neighbour Autolycus so as to prove that the thief Autolycus is guilty of having stolen his cattle. However, while some sources narrate how clever Sisyphus gains back his property, others portray him as a villain who takes revenge by raping Autolycus’ daughter: “Gerade die zweite Hälfte der Geschichte […] zeigt auch, daß man sich Sisyphos nicht nur als einen gerissenen Schelm, sondern auch als skrupellosen Bösewicht vorgestellt hat” (ibid.).

Other stories point out how Sisyphus tricks the Olympian gods. When Zeus abducts a young maiden, Sisyphus incurs Zeus’ anger by betraying him to the girl’s father. Zeus sends out Thanatos (the god of death) to lead Sisyphus down into the underworld, but Sisyphus is too clever for Thanatos, binds him and thus deprives him of his power. Zeus next sends out Ares (the god of war), who releases Thanatos and guides Sisyphus to the underworld. Yet Sisyphus responds with a second ruse. He has already told his wife not to perform the traditional funeral rites for him. When he arrives in the underworld, he complains that his wife does not pay him sufficient respect by giving him a proper burial, and Hades consequently allows Sisyphus to return home so as to punish his wife. Afterwards, Sisyphus simply refuses to return to the underworld. Aspiring to elude death, Sisyphus thus twice outwits the gods. His trickery can either be seen as hubris or as a justified rebellion against the gods. Sisyphus’ trickster traits define him as a fundamentally ambiguous character, which is also underscored by the large number of contradictory stories about him.

The ambiguity inherent in the character is complemented by the ambiguity inherent in the evaluation of his punishment (for the inherent ambiguity of a character, see also Bergstrand and Jasper [231-232] and the introduction to the present volume). When Sisyphus finally dies in old age, the gods sentence him to pushing a giant rock up a mountain without ever reaching its peak. Yet whether Sisyphus is a perpetrator who deserves his punishment or a miserable victim of the gods, who abuse their power, is a matter of interpretation and depends, among other things, upon which episode of Sisyphus’ earthly life is regarded as the reason for this harsh verdict.

In the later tradition, Sisyphus’ punishment has been deprived of its mythological background. It has been referenced by poets, essayists, philosophers, theologians and other writers alike, and it has been interpreted in various and contradictory ways. Rolling the boulder, Sisyphus is, for instance, perceived as a miserable sufferer who endures extraordinary pain. Phaedrus describes Sisyphus’ plight and concludes that “this illustrates the never-ending wretchedness of man” (Appendix Perottina 7.6). In this tradition, any reference to Sisyphus indicates (physical or mental) pain and suffering. Besides, Sisyphus is understood as a pitiable worker whose efforts remain futile. For Lucretius, Sisyphus’ labours serve as an image for any fruitless endeavour. He writes, “for to solicit power, an empty thing, which is never granted, and herein always to endure hard toil, this is to push laboriously up a steep hill the rock that still rolls down again from the very top” (De rerum natura 3.998-1002). In this tradition, any reference to Sisyphus indicates an endless, futile and exhausting effort – the “Sisyphean task” introduced above.

However, Sisyphus also sets an example. He is likewise interpreted as an admirable optimist who pursues his goal despite seemingly insuperable obstacles, and as Albert Camus’ “absurd hero,” who finds happiness in the very futility of his task. In Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942), the crucial moment of Sisyphus’ experience is the period when he walks downhill after the rock has again rolled to the foot of the mountain. During this phase, he does not have to exert himself and thus has the leisure to reflect on his existence. Hence, he becomes aware of the meaninglessness of his life, which is characterised by endless labour, tedious repetition and futile action. Sisyphus realises that he will never reach the top of the mountain, yet during this “hour of consciousness” (109) when he trudges down the slope, he can be “superior to his fate” (ibid.) because he becomes aware of it. His consciousness – or “lucidity” – is paradoxically both torment and triumph: “The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory” (ibid.). Realising the futility of his life, Sisyphus scorns the gods and his destiny, and thus inwardly liberates himself from them. At this moment of existentialist freedom, he deliberately decides to continue pushing his stone. From now on, “[h]is fate belongs to him” (110) and
therefore, Camus concludes in complete break with the tradition, “[o]ne must imagine Sisyphus happy” (111).

