

## Warming Her Pearls

- Carol Ann Duffy

### Relevant Background

- The poet Carol Ann Duffy was born in Glasgow. She grew up in a working class family that believed in social change and the politics of protest.
- One of her schoolteachers encouraged her to write poetry. So she published her first poems at sixteen.
- Duffy attended university in Liverpool.
- Then she lived in London for 15 years and now lives near Manchester.
- Carol Ann Duffy works as a lecturer in poetry. She writes plays and writes poetry for children also.
- Carol Ann Duffy likes to challenge normal views with new ideas and approaches.
- Carol Ann Duffy published 'Warming Her Pearls' in 1987. In this poem Duffy pretends to be a 19th century lady servant.
- This poem is not about Carol Ann Duffy. Duffy creates a character, a speaker who speaks the words of the poem.
- The speaker is a maid, a servant.

### Analysis

The speaker in the poem 'Warming Her Pearls' is a maid who has an unusual daily task: to wear her mistress' pearls during the day to warm them. It is one of her duties as a maid or servant. In the first stanza the speaker or maid describes how she transfers the pearls from her throat to her mistress' throat when she brushes her mistress' hair every evening at six o' clock. The feeling of the pearls on the servant's throat all day is a constant reminder of her mistress.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes the idle daily life of her mistress as she plans her evening outfit and fans herself. The mistress is obviously a socialite; that is someone who lives for parties. The speaker on the other hand works all day as her maid. The maid feels like she is a slave on a rope. The rope represents the power of the mistress over her. The pearl necklace forms the imaginary rope.

In the third stanza, the speaker considers her mistress' social life. She praises her mistress' beauty. As the maid lies in the attic at night she daydreams about the handsome men who dance with her mistress at parties. The maid has a funny thought then. She realises that her mistress' dancing partners are probably put off by the pearls because they carry her body odour from warming the pearls. This odour is not hidden by the expensive French perfume that the mistress wears. It is funny that the maid pictures the scene of men feeling confused by this persistent scent but the mistress never cops on to it. Thus, it is ironic or a funny contradiction that the pearl necklace is the very thing that prevents the mistress from gaining a lover or partner. The maid obviously likes this mischievous thought.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker applies various cosmetics on her mistress' skin, one of her main duties. She is aware of the lazy luxury of her mistress' lifestyle. There is a suggestion of a sigh. This suggests that behind all the fussing the idle mistress is not happy with her rich life. As the maid dusts on the powder she has an urge to tell her mistress something, most likely the reason for her lack of success with men. But the maids of posh ladies are not supposed to express opinions so she stays quiet. Perhaps the maid remains silent also because if her point about the disturbing scent is true, then it is a type of revenge for being used and abused as a servant. It is payback for the rope factor.

In the fifth stanza, the posh lady arrives home alone in her grand carriage. The speaker imagines her mistress undressing and going to bed after putting her precious pearls in their case. The scene in the opening line of a carriage in the full moon reminds us of Cinderella. The mistress is a rich Cinderella who doesn't win over a handsome prince.

In the final stanza, the maid lays awake thinking about the pearls cooling in their case. She is aware that the mistress is always alone. The maid misses the cool feeling they gave her throat. She burns either with a desire to have the pearls around her neck or with rage at the contrast between her lifestyle and her mistress' lifestyle.

### Themes

- **Self-deception**

The speaker portrays a vain mistress who devotes herself to socialising. The mistress is a posh lady whose most proud possession is her pearl necklace. The same pearls, designed to impress and attract handsome men, put off potential lovers because they carry her servant's body odour. The posh lady is unaware of this problem. The maid gains an unintended revenge against the mistress

who uses her only to beautify herself. The mistress is described as 'indolent' or lazy. Her only effort is when she fans herself. But the outcome of all her preparation and attempts to impress men is loneliness. She returns home alone from the ball every night.

