

Elvis's Twin Sister



SUMMARY

Folks: in my community of nuns, I garden, watch my plants sprout, and pray for the eternal life and health of rock music.

In this convent, I'm known as "Sister Presley." The head nun likes how I swing my hips, the way my brother, Elvis Presley, did on stage.

Sacred song floats over the herb garden. I hear, in Latin, "Our Lamb (Christ) has been sacrificed." I wear plain religious garb in dark colors; a cloth head-covering, tied with a lace band sewed by a new member of the convent; prayer beads, a keychain, and some solid blue suede shoes (the kind Elvis sang about).

I imagine this place as my version of Elvis's mansion, "Graceland"; it's literally a land of divine grace. It makes me grin my signature crooked grin (the kind Elvis also had).

Lord! I've survived. It's been a while since I was lonesome and miserable, the way Elvis sang about in "Heartbreak Hotel."

her brother's career, connecting *his* work to *hers*. Her unorthodox belief that "rock 'n' roll" has an "immortal soul" casts music as a spiritual pursuit—a powerful form of connection or communion with others and a way of expressing one's own deepest "soul." (Elvis also sang gospel, a more traditionally spiritual music, and acknowledged that rock and gospel had common musical/cultural roots.)

Playing on the name of her brother's famous mansion, she imagines her convent as its own kind of "Graceland," a literal "land of grace." In doing so, she implies that the name of his mansion was no accident; he, too, was seeking a form of "grace," as in spiritual virtue or healing. Even her exclamation "Lawdy"—an allusion to the Elvis song "[Lawdy Miss Clawdy](#)"—draws a link between Elvis's secular music and a nun's spiritual life. ("Lawdy" is a variation of "Lord.") Again, she's implying that there's common ground between her brother's world and hers: there's something rock 'n' roll about spirituality, and there's something spiritual about rock 'n' roll.

Broadly, these details suggest that the artistic and spiritual life, or the secular icon and the religious worshipper, have more in common than one might expect. One of the quotes that introduces the poem ("Elvis is alive and she's female") comes from another rock icon, Madonna. Since the stage name "Madonna" [alludes](#) to the Virgin Mary, this detail playfully links rock with religion and implies that Elvis wasn't alone in bridging the two. The line Sister Presley quotes from a hymn in Latin ("*Pascha nostrum immolatus est*": "Our lamb [Christ] is sacrificed") may also hint that Elvis, who died young, was a kind of martyr to his own talent and fame. Perhaps both art and religion attract spiritual seekers who occasionally go astray, die tragically, and so on.

Finally, Sister Presley hints at her own painful past by alluding to the Elvis song "Heartbreak Hotel." Romantic disappointment ("walk[ing] / down Lonely Street") may have helped convince her to renounce worldly life. The implication is that heartbreak can drive people as easily toward faith as art. Human suffering is universal; private worship and creative expression are two different but related ways of responding to it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-30



THEMES



MUSIC, ART, AND SPIRITUALITY

"Elvis's Twin Sister" is a dramatic monologue written from the perspective of an imagined twin sister of rock icon Elvis Presley. This sister is "alive and well," living as a nun in a convent while still appreciating the music her brother made. There's a gentle [irony](#) to this appreciation, since religious conservatives decried rock 'n' roll as the "devil's music" in Elvis's day. But "Sister Presley" sees no conflict between the passion of rock music—or art in general—and the introspection of the spiritual life. In fact, the poem implies that art and spirituality exist in deep harmony with each other.

Elvis's twin is his double in many ways. Though she's an anonymous nun rather than a world-famous rock star, she shares his love of music, style, and sensuality. She "pray[s] for the immortal soul / of rock 'n' roll" rather than praying in a conventionally Christian fashion. "Sister Presley" is clearly a music fan! Unlike Elvis, she wears a nun's restrained clothing, "simple habit" and all. But like Elvis—and unlike most nuns—she also wears flamboyant "blue suede shoes." Referring to Elvis's onstage gyrations, she claims that a senior nun "digs the way I move my hips / just like my brother." She may be in a convent, but she's a kind of local sex symbol, just as her brother was a global one. All of these details link her work with her brother's, suggesting an unexpected similarity between the worlds of religion and rock.

At the same time, "Sister Presley" refers to spiritual elements in



LOVE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

"Elvis's Twin Sister" appears in *The World's Wife*, a book of monologues voiced by female relatives of famous men from history, literature, and myth. The book

consistently comments on gender, and this poem is no exception. Since Elvis's twin resembles him in most ways, gender aside, the poem imagines the kind of career an Elvis-like woman of Elvis's time might have had. Whereas her brother was known and heard around the world, she's anonymous, cloistered, and quiet. The poem hints that, as a woman, she may have lacked his opportunity to express her passion and sexuality, and that this frustration may have informed her choice to become a nun. Unlike Elvis, however, she's grown old and found peace, so the poem also reflects the downside of the kind of swaggering masculinity Elvis embodied.

"Sister Presley" is a near-identical twin of Elvis Presley, apart from her gender. The poem implies that this difference helped determine her very different life path. She loves rock 'n' roll like her brother, can "move [her] hips / just like [her] brother" did onstage, and shares her brother's "trademark slow lopsided smile." She's also attractive to women in the same way her brother was—even "The Reverend Mother / digs" her! It's implied that she's attracted to women as well (she's noticed how the senior nun responds to her, and they may even share an illicit romance).