### Sisyphus in contemporary poetry

The urban everyman and his ambivalent experience

Inspired by Camus’ reading of the myth, Dunn’s cycle of Sisyphus poems explores the ambivalent experience of the contemporary urban everyman. “Sisyphus’s Acceptance,” “Sisyphus and the Sudden Lightness” and “Sisyphus at Rest” form a chronological sequence which portrays Sisyphus at subsequent stages of his development. “Sisyphus’s Acceptance” depicts Sisyphus in some unnamed modern city with its bagel stores, newspaper stalls and “bustling streets” (18) which he trudges along going to work. Sisyphus is an average man who blends in with the crowd: “he looked like anyone else” (5). The Sisyphean experience of the twenty-first century is internalised and hence goes unnoticed by Sisyphus’ environment: “These days only he could see the rock” (ibid.). Sisyphus suffers mentally rather than physically. His suffering stems from the dreary, monotonous repetition of an empty and purposeless life. He realises the uniform and repetitive nature of his daily work and, like Camus’ Sisyphus, he is aware of the meaninglessness of his existence: “Rote not ritual, a repetition / which never would mean more / at the end than at the start …” (13-15). His routine is paradoxically characterised by “plenitude and vacuity” (19) – it is a busy life which yet remains empty.

Besides the monotony of his life, two further experiences add to Sisyphus’ distress. First, the precarious situation of the earth worries him. Lonely Sisyphus’ knowledge of the world derives from the news, which the gods allow him to consume because they “only make him feel worse” (10). Watching the news is rarely a pleasant experience. Second, Sisyphus believes (or perhaps knows) that he is doomed to wretchedness and that his life has been determined by forces beyond his control: “Let him think he has choices; / he belongs to us” (11-12), the gods reason, indicating that Sisyphus has no choices at all. Therefore, life itself is a punishment for Sisyphus (28) and suicide at times appears as the only escape (27).

Camus’ Sisyphus is finally a happy man; Dunn’s Sisyphus likewise experiences a sudden moment of inner calm and even happiness: “One morning […] / Sisyphus smiled” (25-29). From this moment on, the gods leave him in peace:

> The gods sank back in their airy chairs. Sisyphus sensed he’d taken something from them, more on his own than ever now. (35-38)

As when Camus’ Sisyphus denies the gods their right to exist, Dunn’s Sisyphus deprives the gods of some of their power; as when Camus’ Sisyphus turns fate into “a human matter” (110), Dunn’s Sisyphus reconciles himself to his monotonous existence and gains control of his life. Jungian analyst James Hollis points out about Camus’ and Dunn’s Sisyphus figure: “When he chooses to roll the fated boulder up the fated hill to fall back in its fated way, he wrests from the gods their terrible autonomy and with it a measure of spiritual freedom” (141, emphasis in original).

However, the smile of Dunn’s Sisyphus does not express pure joy but rather suggests his ambivalent attitude towards life. Like the smile of “a gambler […] / when he finally decides to fold / in order to stay alive / for another game” (30-33), Sisyphus’ smile only shows a small degree of relief and satisfaction. Life is a game of chance in which Sisyphus must always be on the losing side. He makes a conscious decision in favour of life (and against suicide), but all he can decide is to go on with his routine as it has always been – hence the cautious nature of his smile, which is “so inward it cannot be seen” (34). This “inward” smile, which indicates Sisyphus’ “acceptance” of his life, is a private experience not shared with any fellow human being.

While Camus’ Sisyphus realises the futility of his work and thus gains true happiness, Dunn’s Sisyphus realises that the sense of control he has gained is a deceptive one. Hence, while the former’s experience is paradoxical (he is happy in spite of his meaningless life), the latter’s experience is ambivalent (he is both happy and unhappy). After all, the final line “more on his own than ever now” is ambiguous and allows for different readings: Sisyphus is “more on his own than ever now” because he fashions himself as master of his fate, yet he is also “more on his own than ever now” because he will just be as lonely and isolated as before (and perhaps even more so). Sisyphus’ experience is thus a mixed one: his triumph is shallow, and his happiness is mingled with resignation.

