

# THETIS

## **Background and Context**

In Greek mythology, Thetis was a sea nymph and goddess, often considered the leader of the Nereids, and the daughter of a shape-shifting power. Thetis is known mostly for her role as the mother of Achilles.

By Greek mythology, Zeus, the ruler of Mount Olympus, and his brother, Poseidon, were rivals for the hand of Thetis in marriage. However, both put aside their rivalry after they received a prophecy that the son of Thetis would become greater than his father. In order to ensure a mortal father to the child of Thetis, Zeus and Poseidon arranged for Thetis to marry a human, Peleus, but Thetis refused.

Peleus was advised to bind the goddess tightly while she was asleep, in order to prevent her from changing forms. Thetis was, however, able to shape-shift, turning into flame, water, a serpent and a lioness, but Peleus kept hold of her resolutely, and eventually subdued, Thetis gave her consent to marry Peleus.

## **Plot**

This poem follows the episode in Greek mythology in which the goddess Thetis changes shape in an attempt to escape the pursuit of Peleus, and her eventual consent and finally, the birth of her son, Achilles. In this poem, Thetis can be interpreted as a metaphor both for the vulnerability of women at the hands of men, and also their ability to adapt and survive.

## **Analysis of Quotes**

- *'I shrank myself'*

Thetis begins her series of escapes by altering herself to please the male gender and allowing them to feel dominant. This first line can be regarded as a gentle attack on the attitudes of both men and women on dominance in a relationship.

- *'a bird in the hand/...the squeeze of his fist.'*

This is an image similar to the 'living dove' in 'Little Red Cap' which is 'One bite, dead.' In both cases, Duffy uses this image to depict the destruction of a peaceful, pleasing, innocent and comparatively weak animal, in order to show the brutal nature of the man in question.

- *'Sweet, sweet'*

Duffy's use of repetition enhances the impression that she is trying to impose her sweet nature on him.

- *'shouldered the cross of an albatross'*

This is a possible reference to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in which the young sea mariner, after shooting an albatross, a symbol of a Christian soul and good luck to the sailors, he is forced by his shipmates to wear it on his shoulders in the shape of a cross. 'Thetis' is transforming into the albatross, by having her 'wings/clipped', she is rendered powerless. Another interpretation is that the man is committing a sin which, in times of the ancient mariner, deserves punishment. Society does not always punish the act of 'clipping' the freedom of a partner. This line also emphasises her burden, as she must carry the 'cross of an albatross' as a woman.

- *'So I shopped.../Size 8. Snake. Big Mistake.'*

A 'snake' is both slim and smart. The short, succinct lines with internal rhyme are mocking both of the generalizations which men make regarding women, such as that all women enjoy the experience of shopping. This line also echoes the first line of the poem, and is mocking of

the female obsession over weight and appearance, especially care over such things in order to please men.

- *'Next I was roar, claw, 50 lb paw,/jungle-floored, meateater, raw,'*

Duffy's use of this rhyming and half-rhyming, frequently punctuated, sentence helps to quicken the pace of the poem, in order to convey the frustration, panic and anger of 'Thetis' as she continues to escape Peleus. Tired of trying to please him, she now starts to play at his game by assuming a ferocious creature.

- *'the ocean's opera singer.'*

This may be considered to be a reference to the legends of Lorelei, which originates from the Lorelei Rock, situated on the eastern bank of the Rhine. Due to the strong current in this narrow part of the river, many boat accidents have occurred on this part of the river. The heavy current and the rock with amplifying features cause a murmuring sound, inspiring many tales. The first to associate a female with the rock is Clemens Brentano, who, in his poem 'Zu Bacharach am Rhein', tells the story of the beautiful Lore Ley, who climbs the rock to watch for an unfaithful lover, and falls to her death. The rock is said to echo her name.

In his poem *Die Lore-Ley*, Heinrich Heine continues Clemens' original story. After her death, Lore Ley turns into a siren, who distracted seamen with her hypnotic singing, thus luring them to their deaths.

- *'his hook and his line and his sinker'*

Here, 'Thetis' is bitterly calling herself stupid. There is a sense that 'Thetis' has fallen for the man's tricks. This may also again be a reference to *Die Lore-Ley*, in which the men had no control over their actions, emphasizing the power and attraction a woman can have over a man, and also the behavior, both rational and irrational, when a man is attracted.

- *'raccoon, skunk, stoat,/to weasel, ferret, bat, mink, rat'*

'Thetis' assumes the form of animals which are known for their ability to survive despite being hunted. The list of animals hastens the pace of the poem, and highlights the frustration and desperation of 'Thetis'.

- *'stink'*

She cannot win whichever form she takes – Peleus now employs the 'stink of formaldehyde' against the 'stink' of the 'skunk'.

- *'I was wind, I was gas,/...hot air.../...hurricane'*

In this poem, 'Thetis' has become increasingly powerful in every new form she takes, another expression of her increasing fear that she will never be able to get away from Peleus. At first, she is a gentle bird, attempting to woo Peleus into releasing her. She then turns into one of the most powerful of birds, an albatross, in order to take to the skies, in an attempt to leave Peleus. After this fails, she then transforms into a slim and cunning snake, still attempting to please her 'charmer'.

It is in the fourth stanza where 'Thetis' gives up this game, and attempts to match the danger in Peleus 'eye' for 'eye'. She then changes to a host of sea creatures, and finally cunning land animals who are capable of escaping easily. Finally, in this penultimate stanza, she becomes ethereal and intangible, and cannot be grasped or held.

- *'the groom wore asbestos'*

'Thetis' is now married. Her last attempt at holding her own is to be harsh towards Peleus, however, even this does not work and has no effect on him, as her 'tongue' of 'flame' cannot penetrate his 'asbestos'.

- *'turned inside out'*

This line has dual meaning – it is a reference to the pain of childbirth, but it may also be referring to how much 'Thetis' has 'changed'. She has 'learned' to stop altering, as she has no effect on Peleus no matter what form she assumes. It is the birth of her son which changes her attitude towards him, and to masculinity in general. Duffy follows a fairly traditional view, in

which the female is regarded as part of nature, continuing life with the innate desire to give birth, while the man is concerned with his own destructive forces.

### **Language and Structure**

As in 'Little Red Cap', Duffy employs the use of enjambment (I shrank myself/to the size...) and internal rhymes (roar, claw). In 'Thetis', Duffy also uses end rhymes, such as 'sky/...eye' and 'paw/...raw/...jaw/...saw'. All these techniques help to hurry the poem, and also create a slightly more light-hearted tone. Duffy also uses abrupt pauses, such as 'up the hill of the sky./Why? To follow a ship'.

'Thetis' is written in free verse, creating an irregular rhythm, and is written in the form of eight sestets. These techniques give an create an impression of a poem full of action, in which 'Thetis' is fast-moving, looking out for even the faintest sign of danger, and heavily in pursuit.