Her talents, interests, and sexual charisma would seem to lend themselves to a career like her brother's. Yet while she's Elvis's double in most ways, she's wound up in a virtually opposite career (anonymous nun vs. celebrity sex symbol). Gender appears to have made the crucial difference: society didn't afford women of her generation the chance to express themselves in the ways Elvis did.

In a sense, then, Elvis represents what Sister Presley might have been as a man, and she represents what *he* might have been as a woman. The poem suggests that this gender gap is changing (the quote from rock star Madonna may be evidence of this), but that it's contributed to her "Heartbreak," and possibly his, too. Still, Sister Presley is "alive and well," unlike her brother, and it's been a "Long time since" she suffered her heartbreak. By contrast, Elvis's troubles drove him to addiction, career struggles, and early death—so perhaps the triumphant masculine sexuality he supposedly represented wasn't so glorious after all. In fact, it was pretty "Lonely," as his quoted song lyrics suggest. He might have felt unable to inhabit more traditionally feminine traits and roles, including the gentle spirituality his "Sister" emanates.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-3
- Lines 6-10
- Lines 24-30



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

*Are you lonesome ...
... Madonna*

The poem is prefaced by a double [epigraph](#): two quotes that help introduce its subject and themes.

The first consists of lyrics from Elvis Presley's song "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" (written in 1927, recorded by Elvis in 1960): "*Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight?*" These lyrics might relate to the poem in multiple ways. They might suggest that, in this dramatic monologue, "Elvis's Twin Sister" is addressing fans who "miss" Elvis after his death. Together with the second epigraph, they might also suggest that anyone who "miss[es]" Elvis can take some comfort in the survival of his very similar "Twin Sister." Finally, they establish loneliness and pain as important themes in the poem (the final [stanza](#) circles back to these emotions).

The second epigraph paraphrases something the pop star Madonna reportedly said about country/pop artist k. d. lang: "*Elvis is alive and she's female.*" (The actual reported quote was, "Elvis was alive—and she's beautiful!") Madonna's point was that Elvis himself may be dead, but his style, charisma, legacy, etc. live on in the work of a female musician. This poem playfully literalizes her quote, imagining that Elvis had a nearly identical, but female, twin, who survives and carries on his legacy. (The real Elvis had an identical twin *brother* who died at birth, so the poem's fanciful [conceit](#) draws indirectly on biographical fact.)

LINES 1-5

*In the convent, ...
... rock 'n' roll.*

Lines 1-5 introduce the poem's speaker and [setting](#). The speaker has already been named in the title: she's the fictional "Twin Sister" of rock star Elvis Presley (1935-1977). As the voice of this dramatic monologue, she's describing her life—which, the poem implies, has continued well beyond her brother's. (Again, in real life, Elvis far outlived his twin brother, who was stillborn.) Not only has Elvis's sister outlived him by many years, she's led a radically different life. Rather than becoming a world-famous rock star, she's joined a "convent": a community of Christian nuns living a cloistered life in a monastery.

At first, then, it might seem as if the poem is maximizing the contrast between the twins. Rather than a rich, rebellious sex symbol with a tumultuous love life, Elvis's sister is a nun who's sworn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Rather than touring as a celebrity, she lives in sheltered anonymity. Rather than burning out and dying young, she's become a contented older woman, "tend[ing] the gardens" of the monastery and "watch[ing] things grow." The gardens seem to [symbolize](#) life,

peace, and renewal—things that eluded Elvis as his career stalled and he battled various addictions. They may even represent a kind of earthly paradise.

But wait: is the contrast that stark, after all? Elvis's sister—presumably born, like him, in Mississippi—seems to share her brother's southern drawl and lingo ("y'all"). And unlike most nuns, who pray for their own and other people's salvation, she "pray[s] for the immortal soul / of rock 'n' roll." She loves the kind of music her brother made so much that she prays for its durability and vitality. (There's also a [pun](#) here on the related, overlapping genre of "soul" music.) Apparently, just as Elvis mixed a little religion into rock 'n' roll—he sang gospel as well as rock—Elvis's sister has mixed some rock 'n' roll into her religion. Despite their contrasting genders and vocations, these twins will ultimately seem more alike than different.

These opening lines establish the poem's form: five-line [stanzas](#) that contain rhymes, but follow no consistent [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). This combination of looseness and musicality, "free" and "formal" verse, has obvious relevance to a poem involving rock music! (Rock songs, too, typically contain rhyming verses of consistent length, but they also contain rhythmic changes, improvisations, etc.)

LINES 6-10

*They call me ...
... like my brother.*

Lines 6-10 add new details about the speaker. She refers to herself by her name within the convent: "Sister Presley." It's traditional for nuns to call one another "Sister" (or "Mother" for a nun of higher rank), but this title also, of course, underscores the speaker's status as the *sister* of Elvis Presley.

This [stanza](#) contains the speaker's only direct reference to her brother—and it's a surprising one. She [alludes](#) to the hip gyrations and pelvic thrusts that Elvis famously incorporated into his stage routine:

The Reverend Mother
digs the way I move my hips
just like my brother.