“Sisyphus and the Sudden Lightness” takes this ambivalent experience further. Sisyphus has grown so accustomed to his rock that it has become an integral part of his identity, wherefore...
his ultimate victory over the gods is terrifying to him. The equivocal title first of all refers to Sisyphus’ impression that the rock has lost some of its weight. At the same time, it indicates the swiftness with which Sisyphus now moves towards the peak, for the rock literally pushes him uphill “as if he had wings” (1). Furthermore, it suggests the lightness of heart that might plausibly characterise this new stage in Sisyphus’ life. Yet although the situation might be expected to fill him with joy and triumph, it has the opposite effect: “Sisyphus, of course, was worried” (5). This surprising response, presented as if it were the only natural reaction, is due to Sisyphus’ inability to imagine life without his rock: “he’d come to depend on his burden, / wasn’t sure who he was without it” (6-7). Sisyphus has come to define himself by his painful and monotonous existence. His routine has so entirely dominated his thoughts that it has become an essential feature of his identity. Thus, the rock has also been a positive factor in his life. It has offered him routine, purpose and meaning, and this has given him strength and certainty. With the loss of it, uncertainty (“wasn’t sure”) creeps into his life, and uncertainty quickly turns into fear: “he kept going forward, afraid / of the consequences of standing still” (10-11, emphasis LL). Sisyphus fears the loss of his burden because he does not know how to handle his new life of freedoms and opportunities. Busy with his rock, he has never had to make any decisions of his own, but liberated from it, he will now have to take matters into his own hands.

Consequently, Sisyphus “no longer felt inclined to smile” (12). First, his fear of the future deprives him of any good mood. His painful rock experience has had some positive effects on his life, and the uncertainty that stretches before him serioulsy perturbs him. Second, while Sisyphus’ “smile” is again reminiscent of Camus’ claim that Sisyphus is a happy man, Dunn’s Sisyphus takes a further step and overcomes his inclination to smile “(no longer) when he shakes off his rock. He thus leaves the happiness of Camus’ Sisyphus behind. Hence, the “Sudden Lightness” of the title is also a “sudden realisation” that the gods finally leave Sisyphus in peace and that he no longer needs to defy them by accepting his fate. Still, what appears to be a triumphant victory is a mixed experience. The force that seems to push Sisyphus towards the peak turns out to be nothing but the “absence” (16) of the force that weighed him down. While to Camus’ Sisyphus the “universe henceforth without a master seems […] neither sterile nor futile” (111), Dunn’s Sisyphus is by no means delighted about his godless world. Provoking the gods – “He dared to raise his fist to the sky” (17) – initially fills him with satisfaction and pleasure (18), yet the joy at his victory is short-lived and quickly replaced by its opposite: “Then a different terror overtook him” (19).

Sisyphus’ mood deteriorates in the course of his emancipation. First he is “worried,” then “afraid” and finally overcome by “terror.” Thus, his liberation is accompanied by deep-rooted fear and dismay. For Camus’ Sisyphus, “[t]he struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (111); for Dunn’s Sisyphus, the absence of the gods leaves a frightening vacuum. The poem ends on an ambiguous note: it is likely that the “different terror” is triggered by the uncertainty of Sisyphus’ new position and by a future in which he will have to make his own decisions, yet it is also plausible that the “different terror” is merely a return to the previous Sisyphus pattern and its wretched labour. In “Sisyphus and the Sudden Lightness,” Sisyphus’ ultimate victory over the rock is thus an ambivalent experience.

