

## Warming Her Pearls by Carol Ann Duffy

“Warming Her Pearls” is a free verse poem written by Scottish poet Carol Ann Duffy. Unable to express her desires, the poem's speaker channels her lust into the pearl necklace that her mistress directs her to wear, warming it to bring out the pearls' natural luster.

It is a sensual poem in which a servant girl reveals her love for her mistress, as she describes wearing her pearls throughout the day in order that they be ‘warm’ for her mistress to wear that evening. Apparently this was a common practice in Edwardian and Victorian England, because the lustre of pearls was seemingly improved by body heat. It was after hearing this piece of trivia from a friend that Duffy felt inspired to write this poem.

This poem is a dramatic monologue in which we are privy to the private thoughts of the servant girl, as she ruminates longingly about the lady for whom she works.

It is set out in six stanzas of four lines each. Most lines contain ten syllables although some are eleven or twelve. This could suggest an overflowing of emotions from the servant as she dreams of her mistress.

The language is rich in comparisons and contrast, tactile [imagery](#) and alliteration and assonance. The frequent use of caesura and enjambment mean that the rhythm is often disrupted, again indicating feelings of disquiet in the servant.

It is worth noting the connotations of the word mistress, meaning both one's superior or one's illicit sexual partner.

### **Analysis of the poem:**

The First Stanza describes the intimacy of the relationship between servant girl and mistress. It is impossible to read these words quickly; we feel how the girl savours the feeling of the necklace against her ‘own skin’. The use of the possessive pronouns placed together seem to load this act with meaning.

We have an immediate sense of the physical closeness between these women, although they are divided by class, their daily lives are entwined in the intimate gestures they share. Again there is sensuousness in the language:

My mistress/bids me wear them, warm them, until evening/

When I brush her hair.

The long alliterative ‘w’ sounds are soft and combined with the repetition of ‘them’ hints that the girl is aware of the pearls, reminding her of her mistress as she feels their weight against her skin. They make her feel close to her mistress as she wears them, as she has been instructed. Then she will transfer them over as she helps the lady of the house with her ‘toilette’ and place them around her ‘cool white throat’. (The fact the throat is white is another indication of class

distinction, since the upper classes did not need to work outdoors and thus remained pale, while others who toiled outdoors acquired a sun tan.)

It seems almost unnecessary to include the final sentence of this stanza: All day I think of/her, because we already have the impression that the mistress is the servant's object of desire, thus constantly monopolises her thoughts.

In the Second Stanza, the mention of Nest we read of the daily occupations of the lady. She has weighty decisions to take while she rests in the Yellow Room, 'which gown tonight?' The capitalisation of the rooms suggests that there are many in the house, perhaps there is also a 'Blue Room' and a 'Red Room'. Certainly there is wealth and prestige because she is 'contemplating silk or taffeta' which are luxurious fabrics. The image of the mistress as 'she fans herself' while her servant "work (s) willingly' could be seen as sensual. Does the mistress experience these erotic thoughts too, and is thus fanning herself to quell her feelings? Duffy now gives us the very sensual image of the servant as she works 'my slow heat entering each pearl.' There is something animalistic about this, as though she is marking the necklace with her warmth, her heat, her scent. The girl admits that she is happy to 'work willingly' such is her desire to please. The next line: 'Slack on my neck, her rope' suggests that the mistress has quite literally a hold on her servant, as she is in the position of power, but her servant is also so enthralled by her that she *wants* to do her bidding.

In the third Stanza the servant is open about her admiration, indeed fixation, with the lady. The opening short sentence 'She's beautiful' requires no elaboration; it is a fact. When she is out, dancing with 'tall men' her servant dreams that she will be distracted by her own scent upon the pearls. She wants her mistress to be 'puzzled by my faint, persistent scent'. This is a clever use of oxymoron to show the lingering quality of the musk which infuses the pearls. Just as she spends her time fantasizing about her mistress, she wants this feeling to be mutual. The strength of her attraction is mirrored by her scent which is evident despite the "French perfume'. The reader feels sorry for the servant girl, relegated to her 'attic bed' while her mistress is out dancing, dressed in her finery.

The [metaphor](#) used at the end of this stanza to describe the pearls as 'her milky stones' gives them another distinctly feminine, earthy quality. It makes them appear more porous, as though they will easily absorb her heat and warmth.

The Fourth Stanza shows us more of the intimate rituals that take place between the women:

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,

Watch the soft blush seep through her skin

The sibilant 's' sounds and long assonance of 'seep' suggest a sense of pleasure from this encounter.

The reader wonders how firm these strokes from a 'rabbit's foot' must be if they cause such a blush on the firm skin of her shoulders. She uses the [simile](#) 'like an indolent sigh' which suggests a sigh of pleasure. The experience is obviously a sensual one for the servant, and I am not wholly unconvinced that it isn't for her mistress too. It is now though that we get the first indications of

the servant's frustration. She wants to give voice to her passion, but cannot. There is something undeniably sensual in this image of her red lips caught in the looking-glass. They 'part' but she stops herself disclosing how she feels.

Fifth and Sixth Stanza opens with a two word sentence "Full moon". The image of a full moon is synonymous with sexuality and femininity. The mistress is delivered back to the grand house in her carriage and we imagine her servant listening as the door slams and imagining her every move. There is again a sense of ritual as she takes the jewels off and returns them to the case. There is the sense that the connection is lost, while the servant dreams of her she replaces the pearls and snaps the case shut, signifying that their relationship is nothing more than that of a typical mistress and servant.

'The use of enjambment here shows the girl relishing these images, before the ellipsis bring in a more wistful [tone](#) as she keenly feels her solitude. She is alone without even the comfort of the pearls which 'are cooling' downstairs. She is trapped in the torment of unrequited love, summed up effectively in the last sentence:

All night

I feel their absence and I burn.

The use of the word 'burn' shows the strength of her feelings and the acuteness of her pain, as does the word 'all', used here and in stanza one:

All day I think of her,

This is the love that dare not speak its name since it transgresses the boundaries of both class and sexuality.