This is pretty salacious for a nun! Nuns are supposed to take vows of chastity, of course. But [ironically](#), Sister Presley seems to be a kind of local sex symbol within her convent, just as Elvis was a global one on the stage and screen. At the very least, the head of her convent, the "Reverend Mother" or Mother Superior, "digs" her sexy moves. (Notice the speaker's use of the youth slang of the rock 'n' roll era—another link between her and her brother.) Adding to the irony, conservative Christians of Elvis's day often frowned on his sexually suggestive dancing, and on the sexual freedom of rock 'n' roll culture in general. Some even branded rock the Devil's music. But in Sister Presley's convent, the sexy "way [she] move[s] her

hips" (while dancing? in the bedroom, as part of an illicit relationship?) is not only tolerated but admired.

The suggestion of lesbian romance here might also hint at Sister Presley's backstory *prior* to joining the convent. It's never spelled out why she turned to this isolated religious life. But perhaps, in an era of deep misogyny and homophobia, Sister Presley found some comfort in withdrawing from a society that didn't understand her (and joining a women-only community that did).

Like much of the poem, this stanza is filled with lively [assonance](#):

Sister Presley here.
The Reverend Mother
digs the way I move my hips
just like my brother.

Short /e/, short /i/, long /i/, and short /u/ assonance join with [end rhyme](#) ("Mother"/"brother") to boost the musicality of the lines. And why wouldn't the poet want to make these lines as musical as possible? The speaker's comparing herself to Elvis!

LINES 11-15

*Gregorian chant ...
... darkish hues,*

Lines 11-15 provide new details about the poem's [setting](#) and speaker. Sister Presley notes the "Gregorian chant"—Christian sacred song or plainsong, dating from the Middle Ages—that "drifts out across the herbs" of the monastery's garden. She quotes a fragment of one chant, part of a traditional Easter hymn: "*Pascha nostrum immolatus est...*" In Latin, this means "Our Lamb is sacrificed"—the "Lamb" being Christ.

This [allusion](#) may have some connection to Elvis's story, the speaker's, or both. (Its prominence in this short poem suggests that it's not just an incidental detail.) It may be suggesting that there's something martyr-like about Elvis's rise and fall—his sudden rise to the peak of celebrity, subsequent career struggles, and early, drug-related death. In other words, the poem may be subtly casting Elvis as a tragic hero, sacrificed on the altar of fame. Alternatively, or additionally, it might be implying that Sister Presley has saintly or martyr-like qualities. She now leads a quiet religious life, but the final [stanza](#) hints at her troubles in the outside world—some loneliness or "Heartbreak" that drove her to the convent.

The "chant" detail has another, more straightforward function too: it's a song in a poem full of music! Religious music seems as important to Sister Presley as rock. That's no surprise, since it was extremely important to Elvis, too (and they're supposed to come from the same family). Church gospel was Elvis's first musical influence, and he recorded popular gospel albums as well as rock albums throughout his career. In quoting the "chant," then, the poem/speaker draws another link between

rock and religion, secular and sacred art.

At the end of the stanza, Sister Presley begins describing her nun's "habit," or religious attire. She calls it "simple" and dominated by "darkish hues"—as is conventional for a nun. In the next stanza, however, she'll mention an unorthodox accessory.

LINES 16-20

*a wimple with ...
... blue suede shoes.*

Lines 16–20 round out the list of Sister Presley's clothes and accessories. The list is structured through [repetition](#), particularly [anaphora](#):

a wimple with a novice-sewn
lace band, a rosary,
a chain of keys,
a pair of good and sturdy
blue suede shoes.

This series of [parallel](#) clauses—each introduced by "a"—layers on detail after detail, saving the most surprising item for last. It's a logical and useful way of painting a character portrait, bit by bit.

Like the "darkish hues" mentioned in the previous stanza, most of these items are standard things for a nun to wear or carry. The "wimple" is a nun's cloth head covering; a "lace band," sewed by a "novice" (new, prospective member of the convent), holds it in place. The "rosary" is the string of prayer beads nuns and other Catholic worshippers traditionally carry. The "chain of keys" is less standard, though it's certainly something a nun might have on her person as she goes about her duties in the monastery.

Finally comes the surprise: Sister Presley is wearing "blue suede shoes," in an homage to the [Elvis song of the same name!](#) This is *not* standard nun's wear; it's a personal touch, expressive of the speaker's devotion to rock as well as religion. Suede shoes are worn for style rather than function, but Sister Presley, as a practical-minded nun, ensures that her pair is as "good and sturdy" as possible.

On closer inspection, there's some wit attached to other items on the list as well. The "lace band"—an odd detail to zero in on—rhymes with "Graceland" (the name of Elvis's mansion) in the following [stanza](#). Meanwhile, "keys" [puns](#) on the musical type of keys (clusters of pitches, as in "the key of F"). Elvis and his sister may be in very different vocations, but they've both worked with keys of a kind, and they've both rocked blue suede shoes.

LINES 21-25

*I think of ...
... on my face.*

In lines 21–25, Sister Presley expresses satisfaction with her life in the convent. In fact, she compares it to her own version of "Graceland": the name of Elvis's estate in Memphis, Tennessee. Graceland has become famous partly for its opulence and partly because it's where Elvis died (at the early age of 42). It's now a museum and tourist destination for Elvis fans.

Graceland acquired its name before Elvis bought it; it didn't reflect Elvis's spirituality in any direct way. But Sister Presley recognizes, and plays on, the spiritual resonance of the name. Her convent is her "Graceland," she says, in that it's "a land of grace"—meaning divine grace, sanctity, blessedness, etc. It's sort of a [pun](#), except that she's highlighting [connotations](#) that were probably intended in the original naming. Unlike her brother, who died middle-aged and troubled in his mansion, she's found a graceful, peaceful old age in her convent.