In “Sisyphus at Rest,” finally, Sisyphus has long been free of his rock, yet this freedom is accompanied by mixed feelings, too. Sisyphus’ new life is characterised by ennui, repetition and the longing for a different life. As an unsuccessful and frustrated writer, Sisyphus spends his lonely days in a dilapidated flat in some unnamed city, desperately trying to live up to his literary aspirations. His humble flat is not an inviting place. It is “small” (1) and without any comfort (1-2); the bed is “spartan” (3) and the chair “hardbacked” (6). Sisyphus would need to invest some time and effort into keeping his flat in good shape. The taps drip (7) and the dishes need to be washed (8). The brief pause that follows “The faucets drip” (7) – by far the shortest line of the poem – invites the reader to fill the silence with the dripping sound of the water. The monotonous sound reflects upon the repetition and uniformity of Sisyphus’ life and, at the same time, disrupts his concentration. The smell of the dirty dishes certainly doesn’t help either. The few personal items owned by Sisyphus are his “[b]ooks, scraps of notes strewn on the floor” (5). In the midst of this mess, Sisyphus’ writing does not go smoothly, and he tears his notes into pieces. Other than the books, the flat lacks personal attributes. It is one among many anonymous flats of the same kind “in buildings like this” (12) above the crowds of people pursuing their daily routine (12-13).

As an aspiring writer, Sisyphus aims at describing his previous experiences, “how it was out there” (15) as a member of the crowd, and at depicting his current life, “what / it feels like to be shuck of it, alone” (15-16). Earlier in his life,
he was obedient and industrious, fulfilling duties and complying with expectations (17-18). This monotony, however, has little to offer for a writer: “How boring sorrows are,” Sisyphus notes (19), indicating that his life provides him with no valuable inspiration. Still, it remains unclear whether Sisyphus’ sorrows are a feature of his previous or of his current life; most likely they are characteristic of both. In any case, the lack of action in Sisyphus’ life results in a lack of inspiration for his writing. He often “has little to say” (21), and then he feels inclined to cover up the emptiness of his texts behind “an abracadabra of big words” (23).

Sisyphus can only endure his isolated existence on the margins of society by dreaming himself away into a different sphere: “He dreams of women, the lure and unfairness of their beauty. He dreams of a gate opening in a distant field” (27-29). While the first dream illustrates both his erotic desires and his longing for a companion, the second dream of “a gate opening” suggests his hope for a better future. Still, he wishes even more for the past than for the future: “more often he finds himself dreaming of his rock, wishing it back, the better to defend himself against so many hours” (30-32). Sisyphus has never truly freed himself. He may have liberated himself from his previous, monotonous work and life, but he does not appreciate his new-found liberty. Instead, he retrospectively glorifies the clear routine of his earlier years, for he is out of his depth with keeping himself busy all day – “so many hours” to be filled (32).

To overcome his inclination to drown his despair in drink (33-34), Sisyphus leaves the flat for a walk in the streets. His life without the rock is not one bit better than his life with the rock; in other words, a self-determined life is in no way better than a life determined by external forces. When twilight falls, Sisyphus feels soothed by the “forgiving cocoon of dusk” (37). In the evening ambience, he is lulled by the darkening contours and soft breeze. His strategy proves successful: “Every day. Every day without fail” (38). Paradoxically, Sisyphus creates his own new routine, for only in repetition and certainty can he find relief and even happiness – a routine also reflected by the repetition of “Every day.” Thus, Sisyphus misses his painful monotony once he has liberated himself from it, and in a typically human response he designs his own new routine to make up for the loss of his previous one. While Camus describes a paradoxical relationship between Sisyphus’ painful experience and futile task on the one hand and his happiness on the other, Dunn depicts Sisyphus’ life as utterly ambivalent, for with or without his task, with or without his routine, never does he find any real happiness. At the same time, Dunn’s Sisyphus resembles Camus’ in that he requires repetition and routine so as to find at least a certain degree of satisfaction. As this example indicates, Dunn’s sequence can be read both in alignment with and not in alignment with Camus.