- **Social class/Power**

The poem shows the power the upper class once had over the servant class. The servant sleeps in an attic, the mistress in a luxurious bedroom. The mistress is surrounded by wealth in the form of French perfume, pearls and silk. The mistress lives an idle life of luxury while the servant works. The servant seems to regard work as superior to the idleness and airs of the mistress as she does her work 'willingly'. The servant regards her mistress' pearls as a 'rope' around her own neck. The servant could express an opinion of the damage the mistress is doing to her social prospects with the pearls. But the strict division between the social classes requires her to remain silent. The servant admits that she burns with rage or jealousy in her room at night. But she also realises that the pearls give her a victory over her mistress. To the mistress they are a rope, a symbol of power. But the servant realises that her odour on the pearls leads to loneliness and social failure for the mistress.

- **Relationship**

The central relationship in the poem is between a servant speaker and her employer, maid and mistress. The maid performs humble tasks such as wearing her mistress' pearls. The word which shows the mistress' relationship to the maid is 'bids'; it means she orders the maid to do tasks. The maid prepares her mistress for her nightly social outings. She performs tasks of an intimate nature for her mistress, such as powdering her shoulders. Her mistress relates to her from a sense of power. The necklace she warms for the mistress is thus a sort of rope. But by the end of the poem this so-called rope is also a means to a secret revenge the maid gains in this relationship. The maid may not speak to her mistress as she performs her duties. She cannot communicate to her mistress the damage she knows her body heat is causing the mistress at the parties she attends. The maid is so fascinated by her mistress that she even imagines her undressing. Meanwhile the mistress goes out to great social events but remains a loner. She cannot establish relationships with the men she meets because of the smell of the servant off her white stones. The mistress fails to find love - due to the fact that she carries in her pearls the body odour of her maid. At the end of the poem the maid secretly burns with rage or jealousy at her mistress. But she also burns with satisfaction at the secret revenge she is gaining on her mistress.

### Style

- **Structure** - This is a carefully structured poem of six stanzas, each containing four lines.
- **Rhyme** - The poem doesn't have a rhyming pattern. This may suggest that the speaker doesn't feel there is harmony in her way of life.
- **Diction** - Some of the sentences are short, with words left out. This may suggest the maid's anger. The language is simple. Many sentences contain lists of verbs, like the second sentence: 'bids', 'wear', 'warm' and 'brush'.
- **Imagery** - The speaker provides various images of her working day. She gives us images of her fashionable mistress. She imagines pictures of handsome men dancing with her mistress. There are many sensual images, especially of touch. The central image of wearing the cool pearls on a throat appeals to our sense of touch, like the powder dusting on the shoulders. There is also a strong appeal to the sense of smell with the French perfume and the servant's persistent scent carried in the pearls. The description of rooms and dresses, the use of the colours yellow, white, blush and red all appeal to our eyes. The images are therefore very sensual.
- **Contrast (difference)** - The speaker contrasts the warm pearls to her mistress' cool throat. The speaker contrasts her own working day with her mistress' idle day, in the second stanza.
- **Mood/ Atmosphere** - The atmosphere is mainly one of luxury, with descriptions of fine clothes, perfume, fine rooms and evening balls.
- **Tone** - The tone is very ironical. The rich mistress gains the opposite effect from the pearls to the one she intends. The speaker is fully aware that the task she performs everyday for her mistress defeats its purpose. During the day, the pearls absorb her body odour. The mistress is beautiful and probably doesn't need to wear the warmed up pearls. Men who dance with the mistress get the maid's 'persistent scent' or body odour from the pearls and feel confused. The mysterious scent of the maid puzzles them and obviously puts them off relating to the beautiful lady who believes she can seduce them with her pearls. Unknown to the mistress, she is lonely due to the consequences of bidding her servant to warm her pearls. Thus the overall tone of the poem is very ironical. Another tone is evident in the last line. The tone of the maid in the final line is one of anger as she burns with hidden feelings.

(Source: <http://www.skool.ie/skool/homeworkzone.asp?id=3625>)