In fact, she says the place "puts my trademark slow lopsided smile / back on my face." This line is a reference to Elvis's own famous [lopsided grin](#) (though they can't be strictly identical, these twins apparently look a lot alike!). Again, Sister Presley is happy with her life as a nun; it puts her smile "back" on her face, implying that she was unhappy before coming here.

At 10 syllables, line 24 is the longest in the poem, so it seems as "slow" as the "smile" itself. Readers might also wonder how Sister Presley, being the *non*-famous twin, could have a "trademark" smile. Is the poem suggesting here that she's really Elvis in disguise—playing on fan theories that Elvis never died? (This would give a whole new meaning to the epigraph: "*Elvis is alive and she's female.*") The poem may be winking at this interpretation, but since it appears in a book (*The World's Wife*) full of female speakers and feminist themes, the speaker is probably supposed to be an actual, female twin of Elvis. Her smile may simply be her "trademark"—something she's known for—among friends, family, other nuns, etc.

LINES 26-30

*Lawdy. ...
... towards Heartbreak Hotel.*

Lines 26–30 close the poem with a couple more Elvis references—as well as a hint at the speaker's backstory. Sister Presley begins with a seemingly simple interjection: "Lawdy" (a drawled version of "Lordy"). Elvis fans will recognize this as a nod to the song "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," which he covered in 1956. It's also an informal invocation of the Lord, and therefore another of the poem's links between religion and rock 'n' roll.

For Sister Presley, the interjection sounds like a sigh of relief. She follows it by affirming that "I'm alive and well"—another poignant contrast with her brother, who died young from health issues related to addiction. Sister Presley has managed to live on and thrive. She ends with a final [allusion](#) to her brother's music:

Long time since I walked
down Lonely Street
towards Heartbreak Hotel.

This is a paraphrase of the lyrics to "Heartbreak Hotel," a song Elvis covered in 1956:

Well, since my baby left me
Well, I found a new place to dwell
Well, it's down at the end of Lonely Street
At Heartbreak Hotel
Where I'll be, I'll be so lonely, baby
Well, I'm so lonely
I'll be so lonely, I could die

Sister Presley notes that it's been a "Long time" since she felt this way. She once shared the kind of loneliness and "Heartbreak" her brother sang about, but she's made peace with it and moved beyond it. She didn't die of her broken heart; she lived and found earthly "grace."

These Elvis lyrics about loneliness also tie back to the poem's first [epigraph](#), which quotes *other* Elvis lyrics about "lonesome[ness]." So the poem comes full circle, suggesting that the pain Elvis helped translate into music is universal, but that redemptive joy is possible as well.



SYMBOLS



THE GARDEN

Gardens are typically [symbols](#) of life, nurturing, and renewal. They also carry religious symbolism, particularly (in this context) through their association with the biblical Garden of Eden. They are often used to represent paradise or a similarly idyllic state. All of these symbolic associations are present in Duffy's poem.

The "gardens" mentioned in lines 1-3 lie on the grounds of the monastery where the speaker lives. "Tend[ing]" them seems to be one of her duties as a member of her convent. Presumably, "the herbs" in line 12 are one of the things she "grow[s]" in these gardens. Unlike her brother, she has chosen a secluded life, close to nature and away from most of humanity. She seems happy in these gardens; they represent a kind of paradise for her, after the "Heartbreak" of the world she's left behind. Unlike Elvis, who died young, she's "alive and well" here: they offer life, sanctity, and healing. The sacred church music ("Gregorian chant") floating over them reinforces their connection with the Christian idea of Eden.

Interestingly, the Garden of Eden is also linked with an ideal of harmony between men and women (think Adam and Eve before the [Fall](#)). This association matters in a poem that

comments on gender divisions. The gardens here are located in a convent, where female nuns take vows of chastity and cloister themselves away from men. [Ironically](#), then, *this* speaker's version of Eden is an all-female environment.

Moreover, in Western culture, gardening (like many other nurturing activities) is often framed as a traditionally feminine pursuit. The poem's symbolism may be suggesting, then, that such pursuits have given "Elvis's Twin Sister" a kind of idyllic peace her traditionally masculine brother never found.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "In the convent, y'all, / I tend the gardens, / watch things grow,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Gregorian chant / drifts out across the herbs,"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem contains numerous [allusions](#) involving religion, rock 'n' roll, or both.

For example, the poem's two [epigraphs](#) refer to an Elvis song and a Madonna quote. (As in the rock star Madonna, not the Virgin Mary.) The first quotes the lyrics of a song Elvis recorded in 1960 called "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" The second paraphrases what Madonna reportedly said upon meeting pop artist k. d. lang, whose style and talent reminded her of Elvis. (The actual reported quote was, "Elvis is alive—and she's beautiful!")

These allusions frame "Sister Presley's" monologue as a testimonial from a female version of Elvis—his imagined, very similar twin. The lyrics may also suggest that Sister Presley is addressing fans who "miss," or feel "lonesome" for, her brother—their now-dead hero.

And all of this comes before the poem has properly begun! The allusions keep raining down from there. Lines 4-5 ("pray for the immortal soul / of rock 'n' roll") pun on "soul" music—a genre related to rock—while recalling other references, such as these lyrics from Don McLean's 1971 rock song "[American Pie](#)":

Do you believe in rock 'n' roll?
Can music save your mortal soul?