A contemporary workaholic as an ambiguous character

Duffy’s The World’s Wife offers a platform for the women behind the great men of Western history, literature and mythology. In the collection, thirty women tell their stories: some of them are historical characters (such as Mrs Darwin), some are derived from the later Western literary canon (such as Mrs Faust), and some are biblical figures (such as Delilah). The largest group – eleven out of thirty – are inspired by ancient Greek and Roman mythology. Among these are Eurydice, Penelope, Thetis, Mrs Midas – and Mrs Sisyphus.

The World’s Wife appears to be a straightforward feminist project. Duffy admits as much herself. In an afterword to the collection, she points out: “the book has been called a feminist manifesto, and I am feminist and it is feminist” (“Afterword” 78). However, Duffy also qualifies this assumption when she asserts: “My aim was to find hidden truths or fresh, female ways of looking at familiar things” (ibid.). And she continues: “I wasn’t trying to attack the male, but put the female […] into the story” (ibid.). Duffy suggests that her feminism is not anti-male. Her rewritings in The World’s Wife do not contradict, but complement the traditional stories centred around men. As my discussion of “Mrs Sisyphus” will show, the poem tallies with Duffy’s balanced view of male-female interaction. Although it might appear to be a straightforward polemic against male workaholics, the poem draws a more complex and ambiguous picture of the male-female relationship.

“Mrs Sisyphus” appears to be an attack on the obsessive pursuit of professional goals, wealth and prestige. This Sisyphus character is a twentieth-century workaholic who puts his career before his life. His “pushing the stone up the hill,” with which the poem begins, is an image of the ambitious, contemporary careerist in his never-ending pursuit of money and recognition. In her introduction to the collection, Jeanette Winterson more specifically argues that “[t]he punishment of the gods turns out to be a 24/7 always-on meaningless managerial job, where no

helden. heroes. héros.
matter how many emails you answer, your inbox will be full again the next day" (ix). Whatever the specific characteristics of Sisyphus’ post, he sets himself goals which are unattainable, wherefore his work is not only repetitive and laborious but also futile and pointless. The enormous size of the boulder – “I call it a stone – it’s nearer the size of a kirk” (2) – indicates as much. Seized by ambition (4), Sisyphus dedicates himself to his job and neglects his wife, who waits for him at home and laments that he values his work more highly than moments shared with her: neither for romantic dinners nor for an afternoon stroll in the park does Sisyphus have any time (8-9). He lives only for his job, and it is thus fitting that the poem begins and ends with his work: “That’s him pushing the stone up the hill” (1) and “he is giving one hundred per cent and more to his work” (32, emphasis LL) frame his wife’s complaint.

Mrs Sisyphus, the speaker of the poem, is embittered and enraged. She calls her husband names, hurls insults at him and even threatens to attack him. She terms him a “jerk” (1), a “berk” (4) and a “dork” (10), and she claims that she “could do something vicious to him with a dirk” (5). As these quotations indicate, Mrs Sisyphus is not only creative in abusing her husband but also in contriving rhymes. She complements “jerk,” “berk,” “dork” and “dirk” with an impressive collection of monosyllabic words ending with -k (among them “quirk,” “shark,” “cork” and “dark”). For Winterson, the poem thus “rhyme[s] with cheeky exuberance” (ix), and for Jane Dowson, “[t]he pleasure here is clearly that of the storyteller whose exaggerated rhyme […] parodies and rejects the symbolic order of language” (140). The rhymes culminate in the very last word of the poem (“work”) and thus emphasise the essential feature of Sisyphus’ daily routine and the very reason for his wife’s displeasure. Besides, the twenty-five lines of the poem that end on these extremely harsh-sounding notes (not to forget the internal rhymes) also reflect Mrs Sisyphus’ aggressive and spiteful mood.

Her colloquialisms and vulgarity additionally indicate her resentment: her husband has no “time to pop open a cork” (8), and while the general public perceives her husband’s obsession as “a bit of a lark” (13) and thus derives some amusement from it, his futile attempts at rolling “that feckin’ stone[…]” uphill (17) are simply “[a] load of old bollocks” (14) for her. As Shelley Roche-Jacques puts it, “the speaker continues to vent her frustration, with the present tense […] used to communicate the habitual nature of Mr and Mrs Sisyphus’ disagreements” (370, emphasis in original). The emotional gap between the spouses is prominently introduced by the very beginning of the poem. “That’s him” (1), Mrs Sisyphus says, as if pointing at her husband in the distance. She does not pay him the respect of giving his name (he is merely a pronoun), and the deictic expression “That’s him” (rather than “This is him”) indicates the physical, but also emotional distance between them.