"American Pie," too, mixes rock references with religious language, and one of its verses is widely believed to refer to Elvis (by his nickname, "The King").

The Latin phrase in line 13, "*Pascha nostrum immolatus est*," comes from a traditional Easter hymn, and translates to "Our Lamb (i.e., Christ) is sacrificed." This choice of quotes may

suggest that Elvis, the speaker, or both are martyrs of a kind. After all, Elvis died young—overdosing on drugs under the intense pressures of fame—and Sister Presley has withdrawn from the world's heartbreak to join a convent.

The last three [stanzas](#) pile on several more Elvis references, alluding to his song "Blue Suede Shoes" (line 20), his "Graceland" mansion (lines 21-23), his song "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" (line 26), and his song "Heartbreak Hotel" (lines 28-30). Clearly, Sister Presley loves her brother's music and finds both its joy and heartbreak relevant to her own life.

Finally, the poem's overall concept may be a winking reference to the Gospel of Matthew (16:18), in which Jesus founds the Christian church "upon a rock." The speaker's belief system certainly incorporates Christianity and rock music alike.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight?"
- **Before Line 1:** "Elvis is alive and she's female / . / — / Madonna"
- **Lines 4-5:** "pray for the immortal soul / of rock 'n' roll."
- **Line 13:** "Pascha nostrum immolatus est..."
- **Line 20:** "blue suede shoes."
- **Lines 21-22:** "I think of it / as Graceland here,"
- **Line 26:** "Lawdy."
- **Lines 28-30:** "Long time since I walked / down Lonely Street / towards Heartbreak Hotel."

IRONY

The poem's portrait of "Sister Presley" is full of gentle [irony](#). It builds off Madonna's paraphrased remark that "*Elvis is alive and she's female*" (referring to the pop star k. d. lang). This quip, in itself, ironically overturns expectations: it pretends to endorse the fan conspiracy theory that Elvis lived beyond 1977, only to reframe this claim by suggesting that Elvis's *legacy* lives on through the work of a female artist. The poet then adds an extra ironic twist or two: she imagines a literal female version of Elvis—his near-identical "Twin"—who's "alive and well" and walking around somewhere. Maximizing the situational irony, she imagines that this female Elvis is not a famous, debauched rock singer but an anonymous, squeaky-clean nun—and suggests that these two roles have more in common than one might suspect.

Of course, "Sister Presley" is an unconventional nun. She "pray[s] for the immortal soul / of rock 'n' roll" rather than (or in addition to) the salvation of individuals, and she boasts Elvis's "blue suede shoes" and sexy dance moves. These details are especially ironic because conservative Christians often denounced Elvis (and rock as a whole, whose sexual suggestiveness they considered sinful) during his lifetime. One wouldn't expect a nun of Sister Presley's generation to embrace

rock 'n' roll—or a rock fan to become a nun—but, again, the poem playfully flips these expectations. It consistently highlights the spiritual side of rock and seems to cast unorthodox spirituality as a little bit rock 'n' roll, too.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "Elvis is alive and she's female / . / — / Madonna"
- **Lines 4-5:** "pray for the immortal soul / of rock 'n' roll."
- **Lines 8-10:** "The Reverend Mother / digs the way I move my hips / just like my brother."
- **Lines 19-20:** "a pair of good and sturdy / blue suede shoes."
- **Line 27:** "I'm alive and well."

PUN

The poem is sprinkled with [puns](#), which contribute to its playful, witty style.

The word "soul" in line 4, for example, refers to the Christian concept of the *soul* as a divine essence, but it also invokes the musical genre called *soul*. Like R&B and gospel, which gave rise to it, soul is a genre with deep roots in Black American musical history. It developed in tandem with and influenced rock 'n' roll.

The pun in line 18 is especially subtle. The speaker mentions that she carries "a chain of keys," presumably to open doors around the monastery. It might seem like a throwaway detail, but notice that Elvis also worked with keys—the musical kind. (A key is a group of musical pitches, as in the phrase "a song in the key of C major.") So this pun-word marks another small connection between sister and brother.

Sister Presley then spells out the double meaning inherent in "Graceland" (line 22). This is the name of Elvis's mansion, which is now a museum and tourist spot for Elvis fans. For her, the convent is its own Graceland, or "land of grace"—as in divine grace, spiritual healing, etc. However, this may be less a pun than a way of highlighting [connotations](#) already present in the original name. Elvis's property was named after the daughter (Grace Toof) of its original owner—but "Graceland" was probably meant to suggest the spiritual kind of grace, too.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "pray for the immortal soul / of rock 'n' roll."
- **Line 18:** "a chain of keys,"
- **Lines 21-23:** "I think of it / as Graceland here, / a land of grace."

REPETITION

The poem uses frequent [repetition](#), particularly [anaphora](#), in lines 14-23:

I wear a simple habit,
[...]
a wimple with a novice-sewn
lace band, a rosary,
a chain of keys,
a pair of good and sturdy
[...]
I think of it
as Graceland here,
a land of grace.

Over the course of this dramatic monologue, the poet is creating a character. These simple repetitions help her layer character detail on character detail, building a look, a voice, and an identity for the fictional "Sister Presley." Meanwhile, the reframing of "Graceland" as "a land of grace" highlights spiritual [connotations](#) in the name of Elvis's mansion, linking Elvis's career with his "Twin's" spiritual life.

Finally, while it's not an exact repetition, the word "lonesome" in the poem's first [epigraph](#) ("Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight?") parallels the word "Lonely" in its closing lines ("Long time since I walked / down Lonely Street / towards Heartbreak Hotel"). In each case, the poem is quoting or paraphrasing the lyrics of Elvis songs ("Are You Lonesome Tonight?" and "Heartbreak Hotel," respectively). This near-echo helps bring the poem full circle, emphasizing the loneliness that informed Elvis's singing and personal struggles—and that also seems to have driven the speaker toward a religious life.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "I"
- **Line 16:** "a"
- **Line 17:** "a"
- **Line 18:** "a"
- **Line 19:** "a"
- **Line 21:** "I"
- **Line 22:** "Graceland"
- **Line 23:** "land," "grace"

ASSONANCE

"Elvis's Twin Sister" is a poem about music, so it's no coincidence that its language is highly musical. One of its major musical effects is [assonance](#). In fact, this device appears in every [stanza](#), and a number of stanzas also feature [internal rhyme](#).

Listen to the assonance in the second stanza, for instance:

Sister Presley here.
The Reverend Mother
digs the way I move my hips
just like my brother.

The mesh of short /e/, short /i/, long /i/, and short /u/ sounds gives these lines a rich, lyrical texture. Fittingly enough, the language becomes more musical just as Sister Presley compares her dance "move[s]" with her brother's.

Assonance also ties together individual phrases in the poem, such as "blue suede shoes" (borrowed from an Elvis song) and "lopsided smile." Meanwhile, the poem's rhyming is subtle but clever. Notice how "simple" in line 14 rhymes with "wimple" in the following stanza, and how "lace band" in line 17 rhymes with "Graceland" five lines later. These unusual rhymes add not only to the poem's musicality but also to its playful wit. They make the language buoyant and fun in the way early rock 'n' roll tunes often were.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "immortal soul"
- **Line 7:** "Presley"
- **Line 8:** "Reverend"
- **Line 9:** "digs," "I," "my," "hips"
- **Line 10:** "just," "like my," "brother"
- **Line 14:** "simple"
- **Line 16:** "wimple"
- **Line 17:** "lace band"
- **Line 20:** "blue," "shoes"
- **Line 21:** "think," "it"
- **Line 22:** "Graceland"
- **Line 23:** "land," "grace"
- **Line 24:** "lopsided smile"
- **Line 27:** "I'm alive"
- **Line 28:** "time," "I"



VOCABULARY

Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight? (Before Line 1) - Lyrics from the song "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" (covered by Elvis Presley in 1960).

Madonna (Before Line 1) - The stage name of pop icon Madonna Louise Ciccone (b. 1958), known as "The Queen of Pop." The quote here is loosely based on what Madonna is reported to have said after meeting country/pop artist k. d. lang: "Elvis is alive—and she's beautiful!"

Elvis (Before Line 1) - Elvis Presley (1935-1977), American rock 'n' roll icon, sometimes called "The King of Rock 'n' Roll" or simply "The King."

Y'all (Line 1) - American (particularly southern American) slang for "you all" or "all of you." It's not clear who, specifically, Sister Presley is addressing: perhaps the poem's readers or Elvis's community of fans.

Convent (Line 1) - A Christian religious order; specifically, a community of nuns under religious vows of chastity, poverty,

and obedience.

Sister Presley (Lines 6-7) - Nuns traditionally refer to one another by the title "Sister" (or "Mother" for a high-ranking nun such as an abbess). This phrase is also a humorous reminder that the speaker is Elvis Presley's sister.

The Reverend Mother (Line 8) - The head nun (abbess or prioress) of the abbey or monastery; can also be titled "Mother Superior."

The way I move my hips (Lines 9-10) - Elvis was famous for his onstage [hip gyrations](#) and pelvic thrusts. Seen as sexually suggestive, they caused controversy early in his career, earning him the nickname "Elvis the Pelvis."

Gregorian chant (Line 11) - A style of Christian liturgical chant or sacred song, dating to the 9th or 10th century CE and traditionally sung by choirs in churches and monasteries.

Pascha nostrum immolatus est (Line 13) - A Latin phrase from a traditional Easter hymn, meaning "Our lamb [Christ] is sacrificed."

Habit (Line 14) - Here meaning the traditional [attire](#) of a nun or religious sister.

Novice-sewn (Lines 16-17) - Means that the "lace band" (line 17) has been stitched by a *novice* in the nuns' order: a prospective member of their religious community, one who has not yet taken formal vows.

Wimple (Lines 16-17) - A traditional cloth [headcovering](#) worn by nuns.

Rosary (Lines 16-17) - A string of beads used to count prayers in Catholic worship. An element of a nun's traditional "habit" (see line 14).

Graceland (Lines 21-23) - A reference to Elvis Presley's mansion in Memphis, Tennessee, now an Elvis-centered [museum](#) and popular tourist attraction.

Lopsided (Line 24) - Asymmetrical; crooked.

Lawdy (Line 26) - A variation of "Lordy," used as an interjection and spoken in a southern American accent (like Elvis's). Also an [allusion](#) to "[Lawdy Miss Clawdy](#)," a song Elvis recorded in 1956.