While the speaker’s annoyance and rage dominate the first two stanzas, her loneliness and disappointment prevail in the third and final one. Attention is turned from the husband’s pointless work to the effects it has on his wife. “Mrs Sisyphus” does not centre upon Sisyphus himself but on his environment. While she “lie[s] alone in the dark” (25), Mrs Sisyphus suggests that this is an experience she shares with the wives of biblical Noah and Baroque composer Bach (26-28). She implies that she is just as lonely and neglected as these fellow sufferers, for Noah and Bach also devoted themselves to their work rather than to their relationships. At the same time, the comparison reflects negatively upon Sisyphus. While Noah and Bach exerted themselves in heroic endeavours and for admirable achievements (saving mankind from extinction in the first case, composing some of the greatest pieces of Baroque music in the second), Sisyphus toils merely for his own advancement. His obsession has a negative impact on Mrs Sisyphus, for isolation and boredom turn her into a nagging and disappointed wife: “My voice reduced to a squawk, / my smile to a twisted smirk” (29-30). Due to her husband’s lack of interest, Mrs Sisyphus becomes a quintessential Xanthippe.

Sisyphus’ professional goals stand in the tradition of the exhausting and futile effort. Sisyphus is never satisfied with his achievements, and since he always sets himself new goals, he is never able to settle down and rest. His work in itself may not be futile, but it becomes meaningless when Sisyphus is never willing to take a break. His efforts are pointless because they destroy what they mean to achieve. Sisyphus intends to gain wealth and a leisurely life, but this very endeavour estranges him from his wife and ensures that he has no time to enjoy his married life. Sisyphus’ task is a self-defeating, paradoxical task. Still, his work is not a punishment imposed upon him but a self-chosen endeavour. Full of hope that his project will succeed, Sisyphus is not forced to roll his boulder but motivates himself to do so.

Therefore, Duffy’s Sisyphus is ultimately an ambiguous character. The general public sees in him a ridiculous freak – “Folk flock from miles around just to gawk” (11) – and Mrs Sisyphus describes him as a senseless block (in which he
resembles the very stone he is pushing), i.e. as an unfeeling, self-centred and disagreeable idiot who neglects his closest relations. Consequently, Jeffrey Wainwright counts Sisyphus among Duffy’s “stolid, blinkered men-folk” (53). However, Sisyphus may neglect his wife, but he is also an industrious worker and admirable optimist who puts his goals before everything else and pursues his aims even if serious obstacles occur. His work ethic is exemplary. Besides, Mrs Sisyphus likewise emerges as an ambiguous character. She portrays herself as the pitiable victim of her husband’s obsession, yet her “shriek[jing]” (7) and “squawk[jing]” voice (29), accompanied by her “twisted smirk” (30), do not reflect positively upon her. Rather, they suggest that she is nasty, unfriendly and disagreeable. Her coarse language and the torrent of abuse she hurls at her husband also contribute to this impression.\textsuperscript{16} Ultimately, it is thus difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate the spouses’ strained relationship.

This difficulty is also reflected by the ambiguity of the poem’s title. At first sight, it seems clear that “Mrs Sisyphus” adopted her husband’s family name (“Sisyphus”) on their wedding day. This reading tallies with other mythological poems in \textit{The World’s Wife}, such as “Mrs Midas,” “Mrs Tiresias” and “Mrs Icarus,” in which the (female) speakers are married to a contemporary version of the ancient (male) character. Yet in the case of “Mrs Sisyphus,” another reading offers itself. After all, Mrs Sisyphus herself is a Sisyphus figure, too. Her everyday life, which she spends alone in her darkened home, is dreary and monotonous. It is a meaningless existence, characterised by loneliness, repetition, waiting and longing. Mrs Sisyphus is thus also a female Sisyphus.