Lonely Street / Heartbreak Hotel (Lines 28-30) - A reference to the lyrics of "[Heartbreak Hotel](#)," one of Elvis's hit songs (1956):

Well, since my baby left me
Well, I found a new place to dwell
Well, it's down at the end of Lonely Street
At Heartbreak Hotel

consistent [meter](#), but most of the lines are short, ranging from three to seven syllables. (There are two exceptions: line 13 has nine syllables and line 24 has ten.) The poem [rhymes](#), but there's no consistent [rhyme scheme](#); the placement of rhymes varies across the [cinquains](#).

This combination of formal elements adds up to a structure that's fairly loose—almost [free verse](#)—yet highly musical. These qualities make perfect sense for a poem about rock 'n' roll! Rock songs also tend to feature brief, rhyming verses of consistent length. But they're more free-flowing than many older styles of music; they incorporate spontaneity and exciting rhythmic changes. (In this way, they're more like jazz and R&B—two genres that helped give birth to rock—than the traditional religious music you'd find in a convent.) The dynamic playfulness of the poem's form contributes to its celebration of rock and Elvis.

METER

"Elvis's Twin Sister" is *almost* a [free verse](#) poem. It has no regular [meter](#) or consistent [rhyme scheme](#). At the same time, it's highly rhythmic and musical, like the rock music it celebrates. In a sense, it combines "formal" and "free" verse; not only does it contain rhymes throughout, but some of its lines follow a kind of disguised meter. Look at lines 14-15, for example:

I wear a simple habit,
darkish hues,

Though they're broken up to look like free verse, these lines form a perfect iambic pentameter line if you combine them into one. That is, they follow a five-beat, "da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm: "I wear | a sim- | ple hab- | it, dark- | ish hues."

This same effect occurs in lines 19-20, which also complete a rhyme with lines 14-15:

a pair of good and sturdy
blue suede shoes.

It's the same rhythm: "a pair | of good | and stur- | dy blue | suede shoes."

In a sense, then, the poem has it both ways: it embraces both the spontaneity of free verse and the songlike qualities of metrical verse. Again, that combination makes sense in a tribute to rock music!

RHYME SCHEME

The poem features [rhyme](#) throughout but has an inconsistent [rhyme scheme](#). In the first [stanza](#), for example, the fourth and fifth lines rhyme ("soul"/"roll"), while the first line adds a [slant rhyme](#) ("y'all"). In the second stanza, the third and fifth lines rhyme ("Mother"/"brother"). The fifth line of the third stanza



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of six cinquains, or five-line [stanzas](#). It has no

rhymes with the fifth line of the fourth ("hues"/"shoes"). The inconsistency continues from there. However, the final line of each stanza is always part of a rhyme pair.

The rhymes add musicality to a poem that's all about music. At the same time, their inconsistency gives the poem some of the spontaneity of rock, in particular. The verse manages to be partly "formal" and partly "[free](#)," reflecting its joint focus on religion and art, its incorporation of traditional hymns and modern pop. (Elvis's own music was a similar kind of hybrid, combining rock and gospel influences.)



SPEAKER

The speaker is named in the title: she is "Elvis's Twin Sister," a fictional sibling of rock legend Elvis Presley. In real life, Elvis had an identical twin—a brother named Jesse—but he died at birth. The poem imagines that the twin had been a girl instead and that she lived to adulthood and became a nun. At the same time, the poem gives her many of the traits and quirks that made her brother famous, including his dance moves ("the way I move my hips"), facial expressions ("my trademark slow lopsided smile"), and passion for "rock 'n' roll." She even wears his signature "blue suede shoes."

It's not clear exactly why she joined this "convent" and devoted herself to a religious life, especially given her Elvis-like talents and interests. However, the poem offers some intriguing hints. For example, the second [stanza](#) implies some degree of same-sex attraction between the speaker and the "Reverend Mother." Perhaps the speaker withdrew from the world outside the convent because it didn't accept her sexuality (unlike the head nun in this particular convent), or because taking a vow of chastity (as nuns must) helped her cope with this aspect of herself. Alternatively, or in addition, she may have felt happier in a community of women only. If "Sister Presley" shares her brother's attraction to women, her era would not have allowed her to express this attraction in the open way her brother did, so she may have gravitated toward a radically different life.

In general, it's clear that she was unhappy outside the convent, owing in part to romantic disappointment. Lines 27-30 imply that her life as a nun has been a welcome escape from "Lonel[iness]" and "Heartbreak."



SETTING

The poem is [set](#) in a "convent," or a community of Christian nuns. "Convent" can also refer to the building and grounds where the community lives, which may also be called an abbey or monastery. Traditionally, nuns take vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience and devote their lives to worship and good works. A convent is a cloistered environment where nuns have limited interaction with the outside world.

The convent in this poem grows "gardens" (specifically, "herb" gardens), and "tend[ing]" them is one of the speaker's responsibilities. The head of the convent, the Mother Superior or "Reverend Mother," seems to have a crush on the speaker: she "digs the way I move my hips / just like my brother." (Elvis's onstage hip thrusts were sexually suggestive and caused a scandal in their day, especially among religious conservatives, who branded rock 'n' roll the Devil's music.) Of course, sex is forbidden for nuns, and homosexuality is considered sinful in some Christian denominations—including the Catholic sects with which nuns are most associated. Still, *this* convent seems to tolerate and appreciate the speaker's sexuality. In turn, she seems happy in this setting, maybe even pleased with her status as local sex symbol.

The last [stanza](#) suggests that the convent offers the speaker a welcome refuge. The outside world caused her some form of "Heartbreak," but that was "Long" ago, and she's found a measure of peace here.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Scottish-born Carol Ann Duffy (1955-present) was the first (and so far, the only) woman to serve as Poet Laureate of the UK. A working-class writer and an out lesbian, she brought fresh air and new perspectives to a laureateship historically dominated by (mostly) straight, white, middle-class men.

"Elvis's Twin Sister" appears in her collection *The World's Wife* (1999), which reflects on the joys and difficulties of being a woman in a sexist world. The poems in *The World's Wife* are monologues in the voices of mythical and historical women from [Medusa](#) to [Mrs. Midas](#). By giving these largely silent—or purely invented—figures their own say, Duffy offers feminist critiques of myth, history, and literature.

In her fondness for dramatic [monologues](#), Duffy follows in the footsteps of writers like [Robert Browning](#), but she also fits into the contemporary poetry scene around her. Margaret Atwood, for example, has used the form for [similar feminist purposes](#). Duffy is also one of many 20th-century poets to embrace [free verse](#) (including in "Elvis's Twin Sister," though this poem playfully sprinkles in some [end rhyme](#)). She sees herself as a descendent both of more recent free verse poets like [Sylvia Plath](#) and of Romantics like [John Keats](#). In turn, she has influenced (and championed) writers like [Alice Oswald](#), [Kate Clanchy](#), and [Jeanette Winterson](#).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Elvis's Twin Sister" draws on details from the actual life of Elvis Presley (1935-1977), one of the most famous rock 'n' roll stars of all time. Elvis did have an identical twin: a brother named Jesse Garon Presley, who died at birth. The poem imagines that

this twin was instead a sister who lived to adulthood—and, in fact, outlived Elvis. Over the course of her monologue, "Sister Presley" [alludes](#) to several of Elvis's famous songs, including "[Blue Suede Shoes](#)" (see line 20), "[Lawdy Miss Clawdy](#)" (see line 26), and "[Heartbreak Hotel](#)" (see lines 28-30; the lyrics include the lines "It's down at the end of Lonely Street / At Heartbreak Hotel"). She also refers to Elvis's mansion, "Graceland," now a museum and popular fan destination.

Finally, the poem's two [epigraphs](#) also sample rock history. "Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight?" is a direct quote from one of Elvis's hits, "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" (written 1927, recorded by Elvis in 1960). "Elvis is alive and she's female" approximates a quote attributed to a later rock icon, Madonna (Madonna Louise Ciccone, 1958-present). In real life, Madonna was praising the country/pop artist k. d. lang, and what she reportedly said was "Elvis is alive—and she's beautiful!" This joke, in turn, references the longtime fan conspiracy theory that Elvis is still alive (i.e., his 1977 death was faked). Playing off all these associations, Duffy's poem envisions a female twin of Elvis living in a convent—and perhaps addressing "[j]all" the fans who miss her brother.

Duffy's poetic career took off during the age of Margaret Thatcher, whose long tenure as Prime Minister of the UK (1979-1990) was marked by class struggle, poverty, and the dismantling of post-war welfare institutions. Thatcher's libertarian economics and conservative social policies, as well as her prominent role as the first woman Prime Minister of the UK, made her a divisive and much-reviled figure. But in response to growing social conservatism, the '70s and '80s in England also saw a rise in feminist consciousness. Books like Susan Faludi's *Backlash* examined the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which society was reacting against the women's movement, and [third-wave feminism](#), focused on identity and political power, began to emerge out of the [second-wave feminism](#) of the '60s.

Duffy's poetry, with its interest in women's inner lives and areas of female experience often neglected by the literary world, reflects the tumultuous political world in which she came of age.

- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — A short biography of Duffy at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- [More About Elvis](#) — A summary of Elvis Presley's life and career at Britannica.com. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elvis-Presley>)
- [The First Female Laureate](#) — A 2009 New York Times article on Duffy's appointment as the first-ever female Poet Laureate of the UK. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/02/world/europe/02poet.html>)
- [Elvis and Graceland](#) — Learn all about Elvis at the official website of Graceland Mansion. (<https://www.graceland.com/mansion>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- [A Child's Sleep](#)
- [Anne Hathaway](#)
- [Before You Were Mine](#)
- [Circe](#)
- [Death of a Teacher](#)
- [Demeter](#)
- [Education For Leisure](#)
- [Eurydice](#)
- [Foreign](#)
- [Head of English](#)
- [In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)
- [In Your Mind](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- [Mrs Aesop](#)
- [Mrs Darwin](#)
- [Mrs Faust](#)
- [Mrs Lazarus](#)
- [Mrs Midas](#)
- [Mrs Sisyphus](#)
- [Originally](#)
- [Penelope](#)
- [Pilate's Wife](#)
- [Prayer](#)
- [Quickdraw](#)
- [Recognition](#)
- [Stealing](#)
- [The Darling Letters](#)
- [The Good Teachers](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)
- [War Photographer](#)
- [We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)
- [Work](#)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of "Elvis's Twin Sister." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nm9yzsSFh0U>)
- [Interview with the Poet](#) — Watch a short interview with Carol Ann Duffy, the UK's first female Poet Laureate from 2009-2019. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnt5p1DGD9U>)



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