\section*{Conclusion}

The many faces of the Sisyphus character are part and parcel of the ongoing fascination with his story. Besides Dunn and Duffy, a variety of renowned poets have published Sisyphus poems in recent years. Alice Oswald’s collection \textit{Woods etc.} (2005), for instance, also features a poem entitled “Sisyphus,” in which Oswald foregrounds Sisyphus’ misery.\textsuperscript{17} “This man Sisyphus” (1) feels oppressed by some heavy burden (10), suffering from physical pain of several kinds (71-72, 75-76), yet at the same time he tries to distract himself from his distress (29-30), unwilling to accept his fate (36). Oswald’s poem emphasises the wretchedness and pain of its Sisyphus character in a universe which is neither ancient nor modern – or perhaps it is both.

In contrast, both Dunn and Duffy transpose the Sisyphus myth to the present, depicting the ancient king as an ordinary character in the contemporary world. Dunn’s poems portray Sisyphus as the present-day everyman in his urban environment; Duffy’s poem renders Sisyphus as a workaholic in a strained marital relationship. Both poets take their cue from Sisyphus’ miserable labour in Hades. Inspired by Sisyphus’ eternal punishment after his death, they turn his underworld experience into an image of human experiences in life. Hence, both read Sisyphus’ afterlife as an image of repetitive and futile work.

While both poets interpret the eternal punishment in connection with tedious and endless work, Dunn’s rock stands for the repetition and monotony of life itself, Duffy’s rock for the endlessness and futility of particular professional tasks. The poems take their cue from varying stages of the myth. Whereas Dunn’s poems stem from Camus’ twentieth-century reinterpretation of the underworld experience, Duffy’s poem is primarily indebted to the ancient story about the eternal punishment itself. The different contexts of the poems also prove the versatility of the myth: Dunn’s poems explore philosophical issues; Duffy’s poem forms part of her feminist rewritings.

Consequently, while both poets create ambiguous accounts of the Sisyphean experience, they do so in different manners and to different ends. Dunn’s poems provide insights into Sisyphus’ mind: Sisyphus suffers from his daily routine, but paradoxically also needs it for his contentedness. The many ambiguities of the poems allow for a reading in which the poems agree with Camus’ existentialist interpretation, but also for a reading in which they overcome Camus’ ideas. Ultimately, Sisyphus’ own ambivalent experience of his life is at stake in Dunn’s poems, which offer an internalised version of the myth. In contrast, Duffy’s poem portrays Sisyphus from the outside. Her Sisyphus character optimistically believes that he will ultimately achieve his goals, and he sets to work full of hope and confidence. Sisyphus himself is thus a truly happy character precisely because he does not realise the futility of his work. Here, Mrs Sisyphus emerges as a mixed character and also draws a mixed picture of her husband. Thus, readers arrive at an ambivalent view of the Sisyphus figure(s).

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1 I should like to thank Ewan Dow, Maik Goth, Anton Kurenbach, Burkhard Niederhoff, Svenja Schürmann, the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of the present volume for their helpful comments on previous drafts of this article.

2 The OED defines “Sisyphean” as follows: “Of or relating to Sisyphus, in Greek mythology a king of Corinth who was condemned in Hades endlessly to roll a heavy stone up a hill only for it to roll down again as he reached the top; resembling Sisyphus or that of Sisyphus; spec. (of labour, a task, etc.) resembling the fruitless toil of Sisyphus; endless, laborious, and ineffective” (OED, s.v. “Sisyphean”).

3 Taplin also notes the “efflorescence [of classical poetry] in the last quarter of the twentieth century” – “an era when Classics has probably had less presence in education than at any time since the Renaissance” (1). Among other things, Taplin foregrounds that many contemporary authors work from translations, not from the ancient originals.

4 The distinction between strategic and non-strategic ambiguitly also features among Winter-Froemel and Zirker’s twelve parameters of analysing ambiguity in speaker-hearer-interaction.

5 For the complexities of ambiguity in literary texts, see the sections on ambiguity in literary studies in Bauer et al. (27-40), as well as in Winter-Froemel and Zirker (294-299).

6 I will use “ambiguous” in the following sense: “Of words or other significant indications: Admitting more than one interpretation, or explanation; of double meaning, or of several possible meanings; equivocal” (OED, s.v. “ambiguous 2.”). Thus, I will refer to mixed characters who trigger positive and negative responses in others as “ambiguous characters.” I will apply “ambivalent” in the sense of “having either or both of two contrary or parallel values, qualities or meanings; entertaining contradictory emotions (as love and hatred) towards the same person or same thing” (OED, s.v. “ambivalent”). Hence, I will refer to mixed attributes which include both positive and negative feelings as “ambivalent attitudes.” My use of the two terms fits in with their use in psychology (see Ziegler).

7 For my sketch of the Sisyphus myth and its reception, I am indebted to the examples in Seidensticker and Wessels’s collection and to their “Nachwort,” in which they provide a detailed overview of the Sisyphus tradition from ancient literature to the present. In chronological order, Seidensticker and Wessels distinguish between the following phases of the Sisyphus reception: “Der Schelm und seine Strafe. Sisyphos in der Antike,” “Der leidende Büßer. Sisyphos vom Mittelalter bis zum 17. Jahrhundert,” “Der frustrierte Arbeiter am Stein. Sisyphos vom 18. bis zum Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts,” and “Der glückliche Mensch? Sisyphos nach Camus.” For Sisyphus in classical literature, see also Halton (141-149).

8 Brief introductions to Sisyphus in the ancient world are provided in Howatson’s Oxford Companion to Classical Literature (s.v. “Sisyphus”) and Grant and Hazel’s Who’s Who in Classical Mythology (s.v. “Sisyphus”).

9 On Sisyphus’ ambiguous rebellion against the gods and on his punishment in the context of the human pursuit of perceptibility, see Simon’s chapters “Introduction. Myth and the Quest for Human Excellence” (15-26) and “Sisyphus. From Myth to Archetype” (27-49).

10 In addition to the three poems discussed in the present paper, Dunn’s Sisyphus sequence also includes “Sisyphus Among Cold Dark Matter” and “Sisyphus in the Suburbs.”

11 For the communicative situation in “Mrs Sisyphus,” see Roche-Jacques (369-372).

12 Perhaps they also mirror “the repetitive idiocy of the rock and its roll” (Winterston ix).

13 See also Roche-Jacques (369).

14 In ancient mythology, Sisyphus’ wife does play a role in at least one version of the story, namely when Sisyphus asks his wife not to give him a proper burial. Yet she is never more than an instrument at Sisyphus’ disposal.

15 There is no evidence that either Noah’s or Bach’s wife felt neglected by her husband. However, it can easily be assumed that they were not given due attention. Neither Noah himself nor the biblical narrative shows any interest in his wife. She is mentioned several times, yet merely in passing (Gen. 6.18-8.18). Bach was married twice, but there is little evidence about his personality and family life. According to the obituary on Bach published in Mitler’s Musikalische Bibliothek in 1754, his first wife Maria Barbara died unexpectedly while Bach was away on a journey (169-170). Perhaps this neglect on his part triggered Duffy’s association (I owe this suggestion to one of the anonymous reviewers of the present article). His second wife Anna Magdalena apparently gave up her own promising career as a singer when they married and subsequently dedicated herself to the household and numerous children. Perhaps this sacrifice on her part inspired Duffy to the allusion (for the life of Anna Magdalena, see Schulze’s essay). Besides, it should not be overlooked that – to English ears, at least – “Ark” and “Bach” fit Duffy’s system of rhymes.

16 Braud similary notices that “the nastiness of some of the female voices [in The World’s Wife] complicates these texts considerably” (201).

17 Kossman’s anthology also includes twentieth-century Sisyphus poems from around the world (165-167); DeNicola’s collection features two poems about Sisyphus (317, 321).

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